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CAMEROON'S DANIEL KAMWA AND HIS CINEMATIC REVISION OF "JIMMY ET L'ÉGALITÉ"

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Synopsis:

This study will analyze Daniel Kamwa's cinematic revision of Francis Bebey's "Jimmy et l'égalité." The paper will discuss Jimmy's metamorphosis as he discovers the important lessons of equality. It is after this lesson in "equality" that Jimmy's attitude changes from feeling inferior (or less than) to one of equality. This study will unveil four main themes: 1) cultural identity crisis, 2) cultural assimilation, 3) cultural alienation and 4) the exploitation of neo-colonialism.

**CAMEROON’S DANIEL KAMWA AND HIS CINEMATIC REVISION OF
“JIMMY ET L’EGALITE”**

The Cameroonian novelist, poet, musician, and journalist Francis Bebey has created such works as *Le Fils d'Agatha Moudio* “Agatha Moudio’s Son” (1967), an African folktale that won the *Grand Prix littéraire d'Afrique noire* “Literary Grand Prize of Black Africa” in 1968. He also wrote *Le Ministre et le griot* “The Minister and the Griot,” a novel published in 1992. Additionally, Bebey penned a collection of eight short stories, each followed by a poem, entitled *Embarras et Cie* “Embarras and Company” (1968). It is from this collection of short stories that the filmmaker Daniel Kamwa, a countryman of Bebey, chose the short story “Jimmy et l'égalité” “Jimmy and Equality” upon which to base his first short film, *Boubou-Cravate* (16 mm, color, 30 minutes). The official English title of the film is *Cross-Breed*.¹

The purpose of this study is to analyze Kamwa’s cinematic revision of Bebey’s “Jimmy et l'égalité.” “Jimmy et l'égalité” is narrated from the first person point of view. The story relates how an African businessman, who recently returns from Paris, receives a lesson concerning “equality” from his servant, Jimmy. The narrator is Jimmy's boss, who remains nameless. He has recently returned from Paris where he felt isolated. Now back in Accra, Ghana, he has an improved social standing and hires Jimmy as a domestic within twenty-four hours of his return from Europe. The majority of the story is a long flashback where the boss

explains the reasons for his servant's declining behavior noting that when he first hires Jimmy, he had no problems with him whatsoever.

One of the first factors the narrator unveils in the short story is that Jimmy is completely dependent upon him for his meager wages. Once the narrator becomes cognizant of this situation, he begins to exploit Jimmy. The narrator reveals: "Et j'ordonne, et je demande, et j'exige, et je parle fort, je sais que je suis seul maître à bord. . . . Et Jimmy marche, court, vole, toujours à mon service" 'And I order and I request, and I demand, and I speak loudly. I know that I am the only master on board. . . . And Jimmy walks, runs, flies, always at my service' (51).² Jimmy's boss now views him as an object instead of a human being. To rationalize the manner in which he treats Jimmy and to have a clear conscience, he explains that it is not his fault for the poor conditions to which Jimmy must submit. It is the system of the government that is at fault. He stresses, "la lutte pour ou contre la vie de Jimmy c'est une affaire entre l'Etat et Jimmy; moi, je ne suis qu'un observateur obéissant fidèlement à la loi qui veut que je donne peu d'argent à Jimmy" 'the fight for or against Jimmy's life is a matter between the State and Jimmy. Me, I am only an observer, faithfully obeying the law that wants me not to give much money to Jimmy' (52).

However, Jimmy has a change in attitude toward his boss. It happens one day as Jimmy observes his boss at the table eating a mango with a knife and fork. Jimmy comments on the way the boss is eating the fruit. Jimmy blurts out, "Vous, les Européens, vous aimez tous les mangues de la même façon" 'You Europeans, you all like mangoes the same way' (52). Feeling insulted, the boss quickly replies: "Nous, les Européens? . . . Suis-je Européen, moi, Jimmy?" 'We, Europeans? . . . Am I European, Jimmy?' (52). The narrator then explains to Jimmy that

even though he has traveled to Europe and has adopted certain European mannerisms that he is, indeed, Black.

