HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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THE GREAT WHITE MAN OF LAMBARÉNÉ / LE GRAND BLANC DE LAMBARÉNÉ (1995)

Bassek Ba-Kobhio

OVERVIEW

Le Grand blanc de Lambaréné (1995) (Translated as *The Great White Man of Lambaréné*) is Cameroonian filmmaker Bassek Ba-Kobhio's second film. It was shot on the site of Dr. Albert Schweitzer's hospital, in the town of Lambaréné, on the Bank of the Ogoué River, in Gabon, Central Africa. The film, which casts a native African eye on the life and work of Dr. Schweitzer in Gabon during the colonial period and after independence, certainly alters the feted image of the Nobel Peace prize winner prevalent in conventional literatures. It is, nonetheless, far from being a simplistic overturning of historical "reality" in the name of revisionism. Ba-Kobhio offers a complex examination of the dilemmas confronting Africa in colonial and post-independence times in which no one, neither the colonizer nor the colonized, appears totally innocent or totally guilty.

A WORD ON DR. ALBERT SCHWEITZER

Albert Schweitzer was born on January 14, 1875, in German-occupied Alsace. He was raised by his father, Charles Schweitzer, a reverend and a teacher. Later, when came time for young Albert to go to grammar school, his parents placed him under the watch of his uncle, Louis Schweitzer. At the age of fifteen, Albert, who had studied music with Eugene Münch, was playing organ in the church of Saint-Étienne. He gave his first public concert at the age of sixteen. He pursued his knowledge in music and registered as a student in music, philosophy, and religion at the Universities of Strasbourg and Berlin. In 1899 and 1900, respectively, he obtained his doctorate degrees in philosophy and theology.

From 1902 to 1912, Albert Schweitzer taught the New Testament in the Department of Protestant Theology of Strasbourg. In 1913, at the age of thirty, he answered the call of the *Société des missions évangéliques de Paris* that was in search of volunteer doctors. He then went back to school to become a medical doctor. Eight years later, Schweitzer obtained his doctorate degree in medicine and chose to serve in Africa. On April 16, 1913, the young Doctor Schweitzer arrived in Lambaréné, Gabon, with his Jewish-German wife, Hélène Bresslau, whom he had married a year earlier, on June 18, 1912.

Schweitzer's work in fighting malaria, leprosy and other tropical diseases in Gabon won him the Nobel Peace Prize in 1952. In 1957, he was inducted into the French Academy. Assisted by his wife, one young Swiss doctor, and two other nurses, Schweitzer continued to care for the people of Gabon, and he kept publishing and playing at concerts to fund his hospital until his death in 1965. Today, Doctor Schweitzer's legacy still stands in Lambaréné, four-hour drive from Libreville, Gabon. It is a hospital of about two hundred beds, where approximately 650 infants are delivered each year.

CHARACTERS

Albert Schweitzer An Alsatian missionary doctor, who built a rural hospital in Gabon to cure tropical diseases. He is an accomplished musician, writer, and `Nobel Peace Prize recipient.

Hélène Schweitzer : The loyal but lonely wife of Albert Schweitzer. She is also his assistant. She never feels at home in Lambaréné but is resolute to stay with her husband.

Koumba A native boy that aspires to be like Dr. Schweitzer and grows up to become a doctor

Lambi : Koumba's father and Dr. Schweitzer's trusted native assistant

Bissa : A native young woman assigned to watch over Dr. Schweitzer by the village chief

Mikendi One of only two survivors among the village sons sent to Europe to fight in the Second WW\

SYNOPSIS

The Great White Man of Lambaréné is Cameroonian filmmaker Bassek Ba-Kobhio's portrayal of Nobel Peace Prize winner Dr. Albert Schweitzer. In the village of Lambaréné, in Gabon, Central Africa. Dr. Schweitzer has a country hospital, where, assisted by his wife Hélène, four European nurses and a local aid, he delivers babies and treats the local populations against tropical diseases like malaria and leprosy. A native boy (Koumba), whose father (Lambi) is one of Dr. Schweitzer's aids, follows the physician everywhere he goes. When Koumba confides in the doctor that he, too, aspires to be a doctor when he grows up, the doctor scoffs at the boy's ambition, telling him that Africa needs carpenters, farmers, and nurses, not doctors.

One day, the doctor slaps Koumba's father in front of his son and the whole village. Mikendi, one of only two survivors among a group of young Lambaréné soldiers sent to France to help in the Second World War, declares that the doctor's slap is confirmation of the whites' disrespect and duplicity he has witnessed on the battlefields of Europe. Mikendi sends Koumba to medical school in Europe, so that he should come back as a doctor in replacement of the white doctor. Years later, Koumba obtains his physician diploma and returns to his village. He marries his childhood sweetheart, Mado, and becomes the father of a child that he names Independence. Koumba's child, Independence, has meningitis. The African physician, who has now become a politician, seeks the help of the white doctor to cure Independence.

Hélène is ill and goes to Europe for treatment. She does not survive, and her ashes are repatriated for burial in Lambaréné. Bissa now shares the doctor's bedroom. One night, he dies in her arms. Like his wife, the doctor is buried in the cemetery of Lambaréné.

