A Different Depiction of Non-Western Culture: An Analysis of Michel Ocelot's Animation Kirikou and the Sorceress Based on Orientalism Theory

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Abstract

Kirikou and the Sorceress, a feature-length animation directed by French filmmaker Michel Ocelot, is set within an African tribe and weaves together elements of fantasy and reality to depict the culture and beliefs of the community it portrays. This article seeks to examine Ocelot's interpretation of African culture and how this perspective is represented in Kirikou and the Sorceress, through the framework of Edward Said's theory of Orientalism.A thematic analysis of the film reveals that Ocelot diverges from the traditional Western gaze on the "East" by adopting a more nuanced and balanced approach. While addressing themes of superstition and its influence on individuals, a subject often associated with Orientalist discourse, Ocelot simultaneously highlights the presence of wise, knowledgeable figures within African societies. This portrayal suggests that the guidance of such figures can safeguard people from the detrimental effects of superstition, offering a more complex and respectful view of African culture.

Keywords: Animation, Michel Ocelot, Orientalism, Kirikou and the Sorceress.

Michel Ocelot's work prominently features African culture, reflecting his deep connection to the continent. As a French writer, designer, and director, Ocelot frequently incorporates African traditions into his animated films, a focus rooted in his formative years spent in Africa before relocating to France. This early exposure to African life and customs profoundly influenced his creative imagination, leading him to repeatedly draw upon the continent as both the setting and inspiration for his narratives. His films are infused with the oral traditions of Africa, which serve as a rich source for many of his adaptations. Ocelot has openly expressed his affection for regions such as Guinea, where he spent much of his childhood, and this affection resonates throughout his work. His approach to African folklore, however, goes beyond mere adaptation. By weaving in his own narrative elements and artistic sensibilities, Ocelot brings a unique and significant perspective to these cultural stories, deepening their impact and broadening their appeal to global audiences.

When examining Michel Ocelot's works as a Western artist portraying Eastern cultures, a key question arises: Has he, as a Western artist, successfully captured the authentic essence of Eastern cultures, or has his portrayal been shaped by the concept of Orientalism, as defined by Edward Said? Said's theory of Orientalism argues that Western representations of the East are often filtered through stereotypes and a power dynamic that positions the West as superior. In this context, Ocelot's portrayal of

Eastern cultures warrants critical analysis to determine whether his works perpetuate these colonialist frameworks or if they manage to transcend such biases and offer a more nuanced, respectful depiction of the cultures he engages with.

Said posits that European, and later American, interest in the East was politically motivated, although this interest was primarily fueled by cultural factors. Alongside a set of seemingly rational political, economic, and military motivations, this cultural fascination contributed to the shaping of the East as a diverse and multifaceted region. This construction eventually laid the groundwork for what we now refer to as Orientalist studies. According to Said, Orientalism is not merely a passive reflection of political objectives in cultural or scholarly narratives about the East. It is also not just a vast, disorganized collection of works written about the region, though it remains deeply intertwined with the history of colonialism. For Said, Orientalism does not represent a nefarious imperialist conspiracy aimed at suppressing or demeaning the Eastern world (Said, 2016: 31).

“Starting in the 15th and 16th centuries, Western powers, including Italy, began to conquer weaker territories to expand trade and strengthen their empires. This expansion extended from the Mediterranean to the New World, Africa, and Asia. By the late 17th century, colonizers had entrenched themselves in significant parts of India, with Portuguese, Dutch, British, French, and even Danish forces present in the region” (Wells, 1988: 1017). In the 19th century, with the onset of the Industrial Revolution in the West, the focus on the East intensified, primarily driven by the desire to exploit its natural resources and labor. What initially began as an economic venture gradually expanded into a cultural mission, as Christian missionaries, historians, and researchers became involved in colonial activities. Colonialism, which started as a political and economic endeavor, eventually intertwined with cultural interests. By the end of World War I, Europe had colonized 85% of the globe. Thus, in Said’s view, it is reasonable to consider modern Orientalism as a facet of imperialism and colonialism (Said, 2016: 225)

"Orientalism is also considered a 'discourse,' wherein the distinction between the West and the East forms the foundation of any argument or reasoning. It is an established and institutionalized framework through which the West academically engages with the East. From this viewpoint, the existence of the 'East' is constructed by and for the West, imagined as an alien, backward 'other' in contrast to the progressive West. Orientalism serves as a Western method of domination over the East, effectively erasing the true essence of Eastern cultures and peoples. This form of Orientalism is patriarchal, ethnocentric, racist, and imperialistic, presenting the East as passive and weak in opposition to the rational and powerful West" (Nassaj, 2012: 130).

