

bamako



a film by
Abderrahmane Sissako

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SYNOPSIS

Melé is a bar singer,
her husband Chaka is out of work
and the couple is on the verge
of breaking up...

In the courtyard of the house they
share with other families, a trial
court has been set up.

African civil society spokesmen
have taken proceedings against the
World Bank and the IMF whom
they blame for Africa's woes...

Amidst the pleas and the
testimonies, life goes on in the
courtyard.

Chaka does not seem to be
concerned by this novel Africa's
desire to fight for its rights...

INTERVIEW WITH ABDERRAHMANE SISSAKO

/ How did this project come into being ?

First, this film is linked to my desire to film in my father's house, who has passed away.

This house is located in Bamako, in the poorer neighbourhood of Hamdallaye.

It's a plain house, made of earth. For years, a tap and a well have been standing side by side in the courtyard. Here, water is expensive, and to save money, my father had a well dug.

This courtyard is where I grew up, with my many brothers, sisters, cousins, aunts, uncles, close and distant relatives. Never had we been less than twenty-five sleeping, eating, learning, living almost in turn.

Today, most of us have left the house to live elsewhere - and yet the house is still always full... New cousins, close and distant relatives live there, go to school or quit to work on some odd job or other.

For me, this house is associated with the memory of passionate discussions with my father about Africa.

The other reason that urged me to make this film has to do with my views on Africa - Africa, not as the continent that I call my own, but as a place of injustice which directly affects me. When

one lives on a continent where film-making is difficult and uncommon, one feels entitled to speak in the name of others: faced with the seriousness of the situation in Africa, I felt a kind of urgency to bring up the hypocrisy of the North towards the Southern countries.

/ Without a doubt, your film adopts the least traditional narrative. How did you develop this method ?

At first, I wanted to limit the setting of the film to a trial without ever leaving it. Afterwards, I understood that I could perhaps go further if I gave up the idea of a single space, one theatrical setting, and that I could introduce characters outside the trial.

/ What is striking, is precisely the life that goes on outside the courtroom: women are dying fabric, a mother nurses her little daughter, a couple breaks up, another gets married...

I developed the secondary plots because I wanted the lives of the people living in the courtyard to echo or interfere with the speeches delivered at the bar. The trial debates illustrate a kind of intelligence which monopolizes all of our



attention and it was absolutely necessary that the sophisticated statements be put into perspective by comparing them with the lives that go on in the courtyard.

The people who gravitate around the courtroom believe in the trial but don't expect anything from the verdict. When talking about the West, in order to encourage me, one of the witnesses said: "At least they'll know that we know".

/ In *Waiting for Happiness*, you showed the impotence of Africa's public authorities and western countries' anti-immigration policies. Here, you reach a new stage with a film in the form of a parable.

I deeply believe that life and hope go beyond the notion of justice. Speaking in a straightforward way is extremely difficult these days and conveying my

message through a parable seemed the right thing to do. I wanted the debate that is carried out by the main characters in the trial, to be regularly broken up by other realities which sometimes take the form of parables.

It was impossible for me to imagine this trial anywhere but within a real living place.





/ Is it possible to say that the trial has a cathartic quality to it ?

The real question is this: no court of law exists to call into question the power of the strongest. It wasn't so much a question of laying the blame on who is guilty than denouncing the fact that the predicament of hundreds of millions of people is the result of policies that have been decided outside their universe.

You find this idea in a statement given by Aminata Traoré, one of the witnesses, who refuses to accept that poverty is the main feature of Africa: no, she says, Africa is rather a victim of its wealth !

So, in this way, I wanted to offer another image of my continent, one different from war and famine.

This is where an artist's creativity comes in, not to change the world, but to make the impossible realistic, like these proceedings against international financial institutions.

/ How did you think up the "dialogues" of the main characters in the trial ?

It's worth knowing that I called upon judges and professional lawyers and also real witnesses. I worked a long time with them. I decided what the framework of the proceedings was going to be like and then I let them put it to life. When we were filming, I gave them a lot of freedom when testifying, accusing or defending.

Some of them had been chosen among the victims of the famous "structural adjustments" of the World Bank and the IMF: these are the people that we call the "outcasts", the laid off workers, like those former public servants who found themselves out of work because public services had been privatized and sold to western multinationals... These "witnesses" had the feeling that a real trial was taking place and so when they came to testify in court they voiced their resentment. Here again, I didn't make anything up.

/ You remind us that women play a central role in Africa and prevent the continent from erupting into violence.

Yes, they are the ones who prevent us from being too pessimistic about the future of the continent... When one sees their will to fight, their strength, it's only normal to give them an essential part in the film, in the trial as well as in the life that goes on around the courtyard.

/ How is the western spaghetti scene related to the film ?

For me, it was a case of showing that cow-boys aren't all white and that the West isn't solely to blame for Africa's woes. We too have a share of blame. This is why the cow-boy who shoots the "extraneous" schoolteacher is African.

Also, a large portion of the African elite is a party to the West: they've never had the courage to act in favor of changing things because each person is only looking out selfishly for their own interests.

