

Film Festival

'Yaaba' Explores Humans and Frailties

By JANET MASLIN

The utter simplicity of "Yaaba," set against flat, barren plains in an African village made of mud and straw and acted by a barefoot, non-professional cast, bespeaks great sophistication. The director Idrissa Ouedraogo, of Burkina Faso (formerly Upper Volta) shapes this spare and resonant drama with perfect control. "Yaaba" is without extraneous details. It is also without specific reference to time, place or the larger world beyond this isolated community. Nothing obscures the mythic, universal aspects of Mr. Ouedraogo's story.

"Yaaba" begins at a burial ground, where a young girl named Nopoko (Roukietou Barry) and her cousin Bila (Noufou Ouedraogo) — both of these young actors are the director's relatives — have gone to visit the grave of Nopoko's mother. It is here, on the outskirts of their village, that a proud, wizened old woman named Sana (Fatimata Sanga) can be found.

Sana is a pariah, thought to be a witch and blamed for most of the village's misfortunes, and so the boy and girl are afraid of her at first. But when they see first-hand that Sana is often blamed for events she's had no part in, they befriend her. And they give her a nickname: Yaaba, or Grandmother. "This is the first time that someone has called me Grandmother, and that makes me happy," the old woman says as she and Bila share a chicken that Bila has heisted from a neighbor.

Petty theft is as common in this village — a place, incidentally, very like the nearby village where Mr. Ouedraogo grew up — as it is anywhere else. So are bickering and gossip, eavesdropping and infidelity and juvenile delinquency. Whenever the film returns from Yaaba's lonely outpost to the village itself, Mr. Ouedraogo lets his cast effortlessly illustrate those frailties that are everyday aspects of human nature in this place or any other.

When it's discovered that the local beauty, married to the village alcoholic, has been having an affair with a local con man, the unfaithful wife gives a spirited response and berates her husband as an impotent fool. The mother of three bad adolescent boys, a woman who views her neighbors' behavior with an unfailingly critical eye, is thoroughly blind to the misdeeds of her own children. And superstition is as commonplace here as it is



Noufou Ouedraogo, left, and Roukietou Barry in "Yaaba."

anywhere. It is superstition that has relegated Yaaba to her lonely life.

When Bila and Nopoko get into a fight with three other children and Nopoko is cut by their knife and becomes ill, Yaaba tries to help. But her reputation as a witch frightens the adults caring for Nopoko, and they resist the old woman's medical advice. "Yaaba" resolves this problem gently and movingly, underscoring the bonds between young and old as it repudiates the ignorance and suspicion that come between them. The film would have its beautifully cyclic quality even if it did not begin and end with virtually identical images.

"Yaaba" has been handsomely shot by a mostly stationary camera that functions as an all-seeing eye. Each frame is so clean and uncluttered that the details of village life emerge with exquisite clarity. The way water is poured from clay jugs, the way sex roles are learned at an early age, the way a worried woman fears that a sick child will have tetanus instead of something minor, like malaria — each of these emerges evocatively yet unobtrusively from the story itself. A glimpse of villagers as they begin, with apparent spontaneity, to dance festively in the evening after the day's work is done is presented with absolutely no fanfare, though it provides one of the film's loveliest moments.

The subtitles for "Yaaba" are col-

A World Apart

YAABA, directed by Idrissa Ouedraogo; screenplay (in Moore with English subtitles) by Mr. Ouedraogo; photography by Matthias Kalin; edited by Loredana Cristelli; music by Francis Bebey; produced by Freddy Denaes, Pierre-Alain Meier and Mr. Ouedraogo; production companies, Arcadia Films (Paris), Les Films de L'Avenir (Ouagadougou) and Thelma Film AG (Zurich); released by New Yorker Films. At Alice Tully Hall, as part of the 27th New York Film Festival (opening Oct. 6 at the Lincoln Plaza). Running time: 90 minutes. This film has no rating.

Yaaba	Fatimata Sanga
Bila	Noufou Ouedraogo
Nopoko	Roukietou Barry
Kougri	Adama Ouedraogo
Tibo	Amadé Toure
Poko	Sibidou Ouedraogo
Razougo	Adama Sidibe
Noaga	Rasmané Ouedraogo

loquial enough to make its universally familiar aspects even more apparent. However, Mr. Ouedraogo's direction is so wordlessly lucid that the film would make perfect sense without any subtitles at all.

"Yaaba" will be shown tonight at 6:15 and tomorrow at 9:15 P.M. as part of the New York Film Festival, and will open at the Lincoln Plaza Cinema on Friday. On the same bill at the Film Festival is Karen Aqua's "Kakania," a jubilant animated short filled with primitive tribal motifs and spiky, witty suggestions of conflict and strife.