

Twentieth Century Films From North Africa: A Look At Their Effect On Colonization And How Contemporary North African Communities Are Shaped Today

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Abstract:

The end of the 19th century saw much change in many countries all around the world. The industrial revolution and advances in technology made communication and production more efficient. As a result, countries began to compete with one another on many levels. Industrialization in the European countries was making great demands on the amounts of raw materials needed for this change, as the resources were no longer available in Europe. ⁽¹⁾

Introduction:

Both World War I and World War II established world superpowers and their allies. Various political factions were trying to gain power through movements such as the Third Reich in Germany, the Fascist movement under Mussolini in Italy, and the Communist leadership under Stalin in the U.S.S.R. ⁽²⁾

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Because Africa is such a large continent, many of the countries within this vast land had not met with colonial powers by the beginning of the twentieth century. European colonial powers were just beginning to explore these regions and to realize the large number of natural resources available to be taken by the colonial arm.

Exploration and colonization gained momentum as industrialized countries sought to expand their wealth and power. Along with colonization comes the exploitation of indigenous cultures under the name of progress. African colonies lacked a trained, experienced class needed for successful self-government. Likewise, European colonial boundaries were drawn without the consideration of ethnic and tribal geography. Often, post-colonial

African nations had both the seed of their own failure as well as governments that could not cope with the ensuing factionalism. They suffered from instability, rule by military strongmen, economic underdevelopment, and internal disagreements within tribal communities.⁽³⁾

Filmmakers had a lot of material from which to create works for the theater and for moving film. This paper will discuss several films created using the subject of colonization in Africa as the setting for dialogue, confrontation, conflict, and resolution, all in the face of great change as many cultures and races from this large continent responded to rapid change and colonization.

Different points of view will be presented to further illustrate the concept that colonization affects populations of people in different ways. Many times, entire societies had to change and adapt the belief systems of the colonizing powers. It is now evident that these types of drastic changes have had negative effects on subsequent generations.

1- Pepe le Moko by Julien Duvivier :

One of the early French films made was *Pepe le Moko*, a good example of the 1930s French movement called poetic realism, which combines graphic realism with flashes of unusual cinematic tricks. Intertwined in the film is also a message of unfulfilled dreams and nostalgia. It was directed by Julien Duvivier and tells the story of Pepe

le Moko, a gangster from Paris who robs and bank and then tries to escape the police by hiding in the casbah of the city of Algiers. He remains there for two years, protected, and cared for by his gang and his girlfriend. ⁽⁴⁾

The local police are frustrated that they cannot capture Pepe. One day, after a chance meeting with the lovely French tourist Gaby, Pepe realizes that he misses his freedom and although he has everything, he needs in the casbah, he still misses the freedom to come and go as he pleases. The local Algerian inspector, who is portrayed by French actor Lucas Gridoux, suspects this and uses Gaby as a decoy to lure Pepe out of the casbah. ⁽⁵⁾

After leaving his common-law wife Inez and continual conflicts with informers, Pepe decides to board Gaby's ship back to France so he can be with her. Just as the ship is preparing to launch, Pepe is arrested and there is a scene where he is calling out to Gaby, but she does not hear. Knowing that his life as he desires is over, Pepe commits suicide and imposes his own death sentence on himself.

Arabic actors were not used in the film. This seems to be a common occurrence in films that use a colonized country as the background. It is like the people who were originally in the place are no longer there. While this film is a fine representation of French poetic realism, the Arabic culture and people are ignored. The main character Pepe has a girlfriend in the casbah, who is not depicted as an Arabic woman, but rather, a gypsy-type woman with all the stereotypical identifiers such as frizzy dark hair, dark makeup, and large earrings. The only Arab name in the credits is Mohamed Iguebouchen, the artist who supplied the oriental music to Vincent Scotto's effective but basically, Western score. ⁽⁶⁾

This film is a typical French colonial film because its underlying theme is to let French audiences know that France did the right thing by colonizing North Africa. Most of the film was shot in a Paris studio and is, for the most part, a European drama film. The presence of native Algerian people is irrelevant and overlooked, even though Pepe is supposed to be content and safe in this casbah in Algiers. The way Arab people and culture are addressed in this film is not respectful and the film received criticism from Algerian critics. There is no use of local

Arab actors or even extras. It makes it seem as though the native Arab people are no longer a threat to the good life in this newly colonized paradise.

