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Guimba the Tyrant (1995)

Cheick Oumar Cissoko

OVERVIEW

At first sight, the moviegoer can easily mistake *Guimba the Tyrant* for an African adaptation of the traditional American Western filled with villains and heroes, horse pursuits in open spaces and through dusty canyons, saloon fights, duels, and, of course, love stories. *Guimba the Tyrant* is less an imitation of the American Western than Malian filmmaker and former minister of culture Cheick Oumar Cissoko's assessment of the rich African culture and human genius that has been tragically laid to waste by the dishonorable twentieth-century African despot whose way of thinking remains mired in his folie des grandeurs. Instead of a direct review of the corrupt African leader, Cissoko carefully proceeds by circumlocution, casting his characters as fictitious, in a remote Malian village. It is, thus, through a perceptive allegory heavily spiced with caricature that the filmmaker depicts the reign of the post-independence African power monger, his megalomaniac dreams and his spoliation of independence. This cinema of the burlesque is appropriate to the subject it treats, for after all the reign of the African autocrat is, up to his fall, a comedic act.

CHARACTERS

<i>Guimba</i>	A ruthless autocrat.
<i>Jangine</i>	The brutal and sexually insatiable son of Guimba.
<i>Kani</i>	She was betrothed to Jangine at her birth
<i>Mambi</i>	Father of Kani
<i>Meya</i>	Mother of Kani

SYNOPSIS

The day she was born, Kani, the daughter of Mambi and Meya, was officially promised by her parents to Jangine, the son of Guimba, an autocratic ruler in a fictitious kingdom set in the African Sahel. Kani has grown into a beautiful woman, and Jangine the dwarf comes to Kani's parents, escorted by the king's griot, to remind them of their engagement and ask them to prepare for the wedding.

Kani loathes the prince and tells her mother Meya that she will not marry him. Meanwhile, the prince has noticed Meya's impressive rump and has lost all interest in his promised wife. He tells his father that it is Meya he is in love with and not her daughter Kani. Therefore, the king decides that Kani's father, Mambi Diarra, must divorce Meya to let his son fulfill his wish of having her as his wife. As for him, he will take his son's place and marry Kani.

Disgusted, Kani's parents break their oath, setting Kani free to marry whomever she desires. In reprisals, the king arrests Kani's father and exiles him to the outskirts of the kingdom, where other renegades have been living in hiding. In the meantime, the news of Kani's independence has traveled to far-away places and has caused scores of suitors to come courting her in an emulation of horse-riding skills and saber fights. Jealous, Guimba declares the kingdom off-limit to all males, executes those who violates his order and commands that their bodies be left to rot in the sun to serve as examples.

Disguised as a male horseman, Kani successfully leaves the walls of the kingdom, evades Guimba's pursuit and joins her father and the rebels in their hideaway. From there, they organize a rebellion that topples Guimba the tyrant and restores the kingdom to its pre-Guimba state of fairness.

SCENES

A griot's story *Guimba the Tyrant* opens with a griot, a traditional West African storyteller and genealogist, recounting the tale of a ruthless African ruler. The griot tells his story in a ballad-like style, playing his typical instrument called the kora.



Guimba's advice on leadership to his son Guimba is instructing his son Jangine about how to best rule a people. He tells his son that a great leader must be callous. He must inspire fear in his people to prevent them from questioning his decisions. He also teaches his son that to be respected, a man must seek out and conquer the most coveted woman.

How Guimba treats his people At Guimba's passage, the people bow down, while a praise singer glorifies him. Guimba's guards fight for his enjoyment. The loser is punished at the hands of the master. The peasants come to the palace to give Guimba their best cattle and yields, and they thank him for accepting their presents.



Jangine's insatiable sexual appetite While his father is busy fleeing the peasants with their livestock, Jangine is busy satisfying his sexual desire, sending the palace guards on a hunt for women, indiscriminately ordering married and unmarried women in his bed. Three fingers raised mean three women. As the palace guards drag his wife to the prince's bedroom, a humiliated husband repeatedly bangs his head to a tree until the tree trunk is covered with blood.



Mumba's newborn daughter Kani was engaged at birth to Guimba's dwarf Meya is preparing Kani for her nuptial night; that is, in case Kani's marriage with Jangine becomes effective. She teaches her the kind of incense she should use to entice her husband, how to gird her waist to have an attractive big rump. Kani is not enthusiastic. She does not want to marry Jangine.