SCENES

Dr. Schweitzer's Medical Work Dr. Schweitzer does all kinds of medical work. He does a dentist's work or cesarean section to deliver the babies if needed. At Lambaréné hospital, a native patient, reclined in an examination chair, his hands clutched around the armrests, is having seven teeth extractions performed by Dr. Schweitzer, with rusty plyers and no anesthetics. The man grimaces and shrieks as the doctor jerks and snatches his seventh tooth, and then the man passes out. One of the doctor's aids revives the patient by emptying a bucket-full of water on his face. Koumba runs into the hospital, calling the doctor. The boy hands the doctor his white safari hat, and they both proceed to the riverside. Through her dining room window, Hélène, the doctor's wife, watches with teary eyes as the doctor, whom she has been awaiting, and Koumba rush to the river to collect a shipment of medicines. In the lower photo Dr. Schweitzer and his wife Helen perform surgery on a pregnant patient.

Obtaining Medical Supplies for the patients. Dr. Schweitzer and Koumba are standing on the bank of the river, scrutinizing the horizon. A procession of small dug-out canoes escorting a larger pirogue with a sick man and his entourage onboard glides past them. Koumba turns to the doctor and observes that there is no medicine arriving. The doctor makes no reply. He does not look at the boy. His eyes remain set on the horizon until the scene changes.

The Iboga, the village healer To remedy the shortage of medicine at the hospital, Dr. Schweitzer yields to Lambi's suggestion that he should see the village healer for a local medicine, *iboga*. The healer refers the doctor to the village chief because, he says, his science belongs to his whole community. The chief reproaches the doctor with being aloof and invites him to share a drink, served to him by a native girl, Bissa. The doctor gets drunk and waltzes with Bissa to his home, where Hélène is waiting for him on the porch. The next day, Lambi informs the doctor that Bissa is a coveted girl among the whites, for whom a shopkeeper killed a government official.

Dr. Schweitzer's wife Helen is lonely and fearful. Hélène is standing by the dining room window. Four nurses are setting the table for breakfast while the kitchen maid brings in an Gugelhupf cake. One of the nurses compliments the cook for the beautiful cake. Madame (Hélène) made it, the cook replies. The nurse notices that the cake has no raisins in it, and this, she adds, will make the doctor grumble. Hélène observes that it does not matter that the cake has no raisins in it since the doctor will not be here to eat it after all, not even on a special day like this one. She notes that, as usual, the doctor will be too busy thinking about the war, the hospital, the medicines, the dock, and his concerts and writing. The witchdoctor, whom Lambi and Schweitzer have come to see for the secret of a native medicine, *iboga*, sends them to the village chief to secure his authorization for it. The process takes longer than anticipated. Hélène, frightened by the sounds of the forest, gasping and coughing, is waiting for the doctor on the porch, under the vigilant eyes of Jean, the houseboy. Hélène's communication with Jean reveals her anxieties about presumed cannibalism by the natives of Lambaréné.

A husband's gift to his wife Dr. Schweitzer is on a stroll by the riverbank with his wife. He proposes that she go to Europe to take care of her health, away from the mosquitoes and the humidity, and also to see her daughter, but she'd rather stay with him in Lambaréné. As they gambol along the river, he offers to give her an imagined concert, one she is likely to see only in European capitals like London, Madrid, or Berlin. She sits on a tree trunk and imagines an orchestra in front of her that the doctor pretends to be conducting. Berta, one of the nurses, comes running to them, alerting them about something alarming in the village, for which she uses a medical term, peritonitis, drawing smiles from Hélène and the doctor.

Hélène is ill and leaves for treatment Later on, Hélène will have to go to Europe for her health. Dr. Schweitzer, the hospital staff, and the villagers see her off to the docks. A native woman offers her a bracelet to wish her good trip. Hélène dies in France. Her ashes are repatriated to Lambaréné for burial.

Dr. Schweitzer's ideas about education As the doctor and Koumba are returning to the village, the doctor casts intermittent glances at the child walking in his footsteps, stops, turns around and looks down at the boy behind him. Koumba looks up at the doctor and announces that when he grows up, he is going to practice medicine, too. The doctor asks Koumba if he wants to be a nurse, like his father, to which the child replies that a doctor is what he wants to be. Resuming his walk, Dr. Schweitzer chuckles. The boy wants to know what is so funny, and the doctor retorts that Africa needs farmers, carpenters, and nurses, not doctors. The child stops and watches the doctor go down the path alone.

Two Music lovers The doctor hears a native boy playing a wooden drum. He rushes to his piano and starts playing. Later on, the drum player is given a trumpet, which he starts to play. The young native drummer, who received a trumpet from Dr. Schweitzer, has been duplicating the doctor's piano notes from afar, every night, to the satisfaction of his benefactor. He has now mastered his new instrument.

Chief Mata is dying Chief Mata, from the Eschira tribe, is brought to Dr. Schweitzer. He is sick, and the efforts of his village healer have been ineffective. He asks that the doctor's science cure him quickly, for his people and his wives are expecting him. Dr. Schweitzer promises Chief Mata that he will soon get him back to his people. Lambi overhears Dr. Schweitzer announcing to Hélène that there is no hope for Chief Mata. Lambi runs to Chief Mata and tells him what he has heard and asks him to return to his village to prepare himself to die like a chief, among his people. The Chief replies that the doctor has betrayed him for hiding the truth from him. The chief collapses. Lambi calls on the chief's guards to help carry him to the doctor. Later, the doctor comes to see Chief Mata in the hospital and asks him to be strong. The chief tells him that he has betrayed him. The doctor explains that

a doctor sometimes does not say everything to his patient out of caution or friendship. The chief accuses the doctor of wanting to rule the land alone. The doctor replies that the land belongs to Jesus Christ. The Chief passes away.