By the end of the 1920s films respectful of Islamic culture were not being considered or even made. Directors began shifting locales to settler-dominated Algeria where there was a strong colonial presence, and they shifted the focus of their scripts to Europeans without considering the North African populations. Although the director attempted to include bits of Islamic culture in this film, the fact remains, it was a story that was told based on a European aesthetic.⁽⁷⁾

Casa Blanca, 1942 - by Michael Curtiz

The main subject of this film is not colonization, but throughout the film, examples of what happens in third-world countries that are colonized are brought out. This film is an American-made love story, where lovers meet again after many years and are drawn to one another even though it is in the midst of war. The film was made for an American audience and so it had to present a peaceful, copasetic environment, all post-colonization.

At several junctures in the film, references are made to colonization through the comments of the characters and the way they deal with the local indigenous people. References are also made to the American experience and how American attitudes about other cultures influenced thinking in countries like France, Germany, and England. In one scene, Ingrid Berman's character refers to the African American pianist as a "boy". This term was popular in the post-slavery South of America, and it was interesting to see it used in this film. It seems as if the term was used to further state White American authority over people of color.⁽⁸⁾

The film's main character is Rick Blaine, (Humphrey Bogart), a bitter, cynical American expatriate living in Casablanca. He runs an upscale nightclub and gambling den that is frequented by various patrons including Vichy French, Italian and Nazi officials, refugees who are trying to get to the United States, and those who prey upon them. Rick claims to be neutral in all matters but it is revealed in the film that he had helped local people to try to fight off colonial invasion at various times over the past few decades.⁽⁹⁾

One night a petty criminal arrives at Rick's club with papers that allow the bearer to travel freely around Europe and eventually to America. He is trying to sell them to the highest bidder but is arrested before the exchange can take place. The thief dies while in police custody and the police do not know where he "hid" the papers.

Rick's ex-lover shows up at the club with her husband to claim these papers so they may escape to America. A German major arrives to stop their flight to America and soon the entire club is involved in this chase. Patriots that support France, Germany, and Italy are all under one roof. They all turn on the German, forcing Rick to shut the club down for the night. Rick's ex-lover's husband approaches him about the papers and his love for his wife. The two try to outwit one another and in the end, Rick sends his ex-lover to a neutral Portugal with her husband.

Concepts about colonization and what this process does to families, relationships, and loyalties are brought out in this film. While it is not directly about colonizing a small African country, the film is filled with metaphors about colonization and how it affects populations of people in various manners.

Throughout the film you see the indigenous Moroccan people assuming the roles of servants and blue-collar workers. It is as though they have been forced to assimilate and adapt to the ways and customs of the French colonizers. Some of the workers in the club are dressed in their traditional Moroccan clothing and they all have parts that portray them as happy and complacent, satisfied with having their culture changed by colonizers.

Another interesting observation in this film is that the individuals who traveled to Morocco to escape what was taking place in Italy, Germany, England, and France found themselves in a situation where they were in a strange land. Given this situation, they seemed tempted to act without the law, to act around the law. One instance is in the diamond trading and selling that was taking place in the nightclub. Another point to be brought forward is that some of the clients in Rick's nightclub drank alcohol. This is not common practice in Morocco as it is a Muslim country, where alcohol is not tolerated. ⁽¹⁰⁾

It was like many of the European visitors to Casa Blanca felt it was acceptable to continue to act as though Morocco was their own country, and some of the time it is disrespectful to other cultures that are the true Morocco.

