

San Francisco International Film Festival 2007

Part 4: Films on Africa—“The problem always comes back to poverty”

By Joanne Laurier
23 May 2007

This is the fourth of a series of articles on the 2007 San Francisco International Film Festival, held April 26-May 10.

Sounds of Sand (*Si le vent soulève les sables*) and *A Walk to Beautiful* are extraordinary films that expose the appalling social conditions ravaging Africa. The former, adapted from Marc Durin-Valois' novel *Chamelle* by Belgian director Marion Hänsel, precisely and lyrically observes the life-and-death journey by Rahne, his wife and three children, forced to leave home in a North African village in search of water.

The magnificent but hostile desert terrain is perhaps the least of the nomads' problems. With goats and cattle in tow, the family faces deadly encounters with sadistic mercenary soldiers and militiamen who steal and kill Rahne's sons and livestock. Daughter Shasha stands up to the trauma, despite being a near casualty at birth for the sole reason that she was born female into a family with too many mouths to feed.

The film poignantly renders the stoic dignity of a population faced with almost unbearable conditions of life. *Sounds of Sand* speaks to the long-standing colonial plunder and devastation of a continent that has spawned a vicious layer of native thugs and criminals, guardian of the status quo that inflicts horrors on the most vulnerable and impoverished.

Director Hänsel explains that after reading *Chamelle*, “I wanted to bear witness to the suffering of these lives, suffering which we only speak of in short television news items. To replace these faraway images which, alas, have become all too banal with an emotion close to the heart, a compassion which is no longer abstract.... When I see the state of the world and of the planet I want to make films that are ‘useful,’ and there, in Africa, humankind and the continent are in danger.” Worthy intentions.

A Walk to Beautiful is a documentary by US filmmaker Mary Olive Smith about poor, rural Ethiopian peasant women who endure a terrible fate because they are afflicted with childbirth injuries that are curable if treated. However, only 146 obstetricians, practicing primarily in Ethiopia's cities, are available to a population of 77 million.

The film focuses on the stories of five women—Ayehu, Almaz, Zewdie, Yenenesh and Wubete—who all suffered through unrelieved obstructed labor and developed a condition called fistula, which causes incontinence. The women are caused further unhappiness when they are treated as outcasts by communities

with no understanding of the problem.

Ayehu, 25, was abandoned by her husband and forced to live alone and isolated in a shack made of sticks. Poisoning herself was a solution she contemplated, but feared her soul would not rest. Yenenesh, given away to two husbands by the time she was 10 and pregnant at age 12, tells the camera: “I'd rather cut off my arm than have this problem—at least I could mix with people.”

Wubete, also married off at age 10, became pregnant by her fourth husband at age 15. Chronically malnourished, she was too small to deliver a baby. Like many peasant women, Wubete began a life of hard labor at age two, another factor in the stunting of her growth. Almaz was kidnapped and forced into marriage during her late teens. After losing a child in the course of pregnancy, she developed a double fistula, and for three years, she says, “My life went down the drain.”

Zewdie had five children before she developed a fistula during labor with her sixth child. As a result, she was abandoned by her husband of 22 years. She speaks bitterly of the fact that some people in her village believed that a curse was coming from her womb.

The women's heartbreaking circumstances and their arduous trek to seek care in the country's capital are sensitively chronicled by the film. The Addis Ababa Fistula Hospital, free of charge to fistula sufferers, was opened in 1974 by Doctors Catherine and Reginald Hamlin, who moved from Australia to Ethiopia in 1959. Reginald Hamlin died in 1993.

An obviously dedicated Dr. Catherine Hamlin describes some of the preconditions that lead to obstructed births: “Most peasant women in the developing world have to do the hard work of cooking, grinding of corn, collecting of water from the well, carrying sticks from the forest. All her energy has gone into work instead of into growth. She hasn't had enough nourishment.”

In an interview in the movie's production notes, director Smith points to the underlying issues: “Anyone not fully educated as the complex causes of a condition like fistula could very easily blame men, religion or entrenched cultural practices. But beneath the surface, the problem always comes back to poverty and the difficult balance of a society barely living at the subsistence level....

“The primary cause of fistula is lack of health care. Five percent of pregnancies throughout the world end up obstructed. In *A Walk*

to *Beautiful*, we see what happens when Caesarean sections are available. Add to that the fact that most girls in the countryside are undernourished and married off too young, a high rate of obstructed labor resulting in death or severe injury becomes inevitable.”