Kani refuses to get married to Guimba's son Janginand . Janginand and his father's griot have come to remind Kani's parents that they have a promise to keep, that of marrying their daughter with Jangine. Kani brings some water to her guests. She purposely spills the water in Jangine's lap. While the griot tries to diffuse the situation and Meya attempts to repair the damage by wiping the water off Jangine's clothes, the prince pat Meya's buttocks. Meya is horrified. As Jangine and the griot retreat, Kani tells her mother that she will not marry the griot.



Kani's parents threaten to cancel the marriage Kani is sad, and her parents are looking for a providential excuse to void their agreement with Guimba. They have found the occasion: They argue that the dowry Guimba is giving them for Kani's hand is negligible; so, they threaten to renege on their promise to marry their daughter to Jangine. On the other hand, Guimba insists that the griot make all the necessary arrangements for the wedding to take place.



The son wants to get married to the mother Jangines confides in his father that it is Kani's mother that he loves. Sadio, one of Guimba's slaves overhears the confession, and she reports it to Meya. *Kani is free* The news that Kani is free travels across the region, and suitors come from everywhere to try their lucks with Kani. They perform horse-riding prowess, and some are even ready to fight for Kani. Guimba decrees the kingdom off-limit to all males and orders his guards to enforce the law.

The father wants to get married to the daughter Guimba desires Kani Guimba decides that since Jangine wants Meya, he will take his son's place and marry Kani. He sends his griot to order Mambi to divorce Meya, so that his son can marry her and he can marry Kani.

Women come from afar to seek Meya's secret The news that Jangine has picked Meya over young and beautiful Kani prompt some women to suspect Meya of possessing some secret supernatural power over men. So, women come from the neighboring regions to seek Meya's secret. Meya finds the situation amusing.



Guimba orders Mambi to divorce his wife so that the son can get married to the mother.

Mambi becomes the laughingstock of the kingdom, and he decides to confront the king. He tells him that he will not divorce to please Jangine. Mambi is arrested and banned from the kingdom. Two young suitors of Kani's brave Guimba's decree and confront him directly. Guimba executes them and demands that their bodies be left to the vultures. Some people ignore Guimba's order and organize the funerals of Guimba's victims. They, too, are arrested and expelled from the kingdom.



Other men want to get married to Kani after Kani is free of marriage promise. Guimba gets jealous and orders that any candidate who wants to marry Kani will be castrated.



Kani escapes Guimba Dressed as a male horse-rider, Kani escapes the palace and is chased by Guimba. She successfully evades him and joins the group of renegades in the mountains where her father was exiled. They recognize and welcome her. Mambi promises his daughter to the rebel chief if he helps get rid of Guimba. Although first offended by the proposition, the rebel chief is persuaded by Mambi.



Guimba's past history While the rebels are preparing their siege of the palace, an anxious Mambi tells his daughter Kani how Guimba came to power. Twenty years before, the town was prosperous and everybody lived in harmony until Guimba, "a master of the occult," decided to put his power to evil use. Guimba then killed the village chief and all the eligible men, took over the throne and implemented his dictatorship. Since that day, Guimba's son, Jangine, has stopped growing, and Guimba himself has been hiding his face from the sun.



Guimba kills his son The rebels march to the gate of the palace and confront Guimba's mystic power with an even greater power of their own. Using as a prop Guimba's slave Sadio, who was sent to poison the rebels and has since joined them (transforming her into a beautiful woman with a formidable back end), the rebel cause Guimba and his son to fight each other to win her over. Guimba kills his son and follows Sadio outside the palace walls. Guimba kills his son and follows Sadio outside the palace walls



Guimba's end. He is captured, taunted and killed. Kani marries a notable and the rebel chief weds with the slave.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

GUIMBA Guimba is a metaphor for the eccentric and ruthless postcolonial African autocrat who rules his nation like a family plantation, forbids any dissent, fills all government services with his tribesmen, uses state muscle to perpetuate his power, and grooms his progeny in the antechamber of power to continue his reign. Just as his rise is carnivalesque, his fall, too, is theatrical.