Guns at Batasi – 1964 by Jhon Guillermin

This film illustrates many of the complexities and difficulties that the British army faced as they were forced to retreat from the empire that they had built in many places throughout Africa. The film is set in an unspecified African colony at the beginning of the 1960s. It tells the story of how the African troops were caught in the middle of political uncertainties and the introduction of new governments.⁽¹¹⁾

The central character is Regimental Sergeant Major, portrayed by Richard Attenborough. His world revolves around black and white, concepts of honor and discipline. Working and operating governments under this type of format proves to be challenging in a new governmental structure such as those found in the newly colonized countries. African leaders combined certain aspects of their traditional cultures along with those adapted from the British, to develop their own unique identities.

The filmmaker did a good job in bringing out the paternalistic feelings of the British in these colonies and their struggle to let go and let the African communities run their own affairs. The film sheds light on several of these attitudes and ideas that were, at the time, considered contemporary thoughts. The film does a good job of documenting how African colonies, one by one, gave way to military dictatorships. The viewers are offered the opportunity to learn about the processes involved in decolonization and how that affected entire communities of native African people.

Guns at Batasi also gives the viewer a look at the difficulties the British army faced as they were forced to retreat from an empire they had set up. There are many mixed emotions about this, and the director does a good job at bringing these to life. New communities that were now faced with governing on their own without the rule of the British found themselves involved in one of several scenarios; simple

racism against their own people who had not interacted with the colonizers, paternalistic thinking patterns that had been imposed on them, making the new governments treat their communities with a paternalistic attitude, or straight, across the board equality for everyone' (12)

Several reviews of the film state that if it is not powerful enough with its message about how countries rebuild after colonization and then decolonization, as countries become self-determining. Perhaps the filmmaker could have gone into a little more depth about exactly what happens once a colonization government is forced to retreat and allow the native countrymen to take over their own affairs. This concept has been explored and experienced in countries throughout the world where colonization has taken place. his film is important to see as it illustrates the complex views the British held about the Africans who were replacing them in government service, changing from simplistic racism to paternalism to outright equality. When everything was settled, in the long run, the British army was only really concerned about which soldiers obeyed orders more than others, no matter the color of a person's skin. It also gives a good idea of the process of decolonization and how that affects the colonizers, as well as the communities. (13)

Battle of Algiers, 1966 by Saadi Yacef

This film was based on a book by Saadi Yacef, an Algerian resistance fighter. It was written while he was a prisoner of the French during the period in the 1950s when the French were making progress in their colonization efforts in Algeria. This was a time of turmoil for the Algerian people, and they were forced to stand up to the colonization efforts after they had endured mistreatment from the French. After Algeria gained its independence from France, Yacef was able to get the Algerian government to fund this film project because the government considered this a very important time in Algerian history' (14)

“The film retraces how the Algerian revolutionary movement began, showing us some of the routine indignities visited on Arabs by French colonials; a bunch of young French punks trip Ali just for the fun of seeing him take a fall...As the Arabs begin to demand an independent Algerian state and terrorist cells begin to leave bombs in places frequented by the French (the race track, bars, the Air France office) the colonists (many of them called *pieds0noirs* because they were born in Algeria) become more and more enraged, attacking even small Arab children trying to sell candy on the street. “(quote – article by tomedispatch.com)

The film follows the events that occurred during a six-year period when the Algerian War of Independence was being fought. It explains how the revolutionary cells or *casbahs* were organized and depicts scenes between native Algerians who clashed with European settlers. These actions resulted in the French army bringing troops to Algeria to hunt down and eliminate the structure and organization of the National Liberation Front-Algerian patriots dedicated to defending their country against further encroachment. ⁽¹⁵⁾

Much of the message in the film depicts French paratroopers as having won the entire battle by neutralizing the FLN leadership, however, the final scenes of the film show demonstrations and rioting for independence by native Algerians, suggesting that France, although victorious in the Battle of Algiers, has lost the Algerian War. You see scenes where the French cops are yelling at the large numbers of Muslims in the streets. They go on to ask the crowds, “What is it that you want?” and the voices shout back, “we want our freedom.” Since the French believe their culture to be superior to the Algerians, it was very hard for them to see that the Algerians were not only rejecting them but French culture as well.