As with the characters in the *Sounds of Sand*, the inner and outer beauty of the women in *A Walk to Beautiful* contrasts with their abysmal social situation. This reality is underscored by Dr. Hamlin: “To meet only one of these mothers is to be profoundly moved. Mourning the stillbirth of their only baby, incontinent of urine, ashamed of their offensiveness, often spurned by their husbands, homeless, unemployed except in the fields, without hope. They bear their sorrows in silent shame. Their miseries, untreated, are utterly lonely and lifelong.”

The humanitarian disaster in the Darfur region of Sudan is the subject of the deeply misguided film *The Devil Came on Horseback*, by the American filmmaking team of Annie Sundberg and Ricki Stern. Based on the commentary and exclusive photos (journalists are banned from the region) of former US Marine Captain Brian Steidle, a military observer with the African Union, the film, as it describes itself in the production notes, “propels the viewer through the tragic impact of an Arab government bent on destroying its black African citizens.”

The press notes continue: “This compelling film bears witness to unmentionable atrocities while celebrating the courage of a refugee community desperately trying to survive and poses the question: Why has the West [i.e., the US] not taken more urgent action to stop genocide this time?”

As *The Devil* documents, horrific events are taking place in Darfur, but the filmmakers deal with the tragedy entirely torn from its historical context. Why has Darfur garnered media attention, when for more than a decade, millions have died in wars in Congo, Somalia, Sudan and throughout Africa, primarily as the legacy of Western colonialism?

The strategically located and oil-rich Sudan has most recently, as the film points out, come under the influence of China, which cuts across the interests of both the Americans and the Europeans. The moral outrage over Darfur, in which the film abundantly indulges, happens to jibe with the geopolitical ambitions of the US ruling elite. This will often turn out to be the case with liberal moral outrage. It has been the case in the Balkans, Iraq and Afghanistan, with disastrous results. Unwittingly or not, the filmmakers are helping to prepare the ideological groundwork, should it be necessary, for a future military intervention.

In fact, the film openly advocates such action, through the belligerent words of Steidle, the former marine. *The Devil Came on Horseback* seems to be suffering from a case of amnesia by discounting the sociocide carried out by the US in Iraq in particular. The source of the misery in Sudan is the catastrophe perpetrated on much of the globe by imperialism. In response, the filmmakers call for a new intervention by...imperialism. This “devil” will not come on horseback, but in armored personnel carriers.

Singapore Dreaming, *The Other Half* from China and *Mukhsin* from Malaysia are appealing and serious, but are all works hampered by limited scope and artistry.

When Loh Poh Huat wins the lottery in Yen Yen Woo and Colin Goh’s *Singapore Dreaming*, it appears to be the solution for a family that covets the upward mobility opened up by globalization. It’s a quicker road to getting out of public housing and into a fancy condominium than waiting for the fortunes to rise of a ne’er-do-well son who has just returned home with an American diploma or a son-in-law who scrapes by selling insurance. But when the patriarch dies suddenly (his over-the-top Taoist funeral is reminiscent of the final scene in Douglas Sirk’s *Imitation of Life*), harsh surprises are in store for his grasping offspring.

At times, *Singapore Dreaming* catches at deeper and more disturbing problems, but it tends to settle, in the end, for a somewhat complacent treatment of the foibles of lower middle class family life. More could have been done with this material.

The new film by China’s Ying Liang’s (director of the impressive *Taking Father Home*), *The Other Half* (*Ling Yi Ban*), is set in the developing industrial city of Zigong in southwestern China. It follows 22-year-old Xiaofen, a transcriber in a law firm, who records the complaints of the firm’s clientele. The tribulations of Xiaofen’s life—which include an errant boyfriend and absent father—and of the lives of those whose woes she transcribes, are exacerbated by the city’s extreme levels of pollution toxicity. The corporate poisoners are defended and rewarded by the government of the “new China.”

Partially autobiographical, Malaysian director Yasmin Ahmad’s *Mukhsin* deals with an unconventional, loving Malay family, whose free-spirited 10-year-old daughter Orked forms a bond with 12-year-old Mukhsin, a boy from a tough background.

Light-hearted and detailed, it is relatively slight fare, as the director’s words indicate: “With *Mukhsin*, I try to examine one common and uncomfortable human experience: What happens when your best friend—someone with whom you’ve been learning to do cool things like climbing trees, flying kites and riding bicycles—starts to develop romantic notions about you? I feel it’s an interesting human condition to look at, because I myself have never understood how, sometimes, something as beautiful as Love can threaten to end something else that’s just as beautiful—Friendship.” An occasionally charming work, but not terribly earthshaking.

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