

# Wendemi, the Good Lord's Child

## Wendemi, l'enfant du bon dieu

**Country of Origin:**

Burkina Faso

**Language:**

Moore (Mossi)

**Studios:**

Laafi Productions (France)

Les Films de l'Espoir (Burkina Faso)

Thelma Film AG (Switzerland)

**Director:**

Saint Pierre Yaméogo

**Producer:**

René Sintzel

**Screenwriters:**

S P Yaméogo

René Sintzel

**Cinematographers:**

Moussa Diakité

Jürg Hassler

**Music:**

Mahmoud Tabrizizadeh

**Sound:**

Emmanuel de Soria

Issa Traoré

**Editor:**

Michèle Darmon

**Duration:**

94 minutes

**Genres:**

Drama

Quest for identity

Adventure

**Cast:**

Sylvain Minoungou

Abdoulaye Komboudri

Sylvie Yaméogo

Alassane Dakissaga

Célestin Zongo

Gustave Sorgho

Sotigui Kouyaté

**Year:**

1993

### Synopsis

‘Go away and come back only when you tell us who made you pregnant!’ so speaks Zacharie (Gustave Sorgho) to his daughter Cécile (Sylvie Yaméogo) in the opening scene of the film, just as she is about to give birth. The next day, after Cécile has vanished, women find a baby in the bush. Back in Koudougou, the babe is handed down from one person to the other until Michel (Alassane Dakissaga), whose spouse first spotted him, starts negotiating with the police, the village chief and Father George ways of finding a home for him. The priest (Célestin Zongo) advises Michel and his spouse to raise the child because he is ‘a gift of God’, and the new parents call the boy ‘Wendemi’, meaning ‘The good Lord’s child’ in Moore.

Growing up, Wendemi (Sylvain Minoungou) becomes unruly. Being ill-treated by his adoptive parents, he is entrusted to Koudougou’s chief, whom Wendemi is to accompany on official trips. One day, Wendemi injures his foot and is passed on to a new tutor. As an adult, Wendemi, wants to marry Pogbi, his tutor’s daughter. To carry this out, he follows an elder’s advice (Sotigui Kouyaté) on how to obtain land. He then goes and searches for his mother in order to find out his real name. His quest brings him to Ouagadougou where he meets a local pimp known as ‘Son of Man’ (Abdoulaye Komboudri). Reduced to work with Son of Man, Wendemi manages to escape this dead-end by saving a girl from prostitution. Will these adventures reveal to Wendemi his father’s identity?

### Critique

In Pierre Yaméogo’s films, characters walk a lot and often at a brisk pace. For each leading role in *Wendemi*, Yaméogo’s third feature film, walking amounts to either a quest or an escape or both. Wendemi’s quest consists in fleeing from his unknown origins before returning to the village and discovering his ancestry. Likewise, his mother escapes from her fate by relinquishing her son until she launches a search for him after she has lost him a second time. Indeed, Wendemi’s mother does not reveal her identity to her son when he asks for the bracelet, which is a symbolic link between them.

The quest takes a comic turn when the baby found in the bush is handed around from one institution to the other. The comic strand derives from the verbal enumeration of events that have already been staged on the screen. Thus, Michel, Wendemi’s first adoptive father, recounts his negotiations not only with his spouse but also with the police, the village chief, the priest and various social services even though the viewers have already seen on the screen the unlucky fellow’s wanderings. By a twist of irony, Wendemi or ‘The good Lord’s child’ is well named since it becomes clear that this phrase is to be understood in the literal as much as in the figurative sense, for indeed, Wendemi is Father George’s child.

All the comings and goings that are linked to Wendemi’s quest for his origins foreground larger movements. First, in relation to the film’s structure, the quest is reminiscent of the bipolar structure that juxtaposes the city and the village. In the course of his travels from one village to the next, Wendemi leaves his adoptive village to join his mother in the capital Ouagadougou. The contrast between the here and elsewhere is not alien to Yaméogo as the theme of the exodus from the village to the city presides in *Delwende* (2005) and in *Dunia* (1987), in the same manner as *Moi et mon blanc* (literal translation: *Me and My White Man* [2003]) is hinged on the alternation between Paris and Ouagadougou. The search for parents in *Wendemi* refers to a necessary homecoming, as the birth village is the initial space of a crisis that must be overcome: mother and son return to the village in order to designate the boy’s father.

As far as *Wendemi* is concerned, these movements lead to Father George’s church, and several low angle shots and other shots, which are emphasized by the roaring of thunder, indeed testify throughout the film to the all-encompassing power of the religious institution in the village life. Although the quest focuses on Father George, it seems that Yaméogo does not specifically indict the Catholic Church; instead, he unmasks all manner of crimes committed under the guise of religion, whatever it may be. In the second half of the film which takes place in Ouagadougou, the episode showing a Muslim family man who acts as a Pharisee echoes Father George’s paternity that is too shameful to disclose. Guilty of an adulterous relationship with an under-age woman, then guilty of her death, the Muslim patriarch soon holds forth dressed in a vermilion *boubou* (robe), a colour that symbolizes his crimes. Later on, he is praying in his compound, with complete impunity, surrounded by his wives and children. This sanctimonious man is seen again donning the same red *boubou* and drinking beer with the chief of police and other people who helped him hush up his scandals.

The quest for origins reveals a wide range of cultural features. On the light-hearted side, a sergeant is labelled a foreigner because he comes from Bobo-Dioulasso, 200 km away from the village where he now resides. On a more sombre note, while Wendemi needs to know his roots in order to get married and to engage in adult life, his search for the past leads him to discover the hardships of those bereft of a future through the TV program ‘The great endemics of the decade’, which he glimpses through a window from the street. Yaméogo could be criticized for exploiting this media coverage of poverty and malnutrition without really engaging in this new theme, even though he juxtaposes the programme on poverty with a shot of a family eating their dinner like gluttons. The boy’s psychological development could justify such images but there is no follow-up. Would these black-and-white images aim to represent Africa as TV audiences are made to imagine it through the screen, as seen in *Moi et mon blanc*? Should such images serve as counterpoint to a critique of film representations of ‘less-fortunate-than-we-are’ Africa, which is a foreign approach to the protagonists’ experience in this story? Whatever the film-maker’s intentions may have been, they would gain in being made more explicit.

Even though *Wendemi* deals with themes that were commonly broached in films from Mali or Burkina Faso in the preceding decade, such as *Yeelen* by Souleymane Cissé (1987), *Yaaba/Grandmother* (1989) by Idrissa Ouédraogo, *Wend Kuuni/God’s Gift* by Gaston Kaboré (1982), Yaméogo managed to give a sharp edge to this story of an orphan in search of his origins. His quest narrative is led from the standpoint of religion without being delivered as a thesis. At the end of the film, the Koudougou villagers join in Wendemi’s quest for the truth when they march in a united front towards Father George’s church. The silent ending stands as an accusation and favours an unambiguous albeit restrained tone.

*This review was adapted from French by Blandine Stefanson.*

**Marie-Magdeleine Chirol**