

# The Washington Post

By **Hal Hinson**

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Idrissa Ouedraogo's "Yaaba" has a shimmering, brighter-than-bright surface and landscapes that seem to stretch out to the end of forever.

Shot in the director's homeland of Burkina Faso, the film is both lush and minimalist, sensual and barren. Gangly trees dominate the horizon, towering with equal indifference over the scrub vegetation and the thatched mud huts and the villagers. In Ouedraogo's hands, nature becomes an arena for myth, a sun-hammered stage for the spinning of tales.

The yarn he has chosen for this evocative, subtly nuanced but ultimately unsatisfying film is one taken from his childhood about a young boy's affection for an old woman whom the villagers believe to be a witch. Wrinkled from age and sun, and skeleton-thin, the old woman, whose name is Sana (Fatimata Sanga), lives apart from the rest of the village. Without anyone to protect her, she becomes an object of abuse for the village boys, who taunt her and pelt her with rocks. Rushing to her defense, Bila (Noufou Ouedraogo), the young boy, attacks his hooligan friends, wrestling them to the ground. Later, during another confrontation, Bila's beautiful young cousin, Nopoko (Roukietou Barry), is cut across the arm with a rusty knife, causing her to collapse with fever.

With Nopoko near death and the villagers unable to cure her, the blame goes to the old witch, whom Bila calls Yaaba (meaning "Grandmother"). Determined to drive her away, the village fathers burn down her hut, but after Bila begs for her help, she travels to find a shaman to help break Nopoko's fever. Ouedraogo weaves several small stories into his central one, and through them we are able to get a sketchy sense of what village life is like in this tiny West African country, and of how daily existence is pushed along on a current of family squabbles, gossip and melodrama.

Somehow, though, the movie never achieves the mythic shapeliness the director has in mind. Ouedraogo flirts dangerously with monotony in his narrative style. Some relationships are vivid -- such as the one between Bila and Nopoko. But others -- such as the one between Bila and Yaaba -- are merely hinted at; they amount to little more than a few rather featureless exchanges. Some directors can work wonders with nonprofessional actors, but Ouedraogo can't seem to engage his performers in his material. Though their exquisite faces are open, there's nothing much going on in them.

Spare might be one word for the way Ouedraogo lays out his story, but elementary might be another. And I don't think our impatience with the film's blandness is attributable solely to cultural differences. "Yaaba" has its virtues, but the talent behind it is unformed. There's much to be learned from the cinema of underdeveloped countries, but almost nothing from underdeveloped cinema.

Yaaba, at the Biograph, is unrated.