The boss then explains that traveling to France does not transform him into a European. The narrator becomes embarrassed because he realizes that Jimmy treats him so well because he considers him like all Whites who come from Europe. The narrator then explains to Jimmy that the two of them are equals. What distinguishes them is their different roles in society. It is after this lesson in "equality" that Jimmy's transformation begins. He complains about being awakened so early to polish his boss's shoes. Because of their "equality," Jimmy no longer feels the necessity to cater to the demands of his boss.

There are several themes unveiled in "Jimmy et l'égalité." First is the cultural identity crisis that the boss suffers when he comes face to face with the conflict between his African personality and his European values. Two incidents underscore his self-realization. The eating of the mango is the first episode that highlights the narrator's identity crisis. It is this situation that spurs Jimmy to openly comment on the table manners of his boss. Jimmy unknowingly insults his employer by pointing out that he is behaving like a white person by the way in which he eats a mango. This scene leads to the second incident that exposes the boss's identity crisis. The boss becomes ashamed when he feels obligated to explain to Jimmy that he is African and not European. The narrator comments, "J'avais honte devant ce cuisinier, qui me servait avec tant de zèle parce que pour lui, j'étais un Européen, un nègre blanc" 'I was ashamed in front of this cook who served me with so much zeal because, for him, I was a European, a white Black person' (53). This verbalization to defend his actions makes him painfully aware of this identity crisis. Having just arrived from Paris, he is unaware that local people consider anyone with Western habits as White. Daniel Kamwa underscores this attitude, "La masse des Africains a

tendance à identifier aux Blancs tous ceux qui vivent comme eux, indépendamment de la couleur de leur peau" 'The majority of Africans have a tendency of identifying as White all those who live as they do, independent of the color of their skin' (qtd. in Hennebelle 81).

The boss has never inwardly confronted his assimilation into European culture until Jimmy makes an issue of it. This cultural assimilation conveys the second theme of the short story. During the colonial era in Francophone West Africa, French language, culture, and ideology were imposed upon the people whereas African values, customs and beliefs were no longer considered worthy to be continued. In his *Africans and their History*, Joseph E. Harris underscores that the assimilation policy “. . . was in fact an arrogant reflection of French assumption of black inferiority and their commitment to ‘civilize’ an elite above the masses. The direct and disruptive results of this divisive policy remain embedded in many continuing conflicts in French-speaking Africa” (189-190). Nevertheless, because of these assimilation policies, some black educators, diplomats and the like desired to immerse themselves in French culture in order to succeed financially and politically. Others went so far as to want to become White. In his *Peau noire, masques blancs* “Black skin, white masks,” Franz Fanon refers to this latter tendency as *la lactification* or the whitening of a black race (40). To achieve this goal, they adopted French heritage as their own. In order to succeed in Paris, Jimmy's boss probably had to adjust to many French customs. Upon his return to Africa, he maintained many of the European habits, thereby neglecting certain customary behavior patterns. The narrator is painfully aware that he is unable to adjust to European culture while in Paris. He admits, “j'ai troqué ma triste condition d'homme du peuple . . .” ‘I truncated my sad condition as a man of the people’ (49).

His inability to adapt to the foreign system leads to the third theme, alienation. Unable to assimilate into the Western world, now that he is in Africa, he still feels isolated within his own

society. Thus, he is torn between two cultures, and for the moment he is having difficulty adjusting in the new surroundings. Samba Diallo, the main character in *L'Aventure ambiguë* by Cheick Hamidou Kane, also painfully faces a similar alienation crisis when striving to fuse two cultures. Unfortunately, Samba's inner turmoil overwhelms him, resulting in his fall. However, the narrator/character in "Jimmy et l'égalité" does not resort to such tragic measures. Instead, he attempts to comprehend the reasons for Jimmy's behavior.

