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Vojtěch Šarše

Us and Them: The otherness in perspective of colonial politics.

You will speak English! Shall I speak the real English?

Abstract:

British and French (or Belgian) colonial politics were devastating in African colonies, through the cultural and identity alienation they had changed the colonized societies. Until today the consequences are visible and objects of various discussions and not only in academic sphere (and all over the world). One of the most powerful aspect of those politics was European educational system brought to African continent, system which in some cases stayed rooted even after the decolonization (until today in some Sub-Saharan universities – specially in francophone countries – they study so-called *Lettres Modernes*, examining the French classicistic theatre etc.). The colonizers along with their own knowledge imposed the occidental values and languages (even nowadays Ngūgĩ wa Thiong’o or Boubacar Boris Diop fight against the omnipresence of English or French). To stress the superiority, the colonizers defined the "local" languages as almost criminal discourse, punished by several different manners (physical punishment, symbol of shame etc.). In the same time, to legitimate their presence in colonies and even gain the support of the public opinion, the colonial powers stressed the white man's burden through the colonial propaganda. Several hundreds of those works were released in the last thirty yours of colonial period (specially in Belgium). Most of them were about new schools established in colonies by European powers. Those institutions enlightened the people of Africa usually portrayed as retarded children dependent on decisions of colonizer. In this paper, we will analyze one short "documentary" movie made in British colony in Africa, Gold Coast, called *I will speak English*.

Keywords:

Colonial politics; simple English; Colonial propaganda; Otherness; Imitation



Vojtěch Šarše (1989, Mělník), born in Czech Republic, graduated from Charles University, Prague, Faculty of Arts in French Philology. Now he is finishing his Ph.D. degree in Sub-Saharan literatures written in French, more specifically the topic of his research is the identity research represented in the anticolonial novel written by Francophone Sub-Saharan authors (in fifties of the last century). He is teaching African literatures, Belgian literature and Postcolonial theories at Faculty of Arts (Prague), Poetics of colonial propaganda in movie and Introduction to Postcolonialism at Faculty of Arts (Hradec Králové). He teaches also the French

language at Faculty of Arts (Prague).

Introduction

In 1948, The Gold Coast Film Unit was found out. It was firstly organized as a school for future Gold Coast's filmmakers, but in the same time it was supposed to become the main film studio in Gold Coast. In 1950, its first film was finished, *Amenu's child*, made by Sean Graham. This film unit produced at least 16 movies (we found different sources indicated different numbers). The production is defined as educational or documentary, charting among other the social development of the local society. In this paper, we will analyze the propagandistic side of this production of those colonial movies. We have chosen one concrete movie from this production, *I will speak English*, and will compare continuously intentions of this British colonial movie with the cinematographic propaganda from France and from Belgium (this part will be added in the second version of this paper).

I will speak English was projected for the first time in 1954 (completed in August of the same year). It is supposed to be instructional film about the new educational system of teaching simple English (we are going to talk about this form of English language). In fact, it is an absurd and illogical propagandistic colonial movie, which we are going to explain in three parts. First of all, we will present briefly the 14 minutes long so called documentary which is based on implicit emphasizing of differences. We use intentionally the adjective implicit, because there is no white colonizer man within the pretended realistic story. The whole cast is probably colonized Ghanaians (better to say colonized people from the Gold Coast), however we cannot confirm the origin of the cast because of the lack of information.

The class takes place outside, in some kind of a unspecified bush, there are a black board, several desks, probably teacher from Gold coast and around 15 students who are definitely, not children; they are adults learning English, with a very simplistic method. The way they are taught stresses their infantile side. Through all those facts we are going to prove better to say demonstrate the veracity of the world known postcolonial statement of Indian American postcolonial theoretician Homi K. Bhabha: “[...], then colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite”¹. The European style (not only British, but also French, Portuguese etc.) of teaching is introduced to Africa; The Africans undergo the partial modernization. The education is passed to them but they are never supposed to become the real civilized people.

In following three parts, we will explain how the primitivism, barbarism, backwardness and underdevelopment of represented Africans are simultaneously stressed and in the same time this colonial movie depicts the white man’s burden without showing a white man. Only his well-recognized values are transferred to students. But they are not supposed to profit out of it entirely, because the colonizer wants to keep the differences between him, the same, and the African, the other. The otherness is spatial, linguistic and visual. In fact, the first linguistic exercise that opens the movie represents already the indomitable dichotomy between the Africans and the teacher who has been Europeanized. They repeat after him: “You” pointing at him and “Me” pointing at them, making the distance very clear. Even though it might seem like an obsolete and outdated but ordinary way to learn English it labels the divers groups of differently shaped copies in a Bhabha’s sense.

Spatial distance

The space in this colonial movie is clearly defined and delimited: there is the space around the teacher and the blackboard and then the space around the students. The teacher is always standing next to the blackboard or his desk (he never sits). This area is arranged and organized – there are exclusively the objects that teacher needs (book, workbook, textbook or chalk). On the other hand, the space belonging to his students is rather connected to the nature. They are sitting under the tree and the viewer sees the African all around the students. It is more than clear that the author of those scenes wanted to strengthen the stereotype connected to Africans as nature people. They live in the nature, they life for the nature and with nature. The students seem very comfortable even though they are crammed into this room without no walls.

¹ Bhabha, K. H. (1984). Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse. October, Vol. 28, Discipleship: A Special Issue on Psychoanalysis, 126.

Only three things in the space of students are representatives of modernity: pencils, student books and some school desks. It is important to put forward: first of all, there are not enough school desks for every student – it seems as a disorganized distribution of desks and positions of students. It seems that some of the students are standing in the back row. It is not even recognizable if every student has a textbook and the pencil. There is no such a clear scene, we would describe the students as a tangle with no order. It supports the formless image of the character indifferntiable and mass of Africans. So, the educational system is meant to bring the civilization among the Africans but firstly not for everybody and not entirely.