Doctor's frustration and anger Lambi runs ahead of the guards, calling Dr. Schweitzer, who recounts his conversation with Chief Mata and the man's death. Lambi explains that he warned Chief Mata because a chief must never be surprised by death but needs to properly prepare for his departure. The doctor slaps Lambi, who falls on the ground. Koumba runs to his father crying, holds up his head, and asks him to get up. The patients or their husbands do not follow Dr. Schweitzer's recommendation. The doctor gets mad at a local woman and her husband for being promiscuous.

A young doctor gets disillusioned A young doctor, Altmeyer, has just arrived from France to work at the hospital. He confesses to Dr. Schweitzer that he is a great admirer of his. The doctor tells him that one must be mad to want to work in Lambaréné; to which Altmeyer replies that he is. Sometime later, Altmeyer confronts Dr. Schweitzer about the patients' living conditions, the lack of electricity and the filth in the hospital. Dr. Schweitzer replies that it is out of the question to disturb the habits of his primitives. Altmeyer removes his doctor's coat, throws it at Dr. Schweitzer's feet and announces that has had enough and that he is quitting. Dr. Schweitzer bids him farewell.

Before the Nobel Prize: criticism A young reporter, Ingrid, has come to Lambaréné to interview Dr. Schweitzer. She raises questions regarding his alleged violence against the natives, his exploitation of the natives as guinea pigs, and his reported collaboration with the Nazis during the war. The doctor tells her that he resents her questions and demands that she leave Lambaréné the following day.

After the Nobel Prize: celebration Dr. Schweitzer wins the Nobel Peace Prize. As he prepares to go collect it in Europe, his nurses explain to the natives that this recognition means that the doctor is second only to God. Someone in the crowd asks: "Is he even bigger than Jesus?" "He comes after Jesus, of course," replies one of the nurses.

Local Woman Dr. Schweitzer receives a gift of young lady from the chief of the tribe. Although Bissa offers herself to the doctor, Dr. Schweitzer refuses her saying, "It is not right." After his wife dies in Europe, Bissa now shares Dr. Schweitzer's bedroom, on a mat, next to his bed. Dr. Schweitzer is ill, and Bissa helps him to his bed. He asks her to spend the night in his bed with him. This is Dr. Schweitzer's last night alive. In the morning, the drums announce his death.

Europeans' attitude towards Africans The French settlers in Lambaréné are celebrating the end of the war at Lacaze's bar. They have invited the local girls, but not the local men. All the white men want to dance with Lacaze's girlfriend and are even openly devising strategies to have her in their beds that night.

Homecoming of the Soldiers Armistice. The village is on the shore to greet its sons returning from the war. Dr. Schweitzer, too, is at the dock to collect his shipment of supplies. Among the village sons sent to Europe to liberate France from German occupation, only Mikendi and another soldier have returned home. The village chief calls each soldier's name, and each time, Mikendi answers that the petitioned man died at war.

Dislike of Europeans The party at Lacaze's ends late at night. A native policeman, who had escorted a white officer to Lambaréné, emerges from the shop, drunk, and carrying a bottle of wine under his arms. Lacaze summons him to pay. As he replies that this was a free party to celebrate the victory of the allies, Lacaze insists that he should pay, for this was a white people's party to celebrate the end of a white people's

war. Meanwhile, Mikendi has gathered the tribe to tell them about the abuse black soldiers received in Europe from white officers. Mikendi concludes his story by saying that he hates whites.

Independence The natives are very happy and celebrate their political independence. Dr. Koumba and his wife Mado are celebrating independence. They will make love wildly tonight, Koumba whispers in her ears; and if they conceive a child on this day, they will name it 'Independence'. Dr. Schweitzer notes that independence has brought changes he does not like. The people, and particularly Koumba, whom he delivered with his own hands, have become arrogant and inhospitable. The crowds that used to cheer him at each homecoming are no more. Only his European nurses and Bissa have come to greet him. As he complains about the bad treatment he received on Independence Day, he asks: "Independence for what?"

Dr. Koumba is disrespectful towards Dr. Schweitzer Dr. Koumba comes to see Dr. Schweitzer, who greets him as "Little Koumba." Koumba reminds Schweitzer that he is speaking now to Deputy Koumba and no longer to "Little Koumba." The deputy, who is standing in front of the sitting doctor, leans over the latter, looks him in the eyes, and informs him that his hospital staff have lodged a complaint against him and demand a meeting.

The petition Mikendi starts a petition to drive Dr. Schweitzer out of Africa. Bissa confronts him and accuses him of lack of appreciation for the work that the doctor does for the natives. Mikendi accuses her of betraying her people by sleeping with a white man**.** She claims that it is not true.

The hospital ablaze A hospital staff recognizes Mikendi setting the hospital on fire in the middle of the night. The villagers, Koumba, and Dr. Schweitzer rush to the site of the incident. They cannot save anything. The blaze consumes the hospital.

Dr. Schweitzer dies The village of Lambaréné, and officials, among whom Koumba, Mikembi, Roman Catholic priests and nuns, gather on the riverbank for Dr. Schweitzer's funeral. His coffin is laid on a catafalque. Dancers in traditional garb perform around the casket. The crowd shrinks until the only person left is Bissa, standing in black in front of the coffin.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

DR. SCHWEITZER Closed

Dr. Schweitzer is an egocentric, bigoted character, solipsistic and shut within himself, for whom all that matters is his aggrandizement, and all that is beautiful is from the West.