This article examines Edward Said's historical analyses of Orientalism and his critique of Orientalist methodologies, with a particular focus on the animation "Kirikou and the Sorceress." Said's works explore how the "East" is constructed by the "West" and the implications this has for Eastern cultures. This critique serves as a foundational analytical tool for investigating the representation of African culture within this animation.An analysis of how the animation elicits specific political and cultural effects on its audience presents an intriguing avenue for exploration.

Edward Said asserts that the fascination of Europeans, and later Americans, with the East is fundamentally rooted in political motivations. However, it is culture that has driven this interest, operating alongside a series of seemingly rational political, economic, and military factors. This interplay of forces has shaped the East into a diverse and complex realm, which now serves as the foundation for Orientalist studies (Said, 1395: 31).

In this discourse, the terms "Orient" and "East" are typically employed in English to refer

to Eastern regions. While "East" may occasionally denote specific geographical locations, it often conveys a broader conceptualization of the East. In contrast, "Orient" is more commonly used to specify territories situated east of the Mediterranean Sea. Consequently, the term "Orientalism" encompasses more than mere geographical orientation; it represents a distinct mode of thought. A comprehensive understanding of this thought requires an exploration of its various dimensions, achievable through the study of Orientalist literature and scholarship.

Cultural Imperialism

"Edward Said's Culture and Imperialism posits that the political and economic mechanisms of imperialism are rendered ineffective without the influence of culture. From Said's perspective, culture imbues those in power with a moral authority that fosters a sense of ideological stability. He contends that imperialism represents a modern, centered operation, theory, and dominant perspective that asserts control over remote regions. This process, according to Said, is distinct from colonization, which entails a direct physical presence in a distant territory. In this context, the term "imperialism" refers to the actions and perspectives of a dominant urban center that dictates policies regarding far-off lands. Conversely, colonization—an inevitable consequence of imperialism—entails the settlement and preparation of foreign migrants in these territories, where a government exercises active political authority over the affairs of other societies" (Baradarān Jamili, 1394: 31).

In this framework, once the active colonial empire in a region dissipates, imperialism reestablishes itself through cultural dominance and the perpetuation of specific social, economic, ideological, and political practices, thereby exerting indirect authority.

Hamid Nasaj, citing Edward Said, asserts: "The foundation of Orientalist narratives lies in the delineation of distinctions. The practice of Orientalism has engendered a series of binary oppositions that juxtapose the attributes of the West against the perceived deficiencies of the East. Consequently, the West is characterized as rational while the East is labeled irrational; the West is seen as tolerant whereas the East is regarded as dogmatic; and the West is described as advanced while the East is considered traditional" (Nasaj, 1391: 133). As previously noted, the exploitative and dominating perspective of American Orientalists is generally less pronounced than that of their European counterparts. It is also important to recognize that not all European Orientalists share the same intentions or approach, and thus generalizations about their motives can be misleading.

Analyzing Kirikou and the Sorceress

Kirikou and the Sorceress, written and directed by Michel Ocelot, is a co-production involving several companies from France, including Exposure, France 3 Cinema, Les Armateurs, Monipoly, and Odec Kid Cartoons, as well as partners from Belgium (Radio-Télévision belge) and Luxembourg (Studio O, Trans Europe Film). The narrative centers on a newborn boy named Kirikou, who possesses extraordinary abilities reminiscent of Christ-like miracles. From the moment of his birth, Kirikou demonstrates the ability to speak and embarks on a quest to confront a sorceress named Karaba. The villagers perceive Karaba as the antagonist responsible for blocking their water supply and devouring many of the village's men. As the story unfolds, she prepares to defeat and consume Kirikou's uncle in a climactic confrontation. However, through his intelligence and logic, Kirikou ultimately triumphs over the sorceress, thereby liberating the village from her malevolent influence. "In his first film, Kirikou Et La Sorcière (Kirikou and the sorceres), set in black Africa, a new born child saves the village from the wicked sorceress Karaba. Ocelot's first animated film, released in 1998 in France, and

later in many countries around the world (Argentina, Brazil, Denmark, Germany, Japan, Russia, Spain, UK, US) gave its creator international attention. The film was actually more than a box-office and critical success, since in France people talked of the 'Kirikou Effect' because of a flood of feature film projects developed in France in the period immediately following the release of Kirikou, as Philippe Monis suggests in Animation World magazine in December 2003." (Apostolou, 2009, p. 97).

