

A critique of the Film Timbuktu: The Paradox of extremism

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This essay will discuss Abderrahmane Sissako's film *Timbuktu* (2014), which covers the stories of multiple inhabitants of a remote area located in Mali, which is occupied by radicalized jihadist soldiers. The paper will provide an explanation of the issues presented, a thorough analysis of the narrative, and several references to the insights of Mahmood Mamdani.

Above all, *Timbuktu* explores terrorism in relation to themes, such as rural life, kinship and human vulnerability on all sides. In spite of the constant atmosphere of terror cast upon small town residents and, to a lesser extent, farmers dwelling nearby in the Sahara Desert, most carry on with their daily routines while trying to find joy in the most mundane things. For example, children play with an invisible soccer ball as radicalized jihadists forbid the practice of Western sports. Individuals who disobey such a rule face up to 20 lashes. Moreover, the film displays family and camaraderie bonds through impactful visual storytelling and dialogues between characters. As such, scenes involving the Tuareg family portray the bliss and idyll of rural familial life while those with a jihadist veteran comforting an agitated recruit when filming a propaganda video. In a sense, these scenes humanize people who are often depersonalized and reduced to monoliths, which prevents Western audiences from understanding them. From this perspective, the emotional reactions of personages reveal a vulnerable side that helps audiences relate to victims of terrorism: locals as much as soldiers. In short, the inhabitants seem the most stable, perseverant and close to their values as opposed to their occupiers and to what the mainstream media claims.

Then, the film highlights the absurdity of radical religious movements, which often contradict the actual principles maintained by the population in general. In fact, the village's imam reprimands jihadist soldiers for wearing shoes in a mosque and forcing marriage without parental consent. The contrast between the two views is important as it is one that most Westerners are not often exposed to. Furthermore, the jihadist group, which is composed of individuals from both the Islamic and Western world, imposed Sharia law on the occupied Malian zone. Hence, the population faces harsh punishments for actions as harmless as singing after the curfew to more serious ones like murder. For example, a woman was sentenced to 20 lashes for singing and two people were stoned for being in the same room while unmarried. Such scenes remind us how similar we are to people from other places and how much we take freedom for granted. Many scenes demonstrate the ways in which jihadist groups are inconsistent with the laws they uphold. This is because they forbid people from playing soccer, yet they argue about the FIFA World Cup. In sum, viewers of this film witness the tragedy of being deprived from basic liberties against one's own will as they relate to fictional individuals in warzones by virtue of sharing the same mundane activities.

Next, the film encompasses topics, such as the human creation of geopolitical systems, kinship bonds and pastoral life, and one of the arguments in Mahmood Mamdani's article *Beyond Settler and Native as Political Identities: Overcoming the Political Legacy of Colonialism* (2001), which suggests that laws form political identities distinct from cultural identities. First, the movie revolves around a region under siege by other individuals who imposed their

radical and violent vision of Islam on locals. Contrarily to what radical jihadists claim, God is not the creator of such a perfect geopolitical system; it is a man-made creation. Obviously, the system is flawed and so are humans. As Mamdani's states in his article: "[the Sharia law] may not change historically, [but] its application by humans on earth is susceptible to change" (2001, p. 6). Second, kinship bonds are an important feature that showcases the immemorial values of African cultures on family. For example, the Tuareg family acts as a support system to a fatherless boy; the fish merchant finds the strength to survive under the regime in her mother's words; and jihadist soldiers of different backgrounds or ethnicity bond over shared values and a common goal very sinister in nature. Also, the narrative presents cattle raising as a source of subsistence as well as an expensive commodity. For instance, the father of the Tuareg family must pay 40 cows to avoid his death sentence for killing a neighbouring fisherman. Fourth, with reference to Mamdani's article (2001), radical jihadist movements interpret the Sharia law in a way that creates false identities based on immeasurable and abstract concepts such as personal religiousness (p. 12). The fact that whether women wear a veil or not does not determine her religious conviction.

To conclude, Sissako's *Timbuktu* portrays the realities of ordinary Malian individuals struggling under the occupation of a radical jihadist group, which serve as representation of how immoral and absurd extremism is. The essay first describes the central themes of the film, which are rural life, kinship, and human vulnerability. After, it points out the contradictory nature of radical religious groups, such as the one in the movie who violates the laws that it imposes on others. The third paragraph

links topics covered in class with aspects of the film, such as man-made geopolitical systems, social connections, and pastoral lifestyle, and it references Mamdani's perception on political identities emerging from legislation. All in all, *Timbuktu* helps viewers gain a deeper level of understanding of the emotional state of terrorism victims as well as the paradox of radical jihadist movements. The film's strengths lie in the diversity of languages used in dialogues and in the humanization of personages. It does not feed into Western preconceptions.

References

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