Egocentric Dr. Schweitzer has no disinterested rapport with the native people of Lambaréné, other than for self-promotion. Most of those who dare to confront him denounce this flaw in his character. For example, on his death bed, Chief Mata accuses him of wanting to rule Africa alone. When Dr. Schweitzer rejects Bissa's sexual advances, she charges him of never sharing anything with anyone, but only giving to others, in the hope of appearing as a compassionate benefactor who owes nothing to no one, but to whom everyone owes something. It is perhaps Dr. Koumba who best exposes Schweitzer's purpose in Lambaréné: "Your concern has never been the emancipation of Africans. You wanted to share our hell in the hope of reaching heaven."

Prejudiced Has Dr. Schweitzer ever felt at home in Africa or was Lambaréné for him a necessary purgatory, a place where, as Dr. Koumba puts it, he can expiate his sins in the company of the black devils? This is a legitimate question, as Schweitzer hardly casts a positive gaze on Lambaréné, its people, and its traditions. He considers Lambaréné his dominion: "I am the Chief here," he yells at Chief Mata on their first encounter. "You're here to do what I want, not what you want; all of you," he impatiently cautions the people of Lambaréné. Thus, the land is his dominion, and the people are his primitives. As he confides

in Hélène and to the dismay of Lambi, “My research will provide a native African medicine for my primitives.” Schweitzer’s gaze is perpetually turned toward white Europe, thus preventing him from engaging reciprocally with blacks; and for good reason: Lambaréné is his laboratory and the natives his guinea pigs. Each time the local drumbeats fill the night of Lambaréné, it is as if the doctor were being drawn into a world of dementia, as if the monstrous spirits in the “heart of darkness,” to use this regrettable expression by Joseph Conrad, were taking over his reason. So, to preserve his sanity, the doctor rushes to his piano and launches into a feverish solo concerto, in the hope of exorcising the sounds of Africa with those of Europe. The idea of Europe is not just one of psychological solace; Europe is also a notion of physical relief. Thus, to his ailing wife, who insists on staying by his side rather than going to Europe for a cure, the doctor offers an imaginary concert, such as those available in European capitals. “I would like to give you a concert to remember,” he says, “London, Madrid, Berlin, and now ... Lambaréné.”

Relativistic If the doctor has failed to find peace and serenity in Lambaréné, it is less because they are lacking there than because he has never entertained the possibility of adopting what his wife so emphatically calls “les principes indigènes,” that is, indigenous standards, the standards of those who are not “like them.” For Schweitzer, there seems to be two irreconcilable worlds, two species of human beings: whites and blacks. As if, at a certain point of human ontological development, blacks and whites split and had different evolutions, Schweitzer is convinced that none of the whites’ invention should carry over to the blacks’ existence, thus displaying a disturbing notion of cultural relativism so prevalent among closet supremacists. Schweitzer seems to accept an argument made by French anthropologist Gustave Lebon in his much-fêted book, *The Psychology of Peoples* (1912), that white people’s institutions are ill adapted to blacks, because blacks constitute an inferior race, or at best an exotic one not to temper with, but to preserve as a museum relic. Therefore, to keep his “primitives” authentic, Schweitzer will neither use electricity in the hospital and distribute uniforms to the black staff nor observe the basic rules of hygiene. Furthermore, during his unethical scientific experiment, he keeps the blacks’ hopes high on placebo and gets rid of the anesthetics donated to the hospital, preferring to perform painful surgery on them.

Individualistic Schweitzer’s aloofness and indifference toward native people, customs, and rituals is molded, not only by bigotry, but also by his individualistic, as opposed to collective or communal, approach to knowledge. When the village witchdoctor is intrigued to see the doctor call on him after so many years of apathy, he quickly understands that it is because the doctor, who is out of medicine, desperately needs the secret of a local drug, the *iboga*. In contradiction to Schweitzer’s individualistic conception of knowledge, the witchdoctor tells Schweitzer that the secret of the *iboga* is collective and under the custody of the village chief, whose authorization the doctor must first seek. So, the witchdoctor sends Schweitzer to the chief, who insists that the doctor share a drink with the community before he can obtain what he came for. Bissa is the woman chosen by the chief to serve the drink to Schweitzer and, in the same spirit of intercultural sharing, to be his native companion.

BISSA Conscientious

Bissa is a tolerant woman, who likes to share, and who has dedicated her life to protecting Dr. Schweitzer. She believes that the chief has entrusted her with a noble mission, which she intends to carry out to the end.

Tolerant Bissa, the native girl whom the local chief offered Dr. Schweitzer to alleviate his lonely nights in the absence of his wife, typifies the kind of patience and tolerance that the women of Lambaréné have shown toward the whites. Like the African land she metaphorizes, Bissa has been indiscriminately hospitable and receptive to the whites, who, in order to have control over her, have not hesitated to stake their lives in a fight to the death against one another.

Sharing seems to be Bissa’s motto. It is certainly not by coincidence that the village chief chose her to make Dr. Schweitzer experience his first taste of the local brew, his first moment of intoxication, and his first sexual encounter with a black woman. When Mikendi starts a petition to run the doctor out of town, Bissa takes side with Dr. Schweitzer and accuses Mikendi of callousness and egotism towards a man who has sacrificed his life for the people of Lambaréné. When the white doctor is reluctant to make love with her, she reproaches him with giving but never sharing.

