

AFRICAN FILM & LITERATURE 2021 FALL- WEEK II, LESSON II

LECTURE NOTES

Yeelen (1987) dir. Souleymane Cissé

- Before we discuss Yeelen more closely, Let's refresh ourselves of this week's theme:

we will be exploring the issues and debates concerning the relationship between religion and corruption. Some areas we can take our explorations into will include the relationship between religion and socio-economic status, specifically poverty. But also, the role of religion in socio-cultural issues and debates, especially those related to power - political, cultural, and supernatural - and how it can be corrupted.

- Can anyone see how this theme is related to our discussion in last week's lab, where we looked at Canons?
- In our discussion of canons, we noted several interesting things.
- The 5 Definitions of canon we looked at orbited certain repeating and related ideas: narrative, agency, validity, identity, and privilege.
- What were some of those definitions? Let's recall quickly:

1a: a regulation or dogma decreed by a church council

b: a provision of canon law

2. the most solemn and unvarying part of the Mass including the consecration of the bread and wine

3: [Middle English, from Late Latin, from Latin, standard]

a: an authoritative list of books accepted as Holy Scripture

b: the authentic works of a writer (e.g) the Chaucer *canon*

c: a sanctioned or accepted group or body of related works (e.g) the *canon* of great literature

4:a: an accepted principle or rule

b: a criterion or standard of judgment (e.g) the *canons* of good taste

c: a body of principles, rules, standards, or norms (e.g) according to newspaper *canon* ... a big story calls for a lot of copy

5. a contrapuntal musical composition in which each successively entering voice presents the

initial theme usually transformed in a strictly consistent way

- Okay, so what do we note about these definitions?

1) They affirm canon as a power to judge, to include, to exclude, to sanction, to accept, to reject, to define, to ignore

2) That they are by definition seemingly always already related to religious authority and power in some way

3) That they are related to the law in some way *and* to its political or cultural weight or importance

4) That they emphasize consistency, consensus, regularity

- We also asked ourselves: How are canons made/how do they form? Who maintains them? Why do canons exist in the first place? What are the problems associated with canons?
- Yeelen provides ample material - visual, narrative, and conceptual - to help us engage the themes of both weeks.

-
- But before we look at Yeelen more closely, let's take a look at a contemporary African film example of these themes; namely, the misappropriation and corruption of religious or spiritual power.
 - Our example is from the witty, incisive, and surreal 2017 film debut by Zambian-born director Rungano Nyoni titled *I Am Not a Witch* which, simply put, is a story set in a remote Zambian community where a mysterious girl named Shula who emerges from nowhere is denounced as a witch. What results is, not dissimilar to *Yeelen* a coming of age story that sees Shula on a trajectory of exploitation, as a tethered member of a witches' camp, a witch for hire, and a tourist exhibit: [*I Am Not A Witch-"All the Suspects" scene*](#)

YEELLEN SCENE ANALYSIS: RELIGIOUS/SPIRITUAL POWER AND ITS CORRUPTION

- Let's start broad and work towards some more specific conclusions.

- I asked you at the beginning of last class what you made of the film generally. We then analyzed some clips from the film in groups after having learned some key film analysis terminology and concepts.
- So since our lesson, and since performing some critical analysis, what did you make of the film now? Has your feeling or opinion changed at all? What do you make of its use of camera, symbolism, genre, setting, plot, structure, conflict, characterization, narrator (P.O.V), imagery?
- Soma, his brother Bambara Dierra, his twin Uncle Djigui (the blind sage of the Bongo cave dwellers), Uncle Bafing, and Nyankoro all come from a family deeply touched by magic and its power. His entire clan is magical. How is this power manifest? How does Cissé depict it? (think of the active and passive depictions of force or energy that emanate in and through the pylon) Think of the scenes in which the king, his royal guard, and others are frozen and/or bewitched.
- Okay, let's now specify: what do you feel about the film's theme and depiction of specifically African religion, spirituality, ritual, and supernatural power? What scenes stand out for you?

CHICKEN IMMOLATION SCENE: 02:53 - 04:17

- Let's start at the very beginning: the Chicken Immolation Scene
- Having seen the entire film, we know that he doesn't change much. His characterization and narrative aren't very dynamic.
- He is a static character.
- This manifests in not only his hardline refusal to relent in his attempt to kill Nyanankoro and his mother, but also his refusal to share his power, reconcile with his son. In the course of the film, much of his dialogue is the same prayer/curse over and over again.
- In this sense, his staticity manifests also in his dialogue and its lack of dynamism.
- His narrative arc doesn't go from being grounded on the volatile theme of revenge and then morph into redemption.
- It stays on one note, one focus, one idea: finding and killing his son in order to prevent his own death.
- But at the beginning, before we even hear Soma speak anything other than a prayer, we already have several clear and incisive characterizations of him.