The final theme treated in this short story is the exploitation of neo-colonialism. This exploitation comes in three forms: economic, social, and political. The narrator mentions that it is the government that perpetuates the substandard living conditions of people of Jimmy's social class by continuing to maintain low wages. He underlines, "L'argent que je lui donne à la fin du mois, ce n'est pas moi qui l'ai fixé, c'est l'Etat. Mais je me suis souvent demandé ce que Jimmy pouvait bien acheter avec douze livres et demie pour tout un mois" 'The money that I give to him at the end of the month, it is not I who determines [the amount], it is the State. But I often wondered how Jimmy could sustain himself on twelve and a half pounds for an entire month' (52). Indeed, there is economic exploitation (Jimmy's extremely low wages), political exploitation (the government maintaining poor salaries), and social exploitation (Jimmy, and people of his social class, are kept at a disadvantage because they are economically and politically abused). As a result of Jimmy's pitiful human condition, 'man became my thing' (51). In Sartrean terms, Jimmy is no longer an "être pour-soi" 'a being for himself' but an "être pour-autrui" 'a being for someone else.' Hence, the boss treats Jimmy as an inferior being because of his position in society.

Now turning to the film version, *Boubou-Cravate*, one observes that Kamwa's adaptation of Francis Bebey's "Jimmy et l'égalité" is the story of an African diplomat, Gilbert, who tries to

assimilate his African culture with his European values. The title of the film highlights the protagonist's attempt at this cross-cultural mixture. A "Boubou" is a traditional African garment whereas a "cravate" is the French term for a necktie. The film terminates as Gilbert and his wife, Angèle, undergo an initiation ceremony to be re-introduced into African culture.

Kamwa's change of title is very significant in that it lets the viewer know at once that the filmmaker has fostered his personal imprint into the movie. In *Double Exposure Fiction into Film*, Joy G. Boyum comments on the importance of a change in the film's title from that of the literary work. She asserts that a "change in title will often make a significant statement about the nature and extent of an adaptation's dependence on its source . . . the change immediately establishing a certain distance between the film and its source" (68).

Because of the various alterations in the film adaptation, *Boubou-Cravate* can be considered as both a loose adaptation and a very creative portrayal of Bebey's "Jimmy et l'égalité." Kamwa maintains the employee/employer theme of the short story. However, he does change the servant's name from Jimmy to Joseph. (Perhaps this is to pay homage to the actor Joseph Campbell, who plays the role of Joseph.) Moreover, Kamwa, who plays Gilbert in the movie, retains incidents concerning the eating of the mango as well as Jimmy's protesting against performing certain household tasks. But what Kamwa does add is a creative dimension to the filmic text.

Kamwa employs various cinematographic techniques in order to adjust the short story's tone, point of view, and time and space (Marcus 238). To transfer the tone of the short story, Kamwa uses a variety of straight-on angles, medium shots, and long shots. These techniques correspond with the story's realistic and everyday themes and situations as observed in the literary text. Low angles are rarely used except near the beginning of the movie when the couple

looks up (the low angle) at their servant, Joseph, as he scrutinizes them eating mangoes with cutlery. The low angle not only attests to the couple's embarrassment but also illustrates their diminished role in the eyes of their employee. This camera angle accentuates Joseph's disdain for his employers' western mannerism. Thus, Kamwa is able to transfer the employers' embarrassing moment onto the screen.

High angles are employed more frequently than low angles. One discovers Joseph looking down upon the couple, displaying his contempt at their peculiarities. Moreover, the high angle is utilized as Gilbert explains to Joseph, while they sit on the sofa, that the two men are, indeed, equals. Additionally, several high angles are noted during the initiation sequence that occurs at the end of the film. Consequently, the spectator is able to scan the events as they occur. This camera angle in this last example reduces the couple's individuality as they are being accepted into the African community.

As for the point of view of the film, Kamwa alternates between the objective and the subjective points of view. Thus, instead of focusing upon one vantage point (as in the short story's first person narration), the filmmaker offers various focalizations or different points of view. To emphasize these diverse vantage points, Kamwa utilizes close-ups so that the spectator can scrutinize a particular movement or attitude of a given character or situation. In fact, close-ups are used to show the couple as they eat the mangoes. The camera highlights the knife and fork as they cut and eat the fruit. In order to focus on the couple's initiation process, several close-ups are given. For instance, one observes Gilbert's face, Angèle's expressions, a mask, and Joseph dancing in the final scene.