Feminist In defense of herself against Mikendi, who accuses her of race betrayal, Bissa defiantly reminds him that she did not initiate her relationship with Schweitzer. The village chief gave her to the doctor. Here, she seems to suggest that if Mikendi or anyone else sees her as a version of the conquered African continent or of tainted black culture, then she is less to blame for the demise of Africa than the indulgent male monarch who gave her away as a mere commodity: "Through our chief, our people told me to watch over the doctor. I did not ask to look after him." Watching after the doctor, too, is a political gesture, a political responsibility, given what Dr. Schweitzer, despite his flaws, is doing for the people of Lambaréné. Here, Bissa offers an insightful woman's viewpoint that seems to lack in stubborn Mikendi; namely, that there has not only been an unfair balance of political power among genders in Africa, but also that the (masculine) gender in power has valued the other gender as mere commodity, failing thereby to take advantage of the great insights that women could have contributed to emancipation and development.

Devoted To Dr. Schweitzer, Bissa is a devoted lover and caretaker. She is already a fixture in the doctor's life even when Hélène is alive. Like a spectre, she appears at night at his doorstep to check on him. When Hélène dies, Bissa moves into the doctor's bedroom and sleeps on a mat on the floor, next to his bed. After independence, when the emancipated natives of Lambaréné stop viewing the discredited doctor like a demi-god, and his homecomings are no longer spectacular occurrences of choreographed clamor and agitation, Bissa is the only local who, along with his white nurses, patiently awaits Dr. Schweitzer on the bank of the river. Only on his last night, upon her insistence, does the doctor invite Bissa into his bed. When the doctor passes, Bissa, dressed in the typical black color of a forsaken widow, is the last person standing by his coffin to bid him farewell before the gravediggers bury the casket.

KOUMBA (YOUNG) Agreeable

By following Dr. Schweitzer, Young Koumba develops an aspiration for himself that is, in fact, influenced by the figure of the doctor as a role model. So, the boy confesses to Schweitzer that he, too, wants to grow up to be a doctor. From the moment Schweitzer brushes off Koumba's ambition, and especially from the moment the doctor strikes his father, the boy becomes distrustful of the doctor and his new path shapes him, no longer to imitate, but to fight Schweitzer.

New breed It is Mikendi who proposes to shape young Koumba into a new breed of black. On the day Dr. Schweitzer slaps Koumba's father, Mikendi announces that he will personally send the boy to the white man's land to study in order to become a doctor, a black doctor for the black people, so that no white would ever again raise his hands against a black. Koumba should come back not merely as another doctor willing to occupy the white surgeon's seat, but rather as a metaphor for a new breed of black leaders, particularly of black male leaders, who will erect upon the ashes of the abusive, self-centered, self-indulgent, narcissistic white doctor the edifice of black pride, betterment, and national development. So, on the following day, young Koumba leaves Lambaréné for a trip that will take him first to Port Gentil and then to Europe, to study medicine and law.

KOUMBA (ADULT)

Bold The Koumba who returns to Lambaréné as a doctor and lawyer after years of study in Europe is a confident and bold man whom Dr. Schweitzer can no longer infantilize, and it is not for lack of trying. In fact, upon a visit to him, the white doctor ventures to greet Kouma with "Good of you to visit me, Little Koumba." The black doctor's response is immediate and trenchant: "It is not Little Koumba that is visiting you, Doctor. It is Deputy Koumba."

Betwixt Koumba has returned from France as a doctor; however, he has chosen the path of politics rather than medicine; while this conversion has rendered him tentative in diagnosing the disease of his dying child, Independence, who was so-named because he was conceived on the day of his country's political emancipation from France, it is nonetheless a necessary compromise. One can hardly view Koumba's conversion as a brain drain. It is a compelling call. It is his ethical responsibility towards his country. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, as Africa was swiftly moving from the status of political dependency on Europe to that of supposed partnership with its former colonizers, either as a result of

revolutionary violence or as the outcome of peaceful negotiation, it had become imperative that the most educated sons and daughters of the black continent be active participants in preparing their countries for the difficult task at hand: the task of governing a country in spite of Europe's prediction and expectation that Africans would fail at self-government and eventually appeal for assistance, giving the racist whites a chance to say "we told you so." Such is the dilemma that confronted Koumba and made him choose politics over medicine. Koumba needed to enter politics or leave the destiny of his country to less sophisticated, mediocre strategists and embittered soldiers like Mikendi.

MIKENDI

Mikendi is a hot-tempered World War 2 veteran, whose experience in Europe has caused him to lose faith in the possibility of interracial understanding and transnational collaboration. For him, Africa must rebuild itself with a new breed of leaders unsoiled by white Western influence.

Racist Mikendi is suspicious of whites. He is persuaded that white people cannot be trusted, because they are naturally duplicitous in their rapports with blacks; they "take blacks for complete jerks," he says. In fact, he admits that he hates all white people. Mikendi's attitude stems from his lived experience during his conscription in Europe, where he fought to liberate France from German occupation and was ignored when the war ended. In Europe, he saw black soldiers' war efforts unrewarded while white soldiers were acknowledged and decorated. Mikendi does not believe in the possibility of any genuine dialogue between whites and blacks, because from the whites' point of view, blacks are not worth engaging with; they are subhuman.

