

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
Martial Frindéthié, PhD

## Oh, Sun / Soleil ô (1967)

Med Hondo (1935-2019)

### OVERVIEW

*Auteur* Med Hondo, whose real name was Mohamed Abid, was born on May 4, 1935, in Ain Beni Mathar (Morocco). Hondo was born of Mauritanian and Senegalese parents. His father was from the Mauritanian low-caste Haratin ethnic group. After some culinary studies in Morocco, Med Hondo went to France in 1956, where he did several jobs, as a cook, a dockworker, and a farmhand. Hondo studied theater in Marseilles and later went to Paris, where he appeared in several classic plays by Molière, Racine and Shakespeare. In 1966, with a few friends from Africa and the Caribbeans, Hondo founded the Griot-Shango theatrical group to feature works from African and Caribbean playwrights. Hondo has produced several documentaries and five features, including *Oh, Sun* (1969), *West Indies* (1979), *Sarraounia* (1986), *Black Light* (1994), and *Fatima, the Algerian Woman of Dakar* (2004). Hondo did the French voice on screen of actors like Sidney Poitier, Eddy Murphy, Danny Glover, Muhammad Ali and Morgan Freeman. Med Hondo died in Paris on March 2, 2019.

*Film* *Oh, Sun* is a cinematic dramatization of several of Martinican psychiatrist and revolutionary Frantz Fanon's critiques of colonialism. The film is a denunciation not just of colonialism, but more importantly how colonization has alienated the colonizer as well as the colonized. *Oh, Sun* won the Golden Leopard Award at the 1970 Locarno International Film Festival.

*Background* The title of *Oh, Sun* is said to have been inspired by a West Indian song denouncing the horrors of slavery. Hondo self-financed *Oh, Sun*. The cast is constituted by friends and actors from Hondo's theater group, the Griot-Shango. Several actors play several roles in the film.

### CHARACTERS

*Jean* (Robert Liensol) An African accountant, who goes to France, looking for a job

*The Head of State* (Théo Légitimus) An African head of state, who indulges himself in pleasure while his constituents are living in horrible conditions in France

*The racist French* Uninformed French citizens who hate the black migrants: the expert (Armand Abplanalp); the French girls (Yane Barry and Michèle Perello); the man with the pipe (Marc Dudicourt); and the man who wants blacks to be interned in a camp (Jean-Pierre Lituac)

### SYNOPSIS

In 1947, René Maran, a poet and writer from Martinique, pens an autobiographical novel in which the main character, Jean Véreuse, falls in love with Andrée Marielle. However, Jean flees to take up a position as a colonial civil servant in Chad, because he is uncertain that Andrée, who loves him, is the woman for him. He is black and André is white. However, the memory of Andrée haunts Jean throughout his stay in Chad, and he writes to one of his white friends, asking for advice on what to do. His friend replies that as far as he is concerned, Jean is not black, that it is only the color of his skin that separates him from whites, and that in everything else Jean is "like us", and should have no hesitation in loving Andrée. In his book *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon devotes a long passage to the character of Jean, whom he diagnoses as an abandoned man, inhabited by an internalized racism, and who in all his actions seeks the approval of the white man. Is it a coincidence that the main character in *Oh, Sun* is also called Jean? Indeed, this character in the film made in the wake of Fanon's critique presents many of the ills noted by Fanon in the colonized black man. Jean, like many of his peers in the film, is a baptized black, educated in the colonial system, acculturated and sent to work in France under the illusion that his ancestors, as taught to him by his French books in Africa, are Gauls. In France, Jean encounters racism and rejection from the French: he is looked at with curiosity and suspicion when he is not simply compared to an animal; he is denied work and decent

housing; he lives in almost homeless conditions. Jean's dreams of a French life in France crumble. He is trapped in a depersonalized body: he is no longer totally African; his French upbringing having distanced him too far from Africa. Nor will he ever be French, as France does not want him to feel like a Frenchman.

## SCENES

**Africa conquered** An African king depicted in a cartoon is sitting on his throne surrounded by his subjects. Two white officers arrive. They order him to sit down again. He complies. They lean on him with all their weight and force him to sit down again.



**We had our civilizations** The cartoon gives way to real images. African men, some bare-chested, others in monk's robes, stand motionless, with serious expressions and folded arms. Their image is voiced over by a narrator who lists some of the great facts about pre-colonial Africa: "We had our own civilization; we forged iron; we had our own dances and folk songs; ... we had our own literature; we had our own legal terminology, religion, science, and teaching methods, etc."



**Missionaries** In a church, men approach the altar of a Catholic priest. The priest rises from his pulpit, walks towards the Africans and adjusts his chalice. One by one, the Africans confess their sins, asking forgiveness for speaking their mother tongues: "forgive me Father, I spoke Fulani; forgive me father, I spoke Bambara; forgive me father, I spoke Creole, Kikongo, Swahili, Lingala" (and so on). The priest orders the spirit of evil to leave "these children" and make way for the spirit of God. The priest blesses the Africans, baptizes them, and gives them new Christian names: Jean, Auguste, Martin, Bernard, Adolphe, etc.