Kamwa's unique film adaptation also sought to thematically alter the short story. To add a romantic dimension to the film, the filmmaker explores two avenues. For instance, Gilbert has

a wife, Angèle, in the movie. Angèle and Gilbert come from the same area in Ghana. She is the second character introduced in the film as the spectator observes her reading a newspaper and then combing her hair. In addition, the director includes a white secretary, Hélène, in the film. Furthermore, Kamwa hints that Gilbert presently has or may have had an intimate relationship with her. One scene illustrates him stroking her long blond hair. However, one does not know if it is a dream of a past occurrence or an event that he wishes would happen in the future. At the office, they seem to get along very well; their body language is positive. But neither she nor Gilbert discusses a past or present affair.

Whereas the short story focuses on the themes of economic, social, and political exploitation of Jimmy, the movie highlights the development of Gilbert's self identity. The first step he takes in achieving this goal is to become aware of how he has been assimilated into European culture. Therefore, the filmmaker underscores Gilbert's personal dilemma of being torn between African and European values. Therein lies the importance of his wearing a necktie with his "boubou," the playing of classical music at the reception party, and his eating a mango with a knife and fork. His uncertainty of how to infuse the two cultures leads to his alienation. The themes of assimilation and alienation are also present in the literary text.

The final sequence of the movie and, consequently, the last thematic addition of the film is Gilbert's and Angèle's initiation into African heritage. This ceremony strives to lead the couple out of its cultural alienation and assimilation and thus, guide them to attain individuation or self-realization. Carl G. Jung asserts that "the aim of individuation is nothing less than to divest the self of the false wrappings of the persona . . ." (*Two Essays* 174).

Thus, the couple undergoes the initiation ceremony. The initiation custom is practiced throughout the majority of Africa. The primary purpose of the ritual is to guide children into

adulthood. Through the ceremony, they become vital members of the community. In his *L'Arbre à Palabres*, Jacques Chevrier reveals the purpose of the initiation ritual in traditional African societies. He asserts, "le principe . . . tend toujours à prendre en charge la formation continue des générations montants en vue de maintenir et reproduire l'ordre établi" 'the purpose [of the initiation] always tends to take the responsibility of the continual training of future generations in order to maintain and reproduce the established order' (45). Hence, the initiation ritual serves both to maintain the established order of the community and to integrate the individual into the mores of the society, thereby aiding the individual to understand and transfer the community's values.

In order to be effective, the initiation ceremony occurs in the private setting before a select group which represents the community. This gesture symbolizes their acceptance into the group. Accordingly, Gilbert and Angèle's initiation ceremony takes place in the couple's home, where they are hosting a reception. Their guests include some of the couple's peers (African and European) who witness their metamorphosis. Kamwa perhaps chose this event (a reception) in order to "receive" the couple into African society. To cross the threshold of acceptance, the initiates must be reborn to shed their former persona. They must undergo the rites of passage which occur at the initiation ceremony.

The couple's rebirth or initiation ceremony is essential in the film adaptation. The procedure they ascribe to is similar to the Jungian initiation process as outlined in his "The Psychology of Rebirth."³ The first step is: "Experience of the Transcendence of life" (*ACU* 117). This involves the initiates' participation in a "sacred rite which reveals to him the perpetual continuation of life through transformation and renewal" (*ACU* 117). To achieve this end, Gilbert and Angèle begin their rite of passage by participating in the ritualistic ceremony.

Gilbert advances in the process as Angèle observes. Gilbert is first encircled by three men: Joseph, a drummer, and a man carrying a mask.

Gilbert proceeds to the next level: "Immediate experiences" where the event remains outside (*ACU 118*). During this stage, Gilbert's personality is not transformed. Only his outer clothing is removed. Joseph strips Gilbert of his western shirt and tie. Joseph replaces these garments with an African cloth that he drapes around Gilbert's shoulders.

The next step in the process involves the "subjective transformation" (*ACU 119*) or the transformation of the personality. There can be either a "diminution of personality" (*ACU 119*) or an "enlargement of the personality" (*ACU 120*). Gilbert's transformation involves the latter, for he is reborn and accepts his African heritage. To achieve this metamorphosis, there must be a "change of internal structure" (*ACU 122*) which suggests a "structural alteration" (*ACU 122*). This stage facilitates a change of the persona. To achieve this goal, Gilbert continues his initiation process. Joseph ceremoniously dances around Gilbert. Later, Joseph and his assistant alternately hold the mask and continue to dance around Gilbert. The assistant then holds the mask near Gilbert's face. Joseph proceeds to comb Gilbert's hair. Then one notices a close-up of Joseph dancing as he holds the mask.