Eccentric Guimba has no regard for justice and the law. He sees himself as a fundamental leader, and his off-the-cuff pronouncements become law the moment he says them. He closes the kingdom's gates to all males when he pleases, orders that his victims be abandoned to rot in the sun, cancels marriages when he wants, expropriates the populations and orders them to thank him for that. He disposes of the kingdom as his personal property and sees the law as only applying to the ruled and not the rulers. Guimba's eccentricities are evocative of the follies of African autocrats like Idi Amin, Emperor Bokassa, Mobutu, and Bongo.

Ruthless It is from Guimba himself that one learns of his governing method. In a father-son advising session, Guimba tells his son, Jangine, that a great ruler must be ruthless to his people; he must instill fear in them so that his decisions are executed without ever being second-guessed. Guimba himself ruled as if to illustrate these tenets, beating and expropriating his subjects, eliminating his opponents, and separating families in order to have his ways with others' wives.

Distrustful Alone in his palace, his only company being his son, his loquacious and faithful praise singer, and his guards that fight for his enjoyment and whom he whips when they lose, Guimba wears a headdress that is meant to protect him from the sun. Guimba hiding his face from the sun is reminiscent of those Al Capone-like African leaders who have so much blood on their hands that they can no longer trust anyone and, therefore, must remain prisoners in their own palaces.

MAMBI Mambi is selfish and chauvinistic. Yet, he is perhaps one of the filmmaker's progressive mouthpieces against autocracy, corruption, and abuse. From this perspective, his limitations are indicative of the filmmaker's own, just as his progressive views have much to say on the filmmaker's advancing stance on certain issues.

Selfish If one believes Mambi, he abhors Guimba's despotic rule. Yet Mambi never confronted Guimba openly, and he was even disposed, under the guise of keeping his word, to marry his daughter Kani to Guimba's son Jangine. In fact, Mambi silently observes Guimba mistreat the population. It is only when Guimba's injustice came knocking on his own door, only when Guimba decided that he wanted Mambi's wife and Mambi becomes the laughingstock of the village, that his love for justice becomes manifest and he rises in defiance against Guimba. In fact, were he not personally affected by Guimba's eccentricities, Mambi would have left Guimba's reign unchallenged, would have even been the proud father-in-law of the dictator. Mambi is selfish.

Chauvinistic Mambi displays a chauvinistic tendency that shows the enormous work that remains to be done by the African males who claim to espouse women's liberation struggles. Mambi had promised his daughter, Kani, to Guimba's son, Jangine, the day she was born. Now that Guimba and he no longer see eye to eye, he promises Kani to the rebel chief Siriman if Siriman helps him get rid of Guimba. Kani is to Mambi a mere commodity to be exchanged for services.

JANGINE Jangine is cruel and degenerate. He is the embodiment of the entitled, careless, party-animal and women-and-car-collecting sons of African leaders groomed in the presidential palace to take their progenitors' place. These sons, when all works to plan, come to power with no other objective than to perpetuate their fathers' disastrous reigns. From the Chad of Deby to the Gabon of Bongo, passing through the Congo of Kabila, and the Equatorial Guinea of Obiang, Africa is replete with illustrations of Jangine.

Cruel Jangine takes a clever pleasure in tormenting the population. Obviously, Jangine has assimilated lessons in governance of his father, who advised him to be merciless with the people if he wants to be respected. However, Jangine takes his cruel manners to a grotesque level that would make his father's brutality seem mild. Jangine beats and abuses the population with no particular purpose other than to see them suffer. While the people are bowing down at his father's passage, Jangine would randomly walk to one of the peasants, slap him, remove his hat and throw it in the dust, and without any provocation from the victim. He would order the guards to break into family homes, remove women and drag them to his bedroom. Jangine's callousness is tactless.

Degenerate Both the griot who tells Guimba's story and Mambi who instructs his daughter about how Guimba came to power suggest that Jangine's diminutive height is allegorical of the arrested development of the kingdom. Jangine stopped growing the moment Guimba became a ruthless autocrat. Jangine, therefore, personifies the kingdom's regression from a state of rights to a lawless state. His degeneration is not just corporeal; it is statal. Thus, Jangine's death marks the beginning of the return to order and growth of the kingdom.

