

FILM

THE COURT

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Abderrahmane Sissako's "The Court, Bamako" (Mali/France/USA, 2006, colour, 115 mins) presents a court in Bamako, gathering evidence in a civil suit against the World Bank and the IMF. Witnesses speak in an open air court in village Zegue Bamba. Mele (Aissa Maiga) sings in a night club. Her little daughter Ina is down with fever. Husband Chaka (Tiecoura Traore) idles his time in the courtyard of several neighbouring dwelling huts. African advocate Saramba (Helene Diarra) points out that while railways brought political consciousness in Africa, now IMF policies were privatizing the railways. The budget in Kenya has a break-up of 12.5% for social services, and 47% for re-imburement of debt.

While the court is in progress, the local inhabitants go about their daily routines. At an adjacent water point, women wash their clothes. The woman advocate continues with her plaint. The West has imposed two fears : terrorism and immigration. An African woman on the witness box feels that Africa needs to pull itself together. How to back assets is a political issue. The European advocate Tall, on behalf of the IMF, counters arguments. African advocate Madome Traore states that by the given rates of interest, Africa has paid off debts. The international bodies were manipulating public international opinion.

The open debate continues on whether debt impoverishes. Why should the destiny of people depend on exports and imports of products? While free export of cotton is discussed, a local child walks around the court premises. The African advocates emphasize that the world is open for whites, and not for blacks. During the court recess, vendors peddle their wares in the court premises. Fake Gucci sunglasses are available.

Neighbourhood women wash their clothes. A young African man gives evidence that he wanted to migrate to Spain, via Morocco and Algeria, for a better life. While local women are busy dying textiles, the young man relates incidents of firing on *emigres*. Witness Madoo Keita states that while walking through the Sahara desert, only sixteen out of a team of thirty, survived. The state had given nothing : No health services, no jobs. The African woman advocate charges the white European advocate of fraudulently defending the World Bank. The hearing is adjourned. The local black community people watch TV in the open air. The TV film "Death in Timbaktu" shows gunfighters shooting women and children, Crooner Mele is planning to go to Mali. The social reality of a wedding interrupts the court.

The court listens to arguments that maintenance of relations is to maintain solvency in credit and debit. The West takes money, resources and conscience. Colonialism ushers exploitation. The scenario cuts to homes of the African villagers, where women weave threads, and food is kept in locally manufactured large metal or bamboo containers. Before the court, an African advocate postulates that the Negro was being crushed to death by development policies, and it was the rape of the imagination. The public address system of the court hearings, is supplemented by radio broadcasts. Man without food and education, is a man on denial. There are passing trains in the landscape.

Muslim prayers are heard at noon. There is a Christian church gathering with halleluia chants. Behind the judge's high chair, flutter flags of Mali, EU and USA.

The native court guard is friendly. Finding the door to her house locked, a local woman scales a wall, and enters her house, from the rear door. Every morning tables and chairs are set for the court. Witness Smaba Dakite has nothing to state. Some of the locals curiously tiddle with the loudspeakers. The debate continues on African society and international organizations. An African woman advocate explains that trees are necessary for life, but not for running a company. There was a feeling of anger that villagers were being uprooted, as trains no longer stopped at local stations. The Africans share compassion for their country. The railways was a victim of conspiracy. The World Bank would withdraw subsidies for health and education. The African advocates emphasize that without transport, energy and communications, a country ceases to remain sovereign. The multinationals were dismantling the structures. The judge reminds the lawyers that each party must provide evidence. The lawyers speak on their mobile phones. While an African woman dances in a night club, her husband is at home, learning French from audio cassettes. The court hears that structural adjustments lead to destruction of the social order. There are interviews on tape. Goats roam in the courtyard. The advocate from the World Bank pleads that mortality was rising in Africa. Corruption in Africa was a process of development, and the West was fighting against corruption. Poverty has been encouraging corruption and terrorism. The World Bank's advocate, Maitre Rappaport feels that the court is biased, as it is with the sympathy of the people.

The African advocates plea that structural adjustments have failed. The corrupters came from the rich countries, and not from the poor countries. The World Bank is the cornerstone of capitalism. Criticisms are bravely expressed. The Africans view the World Bank as guilty, and demand humanitarian services for mankind. Arguments flow on the cycle of vicious debt, with cynicism. The Africans plead that the acquisition of knowledge, should be shared by all. There are vocal demands for justice and dignity. At the restaurant, Mele sings with tears in her eyes. A man has been shot dead near the security fences of an industrial area, and the dead body is brought to the open court premises. Muslim prayers offer the sublime. Mele's daughter is still ill.

Sissako's script deftly brings out social reality, through the arguments before the court, and the routine events in the Bamako village, Jacques Besse's camera freely moves around the open courtyard, in a direct style, without any special highlights nor pathos. Though the plot is of fiction, "The Court" integrates reality, fiction documentary, economic disorder and court 'room' drama. The film was screened at the Kolkata Film Festival (November 2007). □□□