**The new apostles** Marching to the beat and carrying crosses, the newly converted Africans are sent out into the African countryside to convert their fellow villagers. At first, the apostles set off at a brisk pace, but the weight of their crosses and the heat begin to weigh them down. Their shoulders grow slouched and their steps slow.



**Converts become soldiers** The converts now wear the uniforms of colonial infantrymen. Their upside-down crosses become wooden swords. The converts, now soldiers, enter a white palace. A white man, his uniform covered with military medals, stands on a pedestal, with the effigies of African chiefs on either side of him.



**Fighting** At the white decorated officer's command, the converts-turned-soldiers line up in two opposite rows, swords raised. The white officer shouts another command, "French, American, English", and the converts-turned-soldiers pounce on each other, sword-fighting. The white officer, on his pedestal, arms crossed, looks on with a satisfied expression. Discarding their weapons, the combatants fight hand-to-hand until they fall from exhaustion. The white officer, visibly bored by the calm caused by the end of hostilities, revives the last two fallen soldiers by passing a banknote under their nostrils. The soldiers get up and start fighting again. The white officer pins the banknote on the chest of the last soldier standing. But the soldier, seriously affected by the fierce battle he has just won, collapses and dies. The white officer removes the banknote from the fallen soldier's chest, puts it back in his pocket, and leaves, looking satisfied.



**Jean arrives in France** The scene shifts to a black man on a hill, carrying a suitcase in his hand. A voiceover reveals his thoughts: "one day, I began to study your charts, to read your thoughts, to study Shakespeare and Molière ... I am whitened by your culture, but I remain a Negro, just as I was in the beginning." This is the black man christened 'Jean' by the priest. Jean has just arrived at a train station in Lyon. He looks lost and disoriented. His suitcase bears stickers of African countries: Sudan, Ghana, Mauritania, Guinea, Cameroon. Jean stays at a hotel in Lyon. The next day, Jean buys a newspaper and browses the job ads. Jean underlines a few ads that interest him. Jean sees signs advertising jobs at business doors. He goes to inquire but is turned away at the door.



**Africa commodified** Jean goes to Paris. Jean walks past a subsidiary of the airline Air Afrique and a poster inviting French people to take a vacation in Black Africa. The poster makes Jean smile. Jean buys himself a sandwich. He enters a candy store on the Champs Elysées. On the shelves are all sorts of chocolate treats.



**Looking for a job** Jean goes to a garage that is hiring for a mechanic's job. Jean tells the garage owner that he has come for the advertised job. The garage owner gives him a long look and replies "no". Jean asks if the job is taken. The garage owner tells Jean that the job is not taken, but that his answer is no. The mechanic's aid whispers to Jean, "Run, run, Comrade. The old world is behind us."



**A fighting couple** Jean knocks on neighbors' door to ask for help. Jean finds the couple seated, each in front of a television set installed in a closet on either side of the entry door: The couple are apparently absorbed in two different program shows. Before Jean can explain why he has come, a violent argument erupts between the husband and wife. They complain about each other's excessive spending. The voice of a Catholic priest celebrating mass on television suddenly calms the couple. The husband and wife slump in their chairs and begin to doze off.



**African labor in France** Jean meets a sociologist specializing in tropical markets. This is the man who played the role of the priest baptizing the Africans. Jean is curious to know what this expert thinks about the use of African labor in France. The expert tells him that it is a very lucrative business for France, which, apart from the costs associated with transporting the material, that is, the African personnel, requires little or no investment for enormous benefits. The expert tells Jean that under such profitable conditions, France is not about to put an end to bringing African workers in France. The expert tells Jean that from this perspective, it is essential for France to choose individuals capable of understanding things like the French, thinking like the French, registering words like the French, and above all giving words the meaning that the French give them. The camera cuts to an African narrator in a three-piece suit, who says, looking visibly indignant, that in this way, millions of Negroes will be whitened but economically enslaved. Whitewashed Negroes who will be civilized slaves for France. The expert tells Jean that if it were up to him, to avoid the social and political problems that will necessarily arise with the anarchic immigration of African workers, France would be better served by importing workers whose origins are more adaptable and closer to the French, that is, European workers. These, he says, are workers who are close to France, and who are eager to come to France. Jean stares at him, visibly disappointed.



**The lesson of the day** The scene shifts. The colonial markets expert is sitting in a teacher's chair, in a classroom, with the Africans previously converted in front of him. Next to the expert is an African interpreter. The expert announces to his audience that the lesson of the day is to make them understand the meaning of words. The expert has an assortment of tools on his desk. He raises each tool and says its name. The interpreter repeats for the Africans what the expert says. The Africans in turn repeat in unison what the interpreter says. The Africans learn what a hacksaw, a wood saw, a screwdriver, and a broom are.



