
 INTERVIEW

Le Loup d'Or de Balolé: A dive into the life of the miners of Ouagadougou



Winner of the FESPACO 2019 Golden Standard Documentary Award and the Special Prize of the ACP-EU Culture Programme, Aïcha Boro's *Le Loup d'Or de Balolé* highlights the socio-economic stakes of a community of miners and the dignity and resilience of people.

ACP-EU Culture (A.U.C.): You started your career as a journalist and then went into the film business. What brought you to the 7th art?

Chloé Aïcha Boro (C.A.B): Making films has been an obvious choice for me since I was a child. I grew up in a Muslim family in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. My uncle, who was a figure of local Islam, had a black and white TV, which was rare at the time. So in the evenings, all the children came to watch TV, there must have been about 50 of us. My uncle always kept the remote control and very often, instead of changing channels when the TV was broadcasting programmes that were a bit "daring", he preferred to spy on us to see how we reacted. So we would find ourselves looking at our shoes or running away from him. He would then send us to bed and we would go to bed while pestering this shameless West. Being in the cinema allowed me to decide when the film would start and end.

A.U.C: Your first documentary, 'Farafin Ko: une cour entre deux monde', shows the "Western" and

"African" way of life. What message are you trying to get across by linking the two cultures?

C.A.B: The idea is to build bridges because I have the feeling that it's about two worlds that are looking for each other without finding each other, without understanding each other. In my opinion, their relations seem to be mainly economic: between Africans who seek the West for its modernity and opportunities, and Westerners who seek Africa for its raw materials. I think it is a great pity when there are cultural and human bridges to be built. There are, of course, some, but we must continue our efforts and promote the connection to the other in order to better understand them. The documentary film allows this universality and we find in Ablassé, the protagonist of the documentary, these human feelings.

A.U.C: How did you come up with the idea of directing "Le Loup d'Or de Balolé"?

I spent my entire childhood in Ouagadougou. I attended a primary school which was 4 or 5

kilometres as the crow flies from the site of Balolé. At the time, I didn't even know it existed. Even the local people didn't know about it. It's not a hidden place because we would have tried to hide it. It just happens that the site is surrounded by administrative buildings and mounds of stones. It is therefore easy to pass in front of it without noticing it, even though it is a quarry, a gigantic hole. While I was in the area by chance, Ablassé, a young miner, approached me and invited me to come and film the site. Not understanding what he was talking about, I followed him. We slalomed between the rocks to finally arrive in front of this huge hole, a little as if we had changed universe when we had barely walked fifty meters. In a split second, I knew I had to film this place. This "social off-screen" had to get into the field of my camera.

A.U.C.: The main subject of the film is the granite quarry which is exhausting its 2,500 workers. What does it feel like to film a "city within a city", where the workers suffer slave-like conditions?

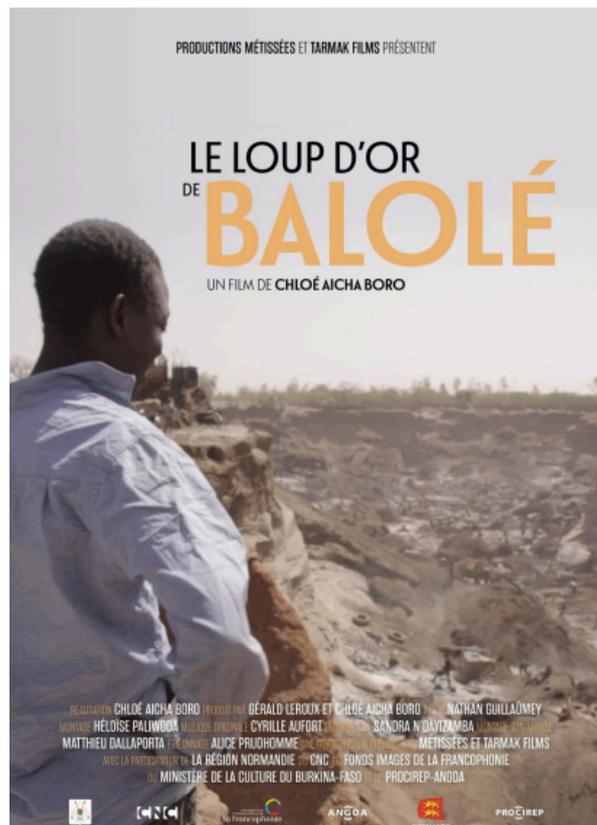
C.A.B. It is a vertiginous place by geography: a true voyage in time and space. I didn't go to meet this place; it found me and chose me. We were in the aftermath of the revolution. Ablassé was beginning to mobilize the miners around his ideas and form an association to defend their interests. This is my third film, but I have to admit that it was a self-made film: I didn't plan anything. The first half of the film was made with my semi-professional camera to film the story unfolding in front of me.

