

# **African Film on Colonialism**

One of the experiences missing from the cultural consciousness of the Anglosphere is the state of being colonized by a foreign power. The last time this happened in Europe on a large scale was the spread of the Roman Empire which occupied lands now called Spain, France, Germany, Greece, Turkey, and a great deal of Northern Africa. The story of Christianity is set in an occupied area around Jerusalem by the Romans, which was conquered before by the Alexandrine empire and introduced a sizable Greek population. But after this event, written about in the Gospels, the experience of being colonized is not part of the noosphere of the Western nations.

The purpose of this paper is to examine this experience and the scars that it leaves upon the collective identity of a people, specifically in Africa. The liberation from colonization is a relatively recent event, spanning from the 1950's to 1975. There are still plenty of people who possess first-hand knowledge of oppression. However, rather than researching first-hand interviews and histories of events, I've decided to examine the films of Africans regarding the experience. Interviews and histories give stricter and more realistic accounts, but films touch upon the realm of dreams and the unconscious. Films usually teach lessons in stories and metaphors, and I suppose this is closer to how people feel about an event, rather than from a single person's perspective.

Unfortunately, I am not a historian and I have not given the colonization of Africa the proper examination that it deserves. I am going to be greatly ignorant about many happenings, both from the point of view of the oppressed and the oppressors. I may say something foolishly, or ridiculously obvious to the people who have suffered. Yet, a journey starts with a single step. I hope I do not misstep too badly.

## La Noire de...

My first film tries to examine the wound of colonialism as soon as the proverbial bandage is removed. The independence of the Republic of Senegal occurred in 1960 and *La Noire de...* (titled in English as *Black Girl*) was released in 1966. This is the earliest film that I could find with the shortest span between liberation and a cinematic response. Prior to independence, films were produced in Senegal, but they were censored by the French.

*La Noire de...* is the story of a young Senegalese woman named Diouana who has left her home in the suburbs of Dakar to become a household servant in France. At first, she is very optimistic about this arrangement. She worked for the same French family when they resided in Dakar and she took care of the children. However, she becomes disillusioned when Madame's children are all away and instead, she has to clean the house and cook. Madame insists that she doesn't dress too well, or wear high heels. She imagined that she would have free time to tour France and make friends, but instead she seems to be stuck in the house and not given any opportunity to explore.

She becomes depressed and feels demeaned about constantly being treated like a servant. At a dinner party which she had to cook and serve for, one of the guests rudely kisses her without her permission, just for the novelty of kissing a black woman.

When I was watching this film, I wondered why Diouana didn't communicate her needs to Madame. She has a rich monologue in her head. She understands French. She has no problem speaking with her boyfriend in a flashback. Yet in France, she says barely anything. Rather than examining this trait as an attribute of the character, I looked at it metaphorically. Madame represents France. Diouana represents Senegal. Senegal as a nation has very little

power and its economy is dependent on more economically rich countries. It's also brand new, only six years old at the time the film was released. Perhaps Diouana is silent because she isn't a peer. In a flashback., Madame chose her, out of all the rest of the potential maids, because she was the quietest one. Perhaps that represents why France chose to do business with Senegal.

But time and time again, Diouana is not treated as a proper person by the family. They attempt to trick her with a ruse to work harder because her mother is sick and needs money. Diouana immediately sees through this because her mother knows she is illiterate. She forcibly takes back the gift of a mask, freely given at the beginning of the film. She oversleeps and wears heels again, discarding them in the middle of the living room when told to take them off. She refuses pay and stops working all together. Finally, at the end of her despair, she commits suicide in the bathtub.

In the epilogue, Monsieur attempts to return Diouana's effects. Her mother is not happy to see him. She refuses to talk to him or to accept Diouana's wages. A child takes up Diouana's mask and follows Monsieur as he leaves the village. This makes him nervous, looking back at the mask on the child. This is to represent not just Monsieur being haunted by Diouana, but the state of France being haunted by the specter of colonialism.

## Soleil Ő

Soleil Ő (Oh, Sun), is a Mauritanian film directed by Med Hondo and released in 1967. Med was born in Mauritania, trained to be a chef in Morocco, and then emigrated to France and worked various jobs there. Soleil Ő is inspired by the racism that he and other Africans

experienced in trying to find employment. Most of the film follows a newly immigrated man, inspired by French and English literature, to travel to France to seek his fortune.

Soleil Ő starts with a prologue, of a group of men telling the audience that before colonialism, their culture possessed feats such as forging iron, currency, religion, and literature. It then shows us these men in a church, confessing their sin, which is speaking a language other than French, and then being baptized with a French name. They parade outside, holding long crosses, and then invert them into swords. The men march in front of a generalissimo and play-fight. Then they start to wrestle in earnest, and kill one another. Two do the same in front of the generalissimo, but are revived and inspired to fight again by a paper money bill, which is retrieved from the corpse once everyone dies.

The movie shifts to a style that is reminiscent of Italian Neorealism, following the protagonist on his journey for employment. The camera shows everything from his point of view and uses long, continuous shots to establish his perspective. We see him be rejected by potential employers very quickly as soon as they see him, even though he is applying for the position of an accountant. As the story progresses, the rejections become more and more hostile. One woman is openly afraid of him, telling him that “there are enough of you, so go back where you came from”. There is also a quick take of some graffiti as the man is forcibly ejected from a hotel, stating “Beware the negro-arab menace”.

The style shifts from Neorealism to interspersing the story with parables about the tribulations of the immigrants. The protagonist is now interviewing an international business owner. The owner talks candidly about migrant workers from Africa. They are considered secondary to other, more European migrant workers. It is very important to the business that the workers all speak and understand their words. This is opposed to the management in the African

countries understanding the words of the peoples there. We then get another shot of Africans being taught the words for tools in French in a classroom. The protagonist remarks that this is how they make slaves. It is reiterated in the story that Western culture, especially France, uses its culture to indoctrinate the African. It makes promises of luxuries and acceptance if they leave their old ways behind and become dependent on their religion, on their language, and their economy.

In the final scene, the protagonist is completely disillusioned. He rushes off into the forest, where he hears a man screaming, and African drums beating out an intense heartbeat. He is confronted by portraits of revolutionaries. At first, he is timid, but eventually his screams join those others. His cause joins that of Malcolm X, Che Guevara, and Mao Zedong.

## Conclusion

The language of film is universal because it is visual. Both films were filmed in French, but the use of subtitles makes it accessible worldwide. Both films depend upon imagery and the use of metaphor, to demonstrate the injustice visited upon the African peoples by colonialists. This dreamlike voice and image lends power to the cause of equality and liberation, letting the world know that the culture of Africa will not be a mirror of Western culture, but will stand up in the world and be heard.