**Looking for a Rental house** A narrator explains that a Frenchman who owned a building in very poor condition, containing 7 rooms, a toilet and a kitchen, had the idea of making it profitable. He planned to rent his building to 80 African migrants, each paying a monthly rent of 23,000 old francs (around 37 dollars). The premises soon became uninhabitable, and the tenants were moved to a homeless shelter. His suitcase in hand, Jean passes an immigrant worker sweeping the street and heads for the entrance to a building. Seconds later, Jean is violently thrown out of the building. At the door, a sign reads, "End the Negro and Arab peril". Jean tries to enter a second building. Here too he is violently rejected. Jean places his suitcase on the sidewalk stairs. The black sweeper approaches Jean. He whispers something in his ear. Jean hands his suitcase to the man, who hands him his broom.



**The class struggle is a national affair** French students and workers are on strike. An emissary from the Swedish students and workers comes to give financial aid to the French strikers. His help is refused by the head of the French youth information office, who says that the French strike is a national affair. The Swedish emissary insists that the strike has international relevance. The emissary asks that the money be given to the immigrant workers. The center's director replies that French workers have no contact with immigrant workers.



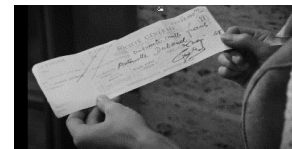
**Go back to your country** Jean enters a courtyard. He is confronted by the concierge, who asks him what he wants. Jean replies that he has come for the accounting position advertised in the newspaper. Jean shows her the advertisement. The concierge tells him there is no such position here. She tells him to go back to his country. Jean asks her to tell him what his country is. She runs and barricades herself behind her glass door to watch him leave.



**Go back to Africa!** Jean is almost run over by a car packed with black occupants and a white woman. The car screeches to a stop. The car's occupants scold Jean, ask him what in the world he is doing in France, and tell him to go back to Africa. The car is driven to a posh villa. The white woman is escorted inside, where an African statesman awaits her.



**A big payday** The white woman leaves the bed of the African statesman. She receives a check for 50,000 francs for her time with him. She goes to the bank to collect her check for 50,000 francs. As she leaves the bank, an immigrant worker proudly counts his monthly pay, 37.30 francs.



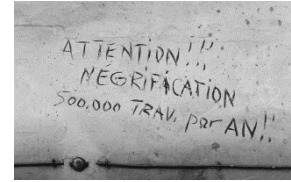
**Thinking about returning to Africa** The immigrant workers meet to discuss their living conditions. They all denounce the hostile attitude of France, which brought them here to work but treats them as undesirables. Several of them raise the question of returning home. Some suggest that they contact their respective embassies in France. However, they conclude that their embassies work on behalf of France, not for them.



**From curiosity to disgust** Jean, cigarette in mouth, meets a passer-by with a pipe and asks him for a light. The man stops and flicks his lighter for Jean, who thanks him and leaves. The man with the pipe turns and watches Jean go with visible interest. As he resumes his journey, the man with the pipe finds himself, for a few seconds, in the midst of a dozen or so black men deep in discussion, heading in the same direction as Jean. The man with the pipe stands still, visibly disgusted.



**The black invasion** A voiceover of French natives complaining about the invasion of black people: They complain about the thousands of Africans that France brings in every year to perform jobs that can be done by machines. They complain that all these migrant workers are taken care of by their tax money. Two white building concierges in front of their buildings talk about the growing number of black people living in the buildings in their neighborhood. One says she has 5, including two teachers. She says that they are well-educated and decent, and that she finds nothing wrong with them. The second concierge says with visible annoyance that she has too many of them in her building, 17, in fact. Their conversation is interrupted by the arrival in the courtyard of a group of black and Arab workers led by Jean. One of the concierges complains that one is no longer free in one's own country. A graffiti on a wall warns: "Beware!!! Negrification! 500,000 workers a year."



**A white, black man** Two young white women visit a friend who gave birth two months ago to a child with a black father. When they arrive, they are surprised to discover that their friend's husband has all the features of a Caucasian, even though their baby is black. They then learn that although the baby's father looks white, the child's grandfather is black. The two young women return home visibly shocked. One of them exclaims that she has never seen anything like it. Once home, the two young women talk about the strange experience they just had at their friend's house. One of them asks the other if she has ever thought of sleeping with a black man. Her interlocutor replies that she must be sick to think such things. The two women whisper and laugh about what they have heard regarding the sexual attributes of black men. One of them announces that she would like to try a black man out of curiosity.



