**Film Analysis of *Yeelen* (1987)**

Elikem Asudo Tsatsu Gale-Zoyiku

Department Of Humanities and Social Sciences, Ashesi University

ENG231: African Literature and Film

Dr. Kwasu David Tembo

January 12th, 2022

*Yeelen* (Cissê, 1987), directed by Souleymane Cissê, is an intriguing commentary on the relationship between the wielding of religious power, the impact on the socio-cultural status of the wielders, and the corruption/abuse of said power. These themes are explored in the movie through the protagonist, Nianankoro's coming-of-age journey through the Bambara lands - what is now Mali, and his juxtaposition against his father, Soma's journey to kill his son.

*Yeelen* is rife with compelling imagery that espouses the themes in subtle and obvious ways. One such way is the visual comparison of the tools of the two primary characters, Soma, the antagonist, and Nianankoro, the protagonist. If a tool could speak, what would it say about its owner? The movie opens after the exposition sequence with a close shot of an intensely burning and screaming chicken on a post, presumably the *kolonkalanni*, the magic post. This scene is followed by a wide shot of a child leading a goat and tying it to the *korê kaman*. The goat peacefully lies beside the wing. The sounds of a forest with undisturbed wildlife back this scene. The contrasts in the two scenes - the chicken burning, as opposed to the goat lying peacefully; the harsh screeches of the chicken and crackling of a fire, as opposed to the peaceful sounds of wildlife - establish the difference in the manner in which the two artefacts, and by extension, their wielders, operate. Soma wields the magic post, while Nianankoro comes into ownership of the wing of the *korê* before the final conflict with his father.

The wing of the *korê* and the idol between whose legs it sits have the pyramid-like jewel situated at the centre of their 'foreheads', a detail of importance because of the slow panning close shots that capture this detail. The jewels also stand out because their colours contrast with the brown of the idol and wing. The position on the forehead that this jewel occupies is known as a third eye in some religious traditions (Blakemore & Jennet, 2018). The third eye represents spiritual awareness, intuition, and the ability to see beyond the physical realm. All of these apply to Nianankoro, who never chants or makes sacrifices to channel his magic. His power seems to be intuitive and innate, as evident in the scrying scene where he sees his uncle Bafing and his father.

In contrast, is the location of the jewels on the magic post. The close shots that pan up and down from the post from the chicken over the streaks of blood to the jewels and back up again indicate that the jewels are located where would be the groin or trunk of a human being. This could represent that the wielder requires strength and physical effort to utilize their magic, as the trunk can be associated with physical power and strength. Also, the very visually striking streaks of blood flowing down the post from the chicken could mean that this artefact's wielder has to part with something to gain power (this could be what Soma meant by saying, "O Mari, to succeed, one must know how to betray."). Essentially, the person's magic is inferior to the wielder of the wing of the *korê.* Soma is the wielder of the magic post, and the necessity of parting with something to gain something else is evident in his immolation of a chicken in the opening sequences and of the albino and the dog in the sequence before he visits the *Komo* to report Nianankoro's wrongs.

Is Soma's magical prowess inferior to Nianankoro's? In the showdown between Soma and Nianankoro close to the movie's end, Soma's post-bearers cannot approach Nianankoro while he holds the wing of the *korê*. Also, Soma stands at a distance and says, "A rabid cat barks like a dog. I, Soma, master of fetishes, nothing will stop me." He sounds like he is scared of the wing Nianankoro is holding and is threateningly affirming that he is stronger than the wing. Also, he shakes his head confusingly when the magic post flies off the thralls' shoulders as if summoned to attention by the *korê kaman.* In the entire confrontation, Nianankoro looks superior in every sense. He boldly walks forward after he sets the *korê* down, whereas the post-bearers cower behind Soma as he shouts threats at Nianankoro, who is very composed, addressing the father who has been trying to kill him. Then the magic post speaks.

The magic post's exposition during the final conflict summarizes the themes evident throughout the movie. The post says it has been an ever-faithful servant of the Diarra family, but for centuries, its powers have been misused and corrupted for only evil and injustice to leave ruin and desolation in its wake. The post tells Soma that it has decided to vanish because his lust for revenge, contempt, and hate for humanity has gone too far. Finally, the post tells Soma he will die because he has been subverting his power. Throughout these exchanges, the sequence moves from medium shots of each combatant to extremely close shots to capture the emotional turmoil and heighten suspense. The scene closes with an ethereal light shining from both magical artefacts, and the magic post regurgitates the screams we had heard from the chicken in the opening sequences. The light engulfs the combatants and the landscape, and the terrain has been changed when it clears.

Throughout the movie, we see Soma brazenly abuse his power and disrespect people below his level, for example, sacrificing an albino man, and knocking down people's doors, in his search for Nianankoro. Also, the crime that Nianankoro is accused of is wanting to spread the knowledge of the *Komo* to the public, knowledge the *Komo* wished to keep secret because this knowledge assures their revered status.

Why didn't Soma back out of the conflict when the post told him that he would die? Because he was a man adamantly bent on killing his son, and he was not capable of feeling remorse for his actions. Soma is a highly static character, and he starts the story with the same quirks he dies with. He is the first character we meet in the story, and we are introduced to him sacrificing a chicken, conjuring fire, and viciously chanting to his deity to reveal Nianankoro to him, which he does several other times in the movie. According to other characters, he is a very ruthless and focused man with no qualms about using the power of his magic post on people he has grudges with. Even in the end, as he realizes he is outmatched, he refuses to back down – so intent is he on killing Nianankoro.

In conclusion, *Yeelen*, directed by Souleymane Cissê, is a powerful commentary on the relationship between religious power, socio-cultural status, and the abuse of power. The movie showcases the differences between the two main characters, Soma and Nianankoro, and their respective magical powers through compelling imagery. Soma, the antagonist, is depicted as misusing his power through violence and sacrifice, while Nianankoro, the protagonist, is shown as being more intuitive and innate in his use of magic. The final confrontation between the two characters serves as a commentary on the consequences of the abuse of power, as the magic post, which Soma has subverted, chooses to vanish, resulting in Soma's death. Throughout the film, Cissê masterfully portrays the themes through a compelling and thought-provoking story that leaves a lasting impact on the viewer.

**REFERENCES**

Blakemore, C., &amp; Jennet, S. (2018, May). Third Eye. Encyclopedia.com. Retrieved February 12, 2023, from <https://www.encyclopedia.com/philosophy-and-religion/other-religious-beliefs-and-general-terms/miscellaneous-religion/third-eye#:~:text=The%20third%20eye%20is%20understood%20as%20a%20spiritual,a%20single%20object%20for%20long%20periods%20of%20time>.

Cinecom. (1987). Yeelen. New York.

Encyclopædia Britannica, inc. (n.d.). Bambara. Encyclopædia Britannica. Retrieved February 12, 2023, from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Bambara>