- The chicken sacrifice by immolation at the beginning is rather stark and severe. How did this scene make *you* feel?
- How do you feel about how it is shot? Anyone care to describe your reaction using scene analysis terminology we learned this week? .
- What do you make of the special effects?
- How did it make you feel *about Soma* as the first piece of characterization about him Cissé provides the audience?
- Let's look at the dialogue that Soma has with the fetishes of Mari.
- Aside from prayers and supplications, what does Soma *actually* say?: "Oh Mari, to succeed, one must know how to betray" (Cissé 1987).
- Who is betraying who? Is a father betraying a son? Is a son betraying the spiritual laws of his people? Is a father betraying the spiritual laws of his people by using his powers to ostensibly locate and punish his son when in fact he wants to murder him?
- Q: Why does he sacrifice this chicken?
A: To hunt down and punish his son Nyanankoro.

Q: What is his son guilty of?

A: Breaking the canonical law of the Koma.

Okay, so is Soma justified in using his spiritual power for this end, or is he corrupting it?

- But it's not just this scene, its depiction of supernatural power and the outlining of the purpose of its use that help us characterize Soma.
- Keep in mind that Nyanankoro's mother goes on to describe Soma as a terror, tellin her son that she had to, on pain of death, flee "fearful forests", that she experienced sacrifices, suffering, and strife as she tried to run and hide to protect her son from his father whom he "cannot vie with" because of his power: a power that would render Nyanankoro "to ashes" (Cissé 1987).
- As an initial introduction to the film's central characters, how do these scenes make you feel about Nyanankoro and Soma?

DIVINATION SCENE: 04:50-05:58

- In this scene, we see Nyanankoro and his mother use a divining bowl to see his uncle Bafing and his father Soma, the former with his magical pylon, the other through a close shot of his face.
- Thinking of the chicken immolation scene and this divination scene, how does Cissé's depiction of African magic and ritual compare to other depictions of African religion, ritual, magic, belief systems, and traditions of practice you have encountered in other media?
- What are the similarities and differences you can note?
- What do you make of the simplicity of the effects? Does it feel coarse or crude to you? Or stylish and minimal? Or even consistent throughout the film?
- Consider how practical, even maybe comedic, Soma uses his magical post as both a wand that sets chickens on fire *and* as a battering ram @ 10:16-10:48
- It's also interesting to note how Soma refers to/engages with his magical post. After asking for the whereabouts of Nyanankoro and his mother, he says "up, Magical Post!". Is he addressing the post or its porters?
- And what about these porters of the post? What did you think of them? As comedic relief at times? Basically as scene dressing as they have no dialogue whatsoever?
- Or did you see them as something more ethically problematic when it comes to the theme of Soma's spiritual power being dependent on a heavy post that he needs servants, perhaps even slaves, to properly carry and therefore wield?
- While the chief of the village Soma first passes through refers to them as Soma's 'companions', did you get the impression that they were his thralls or slaves? Or were they more to you like junior priests to a high priest?
- What is the relation here Cissé makes, if any, between religion and subjugation and obedience?

FREEZING OF ROUMA BOLL'S GUARD: 24:02-25:06

- In this scene we see another depiction of supernatural power. We see Nyanankoro freeze or petrify a man, while also setting fire to the blade of one of the king's guard's swords.
- What do you make of this display of supernatural power? What of the effects, the style? What does this scene say about the relationship between power and survival?

- Remember: Soma wants to find and kill Nyanankoro because he has absconded with Bambara lore and knowledge which is against the cannon of laws enforced by the Order of the Komo to which his father belongs.
- Does Soma view *this* as a corruption or betrayal of their people? or rather is the question here: Is it corrupt for Nyanankoro to use this lore and power simply to survive?
- Does he HAVE to use his powers to fight the king's enemies or else face death himself if he refuses? Is this a corruption of power or a pragmatic solution to a problem?

