

# 'Yaaba': A Tale of a West African Queen

By Marco Werman

NEW YORK — Idrissa Ouedraogo, the filmmaker from Burkina Faso, West Africa, sat in his room at New York's Empire Hotel, surrounded by sheets and blankets and a bit bewildered by the pile of items he had to pack into his valise for that day's trip to Japan. The previous night at Alice Tully Hall across the street, Ouedraogo had charmed the sold-out house with his feature film "Yaaba."

His thoughts were interrupted by the telephone. It was a strictly business conversation in French in which he explained his busy itinerary to yet another producer curious about his plans.

Ouedraogo's latest film, "Yaaba," which translates as "Granny," takes place in the country's bleak Sahel region. It tells a story of an ill-behaving village boy and an elderly woman who is rejected by the other residents in the hamlet because they think she is a witch.

Following his three-day appearance at the New York Film Festival, Ouedraogo was accompanying "Yaaba" to Tokyo, then back for the Chicago Film Festival, a quick stopover in New York, and then he would finally be reunited with his wife and child in Paris.

Ouedraogo appears to be a man who has mastered his craft and himself, after many struggles. During the making of "Yaaba," for example, a close friend (to whom the film is dedicated) died in a car accident during shooting; filming in the 110-plus degree heat (above 40 degrees Centigrade) in a country with no infrastructure to speak of, was a logistical nightmare. Now not even the clouds of dust that rise from the incessant buzz of orange scooters in his home village can bring him down.

"Yaaba," costing \$750,000 to make, would soon be in the can. And when the Pan African film festival rolled around in February, Ouedraogo would not have to scamper frantically off a plane, like so many other African filmmakers, with the only copy of his picture under his arm and rush to the Ciné Burkina for its world premier.



Idrissa Ouedraogo, the West African director, and villagers in a scene from "Yaaba."

Despite the widely favorable reviews, the festival jury handed the grand prize to "Heritage Africa," a comparatively less professional production by the Ghanaian Kwah Ansah. Insiders were saying that no English-speaking African country like Ghana had ever won the prize, and that after 20 years of the Pan African Film Festival, 1989 was going to be their year. Ouedraogo, from French-speaking Burkina, picked up the Prize of the Public, which, in itself, was prestigious, and waited for the Cannes film festival in April.

At Cannes, the payoff came. "Yaaba" won the International Critics Prize. And at its first screening, Daniel Talbot, the president of New Yorker Films, sat with his wife in the audience. Fifteen minutes into "Yaaba," he turned to her and said, "This is fantastic."

"It was fresh, new, and brilliant," recalls Talbot. "I thought, 'It's a masterpiece.'" Afterward, Talbot spoke with the producer Freddy Denaes, Pierre-Alain Meier and Ouedraogo, and a contact was signed on the spot for New Yorker to handle the distribution.



of "Yaaba" in the United States. According to Talbot and Ouedraogo, this was the first time that an African film had been launched in the United States film market on the same competitive footing as that of American films.

One might look at such an undertaking as sheer folly. Ouedraogo doesn't film on slick sound stages. His budget necessitates that his set be no more complicated than the roaming expanses of the Sahel. And his actors are mostly villagers, non-professionals, people who, with the exception of his storytellers, are not linked to any sort of Western tradition in which mortals interpret roles of dramatis personae, acting out things that have happened to other mortals. "I don't teach them how to act," Ouedraogo explains. "The lines are easy and often ad-libbed. I simply explain to them what emotions I want them to feel under certain situations."

Ouedraogo's previous film, "Yam Daabo" ("The Choice"), about a family that makes a decision to uproot itself from its traditional farming village and move

to a more fertile part of the country, was not as well received in the United States; and audiences who came out of its screening at Kennedy Center two years ago complained of its immaturity. But then again, it was Ouedraogo's first feature film.

The 35-year-old filmmaker comes from a small village near Ouagadougou, and his parents, like 95 percent of his countrymen, are farmers. If a Burkinabé student shows himself to be promising in primary school, he comes into the capital to continue his studies, which is the route that Ouedraogo took.

When he was in high school in the 1970s, Ouedraogo saved 25 cents for weekends, the ticket price for a movie at one of Ouagadougou's three outdoor cinemas. Then, as today, the typical offerings were karate and Indian romantic musicals, or what the Ouagalese call "les Hindous."

But it wasn't a noble motivation to create an authentic African cinema that spurred Ouedraogo to become a filmmaker. He claims that he simply did not want to become a teacher and that

Ouagadougou's film institute was close to his house.

From there he moved on to the Institut d'Hautes Etudes Cinématographiques in Paris and received his degree in 1985.

Ouedraogo's reasons for making "Yaaba" are just as guileless as his reason for becoming a cinematographer. "I wanted to show how similar the range of human emotions is all over the world. We are basically all the same and respond to joy, sadness, anger, content in the same way." Though Ouedraogo's two feature films have been financed in part by the Marxist government of Burkina Faso, the latitude for expressing himself is great. "I used to feel that African filmmakers had to work and struggle together as militants, as a unit," he said. "But we are all individuals. We all have different things to say. I don't think infighting is good for us, but competition will make us all better."

One thing European and American audiences chuckle over when they see the credits for Ouedraogo's films is the overabundance of personnel named Ouedraogo. Are they all his family?

"If you open the Ouagadougou phone directory, you will find at least three pages of Ouedraogo. It's like Smith here," he said with a laugh.

Ouedraogo senses the cue to recount a story, and like the fable about "Yaaba," the grandmother, he gladly explains why Ouedraogo is such a common surname in Burkina. It is a tale of an ancient king whose only child, a princess, is carried on horseback to the fortunate man she will marry. In celebration, he names her Ouedraogo — a rough equivalent to the French *chevalier*.

Idrissa Ouedraogo, smiling, is obviously happy to be what he is now, what he never expected to be in high school — a celluloid storyteller. As he says, "We may not have a tradition of screenwriting in Africa, but there is a great tradition of wild stories that we can base some very beautiful screenplays upon."

Marco Werman, who was a BBC correspondent in Burkina Faso, wrote this for The New York Times.