**Jean is being baited** Jean, leaning against a guard rail, is reading the newspaper. The young woman who has decided to sleep with a black man approaches him. She circles him, stares, gives him hints that she is interested. Jean moves closer to her. Their breaths seem to be meeting. She crosses the road. Jean follows her. Jean walks with the young woman, arm in arm. They window-shop. They now walk close together, under the visibly embarrassed gazes of passers-by and customers seated at the café terraces. The scene is accompanied by a cacophony of jungle and farmyard animal noises. Jean and the young woman enter the young woman's apartment building just as the black baby's white father is coming out with one of his friends. The friend of the black baby's white father remarks that seeing a white woman on the arms of a black man is disgusting. His interlocutor reveals that he too is black, and leaves him, visibly surprised and embarrassed.



**Not up to expectations** Jean spends the night in the white woman's bed. Upon awakening, he asks her if she had a good time. She replies with a pout of disappointment that she expected more from him, given what she has heard about the prowess of black men in bed.



**Arguing about the skin color** Jean falls asleep on a park bench. He is awakened by the shouting of two black Caribbeans arguing. One of them tells the other that he is lighter-skinned and has the right to live in France, and that his darker-skinned counterpart should return to the West Indies. On the way down the garden stairs, the light-skinned black man bumps into the man with the pipe and knocks over his basket of groceries. As he apologizes, the man with the pipe scolds him and tells him that blacks are all the same, and that they should all go home.



**Jean has nightmares** After a night of drinking with some black workers in a city bistro, Jean returns to his apartment, visibly dejected. He collapses into bed fully clothed and falls into a restless, nightmare-filled sleep. In his nightmares, Jean sees himself being instructed by white authorities to be the agent of a white order and of the enslavement of blacks in Africa. Jean has visions of an Africa invaded by a Western culture, which is unable to export its culture to Europe. He sees himself in an Africa that is exploding around him with cannon fire, while he is bare-chested in the



rubble and screaming with banknotes stuck to his skin. Jean sees himself running across the fields, chased by a dog as he stops and raises his fist in the air like a member of the Black Panther Movement.

**Fleeing the city** Jean snaps out of his stupor. He dresses and leaves his room. He sets off on a frantic run through meadows and woods, away from the city. Jean's run takes him to the countryside, to the home of the director of the youth information center, his wife and three children. They invite Jean to their home. The table is set in the garden, and Jean is invited to share the family meal. The meal, which starts well, soon takes a different turn. The children climb onto the table and start stamping on the food, to the laughter of their parents. Jean stands up, and without saying goodbye, walks away from his hosts.



**Violent decolonization** Jean has visions of naked black men throwing themselves in the sea. Jean starts running aimlessly through the forest. Several times, he stumbles, falls, gets up, runs again and falls. Jean does not seem to find his way back. Jean screams in anger. Images of revolutionaries killed by the West - Lumumba of the Congo, Guevara of Cuba, Cabral of Guinea Bissau, Malcolm X of the United States - flash before Jean's eyes.



## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**JEAN** Jean is the representative figure of the French colonized. He bears all the symptoms of the black brainwashed in the French educational system, often converted to Christianity, and rendered alienated by his propensity to copy France. At the end, however, disillusionment too often awaits him.

*Naïve* Like any colonized African who has been educated by imperial France, Jean learned in his schoolbooks the phrase known to all African schoolchildren: "Our ancestors the Gauls". Persuaded by this assertion, Jean arrives in France, years later, with an accounting diploma in his pocket, convinced that France is his country, and that he will certainly find work there and be accepted by his French "compatriots" as one of them. Jean's naïveté leads to disillusionment.

*Selfless* In France, Jean does not think only of himself. He puts himself at the service of all the black workers of his town who are discriminated against by the French system. He organizes them into support groups to demand their human rights, work and better living conditions. This is no easy task, as the African authorities in France to whom these support groups turn remain deaf to the demands of the black immigrants.

*Disillusioned* In France, Jean realizes that the French are not ready to welcome him as one of their own. On the contrary, they see him as an animal, a tool to be used by France, and at best, a foreign nuisance. He is denied work, decent housing and even human dignity. Jean would like to leave France, to regain his humanity. But he realizes that he is trapped, that he no longer has a personality of his own, having been stripped of his African culture and rejected by France.

*Revolutionary* Jean's disillusionment leads him to embrace a violent decolonization like that of past international revolutionaries. The film ends with Jean trapped in the European forest, screaming his anger. In his anguish, Jean has visions of African and American revolutionaries burning in the fire kindled by the West. Jean seems to be calling for revolution. Jean joins Frantz Fanon, who in *The Wretched of the Earth*, called for armed and violent decolonization.

**THE AFRICAN LEADER** The representative figure of the African ruling class is a French bourgeois wannabe. Alienated from his people, he is so fixated on France that he fails in his mission to protect his countrymen. Instead, he becomes an accomplice of the French in their oppression of blacks.

*Alienated* The African ruling class is represented in the film by the character playing the role of an African head of state, who at the beginning of the film converts to Christianity and takes the name of Auguste. This head of state wants only one thing: to resemble the master of yesteryear. He buys himself a big villa in France, stuffs himself with French delicacies and has white women served to him in bed, for whom he pays a lot of money. He is a man materially and morally alienated from Africa.