THEMES

SOCIETY

African Cinema (as art engage) In his article "What is Cinema for Us?" Mauritanian film producer Med Hondo argues that African cinema should be a tool of defiance and of ontological re-memorying that recaptures an African personality, collective and private way of life, cultural code, specific art, way of communicating, and history and civilization. By this standard, Cheick Oumar Cissoko's *Guimba the Tyrant* accomplishes the mission of *art engagé* assigned to African cinema by its showcasing of Malian colorful spirituality, its sartorial traditions, and its architectural wonders, among other things.

Animism Though predominantly Muslim (94%), the Malian populations, who gradually adopted Islam since the thirteenth century, remain attached to their animist beliefs. The producer of *Guimba the Tyrant* dramatises that animist spirituality not only in Guimba's everyday life, but more strongly in the mystical confrontations between Guimba and his enemies. The rebels who confront and defeat Guimba are Dozo hunters. These hunters, always dressed in camouflage-like green tunics and tight-fitting pants, are rumored to possess supernatural powers, such as invulnerability to bullets. The movie's setting of Djenne, built by masons who still practice esoteric rites today, also enhances the theme of spirituality.

Culture Though not discernible in the movie, a typical Djenné mud house is built to bring abundance and fecundity to the people who dwell in it. As such, it reflects those expectations by having on its top, above the main entrance and conveniently noticeable, some emblems displayed in a row. The outer two emblems, shaped like two phalluses or two men wearing hats, represent the power of men. Five smaller structures representing women stand between the two phalluses; below the women are even smaller structures standing for the prospective children or the navels of the prospective children of the house. In order to give force to these life-creating symbols as well as to warn off any curse that could befall the house by the hands of Satan or the bad spirits that might frequent building sites, the mason performs an ancient magical ritual.

Gender The idea of women as sorceresses is among the most historically and transnationally shared notions. That notion covers several ideas, among which the women's supposed inclination for seduction, manipulation, and vindictiveness. Jangine is infatuated with Meyya. She has undertaken nothing to even remotely suggest that she is interested in him. On the contrary, she would rather steer as far away from him as possible. Yet, Jangine's obsession with Meyya is viewed as a result of Meyya's dark power of seduction and manipulation over him; and women come from afar to seek that power. Likewise, Guimba's slave Sadio is propped up as a seductive woman who makes Guimba lose his faculty of discernment and drives Guimba out of his palace without his mystic horse and his protective headwear. Sadio even manipulates Guimba into consuming the poison he had prepared for his enemies.

Language (of masquage) The most powerful asset of the griot as collector of information and disseminator of knowledge is his ability to be a great dissimulator. Neither totally committed to the center nor exclusively pledged to the margin, the griot is a self-conscious actor, always suspicious of any absolutism. To be both inside and outside the palace is a dangerous job. To perform that risky task of equilibrist, the griot has developed a technique of feigned naïveté, of masquage and connivance, which allows him to move information from the palace to the village, and vice versa. This strategy is one of false self-erasure, whereby the griot burlesques himself, mocks his own stories by injecting occasional exaggerations and vulgarities into them, refusing all responsibility for the stories he tells. For instance, Guimba's griot warns Guimba of his imminent fall, but he tell it as the parable of the dusk that signals the end of the sun, thus subverting his master's suspicion and protecting himself.

Language (of Allegory) At one time, Africa enjoyed moments of great civilizations, intellectual and artistic creativity, economic abundance and political stability. What then went wrong and how? It is in answering these questions that Sissoko's historical allegory reveals itself as an up-to-date political critique. The contemporaneous nature of Sissoko's criticism is illuminated toward the end of the movie when an anxious Mambi recalls to his daughter Kani that twenty years before, the town was prosperous and everybody lived in harmony until Guimba, "a master of the occult," decided to put his power to evil use. Guimba then killed the village chief and all the eligible men, took over the throne and implemented his dictatorship. Since that day, Guimba's son, Jangine, has not grown an inch, and Guimba himself has been hiding his face from the sun. When one looks at the West African rulers today, Cissoko's metaphor resounds with truth.

POLITICS

Autocracy/absolutism In theory and in practice, most governments function on ideology, that is, on a system of ideas that operate as guiding principles for policy making. Guimba's administration of power lacks rationality and logic because it rests on no ideology. Guimba makes his decision haphazardly, on a whim, and often in ways that are counterproductive to the stability and longevity of his political regime. As a metaphor for the governing style of African rulers, Guimba's rule is telling. Most African government south of the Sahara are not ideological in the proper sense of the term. They are not rooted in reason but in political irrationality and the illogical whims of the kind of absolutist autocrats who have made a mockery of the painfully acquired African independences.