Revolutionary Mikendi is convinced that all will be good when Africa is able to rid itself of all white people and of all white vestiges and replace them with black entities. Identifying white elements, rooting them out, and replacing them with black element demands that blacks be in a constant state of sleeplessness, in a relentless position of vigilance, in a permanent revolutionary mood. It is in that spirit of a clean slate, of building anew on the ashes of the old, that Mikendi decides that Koumba should pursue medical studies and take the position of the white doctor. It is in that spirit that despite the blacks' political independence, despite Koumba's successful studies in Europe and his return to Lambaréné as a doctor, and despite the fading authority of the white doctor, Mikendi still sees Schweitzer or any vestige of his presence in Lambaréné as a threat to black independence. When Mikendi decides he should be the one to complete the revolution that will make way for absolute autonomy for the blacks by burning down Doctor Schweitzer's hospital, he is fulfilling Martinican revolutionary Frantz Fanon's prophecy that the "thing" which has been colonized will become "man" through the same violent revolution by which it frees itself. Likewise, Mikendi is adamant that for the subjugated black people of Lambaréné, freedom always implies violence; that true independence presupposes a program of absolute disorder, the replacement of the old order by a new one, a total substitution, without transition, without rational engagement, without the kind of friendly understanding proposed by Bissa.

Masculinist To be successful, Mikendi's permanent revolution for the emancipation of black people, which calls for general violence against whites, relies on the figure of a strong black man. This revolution has two potential enemies in Lambaréné: Dr. Schweitzer and the black women in search of white love, represented by Bissa and Soudou, the white shopkeeper's girlfriend. The shopkeeper has fled just before independence, and Soudou is no longer a menace. When Soudou laments Lacaze's absence, Mikendi tells her to toughen up, for she is better off: "There is no good white person." As for Bissa, she continues to see Dr. Schweitzer and is thus a potential ally of Schweitzer's in undermining black people's liberation struggle. From this perspective, Bissa has enabled Dr. Schweitzer's slap to a black man by weakening the black man's position in Lambaréné. She is the betrayer of her race: "You betray our people, Bissa. You sleep with a white." For Mikendi, Bissa's posture is pervaded with disloyalty. He is not willing to accept Bissa's suggestion of resolving the natives' crisis with the whites through civil engagement. For him, only violence will drive away the white invaders, assuage the humiliation suffered by the blacks over the years, and open the door for real independence for the natives

Suspicious It is not just the black woman in search of white love that fuels Mikendi's wrath. Since he believes that white people have never regarded and will never regard blacks as their equal interlocutors,

Mikendi also suspects any blacks seeking collaboration with whites as mentally corrupt and racial traitors. Another threat to racial autonomy is the village chief, who so unwisely collaborated with whites as to offer a local woman (Bissa) to Dr. Schweitzer, and whose dwindling health and imminent death make Mikendi rejoice. To a native that suggests that the village chief should be consulted before chasing Dr. Schweitzer out of town, Mikendi replies that the sick chief is irrelevant and will die soon, along with his old authority.

Failed hero Mikendi is certainly a war hero—if one believes his rendition of the role he played in the second European war; however, by his unexceptional political skills, Mikendi is an allegory of the many African praetorian leaders, former soldiers in the colonial army who, in the years following decolonization, have moved from the barracks to the presidential palace, making, by virtue of their governing style, a mockery of independence. Mikendi can take advantage of the shortage of African intellectuals in the aftermath of decolonization and proclaim himself leader of the people. Fortunately, this will not happen, thanks to the professional conversion of people like Koumba.

THEMES

POLITICS (colonization, collaboration, separation)

Colonization this film is an allegory of the colonization of Africa by France and the kind of relations implied by this political system. Schweitzer and the French settlers are the representatives of colonial France, just as Koumba, Bissa, and the other natives of Lambaréné represent Africa. There is in Schweitzer and his compatriots not only a claim of superiority but also a presumption of knowledge. In a word, like Schweitzer who affirms that the natives are his primitives, and, therefore, he knows their needs and desires, France affirmed that it had penetrated and understood Africa, and that it knew what was good for Africans. For Schweitzer, Africa did not need sophisticated intellectuals. What the continent needed were barely literate civil servants good enough to serve as interpreters between France and the native populations in the implementation of the colonial program. Moreover, like Schweitzer who complained about the independence of the Gabonese, France had not envisioned the independence of the Africans. France hoped that the master/slave relationships that governed the colonial system would remain intact. However, Africa won its independence through negotiation, but above all through the violent actions of nationalists like Mikendi, who made France realize that its power over Africans would only survive if it was ready to send millions of its sons to be killed in Africa to conserve it.

Collaboration One of the dilemmas confronting African nations in the aftermath of decolonization was whether to remain in a relationship with their former colonizers or to completely sever ties with them. The characters Bissa and Mikendi allegorize these two positions. Bissa is someone grounded in her culture and at the same time open to French culture. A woman from the Galoa tribe, she is held in high regard among her people and respected by her chief, who gives her the mission of being the bridge between her culture and French culture. She has never been short of affection and consideration among her people, of whom she is an ambassador. Furthermore, Bissa is the object of desire among the whites, who see her as a land to be conquered. Thus, Bissa's encounter with the colonizers in Lambaréné is primarily mitigated by romantic relationships. She feels wanted. The white men stake their lives in a battle to the death to win her over. She is adored. She shares their most intimate moments, consoles them in their most vulnerable moments, as is the case with Dr. Schweitzer, who turned to her in his last hours and died in her arms. There is, therefore, no reason for Bissa not to want to continue collaborating with the colonizer, or with any entity that amounted to the colonizer. Bissa is the Africa that seeks collaboration with the West.