*Negligent-complicit* The African workers in France are living in deplorable conditions. They are organizing to request the intervention of their representative consulates with the French authorities. But the African envoys are more concerned with pleasing France than fighting for the rights of their citizens. Officially, say the African diplomats in France, there is nothing to report; everything is going well. African statesmen have abandoned their citizens to the whims of racist France.

*Selfish* The African statesmen work to fulfill their own pleasures. They buy luxurious villas in France, dine on caviar and wine, and spend vast sums on pleasure girls. Meanwhile, the African workers for whom they are responsible sleep and work in inhuman conditions, unmoved. It is as if the African workers in France have neither a state nor representatives, their rulers having abandoned them.

**THE FRENCH** Uninformed about the contribution made by the black workforce to France's development, the French judge blacks based on the erroneous image given to them by colonization. The French behave like ungrateful supremacists towards the black community.

*Supremacist* Most French people in the film are portrayed as believing in the superiority of their race. The tropical market expert calls for white immigrants rather than blacks to be brought to France. The concierges hate having blacks in their buildings. One man suggests replacing the blacks with machines, and another Frenchman, shocked by Jean's relationship with a white woman, suggests that the blacks be herded into camps "as was done with the Amerindians ... and the blacks in America."

*Ingrate* The African workers brought to France by the French government to work in the factories and sweep the streets of the French are, according to the tropical markets' expert, good business for France. With them, France makes big profits with minimal investment. However, the French see them as nuisances and treat them with contempt.

*Ignorant* If the French are so hostile and contemptuous towards black people, this is because they are ill-informed. Like the two young white women gossiping about the supposed sexual attributes of blacks, most French people know black people only through the stereotypes fed to them by colonial "experts" like the film's racist expert, who objectifies blacks and prefers European workers to them. This lack of information has led some French people to suggest that blacks should be herded into camps.

## THEMES

**Culture-acculturation** "The tragedy of every colonial situation," writes Fanon, whose theses nourish *Oh, Sun*, "is that of the impossible encounter." When we know that colonization is the arrival on the land of the other and the subjugation of the other by a foreign power, we have every right to wonder how it is possible for individuals to interact physically without encountering each other. The simple explanation is that, for Fanon, every encounter must be prompted by a desire to exchange with and recognize the other. In the colonial context, however, what is at play is a unidirectional relationship in which the colonizer imposes himself on the colonized, imposes his imported culture on the colonized, but does not allow the colonized's culture to import itself to him. The result is an inferiority complex leading to alienation, in which the colonized is denied all culture by the colonizer, who asks him to deny his own civilization in order to assimilate to the colonizer's civilization. According to Fanon, colonial institutions (the colonial school, the church, the colonial army), and even the colonizer's language and gaze, contribute to this acculturation of the colonized.

*Illustrative moments: "Forgive me Father, I spoke Bambara, Fulani, Lingala."*

These are the confessions made by the Africans to the Catholic priest, who absolves them of their sin and baptizes them, thereby taking them out of the devil's dominion. The Africans are thus shamed by the Catholic Church for speaking their mother tongue and for worshipping the gods of their respective cultures. In replacement of their languages, their ancestral gods and their cultures, what the church gives them is the French language and French names: Jean, Paul, Auguste, Martin. In this way, the colonial church helps to impose Western culture on Africans, and to erase from them everything that had hitherto constituted their "sense of self". Then comes the army, which equips the Africans with weapons,



makes them march to the beat, and, under the orders of a white officer, incites them to put their lives at stake to protect Western culture and interests. Having been alienated from their own culture, the African migrants in France learn to serve the members of the “superior” culture through approximate training in manual labor: the Africans are taught how to use a saw and a broom. And when Jean's ambition to work as an accountant is crushed by repeated rejections from employers, an African street sweeper puts a broom in his hand, as if to bring him back to the reality of his supposed inferior condition.

**Religion-army** In the African colonies, Christian religion and the army worked in close collaboration for the furtherance of Europe's colonizing ambition. Religion was always the sentry of the colonial enterprise, which in its churches and schools diverted Africans from their ancestral practices, softening them up, making them malleable and receptive to Western ideals. Indeed, King Leopold 2 of Belgium was known to tell Protestant priests sent to the Congo that their mission was to serve the interests of Belgium, not God. When, after the efforts of the church to pacify Africans and the Christian school to turn Africans into docile interpreters and servants of the West, recalcitrant souls persisted, the army would intervene to quell any hint of resistance to the colonial enterprise and kill any rebellion in the bud. From the outset, *Oh, Sun* criticizes the collusion of the army and religion, and the deleterious effects of these two colonial institutions. Religion causes the African to deny himself, to spit from his body and soul all vestiges of his Africanness, henceforth perceived as primitive and evil, to accept Western values presented as superior. As for the colonial army, made up of African recruits and led by white officers, it inculcated in Africans an instinct for self-destruction that made them turn against their own selves, fighting anyone in their tribes who did not adhere to the ideals of the colonizing powers.