JUSTICE

Revenge For Sadio and Kani, getting rid of Guimba has an even personal motive: revenge. To make Guimba pay for mistreating them, Kani is disposed to go as far as offering her body to anyone who would defeat him. She first makes the proposition to two young men who are killed by Guimba; then she accepts her father deal with the chief rebel Siriman. While the motive of revenge would be seen as normal in men that have been abused, in women it usually comes across as unnaturally evil and incompatible with their expected docile dispositions.

PSYCHOLOGY

Isolation The idea of the griot as lonely speaks less of his actual supernatural power than of his rhetorical postures of double entendre. The griot is a double agent, who has learned to establish alliances both within the center and at the periphery of the political machinery, and who dances perilously on the tightrope of the dividing line. When the griot loses his footing, the part of him that falls into reproduction and representation of the official discourse is the griot-within, the tyrant's praise-singer. On the other hand, when his discourse goes counter to official discourse, he becomes the griot-without, committed to the periphery and against the power center. In the first case, he is reactionary, in the second, reactive. Either way, he is a subject of deep resentment. As a sorcerer, the griot must learn to swim between these two tides. Above all, the griot must learn to live with the suspicion of both the power center and the periphery, a lonely position.

Parallax (of the griot) The griot is a double-bind reporter of fact, who is both within and without. The use of the term the 'griot-within' is meant to name the reporter of fact whose immediacy to the power center causes his narrative to pass over the diverse marginal experiences and to only reflect and spread the philosophy of the center. Such is Guimba's personal griot, whose blind allegiance to his master leads him to excessively glorify Guimba, despite clear evidence of the tyrant's shortcomings. Were Guimba's personal griot (the griot-within) left alone to record and transmit history, he would only record and pass on to future generations moments of great deeds by his master. It is from the griot-without (either the filmmaker or the griot who opens the film) that one learns of Guimba's flaws, of his taste for the superfluous, of his inclination towards the bizarre and the occult, of his contempt for morality, justice and legitimacy, and of his ineptitude in leading.

Objectification At her birth, Kani was promised to Jangine. This was a marriage meant to seal the union of two important families. Even though Kani did not love Jangine, this marriage would have happened had Jangine not targeted Kani's mother. Later, when Mambi is expelled from the kingdom and seeks the help of rebel chief Siriman to return to the kingdom, it is again his daughter Kani whom he offers as a potential reward to Siriman. In both transactions, Kani is treated as exchange currency and her opinion matters little and is not asked for.

The griot's ubiquity In traditional oral society, besides the griot's ascendancy (he inherits his trade from his forefathers), his legitimacy comes from the confidence the people place in him. To sustain that confidence, the griot must strive for objectivity, operating from both the power center and the periphery. Despite his closeness to the ruling class, the information that the griot transmits to future generations must not be warped in favor of that class. The griot's stories must encompass the community's diverse individual narratives. In *Guimba the Tyrant*, the filmmaker suggests that the griot is a communal story gatherer, and he uses three griotic agencies (the filmmaker as griot, the griot who opens and closes the film, and the

king's griot) to illustrate various constitutive layers of the same reporter of fact. Rather than seeing these three griots as different and unrelated individuals who tell three unrelated stories, they must be thought of as three aspects of the same person; one omnipresent memory-gatherer whose ubiquitous power allows him to be everywhere (inside and outside the power center) and to witness all the community's events that need reporting.

PAST

History *Guimba the Tyrant* contains numerous clues that facilitate a temporal movement from history to actuality. Guimba's son, Jangine, who "hasn't grown an inch" since his father's occupation of the town, is certainly a metaphor for what has become of African countries since the rise to power of despots who, too preoccupied with filling their own pockets, indulged in mismanagement of national resources or wasted their energies in interminable wars, making their countries poorer than they were at the time of independence. Furthermore, Guimba and his soldiers riddling the architectural marvels of the ancient African city of Djenné (the site of the movie) with bullets can only bring back memories of the desolation and sorrow which the people of Liberia, Somalia, Sudan, Zaire, Côte d'Ivoire and many other African countries have experienced in the last three decades.