In this colonial movie there is another degree of distance, more complex and more implicit. In the second half of the so called instructional *I will speak English*, the teacher takes his class outside, it means in the town in order to observe the fellow colonized in their everyday chores (fisherman with the boat and fishing rod or the non-specified woman working in her home – it is surprising that one of the female student quickly comes to help this woman). This live is showed to them as it was something new, they are studying it, naming it in the language of the colonizer. Them, being already a very approximate copies of the British model, take their distance against their own people only because they are studying the English. It makes them already different from the Africans (the observed seem to not acknowledge them, as if they were from a different world).

Visual hierarchy

For the first look, the hierarchization is obvious, the visual difference and distance between the teacher and the class are based on colonial imaginary about Africans. The teacher is dressed by western standards (shirt and shorts, both are clean and ironed out). This dress style is the copy of colonizer clothing, he could not be more British and would not be allowed. On the other hand, the so called students are dressed exactly as we imagine (because of colonial imaginary) the savage and uncivilized Africans, they are dressed in something which could be called traditional dresses. Most of the men are half naked, body partially covered in colorful textile which reminds the skin of a wild animal. The women in the class are all dressed in the same manner, in the long dresses with their hair covered. They look alike and it is different to say their age.

What is interesting, some of the men are wearing the shirts as the teacher, thus it seems that the class is the exemplification of the evolution in progress. The message is clear: studying English make them closer to white colonizer. This tactic of representation of Africans clearly states the propagandistic side of this colonial film. There are three levels of different qualities

of the copy: the teacher, European style dressed students and African style dressed students. Those comparisons give impression of the image of evolution symbolized by the space dominated by British colonizers. In fact, the colonizers rule over the evolution of colonized Africans. It is not comprehensible for the first projection, but this dimension can be found when the viewer watches between the lines.

This fact is even more stressed when the teacher brings some family (of course without names) to the class in order to show the “boy”, the “girl”, the “man” and the “woman”. Those members of family from Gold Coast is even more apart to the world of colonizer, because they do not speak English at all. They are presented only to portray the different sex and stage of human species. They are standing in the middle of the class like mannequins or like an attraction for the students, following strictly the gestures of the teacher: appearing and disappearing when they are showed. They do not have any will of their own, subordinated entirely to colonial system.

Linguistic subordination

I will speak English is definitely a movie with propagandistic intentions. It shows how the presence of British colonizers is indispensable, even though the colonizers are not physically present. They are represented by the position of the teacher: he is – in European standards – superior to the students with his clothing, by his posture and of course by his mastering of English, language of the colonizer. He is transferring it to his students, his fellow-citizens (even though they are colonized). It is important to point out that the speech of the teacher is divided between two groups of viewers or audience: there are students, attentive to every of his word – in fact they do not even move during the class, they are silence, speaking only when they are asked. The second group is the viewer who is watching the movie – it could be anybody, at the glance.

The teacher adopts very childish manner of speech, talking to his students, he articulates carefully every single letter, pretending to simplify the understanding, but all things considered he is stressing again the underdevelopment of the school system. Furthermore, he is using the expression “new literate” describing the students, pointing out the fact that it was the Europeans who brought the knowledge of reading and of writing into their colony. But when he is talking to the viewer of the movie, his linguistic style changes clearly and rapidly. His rhythm is quicker, his intonation more naturel and vocabulary largely richer. By this indisputable observation, it is possible to claim that the viewer is supposed to be European (not necessarily but probably, at the end the viewer discover that it is supposed to be a film for teachers or future

teachers, last phrase is: “The success of your teaching depends on you” and he is showing the textbook which has the same name as the movie). In fact, it could be also prepared for future teachers from Gold Coast. It could be a manual of teaching in the colonies, because he is explaining almost every step of the method. This colonial film trains the future copies to raise another generations of not perfect copies.

What is also important, the students only repeat words or phrases pronounced by the teacher or written in the workbook. They do not have a possibility to talk by themselves. Their language and discourse are both prepared by the Europeans (it is not said but very probably the textbook was made by British and imported to Gold Coast). This colonial film shows how the simple English (it means the reduce English designed for less developed parts of the world) is taught and it is obvious that in this kind of educational system there is no place for individual reflection of Gold Coast’s students. This fact illustrates very well the assertion of Homi Bhabha; this educational system is supposed to create a new and better generation of Africans, the elite of so called natives who are able to be part of British society, but in the same time it does not develop or even allowed their own individual reflection. They are repeating, and in most of the case they are repeating all together, some kind of chanting and so they are becoming one voice, contributing to the process of homogenization of Africans.

Conclusion

The chosen propaganda stressed indirectly, in a delicate way the contrast between the stereotyped African and his English teacher, probably the closest copy of the British model the viewer can see. As we said at the beginning, the methods are very outdated and cannot bring the success. The attentive viewer realizes that this quick method of learning simple English is absurd – so the important message of the movie is anyway the British domination – students repeat the words and the phrases that are not interconnected, in fact chosen randomly (body parts, sex, professions etc.). In the same absurd way, during the last linguistic exercise, the students are using the fluent English (past perfect, rich vocabulary etc.), which makes no sense taking in consideration the fact that at the beginning they repeated personal pronoun. But what is really important in the symbolic of this movie: the fact that learning English is already causing the dissension in the society of the colonized Gold Coast’s inhabitants. Even though the British colonizers are not present, almost every gest in this film is ordered by established colonial system.

References (will be extended after the comments)

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