Following Gilbert's involvement in the ceremony, his wife is then included in the proceeding in order to begin her "structural alteration." Joseph holds the mask up toward her while continuing the ritualistic dance. Then both Angèle and Gilbert participate in the ceremony.

The next two transformation experiences are "Identification with a group" (*ACU 125*) and "Identification with the cult-hero" (*ACU 128*). When the individual feels accepted, these two levels of the transformation experience enable him to become a part of a collective body. To integrate Gilbert and Angèle as viable members of a group, Joseph offers Gilbert (who represents

the traditional head of the family) a gift--a necklace that he places around Gilbert's neck. This gesture indicates that the couple has been admitted into African society. Furthermore, it fosters recognition with the “cult-hero,” Joseph, as he leads the couple to achieve personal and psychological renewal.

Throughout the ceremony, one has observed the importance of the mask. In Ousmane Sembène's film, “La Noire de...,” the mask represents an essential tool in establishing the persona of the main protagonist, Diouana. In *Boubou-Cravate*, the persona (or mask) allows Gilbert (and his wife) the opportunity to acquire a new personality. Here, it represents an essential vehicle by which the couple may renew their commitment to African culture. Therefore, the mask allows Gilbert and Angèle the opportunity to acquire a new personality. In certain African societies, the mask is often used not only in “totem ceremonies . . . as a means of enhancing or changing the personality” (Jung, *Two Essays* 150) but also as a representation of a link between the living and the ancestors, thereby reflecting the “collective psyche” (Jung, *Two Essays* 157). By accepting a new persona, the couple agrees to become members of a collective society, the African society.

Not only is the mask essential for the couple to be initiated into African society, but also the dance ritual seals their bond to their native heritage. It must be emphasized that when the mask is accompanied with dance, its meaning comes alive. In *Muntu*, Janheinz Jahn underscores the significance of the dance and the mask: “Only in the unity of mask and dancer, only in action is the muzimu mask [which represents a living person] the carrier of supernatural forces” (171). In his article “Le Sacré,” Jacques Binet concurs. He suggests that the mask “n’a d’importance que lorsqu’il [le masque] danse car les esprits descendent alors sur son porteur . . . il devient un symbole, un véhicule sacré” “[the mask] only has importance when it dances

because the spirits descend on its carrier . . . and it becomes a symbol, a sacred vehicle' (*Camera Nigra* 71). It is through these extraordinary forces (achieved via the mask and dance) that the couple is successfully integrated into African culture.

Hence, the ritual comes to a close as the couple achieves the last stage in the rebirth process: "Natural transformation (individuation)" (*ACU* 130). The final sequence of the movie spotlights a close-up of the couple as they humbly bow toward the floor. Thus, they have attained self-realization in that this final gesture illustrates their acceptance and commitment as members of African society.

With his creative cinematographic techniques, Daniel Kamwa transcends the original concept of the short story (the revolt of an employee) to produce his own interpretation of the literary text. He achieves this goal by exploring the rebirth of an African couple who rediscover their cultural heritage. By participating in a ritualistic ceremony, both husband and wife are able to attain their "individuation," thereby destroying their false persona of assimilation and alienation. Now they are able to rebuild their lives as productive members in the African community.

Notes

¹Daniel Kaamwa's other films include *Pousse-Pousse* "Tricycle Man" 1975, *La Ligne de coeur* "Line of the Heart" 1978, *Notre Fille* "Our Daughter" 1980, *Les Fleurs du terroir* "Flowers of the Soil" 1983, *Totor* 1994 which won the UNICEF Prize at FESPACO in 1995, and *Le Cercle des pouvoirs* "The Circle of Powers" 1997 that was co-directed with Jules Takam.

²All translations in this study are mine.

³The text used is *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. Further references to this work are indicated by the initials: *ACU*.

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