THE LEG BONE SOLUTION SCENE: 31:37-35:07

- So how does Cisse shoot this scene? Notice the lighting and the fire. Cisse makes it seem as if something truly spectacular is or is about to occur.
- But speaking of practical solutions, we should notice how Nyanankoro specifies he needs a hollow leg bone. Why is that important in relation to power? It is important because here, there are several visual suggestions that Nyanankoro's power is not limited by the supernatural but extended by his practical knowledge. So it is his knowledge of bushcraft that allows him to serve the king in a way that does not rely on magical power.
- Okay, that sounds good, but the burden of proof rests with me to affirm or show this, especially because there are at least two main ways I see that this scene can be interpreted.
- Okay, let me try. I can say, well, looking past Nyanankoro drawing symbols on the bone with charcoal, what we really see him doing is taking up half of a hollow horse's thigh bone from his satchel. It is brittle enough to split with his tools, but firm enough to more or less withstand a hammering *and* heat. He then takes some kindling and places it inside the hollow made by the two halves of the bone. He then seals the two halves with thread, then takes the fetish/talisman to the top of what looks like a termite mound, and hammers it into its summit with the back of a hatchet. He then spits on it and that's that.
- Or is it? If we watch carefully, there are some interesting things happening here. First, why would Nyanankoro ask for a hollow bone, place some kindling inside it, then hammer it into a termite mound as if he were using it as a means of creating and controlling smoke - smoke which can then be used to disturb and agitate bees, which then could swarm and sting a group of individuals. Was this his plan?
- Then again, is this actually *visually confirmed*? We hear and see the beehives in treetops after we cut *away* from Nyanankoro as he hammers the leg bone with his hatchet. Is it enough visual information to infer that what I just suggested happened *despite* not occurring in the same frame or cut? Okay, but then how did he control the bees in such a precise manner?

- Well, maybe it's both. Maybe it's a blending of magical powers and bushcraft. Maybe he smoked the bees out and then used his magical powers to subsequently control them.
- Ah, but that would have to assume that the bees we see in medium close are the same bees Nyanankoro summons/aggravates and controls as those that sting the enemy troops. None of this explains how the fire that surrounds them starts or is controlled.
- Either way, whether purely bushcraft, magic, or a hybrid of both, the result is victory *and* favor from the king. This gives him not only practical power in terms of surviving his capture and time with the Peul people, but his displays of supernatural abilities also gives him political power because they are of practical use to the king macroscopically (in helping him defeat his enemies) and microscopically (in helping 'heal' his wife of her inability to conceive)
- Speaking of this power, hold Shakespeare's famous adage "absolute power corrupts absolutely" in your mind when you ask yourself who is more powerful - Nyanankoro or his father? The latter is respected, feared, has thralls/assistants/slaves to do his bidding, to carry his symbol and means of power - the magical pylon - and he has a deep knowledge of rites and prayers of power.
- However, you could argue that his power only comes from Mari, the deity he prays to. In contrast, Nyanankoro's knowledge and power seems to come from within himself. He does not invoke any deity, spirit, or entity. His magic doesn't seem to rely on a specific object either. He uses materials, it is true, like a horse's right leg bone to summon a swarm of bees and fire against the Peul king's enemies, but the *means* and *results* of his magic are close to *nature*. Does this closer connection to nature somehow make Nyanankoro's power more pure? Less corrupt?

INTERMISSION

- Okay, so by now, about the first 30 minutes of the film,, we are shown ritual sacrifice, divination through scrying (when Nyanankoro surveils the movements of his father and uncle using a 'looking glass' in the form of the water in a calabash), and we are also shown protective rituals such as Nyanankoro being given a protective amulet and his mother praying in a milk pouring ritual for her son's safety.
- What do you make of Cissé's depiction of magic in this setting, context, and being accessed and deployed by these characters specifically? What is the tone, the style, the characterization of not just magic as a tool or type of agency, but how it is characterized in how it is received or interacted with by other characters?

ATTOU PREGNANCY RITUAL SCENE (Just after both Nyanankoro *and* Attou consume the white substance): **44:48-45:14**

- Now, just because Nyanankoro's power is seemingly closer to nature does not mean that his power is not without limit - naturally endowed though it *appears* to be.
- Nyanankoro's attempt to help Attou, the Peul king's wife, is confessedly arduous.
- However, what do you make of the depiction of Attou's ritual? What does Nyankoro make her eat?
- What vision of her - set against smoke - does he have?
- What did you make of it - her smiling, crying?
- Why is Nyankoro so overwhelmed?
- What do you think of Cissé's decisions in depicting what we will later learn is essentially a very stylized depiction of a sex scene?
- However, did Nyankoro assault Attou? I ask this question because the 'treatment' that Nyankoro has Attou consume seems to put her into some kind of a trance. There was no consent as she was bewitched. Not only does she have her consent overseen and sanctioned by the king her husband, but as a result of this 'treatment', Attou loses her status as king's consort, and the privileges, comfort, and security that comes with said status.
- But what of Nyankoro? Is Nyankoro's behavior and/or the difficulty of the ritual the result of his father's magic in the scene before (specifically the sacrifice of the Albino man and the red dog)?
- If so, who is subject to reproach here? If this is a test of virtue, in keeping with the hero's journey, what exactly is Nyankoro's test here? To use his powers honestly and not for self gain *including* self-gratification? Does he pass or fail? Or is Nyanankoro absolved of responsibility for his actions because he too is part of the ritual having consumed the same substance at its commencement that Attou consumed - assuming it has the same effect on either of them? Or that his father bewitched him 'remotely', causing him to behave as he did?
- BUT at 48:42-49:19, not only does Nyankoror admit to and confess to corrupting the King's trust and his assignment, but also the canon of laws of his country, which include the laws pertaining to their magical power, and perhaps most ethically problematic of all, his corrupting of Attou's trust in him as a healer - as someone who would use his powers to solve a problem, not create a whole host more others.