The film is quite graphic, and several scenes illustrate the great amount of killing and violence that everyday Algerian citizens had to endure during this difficult time. Underhanded tactics that oftentimes become part of warfare are shown in the film. So much so that everyday citizens, many times, did not know if they could even trust their own people because there were also a lot of traitors collaborating with the French. ⁽¹⁶⁾

The Battle of Algiers also touches upon the role of women during this period. Traditionally in Arabic culture, women did not participate in war. The film shows how Algerian women stepped away from their traditional beliefs to help with the revolution. In one of the scenes, three Algerian women are shown removing the *frashaya* (traditional Arabic clothing for women in north Africa) and changing into the clothing of Europeans. Once in the attire of European women, they went into different places like bars, restaurants, and hotels, carrying bombs. These brave women soldiers left the bombs in these places so they could explode and kill people. They were also very dedicated to winning independence and to winning the conflict. These women fighters were considered heroes in the war effort.

The film was shot in black and white to give the effect of being a documentary. The special effects were so convincing that some reels of the film carried a disclaimer on them stating that no newsreel was used to make the film.⁽¹⁷⁾

The filmmaker also received attention for including thousands of real Algerian citizens in the crowd scenes, as well as Algerians who had the physical characteristics, he was looking for to make the film appear more realistic. There was only one truly professional actor in the entire film, Jean Martin, who played the role of Colonel Mathieu. The rest of the cast were Algerian citizens who contributed to the authenticity of the film because they had a deep and true understanding of their culture and what was happening to their country.

Pontecorvo used sound and music effectively in the film as well to further drive his point across. Indigenous Algerian drumming instead of dialogue is heard during a scene in which female FLN militants prepare for a bombing attack. Pontecorvo also used the sounds of gunfire, helicopters, and truck engines to symbolize the French approach to the battle, while using bomb blasts, wailing, and chanting to symbolize the Algerian approach.

The film received critical acclaim not only for its technical merits but also for its careful and even portrayal of both sides of the issue.

Atrocities committed by both sides are portrayed and one side is not made to be more right than the other. This type of careful attention to balance is hard to portray in the film so this is a major reason why the film was popular among critics. Its fair-mindedness is the film's most appealing feature⁽¹⁸⁾

The film produced much political controversy in France and as a result, was banned in France for five years after its release. The torture scenes were eliminated from the original American and British releases because it was felt that this made the French look bad. It also became a reference for various guerilla movements throughout the world. During the 1960's the film gained a reputation for inspiring political violence and being used as a way to inform left-wing radical groups that were forming as a response to various conflicts taking place at that time around the world. In the US military schools, this film was used to show classes of soldiers that there was a different kind of war being fought than what they had been taught in military school. Young military recruits now had to be trained to combat civilians as well as enemy soldiers was the message the film presented. Now soldiers found themselves faced with a different kind of battle. In this environment, children were capable of shooting soldiers, women could plant bombs in café - every citizen participates in the war at some level. While it is true that there was a war and that innocent people get hurt and even killed in the war, is the director trying to say that the war is necessary? No matter where you live and what community a group of people may belong to, it is a basic human right to want to fight for your home and to protect your land and your family. In many cultures throughout the world, people will go to great measures to protect their homes and families, but does that make them terrorists? I do not think it does. It is just what happens when passionate people believe in their family and home and protect this at all costs.

Lion of the Desert, 1983 by Moustapha Akkad

Lion of the Desert is regarded by Hollywood and many filmmakers as one of the most successful films of the 1980s. The film was funded by the Libyan government and directed by Syrian director Moustapha Akkad, who believed that moviemaking was dependent on the experience of an individual at a particular point in time. Based on this reasoning, the film was shot on location in Libya and Italy, as well as in the studio.(19)

The film tells the story of the Italian Fascist regime that existed in Libya for a twenty-year period in the early part of the 20th century, between 1911 to 1931. In my estimation, the film presents a realistic view of the life of Libyan people during this period and introduces the audience to Libyan traditions and culture. This makes the film more real and as a result, a successful work.