Narratively, Kirikou and the Sorceress shares numerous elements characteristic of traditional children's stories. Like Ocelot's other works, the film intricately weaves together fragments of traditional folklore, reinterpreting them into highly personal narratives while preserving their authenticity. Ocelot draws inspiration from the expansive realm of fantasy literature, skillfully mining materials to craft and shape his distinctive tales. He excels in the art of intertextual bricolage, deftly blending diverse narratives to create an exceptionally engaging and original work.

Kirikou and the Sorceress unfolds as a series of remarkable adventures centered around the newly born Kirikou, making it readily adaptable into a cartoon series. Upon announcing to his mother that he is prepared to be born and cutting his own umbilical cord, he immediately begins articulating his desire to protect his village. The villagers, chosen by Ocelot as the narrative backdrop, are depicted as overtly superstitious. They erroneously believe that the sorceress Karaba has blocked their water supply and dried up the spring, a misconception that fuels their fears. Moreover, they hold a misguided belief that they should avoid confronting the sorceress, convinced that she has devoured the village's men—a notion that is equally unfounded. Karaba exploits the villagers' superstitions to maintain her dominion over them, mirroring how tyrants in Eastern regions often exert power over weak and superstitious populations. These superstitions, passed down through generations, perpetuate the authority of sorcerers and exploiters over the people. From Ocelot's perspective, this enduring predicament arises from entrenched beliefs and convictions within the community.

The animation offers a nuanced perspective on the East-West relationship as defined by Edward Said's concept of Orientalism. The villagers are portrayed as superstitious, irrational, and unreasonable, while Kirikou embodies Western and Christian ideals—powerful, logical, and rational. However, Ocelot introduces Kirikou's wise grandfather, indicating that he does not perceive the East as entirely lacking in merit or wisdom. By exiling the grandfather to a cave, Ocelot suggests that such enlightened figures often retreat into isolation or are marginalized within their communities. This disconnection underscores a significant factor contributing to the perceived backwardness of Eastern societies: the separation between a few enlightened individuals and the superstitious majority.

"Ocelot traveled regularly between all locations, but he also worked closely with seven lead animators. Everything was drawn out in 2D, though one artist actually constructed his character in a 3D computer program, then drew it out by hand in 2D. While the character drawings feature some detailed markings, most tend to be rendered in a flat style, with minimal colors, dark lines to denote muscles or body parts, and heavy outlines. Much of the rigidity of Ocelot's earlier silhouette cut-outs remains in the drawn animal and human bodies of Kirikou and the Sorceress. The characters move more deliberately than naturally. The dark brown characters resemble figures from a coloring book, while the clean, mildly abstract graphic style fits the subject matter of a children's folk tale."(Neupert, 2011: 129).

"By contrast, Ocelot wanted the setting to be spectacular in terms of species of plants, soil, and terrain: "I advised the designers that each plant in the forest should be a masterpiece, botanically accurate, with Egyptian styli zation, coloring from Henri Rousseau, with each petal and leaf

carefully made iridescent" (Ocelot 1998: 93). The resulting visual style is a startling mix of mostly monochromatic human and animal figures inserted in front of richly detailed and colored backgrounds. Each plant is drawn with extreme precision and careful color gradations (Ocelot, personal email). Thus, while the wild boar resembles a piece of construction paper, the fields he runs through are made more fully rendered with fine-grained details and 130 French Animation's Renaissance careful volume cues. Further, Ocelot occasionally uses motion blur on his backgrounds, creating a tension between the fixed outline of characters and the colorful abstraction of the environment. When Kirikou runs to rescue the children in a boat, the forest is reduced to streaking speed lines, but once he leaps in the boat and cuts a hole in the bottom, his surroundings appear to be a series of parallel surfaces rather than the sides of a three-dimensional boat interior. Repeatedly, the viewer's attention is drawn to the surface of the screen and the artifice, and rarely do perspectival cues generate a plausible diegetic visual space". (Neupert, 2011: 130).

Kirikou" is an extraordinary protagonist who showcases his miraculous and unique traits from the moment of his birth. He quickly begins to move and proclaims his name, demonstrating his intelligence, curiosity, and helpfulness. Kirikou poses questions that challenge the villagers' long-held superstitions, allowing him to uncover the truth. His quest to find answers and liberate the village from the tyranny of "Karaba" represents a struggle against both the ignorance of the people and the sorceress's power. Evoking a Christ-like figure through his enlightening nature and early ability to speak, Kirikou utilizes his exceptional gifts to free the villagers from their superstitions, guiding them toward a deeper understanding of their reality.