Separation Opposite Bissa's, Mikendi's experience in France during the war was physically painful and psychologically destabilizing. It made him feel inferior and unwanted. Mikendi talks angrily about the way he was treated in France by the French people he went to defend against German occupation. He recounts how he and his fellow African soldiers were kept away from the ceremonies of recognition and celebration of the Allied victory. And he concludes that whites take blacks for idiots. For Mikendi, the colonizer who has treated him like a sub-species of humankind, like a mere thing even, cannot be trusted in a relationship of mutual respect after independence. From his perspective, negotiation with the colonizer for independence is out of the question. The colonized people must seize their independence by force, with the same violence hitherto used by the colonizer to submit them. Once independence is gained through purgative violence,

the colonized must constantly be watchful of the colonizer, lest the colonizer should sneak into the newly independent nation with the intent of regaining his lost authority on the post-independent subjects, this time, in the form of neo-colonization. To avoid the return of the colonizer through neo-colonization, Mikendi believes that all the vestiges of the colonizer must be burnt down. Mikendi burning down Dr. Schweitzer's hospital symbolizes that belief.

RELATIONSHIP (giving/sharing, becoming, death)

Giving/sharing The theme of the gift is one that traverses the film and through several forms. Bissa and Schweitzer seem to have two different understandings of the gift; Bissa's as a disinterested act of donation, of exchange, and of communion; and Schweitzer's as an act of donation that melts necessarily into obligation and debt. Schweitzer, as Bissa reproaches him, would rather give than receive. Since for him the receiver of the gift is necessarily obligated to the giver, were he to accept any gift from the Africans, whom he regards as inferior beings, his ego would be blackened at an irremediable measure. Therefore, he will not share the customs, the food, and the beverages of the natives; for to share is to receive something from the other, and therefore to owe something to the other. Thus, he would not accept Koumba's offer to rebuild the hospital. It would no longer be his hospital, stuffed with his medicines, bought with the money of *his* concerts, *his* conferences, and *his* publications, and staffed with *his* primitives, but a communal hospital in which the natives of Lambaréné would have a claim, too; a hospital that would put them at his level and remind him to smile anytime he passes them in the streets of Lambaréné. For Bissa, on the contrary, the gift presupposes empathy, communion, and identification with the other, a position that bruises no ego, that presupposes no debt and that demands no repayment.

Becoming Schweitzer gives Koumba the aspiration to becoming. Indeed, the greatest gift that Koumba receives from Schweitzer as a father-figure is the aspiration to become a doctor. However, because that gift is tainted with physical and emotional violence (Schweitzer's disdain towards Koumba and his humiliation of Koumba's biological father and compatriots), the gift turns out to signal the finitude of Schweitzer rather than his extension in time, as fathers usually wish their sons to be. Schweitzer has triggered in Koumba the aspiration, though he did not give Koumba the encouragement, to become a doctor. Mikendi takes over Koumba's education to make this aspiration come true. Koumba's return to Lambaréné is filled with resentment, though not as violent as Mikendi's, towards Schweitzer and a wish for his replacement. Since Koumba has entered politics instead of medical practice, it is not certain as to whether Koumba will effectively become Lambaréné's doctor. This, however, matters little. Koumba has become a leader in independent Africa in replacement of Schweitzer the overbearing colonial father, ans this is what matters.

Death Another instance of the gift as death of the father is the trumpet that Schweitzer offers a young drummer with the expectation that he will stop haunting his nights with primitive drumbeats. From a distance, the boy replicates the notes Schweitzer plays on his piano, to the latter's satisfaction. Ironically, it is that young trumpetist who, having mastered his new instrument, plays the song of independence that marks the end of Schweitzer's reign, the death of colonization and the emergence of self-governance. It is that trumpetist again who will play the bugle call at Schweitzer's funeral to mark his finitude. Here, the theme of death is intertwined with that of the gift. To give life is in a way to sign one's own death.

PSYCHOLOGY (otherness, alienation)

Otherness The stigma of the exotic is one that Africa has had difficulty shaking off, both from the racist and the progressive, and often, too, from Africans themselves. Africa has always been represented as the land of the foreign, the unfamiliar, and the savage that titillates people in search of strong sensations and scares off imaginative cowards. Schweitzer's idea that black ways of life are not to be tampered with but instead preserved as museum relics is fueled by his sense of the exotic. Doctor Koumba is very perceptive in noting that Schweitzer's decision to come to Africa is a gesture of expiation. Where else to fight one's demons in the hope of reaching heaven than in the purgatory of Africa, where those demons can still be found in their most pristine conditions? Likewise, the Altmeyer, who comes to Africa with hopes of eating some unfamiliar dishes and expectations of sexual adventures with African women, invents his own Africa as a place of strange thrills. It is not uncommon that the exotic be tied to the sexual. After all, if Africa is hot and humid, so must be its women. Thus, the white men's fascination with Bissa and Soudou.

Alienation Bissa told the doctor that it was a shame that he had lived so long among the people of Lambaréné without trying to understand them. In fact, convinced that he was living with primitive people, the doctor never wanted to share with them, thus alienating himself from the people of Lambaréné. This is the reproach that the witch doctor and the chief make to him when Schweitwer asks them for Iboga. Moreover, just as their food and drink repelled him, their musical instruments of the natives also drove him mad. Schweitzer could have been buried anonymously had not Koumba prepared a popular funeral for him.