In 1911, the Italian army invaded Libya, claiming it as the fourth Shore of Italy, and sought to establish a new Roman Empire in Africa. Mussolini appointed Italian leaders to work as governors in Libya, and to lead the war effort. Each of these governors failed to achieve any tangible victory so Mussolini appointed General Rodolfo Graziani as the sole governor of Libya. Mussolini was totally confident that Graziani would be able to break down Libyan fighters and in effect, conquer the culture. He was charged with “restoring glory to Rome” and succeeding at colonizing the Libyan population. Upon arriving in Libya, Graziani worked enthusiastically towards attaining what the others who preceded him had failed to accomplish. He implemented a new plan to expand Italian colonization in North Africa.

During this time, Libya was a country with a population of around one million. Because most of its citizens lived in concentrated centers in the middle and east sections of the country, Italian military operations were focused on these areas. In the East, where many big battles took place, Libyan resistance succeeded at keeping fascist rule out. They were well organized and knew how, when, and where to fight.

Libyan patriots fought with strong faith and believed in bringing freedom to their country.⁽²⁰⁾

When Graziani arrived in Libya, he divided Libya into three political states, Barka in the east, Fazan in the south, and Tripoli in the west. Large refugee camps located deep in the desert were built, surrounded by barbed wire fences. He believed that by alienating Libyan communities, he would advance the colonization process. Libyan fighters used horseback and traditional weapons to fight. The Italians used modern weapons like tanks and aircraft, all of which were being used in the desert for the first time in history.

Libyan resistance was headed by Omar Almoktar, who gained his people's respect because of his wisdom, courage, and love of freedom. Over a twenty-year period between 1911 - 1931, he led successful military operations against the Italian military in different places across the country and achieved important victories, even though his Libyan fighters lacked adequate weapons. The majority of military operations and battles were concentrated along the eastern shore of Libya.

Graziani was a very aggressive fighter. He was focused on his ego and wanted to leave a mark on history, so that made him appear even crueler. He never distinguished between children, elders, women, or men. When the Italian forces invaded Libya, they destroyed crops, killed anyone who got in their way, and destroyed towns, schools, and homes. He violated human rights and had no regard for international laws. Graziani committed one of the worse crimes against Libyan people when he murdered 5,000 innocent Libyan citizens in one day in the southern part of the country.⁽²¹⁾

On the other hand, Omar Almokar refused to kill the Italian refugees who were arrested by Libyan fighters because of his Muslim religious belief that it is prohibited to take another person's life for no reason.

Dividing the country into three parts had a big impact on the Libyan fighters who found it difficult to continue fighting. An example was fighters from Fazan were not allowed to enter Tripoli or Barka and vice versa. Another devastating effect on the Libyan army was they were unable to get information or weapons from other countries such as Egypt. In 1931, during a battle in Green Mountain, the Italian army arrested Almoktar. This was a great victory for Graziani who offered him money for his surrender; however, Almoktar refused and demanded freedom for Libya. Soon after, the Italian court accused and convicted Almoktar of killing Italians and leading a war against Italy, so they executed him in public in the city of Slog.

This film was significant because it portrayed events in Libyan history in an accurate manner. Of course, some of the little things are Hollywood, but for the most part, the storyline and the events that take place did occur how the film shows that they did.

Anthony Quinn played the part of Almoktar and did an outstanding job and brought intense feelings to his character, even though he is not Libyan. It is interesting to me that a film of this type was able to achieve success in Hollywood, given that Hollywood films about war and colonization subjects are usually more sensationalized, and therefore, less accurate. The other lead actors were appropriate to their roles, which contributed to the film's success as well. Especially convincing was Rod Steiger in his role as Mussolini. In preparation for his part, Steiger spent time studying and observing. This proved to be worthwhile as he was able to portray the aggressive personality of Mussolini effectively.⁽²²⁾

Another interesting note about this film is that it was funded by the government of Libya. It is not too often that a national government takes on financial responsibility for a large Hollywood production. This is not too common, but the Libyan government was committed to showing the world how they felt they had been mistreated by another country during this time in world history. The cinematography is spectacular, and I believe that shooting the film on location contributed greatly to this fact.