*Illustrative moments: From cross to sword.* Med Hondo merges religion and the army in a scene that is meant to illustrate the collusion of these two institutions in the establishment, maintenance and perpetuation of Western supremacy. The film opens with a Catholic priest blessing native Africans after making them confess their common sin of speaking their mother tongues. To affirm their faith in Christianity, “these children inhabited by the spirit of the devil” spit on the ground, then repeat their new Christian names from the Bible, an action meant to symbolize the rejection of their lives of darkness in favor of a life of light. Each wearing a cross, these new converts set off on a mission, evangelizing the countryside. Then we see them turn their crosses upside down, turning them into swords at the service of colonial soldiers into whom they themselves have now been transformed, responding to the battle cry of a white officer. Thus, Africans are first softly persuaded to join the church, then forcibly enrolled in the army, as if in a continuous training program to serve the colonial administration, the army being but the logical extension of the church in the civilizing mission of imperialist Europe.



**Selfishness-Hypocrisy** The film offers a critique of the civilizing mission of the colonizing powers. This mission, which officially began in 1885 after the Berlin Conference as a charitable and altruistic action by Europe towards the Africans, was no more than a veneer for Europe's selfish ambition for wealth accumulation and racial aggrandizement. Indeed, while Europe was advertising itself to the world as the savior of Africa, in the hushed salons where Westerners talked amongst themselves, their true intentions were not hidden. For example, after France's defeat by Prussia in 1871, French Prime Minister Jules Ferry, a passionate advocate of colonial expansion, said it straight out: France needed colonies to open new commercial outlets for itself as a solution to American and German protectionism, and to assert its racial superiority on the world stage. To achieve this, it was necessary to revitalize the policy of assimilation, which claimed that French civilization was the quintessential civilization to which the colonized African should aspire by gradually distancing himself from his diabolical, savage Africanness. The Catholic Church and the colonial school were thus set on a mission to humanize and civilize the black monster, turning him into a docile workforce for France and an unrepentant future consumer of French manufactured goods. Hondo's critique of France's duplicity is incisive.

*Illustrative moments: whitewashed and enslaved* During an interview that Jean, an African migrant in France, has with the expert in charge of recruiting workers in Africa on behalf of France, Jean learns from the expert that the practice of bringing African migrants is very lucrative for France. Jean learns that the French state has every reason to perpetuate it, as it requires little or no investment for great profits to France. This revelation by the recruiter contradicts the explanation France





officially gives in justifying its colonizing venture in Africa. Sometimes citing the salvation of the souls of Africans living in the darkness of the devil, other times citing the need for France to bring civilization and education to Africans, France has seldom officially disclosed to its citizens the enormous dividends that its colonial enterprise brings. Thus, convinced that France is wasting money in Africa to save primitive people, the French people, such as the two building concierges and the man with the pipe, see the Africans in their country as a nuisance they must put up with, and they turn against the Africans, admonishing them to “go back to Africa.” Exasperated by France’s duplicity, an African remarks that the colonial education that precedes the transferring to France of African workers is only meant to turn Africans into intellectually whitened slaves still discriminated against in France.

**Fear and aspiration** Med Hondo plays with a very Fanonian topic of the relationship between races. In passages from his book *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Frantz Fanon characterizes sexual attraction to the opposite race (the white woman attracted to the black man, and the black man attracted to the white woman) as a yearning for self-promotion. According to Fanon, the white woman who sleeps with the black man does so with the fear of being rejected by her white congeners, but also with the aim of asserting herself by conquering her own demons, that is, her fear of the black monster as constructed or invented by her race. Similarly, the black man who sleeps with the white woman does so at the risk of castration, and Fanon recalls the American colonial context, where the simple fact of a black man raising his eyes to a white woman sometimes earned him castration or hanging. Thus, the black man puts his life on the line when he sleeps with the white woman. However, he takes this risk in his quest for ascension in the white world, symbolized by the milky breasts of the white woman he caresses during the sexual act. The sexual relationship between Jean and the white woman in *Oh, Sun* takes us right to the heart of this question.

*Illustrative moments: I love you; neither do I* Two white women returning from a visit to a friend’s house are stunned to realize that their friend’s husband has black origins. Sitting on their couch, they are lost in contemplation for a few minutes before one of them asks the other if she has ever slept with a black man. The question comes as a surprise to the other, who finds it preposterous. The two women go on to make fun of black people’s flat noses, thick lips and accent. Then they whisper and laugh about the alleged anatomical virtues of blacks and their prowess in bed. Suddenly serious, one of them announces that she would like to sleep with a black man out of curiosity. The next day, the woman targets Jean while he is desperately looking for a job in France. Pleased with the young woman’s interest in him, Jean spends the night in her bed. The next day, it becomes clear that this “love affair” is nothing more than a passing fancy, and that there will be no follow-up. The woman expected more from a black man, given the reputation attributed to blacks. Jean will return to the streets, trying to conquer the “French dream” in a different way.