UNKLE

BAFING

VS

KING

PEUL:

53:43-56:29

- Notice how Cisse shows the movement of the pylon carriers. It's as if the pylon is aware of a threat to both it and its master. The carriers seem to have little control over it.
- Note what happens to King Boll's men when they try to touch the pylon carriers. Also what happens to the king himself when he tries to strike Bafing. What do you make of the repeated manifestation of using this supernatural power for attack and defense being freezing people?

THE GUILD OF KOMO: 01:01:47-01:05-17

- The wizards' Order of Komo decree that Nyankoro has betrayed the Komo, its secrets, and power by using them beyond the council's authority. Is this a corruption of knowledge and power? What is the relation between corruption and authority here? They control this power and its use unanimously. Is that fair or protective?
- Think of how characterization of power works here in terms of the proverbs uttered by the Komo initiates:

“don't waste a bullet meant for an elephant on a rabbit”

“an eagle is a royal bird, but it cannot carry off an elephant”

“even the sharpest knife cannot cut its own handle”

“not all clouds bring rain”

“a snake's molted skin is not the snake”

Are these proverbs a form of coded language?

- We assume that proverbial discourse is something common or native to African epistemology or knowledge. But to code something is to occult/occlude it - to hide it. Do the order of Komo use proverbs to conceal their power? To limit its understanding to only those who have been taught what these proverbs mean? Is this a way of retaining the power of their wisdom?
- Keep in mind that the entire scene is about 8 minutes long. What happens? Soma lays out his complaint and concerns. The order of the Komo hear him. They advise him through coded language, proverbs. Then they offer ritual prayers. Ask yourself: Do they seem like a powerful group? If so, how do you interpret their power? How does it manifest?

THE FINAL BATTLE SCENE: 01:28:50 - 01:29:43

- A LOT happens in the entire scene that has to do with magical or supernatural power. Reaching his father, Nianankoro attempts to reason with him but is dismayed to find his

father cannot bear to share his power and only wants him dead. They call upon the power of their artifacts, Soma with his pylon and Nianankoro with Kore's Wing, turning themselves into an elephant and a lion, respectively. The power of Kore creates a blinding wave that kills them both and transforms the land around them into sand.

- Nyankoro inheriting the Kore's wing gives him a power equal to that of his fathers - he not possess a pylon of his own, so to speak, however it is different from his uncle's and father's.
- The blinding power of the complete Kore's wing - featuring the jewel called the eye of the Kore, and the voice of the Komo itself suggests something that goes back to the Shakespearean adage which, we should note, is also a warning:

Is the overarching theme of the film that though human beings try to claim and keep powers beyond themselves for their own human desires and singular narratives, are the powers-that-be beyond their comprehension in both space and time the ones actually using them for their own purpose - a purpose beyond the ability of human minds to conceive? Therefore, any attempt to own this power, to use, and keep it for one's self and not in service of others is to *corrupt* it?

- Think of the final narration of the Komo (the spirit, power, or force of the pylon) which tells the audience that the Diarra's have corrupted the power of the Komo, specifically Soma and his lust for vengeance and injustice and self-gain after having a vision that his son would destroy him. The Komo, with its own voice, states that the Diarra people's systematic corruption of its power has gone on for centuries. It basically quits. Not for exhaustion, or loss of interest. But due to the corruption of its power by those who wield it.
- As we can surmise, Yeelen is very much a film about religious or spiritual power, its use and corruption just as much as it is a coming-of-age tale or a hero's journey. How does the question of religious/spiritual/supernatural power and corruption as described by Karl Marx manifest in *Yeelen* (1987)? Think about the ideas of control, manipulation, being bewitched or entranced and as such unaware of the conditions of exploitation you face. Is this true of Nyankoro under Soma's power? Is this true of Attou under Nyankoro's power? Is it true of the Bambara and Diarra people under the power of the Komo?: [60 Second Breakdown of Marx's Critique of Religion](#); [Marx on Religion](#).