Loss On the day of Gabon's independence, it was a bitter and unhappy Dr. Schweitzer who, returning from Libreville, where the Gabonese celebrated an autonomy that he received as an insult, ruminated on the loss of his supremacy. He complained about Koumba, a child he saw being born in his hands, and who today had the audacity to indicate where he should sit, even though it was in the front row, among the officials. In addition to that, it was the trumpet that he had offered to a son of Lambaréné who was playing the independence song. Independence for what? he kept repeating to his nurses. Schweitzer had difficulty accepting the fact that he was now on the same footing as the natives he had mistreated for so long. In a last-ditch attempt to restore the old unequal relationship, he dared to call Dr. Koumba "little Koumba," who quickly brought him to order, reminding him that he was talking to a doctor and not to little Koumba, whom he used to look down on with condescension. Schweitzer complained to Bissa about this "insolence" which meant the end of his power.

SOCIETY (patriarchy, gender, racism, feminism/womanism)

Patriarchy A woman comes to the doctor because she has contracted gonorrhea. The doctor tells her that her husband should not sleep with multiple women and bring diseases to her. The woman is offended, because, as Lambi explains to the doctor, Schweitzer has disrespected her husband. For her, her husband has the right to see as many women as he wants, Lambi explains. During an assembly of the Galoa tribe, the chief asks the men to control their wives who dare to laugh in the presence of men. The chief of the Galoa gives Bissa to Dr. Schzeitwer as a gift to a person. All these events testify to the preponderance of men in Lambaréné.

Gender For Mikendi as well as for Schweitzer, women can be distractions to the male hero on his march towards great accomplishments. For Schweitzer, this great accomplishment is sainthood in race purity. Thus, he warns Altmeyer on his very first day in Lambaréné, as he catches the young doctor gazing at local girls, to remain focused and celibate as Francis of Assisi. Schweitzer also avoids his wife as much as possible, and he advises her to return to France spend time with her daughter. The first night Bissa enters Schweitzer's bedroom and walks to him with the intent of offering herself to him, it is his reason that overpowers her emotion and prevents him from swerving from his path of sainthood. As he resists her, she asks: "Because I'm black?" "No, Bissa," he replies, "because I mustn't." This is the victory of white reason over black emotion; that is, until Dr. Schweitzer, on his last night, succumbs to Bissa's passion. For Mikendi, Bissa and Soudou's inclination to dating whites is an hindrance to the strong, heterosexual masculine black hero in his fight for emancipation. Mikendi tells Bissa that she betrays her race by sleeping with whites.

Racism Schweitzer lives in the illusion of a Manichean division of the world between those who are primitive and emotional and those who are civilized and rational. He establishes this Manichaeism on the axis of race. If Schweitzer refuses that any of the white people's inventions should apply to black people's lives, it is principally based on his conviction that blacks are emotive and whites are rational, and that these two perspectives are irreconcilable. When his recruit, Dr. Altmeyer, complains that it is inadmissible that the hospital remain in the dark while ten donated generators are collecting dust in crates, Schweitzer retorts that he will not want "his primitives" to confuse electricity with sorcery. As for the filth, it is better not to disturb the lives of "his primitives." So, to keep his primitives untouched, Schweitzer throws away the medicines donated by his benefactors, preferring to keep his patients' hope high on placebo and treat them without anesthetics, until he discovers cures appropriate to their primitivity.

Feminism/Womanism Lambi's and Mikendi's representations of Bissa in, respectively, an economy of promiscuity (she has had several white partners in the city) and betrayal (she betrays the racial struggle for emancipation by sleeping with the enemy) as well as her own relentless pursuit of Dr. Schweitzer can make it difficult to think of Bissa as a feminist in the general sense of the term; that is, one that promotes women's rights on the basis of equality of the sexes. This would be a too restrictive idea of feminism, for feminism is a house of many corners. Bissa's feminism is instead an African approach that recognizes the centrality of

the maternal body of the woman, filled with empathy, emotion, good will, sincerity and the accountability of the spoken word. This Afrocentric feminism has been called ‘womanism’ by black women writers. It is not by accident that Bissa tells Koumba that she is the preserver of the Chief’s spoken promise to look after Dr. Schweitzer. In womanism, the spoken must be reminisced and preserved by the woman figure as the custodian of culture, an archeologist in her own terms. It is not by accident that she mothers the doctor until his death and finds words to draw from him confessions of vulnerability that Hélène has never been able to make him say. Although she may not fall within the prescription of Western feminism, Bissa is a womanist, a black feminist, driven by compassion, identification with the other, candor, and devotion.

QUEST

It is Schweitzer himself who says it, in Africa, he is looking for a drug appropriate to the primitiveness of the local populations. For this he rejects the drugs offered by his donors, performs surgeries on his patients without anesthesia so as not to affect his research. In his quest, Schweitzer, who hates the "primitive practices" of the natives, even let himself be convinced by Lambi, his assistant, to lower himself by going to ask for help from the sorcerer and then from the chief of Lambaréné. Mikendi is also on his quest. His is the quest for independence, which he wants to obtain only by violent methods, which persuades the colonizer once and for all that the colonized is ready to shed his blood for his freedom. As for Koumba, his quest goes back to his childhood. It is that of becoming a doctor like Schweitzer, but a doctor respectful of his people.