So, I saw this western sequence as a metaphor of the World Bank's or the IMF's mission - since these missions are carried out jointly by the Europeans and the Africans.

/ How did you go about the filmmaking ?

For me, we had to film the trial as one would a documentary: a scene couldn't be interrupted, a witness wouldn't have been asked to repeat a sentence and we let the court president and the lawyers listen to the testimonies and intervene as they saw fit.





We used four video cameras and a sound recordist, deliberately letting them be visible on the screen. Because I wanted everyone to get used to this technical device, just as one would in any trial.

On the other hand, for the scenes outside the trial, we chose a fictional scenario, with shooting script, reverse-angle shots, master shots... and we shot on 16 mm.

This is how it turned out that together, in the same film, we had professional actors and actual lawyers, judges and witnesses, people from the neighbourhood, and members of my family.

/ You also introduce a character who carries a camera.

The character of Falai, the cameraman, makes videos both for weddings and for the crime squad. But he says he prefers filming the dead, "they're more

real". I wanted to show his personal point of view, without sound. These images represent for me the glance of those who don't have the means to speak out.



CAST

Melé
Chaka
Saramba
Falai
Chaka's sister
Journalist

Aïssa MAÏGA
Tiéoura TRAORÉ
Hélène DIARRA
Habib DEMBÉLÉ
Djénéba KONÉ
Hamadou KASSOGUÉ

Court President
Victims' Attorneys

Hamèye MAHALMADANE
Aïssata TALL SALL
William BOURDON

Defense Attorneys

Roland RAPPAPORT
Mamadou KONATÉ
Mamadou SAVADOGO

Prosecutor

Magma Gabriel KONATÉ

Witnesses
(in order of appearance)

Zeguè BAMBA
Aminata TRAORÉ
Madou KEITA
Georges KEITA
Assa BADIHALLO SOUKO
Samba DIAKITÉ

Special appearances
in the roles of the cow-boys

Danny GLOVER
Elia SULEIMAN
Dramane BASSARO
Jean-Henri ROGER
Zeka LAPLAINE
Ferdinand BATSIMBA

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Today's core missions of the Washington-based IMF and World Bank, which were created in the wake of World War II, are to regulate the international monetary system and lend money to developing countries.

As many countries had difficulty repaying their debts, rich countries imposed, in the early 80's, structural adjustment policies that set the rules of the game for millions of people.

International financial institution officials were granted the power to impose on the most debt-ridden countries' governments a policy supposed to balance their budgets.

Most Sub-Saharan African countries are under structural adjustment programmes these days.

These programmes based on neoliberal principles serve rich countries' vested interests - essentially those of the United States and of Europe.

The reforms imposed on Southern countries have always been the same while, paradoxically enough, they are far from being implemented in Northern countries: suppression of State subsidies (in agriculture, textiles...), dismantlement of public services and job cuts in the public sector (school teachers, doctors...).

In debt-ridden countries, the privatization of State-owned firms which managed natural resources, water, electricity, transport and telecommunications has always been carried out in the interest of rich countries' multinationals. The contracts - signed against a background of corruption and political pressure - have always benefited these multinationals.

At the same time, the populations under structural adjustment have grown poorer and poorer, their life expectancy has declined, their child mortality has risen and their literacy rate has dropped.

Most official reports indicate that the Very Indebted Poor Countries are poorer today than they were twenty years ago

However, if we take into account the total capital flow and wealth transfer, African countries have more than repaid their debts to rich countries. Many of them have had to relinquish everything they owned and can no longer secure their future development.

A long overdue debt relief seems now to be deceiving.

Abderrahmane Sissako

CREW

Screenplay and Direction	Abderrahmane SISSAKO
1st assistant director	Philippe TOURET
Director of photography	Jacques BESSE
Camera operators (<i>trial</i>)	Thomas NIKÉMA Makhète DIALLO Abdourahmane SOMÉ
Sound engineer	Dana FARZANEHPOUR
Set decorator	Mahamadou KOUYATÉ
Costumes	Maji-da ABDI
Make-up artist	Batoma KOUYATÉ
Editor	Nadia BEN RACHID
Sound editor	Christophe WINDING
Sound mixer	Bruno TARRIÈRE
Line producer Mali	Maji-da ABDI
Production manager	Thomas ALFANDARI
Production manager Mali	Moctar BÂ
Location manager	Dramane TRAORÉ
Producers	Denis FREYD Abderrahmane SISSAKO
Executive producers	Danny GLOVER Joslyn BARNES

ABDERRAHMANE SISSAKO

Born in 1961 in Kiffa, Mauritania.

After spending his childhood in Mali and returning briefly to Mauritania, he went to Russia to study Cinematography at the VGIK, the Moscow Federal Institute of Cinematography, from 1983 to 1989.

- 1991 **THE GAME**
- 1993 **OCTOBER**
- 1995 **LE CHAMEAU ET LES BÂTONS FLOTTANTS**
- 1996 **ABRIYA**
- 1997 **ROSTOV-LUANDA**
- 1998 **LIFE ON EARTH**
- 2002 **WAITING FOR HAPPINESS (HEREMAKONO)**

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