

Reviews

Kounandi

2004 Burkina Faso

Written & directed by: Apolline Traoré, produced by Idrissa
Ouédraogo

In Jula with English subtitles, 50 minutes

US distribution: California Newsreel

Reviewed by Barbara G. Hoffman
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Billed as “that rarest of films -- a film about African women by an African woman,” *Kounandi* opens with a scene of violence directed toward a woman, Miriam, by her husband Moussa. He is inside their house and calls for her; receiving no answer, he emerges shouting her name over and over, then runs back into the house to retrieve a whip. When he reemerges, he runs through the village to find her sitting in the open with some men, relaxing and enjoying an afternoon break. Moussa accuses her of being a slut, chases her about while she screams in fear and the men she was chatting with look on in amusement. The women witnesses tell him to take his quarrel back where it belongs: inside the house. The next scene has the pair convoked to a hearing in front of the village chief and the village population. When Moussa accuses his wife of adultery, she retorts in front of the entire village that he is impotent and that, in the seventeen years they’ve been married, they haven’t had sex once. She pleads for understanding, declaring that she doesn’t want to die childless – a fate (in Mande as in most African cultures) to be avoided at all costs.

Although the village chief threatens to banish her from the village if Moussa’s accusations are found to be true, no sooner have the words left his mouth than a *deus ex machina* appears in the form of a lone Peul woman who is about to give birth and stands moaning at the edge of the village. Within less than a minute, she has been taken inside a house, has given birth, and died while doing so. Before the village court has disbanded, her orphan baby girl has been given to Miriam and Moussa to raise as their own. We are only seven minutes into the film when the solution to the couple’s marital problems, or at least to Miriam’s loneliness, appears to have been found.

Up to this point, meticulous attention has been paid to setting, costumes, language, and props to achieve a sense of *vraisemblance*, as though the film were historical fiction. However, the pace of storytelling here is that of a dreamscape where time is collapsed, characters are iconic, and gender relations are caricatured. The old women who assist the Peul woman in childbirth are stereotypical crones, childless themselves and accused of sorcery in later years. Although the babe whose birth they assisted develops into a dwarf, no one looks to the crones for an explanation; in fact, none is sought at all. Kounandi, the adopted daughter cherished by Miriam, is raised to be self-sufficient and to defend herself against the inevitable taunts and insults; she may be a little person and disdained by her community, including her adoptive father, but she is in

no way disabled. When she finds herself truly alone after Miriam's predictable fate takes her, she finds in her maternal inheritance the means to make herself indispensable, first to the village itself, then to one man in particular, and eventually, magically, to his wife as well.

This is indeed a rare type of film. Africa has given us fine women documentary filmmakers such as Anne-Laure Folly of Togo (*Women With Open Eyes*), Flora M'mbugu-Schelling of Tanzania (*These Hands*), and Marie-Clemence Blanc-Paes of Madagascar (*Awara Soup*), all of whom have made the lives of African and Diaspora women the focus of their work. Until very recently, however, the domain of cinematic representation of African women has been in the hands of men. Apolline Traoré is a member of a new generation of African women cinematic directors who are telling the stories of their foremothers and sisters themselves. The griot who praises Kounandi upon her death is also singing for the director, although non-Jula speakers will not detect this since it is not translated into the subtitles. He cites Traoré's ancestral lineage just before stating, "Your day has come." Let us hope he is prophetic and that the time of African women directors has finally arrived.