**Alienation and Betrayal** One of the greatest achievements of colonization is to have turned the colonized black into an ‘abandonment neurotic’, in other words, a man living in fear of being abandoned by the West, and who in his everyday actions desperately seeks the West’s approval. The consequences of this neurosis become catastrophic when this alienation affects the governing elite of the newly decolonized nations, the very elite who are entrusted with the very important task of seeking out the illnesses that plague their young nations (inequality, poverty) and finding solutions to them. The elite affected by abandonment neurosis have no national or nationalistic ambition. Their only ambition is to personally resemble Westerners by accumulating Western symbols. And all too often, the neurotic elite push this mimetism to excess, to the point of absurdity, ignoring the concerns of their people, betraying the ideal of independence, and in too many cases, unfortunately, becoming agents for the neo-colonization of their people. Med Hondo’s film reiterates this Fanonian critique of the black elite guilty of dereliction of duty and betrayal of the independence struggle in their propensity to seek the West’s approval.

*Illustrative moments: All is well!* The black immigrant workers in France live in miserable conditions. 80 of them are housed in a decrepit space with 7 rooms and one toilet. They are insulted by the French, who refuse them jobs. During a meeting, some of them suggest that they talk to their consular authorities in France about the difficulties they are experiencing. Others retort that African ambassadors in France are more concerned with the welfare of France than that of their own constituencies, and that it would be a waste of time and energy to rely on their embassies.



They appear to be right, for while Africans are subsisting in France, one of their heads of state, in a luxurious villa in Paris, is gorging himself like a pig on delicious food and expensive wine before joining a French prostitute waiting for him in bed. For a few hours' pleasure with the French prostitute, the African head of state writes her a check for 50,000 francs, the equivalent of 1,300 times the monthly wage of a black worker. At a press conference where he is asked about the state of the relationship between France and Africa, the African head of state announces, satisfied: "All is well!"

**Colorism (black on black discrimination)** There exists among black people a racial discrimination based on the level of melanin. This discrimination has its origins in the colonial encounter during which human beings were classified on a gradation scale that elevated lightness of skin to a state of grace. The less one was black, the more one was valued. The colonial plantation (where the white man was superior to the mulatto, who in turn was superior to the black man) was the first stage on which this human absurdity was played out, and the absurdity continued to permeate social relations over the following centuries, right down to the black man's psyche. In his book *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon puts his finger on what has become an identity crisis for the colonized, leading them to hate the color of their skin and to seek rapprochement with the white, either through compulsive denial of their race or through a process of "lactification" (marrying a white man or woman and hoping to whiten the family). Although Fanon's critique of colorism focuses specifically on the condition of the colonized West Indian, today, all over Africa, colorism is claiming victims, and cosmetic products promising whiteness and higher status are selling like hot cakes.

*Illustrative moments: my skin is fairer than yours* Two black men from the Caribbean are arguing in the street of France. One of them tells the other to return to where he comes from. He adds that he, at least, is light-skinned and therefore deserves to be in France. As the proud light-skinned black turns away, he bumps into a white man and causes the latter to drop the groceries he was carrying. The white man scolds the proud light-skinned black man and tells him that all Blacks are the same troublemakers, and that they must all go back to Africa, thus crushing the black man's hope of moving socially upward on account of his low level of melanin.



**Otherness** When, in 1807, the German philosopher Friedrich Hegel asserted that any interpersonal encounter is an opportunity for diverse consciousnesses to enter a (non-physical) confrontation, at the end of which they necessarily recognize each other as individuals, the Martinican psychiatrist Frantz Fanon replied almost a century and a half later that this assertion is not valid in the colonial context of fraught interracial relations. Here, Fanon asserts, the white man's superiority complex, and conversely the black man's inferiority complex, make black-white encounters impossible. Hondo undertakes this Fanonian critique which posits that the white man does not allow the black man to assert his certainty, because he does not give him the opportunity for a reciprocal relationship. For the white man, the black man is inferior, even invisible, and therefore unworthy of engaging. All the white man wants from the black man is the labor of the black man, and this labor of the black man is important, no matter which black man it comes from, because after all, all black men are the same. This dismissive attitude of the white, which cast the black man into invisibility, provokes in the black man a frantic search for the signs of the white, the desire to whiten himself, and consequently the inability to access his own certainty.