When I returned to France, it took two years to gather the financing and then return to Burkina Faso to complete the film. During the second part of shooting at Balolé, I met Adama, by chance, an extraordinary storyteller.

Once again, the real thing came into play: the protagonists are the ones who made the film, so I would say that my only merit is that I trusted them because they knew what they wanted to tell. I simply had the humility to step aside.

'This socialite off-screen had to get into the frame of my camera.'

CHLOE AICHA BORO



A.U.C.: Watching your documentary, one feels hope despite the difficult living conditions of the miners. What did you take away from the experience of filming with characters such as Ablassé, Hassan, Sény and Adama?

C.A.B. The relationship to the matter. One can be in poverty without being in misery as long as one detaches oneself from the material and remains faithful to one's identity, to one's values. One does not expect such intelligence and depth of soul. One could imagine that the harshness in which they live could have stifled some of their humanity, but not at all. Faced with such human richness, I have learned to distinguish between the misery that touches souls and poverty. To be an intellectual is not to accumulate degrees, but to have a depth of soul.

Professionally, I have learned to trust the protagonists completely and have the humility to simply witness what is happening in front of us by letting them make their own film.

A.U.C.: Your film won the gold standard at FESPACO 2019 and the ACP-EU prize for best documentary. What opportunities did these awards offer you?

C.A.B.: These awards led to an international tour and the film was shown in many festivals. I have been able to make my entry into prestigious film circuits and I hope to be up to the task by continuing to offer relevant films.

As for the protagonists of the film, the repercussions were positive for them. Part of the broadcasting rights were donated to an association to finance the education of the young people in the career. A Swiss member of parliament also succeeded in improving the working conditions of the quarry's employees by facilitating the installation of a freight elevator for stones. Their story has travelled around the globe and for the first time the Balolé site has attracted attention.

A.U.C: The ACP–EU Culture Programme is a joint initiative of the Organisation of ACP States and the European Union to support creative industries in ACP countries. What is your analysis of the cinema sector in Africa and more particularly in Burkina Faso?

C.A.B.: Fundraising is laborious. I generally have to finance part of my work with my own funds before securing external funding for post-production. The demands and needs are high compared to the limited number of windows, which are also selective. Initiatives such as the ACP–EU Culture Programme are obviously to be welcomed, as they are vital, especially for young filmmakers. Nevertheless, grants should be multiplied, because calls for proposals attract many projects, while only a few will be able to obtain funding.

A.U.C.: In your opinion, what aid is needed to further support this sector?

C.A.B: A new start is already in place for a structural improvement since the calls for proposals favour co-production, which implies tripartite collaborations. But we should go further. It is necessary to "compartmentalise" the calls for projects. There are generally many of us competing for access to funds from the same windows, regardless of our profile, whether we are beginners or experienced professionals. Profiles should be more targeted and several niches should be created to prevent one window from having too many files to process.

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A.U.C: To conclude, what are your future projects?

C.A.B.: I have a documentary project on the court of my childhood that I mentioned at the beginning of our interview. It is now at the heart of a legal procedure because of an inheritance problem that arose following the death of my uncle. This court was a religious crossroads. Some heirs consider it as a simple real estate and want to desecrate it in order to share the inheritance. While others continue to see this courtyard as a religious and sacred place. So there is a tug of war between modernism and spirituality that reflects current global issues, where some see the world crumbling because of the contamination of modernity on the sacred and are becoming radicalized because they doubt the future. My next documentary will try to understand these mechanisms and propose a personal vision of them. ■