Filming on location also makes the story more effective. The special effects such as the bombing scenes helped make this a successful historical action film. It is truly a good example of how film can educate our society about significant historical events in world history.

I feel Akkad's work on this project was important. Making a historical film based on an accurate story requires much time and effort. He spent long hours collecting information from different sources to keep the film more realistic. Although many actors were not from Libya, they were convincing enough to hold people's attention. The film is regarded as the first of its kind...a film made in Africa and with a huge budget. It also serves as a recollection of an important time in Libyan history. The scenes present graphic lessons to people worldwide about the struggle for freedom, even in the face of hardship. ⁽²³⁾

Technically, the film is a good representation of modern filmmaking styles. Shooting on location like in the desert is not like shooting in the studio. Real places always require more work, extra effort, a big budget, and high skills from the crew members. Because the film included many action scenes, different techniques had to be used to make the big battle scenes seem more real. The special effects like the bombing scenes were impressive and I am sure very costly as well.

Akkad visited Italian museums and studied how military clothing and weapons and war machines were constructed. He also studied various personalities of Italian people so he could have his actors portray these individuals in a realistic manner. I believe that when a director spends extra time learning about the cultures presented in a film, this makes him more sensitive, and he feels more obligated to portray these cultures accurately.

This film is showing not only the struggle of Libyans for freedom but the struggle of all people worldwide even in the present time. Colonizing countries compete such as France, Germany, England, and Italy. They all tried to get another place where they could expand their geographical boundaries, and open new settlements for their citizens.

When the Italians decided to invade Libya, they believed it would be easy for them to achieve victory. I believe they thought that Libyan people were weak, stupid, and poor people, unable to defend themselves, and that they would fall fast to the Italian army's modern weapons. However, Mussolini was not aware of what freedom meant to the Libyan people. As the Italians were enthusiastic to achieve their victory, Libyans were also working very hard to keep fascist rule out. He also did not realize that Libya is a big tribe. People have strong boundaries, so they can work together for an important cause they believe in. The most powerful weapon they employed to face the Italian army was courage, faith, and patience. ⁽²⁴⁾

Conclusion:

The films we have reviewed thus far have provided a deeper insight into various experiences and levels of colonization. Through these films, in many instances, we have seen that colonization has had some good points to it because countries and communities that were colonized learned new concepts and interacted for the betterment of their own communities because of the relationships that were developed during this process.

A common storyline was the notion of one society invading another and forcing its culture on another because they feel its society is more sophisticated than the other. When communities of people organize and form a certain type of government, sometimes, they begin to feel that they need to conquer another smaller society that they do not understand. Because they do not understand the culture, they begin to feel insecure and then try to take it over and impose their customs, language, and ways of thinking on another. Many times, the cultures that are being overrun are resistant before the process is over.

One good example was from the film *Nowhere in Africa*, where the Jewish man who had moved to Kenya from Germany was taught to be a farmer and learned to survive off the land as the Kenyans did.

This type of subject is portrayed in many ways through film. The process of colonization and assimilation takes a big toll on communities

on both sides of the situation. It can be a long-complicated process or short-lived and violent. The films reviewed in this paper presented different situations that arise from colonization.

Through the medium of film, different facets of colonization can be presented to give the viewer many stories. When people are allowed to be a part of the many experiences of humankind through this art form, they can learn about other societies.

One of the most important points for audiences to learn through these films is that although we are all different people, we are also similar in many ways. We are similar because we all have a need to belong to a family, to a community, to a country. There will always be people who want to conquer other people and try to change their customs. In my opinion, the art of film is an appropriate vehicle to express these views and to share the diversity of human experience throughout the world.

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