*Illustrative moments: Too busy recognizing each other* Jean knocks on the door of a French couple asking for help. However, we never find out what kind of help Jean needed. The husband and wife, each slumped in front of a TV set, absorbed in their own shows, do not notice Jean, do not hear him. Then, suddenly, standing up as if jolted by some superhuman force, unaware of Jean's presence, they start barking insults at each other, accusing each other of spending the family's money uncontrollably. A Catholic mass on TV calms them down. And as if nothing had happened, the couple quieten down and collapse, half-asleep in their chairs while Jean withdraws from their apartment. Everything happens as if Jean were never there, as if he were invisible to this couple in the midst of their struggle for recognition. As Frantz Fanon said: in the colonial context, the black person, as a human being, is invisible to the white. What the white man wants from him is his work, not his recognition; after all, as the man with the pipe says in the film, black people are all the same; they have no individuality.

**Objectification** In his *Discourse on Colonialism*, Martinican poet Aimé Césaire wrote, colonisation = chosification), meaning, colonization = thingification/objectification. Two years later, in 1952, Césaire's idea

that colonization dehumanizes the black man is picked up by his student, Frantz Fanon, whose theses Med Hondo's film builds on. Hondo shows how the black man, stripped of his human value, is transformed into an object of commodification, easily modified, lackadaisically bartered as a tool to serve the West. If this objectification is possible, it is also because it is enabled by a gullible, impressionable, easily malleable black, who has allowed himself to be seduced by an image of himself invented by the West. Hondo shows how the racial gradation that elevated the European's skin to a state of grace is taken up by certain blacks with lighter complexions to prove their supposed superiority over darker blacks. For whites, however, as Fanon demonstrated through his own experience in France, whether the black is of lighter or darker complexion, he remains a black, a thing devoid of humanity, and from whom the best that can be drawn is toil. And even there, as Hondo shows, the racist white man prefers machines, which do not have the audacity to compete against whites for humanity.

*Illustrative moments: blacks as tools* In a conversation with Jean, the tropical markets expert in charge of recruiting black workers for France makes a revealing slip of the tongue. He announces that "transporting the equipment" costs France very little, before correcting himself to say that he meant transporting black workers. Thus, Africans are classified not as human beings with souls and feelings, but rather as mere objects, tools that are only relevant for the purposes for which they are used. Indeed, it is in this spirit that a Frenchman, outraged at seeing more and more Africans in France, cries out his exasperation and wonders why France is bringing in Africans to perform tasks that could well be done by machines. Here, then, there is no human relationship between the black worker and the French citizen. The black man is like any other object, any other tool, the only difference being that the presence of this object, of this tool, is an insult to the eye; an aberration that destroys the beautiful French landscape and which must be removed from view.

**Zoomorphism** The first theses of white supremacy were based on associations of blacks with animals, and treatises supporting the bestial character of blacks are legion. Thus, for example, Edward Long, a British planter and administrator in Jamaica, wrote of the blacks in terms that were evocative of animals. In his view, blacks did not just conduct themselves like apes, as his contemporaries would think. Long was convinced that blacks had sexual intercourse with apes, and even that they would not hesitate to establish themselves in domestic partnerships with orangutans. Obviously, all this stems from the myth and invention of the black man in the colonies, forbidden to marry but forced by slave masters to sexual promiscuity with several partners to increase the number of slaves. The invention of the black man retroactively frightened the inventor and, above all, the wife and daughter of the inventor of the bestial black man, who were urged to stay away from the black animal at the risk of being violated in the most irreligious, un-Christian and untidy way possible. Hondo shows, as Fanon does, that the zoomorphism of the black man, rather than frightening the white woman, only sharpened her curiosity, her desire to sleep with the black man.

*Illustrative moments: I want to try it out of curiosity* Two white women mock the physical appearances of blacks. They flatten their noses, puff their lips, emit guttural, incomprehensible sounds and laugh. And then one of them, out of curiosity she says, announces that she would like to sleep with a black man. She makes a pass at Jean, and soon Jean and the young white woman are walking down the streets, pressed up against each other, stopping from time to time to exchange kisses. The scene arouses curiosity and disgust in the people who are watching them. It even evokes a certain repulsion in passers-by, which the film translates into animal sounds, bleating, roaring, neighing, cackling and braying. Love between a white woman and a black man registers in the French imaginary as an interdicted act, the mating of two incompatible species, one human and the other animal. This representation is born of the colonial encounter and its racist apriorism.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is the filmmaker's message in turning the crosses upside down to turn them into swords?
2. What does Jean find amusing in the poster inviting French people to buy a vacation in Africa?
3. The racist white women discover that their friend's husband, who looks white, is a black person. What is the filmmaker's message about race? Elaborate on your answer.
4. A racist mechanic refuses to hire Jean, and his apprentice whispers to Jean, "Run, run, Comrade. The old world is behind us." What do you think the apprentice is suggesting?

5. Med Hondo seems to be saying that the struggle waged by the workers' international is being betrayed in France, because black workers are not included in the demands for the workers' welfare. Where do you see this in the film?
6. Jean arrives in France with an Accounting diploma but is taught to use a broom and a saw. Which message does the filmmaker convey? Elaborate on your answer
7. What does the image of naked black people throwing themselves in the sea symbolize?