Initially, Karaba is introduced as a sorceress and a negative force, but as the narrative unfolds, the focus shifts to the superstitious and fearful villagers. This shift highlights the naivety and ignorance of the people in stark contrast to Kiriku's inquiry and rational thought. Kiriku, embodying intellect and curiosity, ultimately finds himself relying on the knowledge and wisdom of the elder, illustrating the importance of guidance and mentorship in overcoming collective superstition. This dynamic underscores the film's exploration of the relationship between knowledge, power, and the potential for transformation within the community.

The film "Kirikou and the Sorceress" explores the culture and traditions of an African village, highlighting the significance of oral storytelling by elders and the labor of village women. These elements emphasize the central role of oral culture in their lives. The narrative vividly depicts symbols of superstition and the misguided beliefs of the villagers, who are under the influence of the sorceress Karaba. In contrast, Kirikou embodies rationality and Western thought, skillfully liberating the villagers from Karaba's oppression. The film further critiques the roles of men and women in society, addressing how superstition perpetuates tyranny.

Music is integral to "Kirikou and the Sorceress," serving as a vital connection to African culture. Traditional instruments, such as drums and other African tools, enhance the film's atmosphere and narrative depth. The music not only amplifies the emotional resonance of key moments but also weaves seamlessly with the visuals and events, becoming an indispensable part of the overall cinematic experience.

In this work, the director frames the narrative by opening and concluding the story with images of the village, echoing the stylistic approach seen in Azur & Asmar. The final sequence culminates in a vibrant celebration characterized by joy, music, and harmonious singing. The men of the village, restored to their human forms, return alongside the wise elder, expressing their happiness through rhythmic drumming and dancing. As they reunite with their families, this scene fosters a sense of communal joy, creating a concluding moment that is reminiscent of the celebratory themes in Azur & Asmar.

In Kirikou and the Sorceress, Michel Ocelot employs distinctive storytelling techniques and specific animation styles to thoughtfully engage with the theme of Orientalism. The use of simple cut-out animation, paired with intricate atmospheric settings and visual subtleties, crafts a world that is both visually enchanting and layered with meaning. This approach allows Ocelot to explore cultural narratives while inviting viewers to reflect on deeper themes related to representation and understanding. Ocelot presents the Eastern and African worlds through the lens of daily village life, local customs, and oral traditions. However, beneath this portrayal of indigenous culture lies a nuanced worldview. Kirikou and the Sorceress symbolically critiques Western generalizations about the East, depicting it as a domain rife with superstition and tyranny. Within this framework, the film suggests that the only route to liberation from such ignorance is through the rationality and wisdom associated with Western thought. This dichotomy raises important questions about representation and the complexities of cultural understanding.

Conclusion of the Research

An analysis of the themes in Ocelot's works reveals that his cinematic animations reflect characteristics of Orientalism, though his perspective diverges from its conventional components. He assigns significant roles to the wise figures of the Eastern world. In Kirikou and the Sorceress, the salvation of the villagers hinges on Kiriku's wise grandfather, who, in response to Kiriku's request for magical powers, counsels him to rely on his intellect instead. However, Ocelot suggests that these wise figures often find themselves in a position of retreat, highlighting a disconnection between their wisdom and the superstitions that pervade the community. This dynamic invites a deeper examination of the complexities surrounding knowledge, authority, and cultural representation in Ocelot's narrative. At the same time, Ocelot acknowledges that superstitions have ensnared the people of this tribe, resulting in significant hardship, suffering, and distress within the community. However, his portrayal of this African culture is imbued with respect and fidelity to its music, roles, and rituals.

Many of Ocelot's early animations are crafted in a cut-out style, a characteristic that persists in his recent works. This aesthetic approach, according to various theorists, reflects Ocelot's Eastern perspective. He retains this flat cut-out technique even in his three-dimensional animations. For instance, in the animated film Tales of the Night (2011), the visual environment is entirely silhouetted, reminiscent of African shadow theaters. Ocelot draws inspiration from the works of Lotte Reiniger, Ancient Egypt, and the art of the Naïve or Primitive artist Henri Rousseau.

Charlotte "Lotte" Reiniger, a German film director and pioneer of silhouette animation, significantly influences Ocelot’s style, particularly in his use of cut-out animation. This influence is evident not only in Tales of the Night but also in Kirikou and the Sorceress, where the animation style evokes cut-out shapes. Additionally, Henri Rousseau’s paintings—characterized by flat colors and defined edges, even in intricate depictions of nature—serve as a key source of inspiration for the visual style of Kirikou and the Sorceress.

Together, these elements culminate in a rich and evocative portrayal of Africa, its wildlife, and its natural landscapes. The visual richness, combined with authentic African music and dance, immerses the audience in the vibrant world where the story unfolds.

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