

# FILM REVIEW

**Mamadou Dia, dir. *Nafi's Father*.** 2019. Original title: *Baamum Naafi*. 107 minutes. Fula (with English subtitles). Senegal. Joyedidi. No price reported.

After cutting his teeth on some short films, including the prescient *Contained* (2016) on the mental health fallouts of epidemiological confinement, Senegalese director Mamadou Dia has released his long-anticipated first feature film, *Nafi's Father*. This film garnered many awards and accolades on the festival circuit, and was eventually entered as Senegal's submission in the "Best Foreign Film" longlist at the 2021 Oscars. In this respect, Dia treaded in the footsteps of Alain Gomis, with *Félicité* in 2017, and Mati Diop with *Atlantics* in 2019, the latter famously making it to the shortlist. Dia's films often carry the undertones of current affairs like the 2014 Ebola outbreak in Guinea-Conakry and Sierra-Leone or, as in *Nafi's Father* (taking a page from Sissako's playbook in *Timbuktu* [2014]), the viral spread of religious extremism in the Sahel following the US/NATO's stirring of the hornets' nest with their botched attempt at regime change in Libya.

Tierno (Alassane Sy), the title character, is the revered imam of a small town in the Ferlo heartland. Formerly host to the Futa Toro theocratic empire, today the riverine area is dotted with pockets of abject poverty such as the village of Yonti, whose underserved denizens suffer all the indignities attendant to the postcolonial condition in the neoliberal era. Into this bleak social climate comes Ousmane (Saikou Lô), Tierno's elder brother, a returnee harboring plans to establish Sharia rule as a panacea to all the ills plaguing his hometown. As it gradually transpires, Ousmane's endgame is even more sinister: to turn Yonti into a jihadi enclave and recruitment base, per an agreement with his bankroller the "sheikh," a shady figure whose planned visit precipitates the film's dramatic denouement. A centerpiece of Ousmane's takeover scheme is the marriage between his son Tokara (Alassane Ndoeye) and Nafi (Aïcha Talla), Tierno's headstrong daughter, a ploy to outplay the imam and enlist him, even if by proxy, into the Salafist cause. Dark clouds of suspicion gather over their sibling rivalry, which incidentally strains the relationship between Nafi and her father, who pulls out all the stops to thwart Ousmane's Machiavellian designs. Out of desperation, Tierno resigns from his post as imam and engineers the bride

abduction of his own daughter, but this transgression entails serious, tragic consequences. In the end, the jihadists slink back into the desert, and the town's "republican" values and interfaith ethos prevail, although it is still in the loose grip of an ineffectual, paunchy mayor more competent at tending his pool than at addressing the needs of his constituents. The emotional toll, however, is too heavy for father and daughter to bear. As Nafi leaves for Dakar to pursue her medical studies, the viewer is left to wonder whether the bond between a dying Tierno and a disconsolate Nafi can outlast their pain and grief.

Dia made no bones about his intention "to stir the debate" and raise "questions about what could happen if a community ignores the early warning signs and allows extremist influences to take hold." Given the limitations inherent in the format, it is fair to say that with this debut fictional feature, he met the daunting challenge of addressing the erosion of interpersonal ties and communal structures against the backdrop of rampant religious extremism in the blighted Sahel hinterland. Throughout the movie, Dia's no-frills cinematic approach squares with the inescapable logic of this hypothetical dystopian scenario. Scenes are shot with the utmost minimalistic efficiency, in a deft orchestration of narrative pacing and compositional spacing. The minute cueing of speech and gesture sharpens the focus on a pervasive feeling of collective impotence and moral atrophy, creating a lingering sense that everyone is vulnerable, including the stern-gazed yet mild-mannered imam.

The opening scene is exemplary in this regard. Few words are exchanged, yet the close-up of Tierno's bare back, dynamically framed from a reverse angle that captures the physician performing a routine checkup of his diabetic patient, speaks volumes about the underlying dramatic tension: the sick imam, with his back against the (fourth) wall, is stuck in a cul-de-sac, bearing on his frail shoulders the moral burden of a doomed town hungry for a fresh start, desperate for a savior figure. As a conniving Ousmane sets out to execute his Machiavellian plan with a proselytizing zeal reminiscent of the infamous imam's in Sembene's *Ceddo* (1976), Tierno appears increasingly unable to get a grip on himself, despite the insulin shots with which he injects himself to fight off spells of hypoglycemia-induced dizziness. This culminates in the scene where, upon seeing his corner shop vandalized by the jihadists during the previous night, the usually affable imam tramples and squashes underfoot a little rat, watching with crazed eyes as the rodent wriggles to its last breath. Brilliantly shot and lit, this eerily fleeting scene encapsulates all the welter of raw, contradictory emotions running riot in the holy man's body and soul.

Discounting some minor flaws typical of directorial debuts, one major problem area in *Nafi's Father* lies in the unevenness of character development. Tierno and Nafi are imbued with much psychological depth, but the rest of the cast are little more than props or, like Munzir, the sheikh's son swaggering around town in his Ranger boots and ominous dark glasses, cartoonish figures. Moreover, Dia falls back on the Manichean structure of the *film à*

*thèse* to stage his critique of religious extremism, as in the scene where Tierno, through a series of rhetorical questions, calmly brings Munzir to admit that his “purist” brand of Islam is hollow at the core, a “pure” travesty of the Koran. Yet this showdown with the short-tempered, bumbling imposter proves anticlimactic, not so much on account of the imam’s magisterial command of the Socratic method, but due to a rigid binary setup, with “good Muslims” on one side, and “bad Muslims” on the other.

Not unlike Desmond Oviagele, whose *The Milkmaid* (2020) was also longlisted in the “Best Foreign Film” category at the 2021 Academy Awards, Dia frames the rise of global jihad in the region in “shallow” focus, a truncated contextualization that blunts the edge of their social critique, for what starts out as a diagnostic probe into the underlying causes of its strong appeal for immiserated rural masses in the Sahel pans out as little more than an ethnographic morality play. In *Nafi’s Father*, Dia frequently alludes to such interplay of local dynamics and global processes, *à la* Sissako. Perhaps it is, then, a redeeming virtue for this film that its director evinces, in Edward Said’s apt phrase, “an awareness of simultaneous dimensions” in the way he traces out the interlocking genealogies of global market fundamentalism and transnational religious extremism in twenty-first-century postcolonial Africa.

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