

Hope, Despair, Courage

An award-winning film, made on a tight budget, captures in powerful images the complexities of small-scale fishers and fish processors in West Africa

I'm in search of happiness. That's how a young Guinean surprises us in the smoky atmosphere of a sardinella smoking oven in Casamance, Senegal, in a sequence from the film *Poisson d'or, poisson africain*. Thomas Grand and his friend Moussa Diop show us the price to pay for trying to make a living on this bustling beach. They give us a scalpel-sharp analysis of the complex realities of a temporary community that brings together, for six months of the year, men, women and children from all over West Africa, around the exploitation of fish.

The filmmakers deserve all the more merit because they made this film almost on a voluntary basis with a paltry budget. The film was released to the general public in 2018 at the Pêcheurs du Monde Film Festival in Lorient, France. Since then, it has seen extraordinary success, winning awards at some 20 festivals around the world, in France, India, Japan, Mexico, the United States and several African countries.

Through the film, spectators discover the extraordinary vitality of a landing site in Kafountine, Casamance. Ten years ago, this site had little activity. Now there are thousands of fishermen, porters, and women fish smokers who occupy dozens of hectares on the coast. If this film moves us, it is thanks to the power of the images and the weight of the testimonies of these men and women from all over West Africa.

From the outset, the film immerses us in the harsh reality of seine fishing on a large 20-m pirogue. Fishermen punctuate their efforts with songs that are both political manifestos and testimonies to their humour. They denounce the industrial trawlers that can be seen in the distance: "It is because of them that we must sail ever

further." "Everyone accuses us when we don't destroy the sea." They also recall what the images show: "Net fishing requires strength."

The scenes of the landing of sardinella and skates are striking and unforgettable. Dozens of carriers of old fish boxes, recovered from the French auctions, with water up to their shoulders gather around the canoes and fill their 40-kg boxes, carried on

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their heads. When the swell is strong, they risk an accident and "when you have an accident, nobody here can treat you". They can also lose the contents of their boxes and others grab these fish with their nets. They then run in single file with their crate on their head for hundreds of metres to feed the tables and ovens where the sardinella will be smoked.

Human beings

A carrier can carry eight to 10 cases during the day to earn 2,500-3,500 CFA francs, or € 4-5. Among these hundreds of carriers are university graduates. The majority are foreigners, mostly Guineans: "We went out on an adventure to look for work." The porters complain of the lack of consideration on the part of the fishermen: "Here, they do not consider human beings, they only consider their fish." "Before considering money or fish, you have to consider people." "The owner of the pirogue doesn't even look at you." "The only rule is to believe in yourself and

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work very hard.” Thus, in six months, a bearer can earn 500,000-600,000 CFA francs (US\$ 900-1000). “The carriers suffer a lot here, they don’t have leaders to defend their interests or to make their demands.” On the other hand,

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how I was able to earn 200,000 CFA francs.”

These women, most of them Guinean, send money to their families: “When our husbands do not have money, we cover the family expenses in their place.” Amidst the ovens and smoke, children and babies accompany their mothers. Many complain about the deterioration of their health. A young Guinean complains: “When you stay four to five hours in the smoke, your eyes hurt.” He is treated with Doliprane and he remains at work in spite of everything: “In a word, I am in search of happiness.”

This processing activity provides cheap fish to the whole of West Africa. Burkinabe, Ivorians, Malians, Liberians, Guineans and Senegalese live side by side near the ovens and load huge 400-kg bales of fish. They sing “Lift, man of courage” to stimulate one another and co-ordinate their physical efforts. But it is not only fish that contributes to feeding the people of West Africa. The waste from smoking after the hulling of smoked fish is carefully recovered and processed to provide feed for poultry farming.

The administration representatives recognize that smoking must be modernized. This is necessary to protect the health of all those who are exposed to smoke on a daily basis. In addition, smoking consumes a lot of wood, often illegally cut, to the great displeasure of the villagers of Casamance who live off the forest. “It is the price of wood that scares many traders”, they say. It has almost tripled in a few years and threatens the profitability of processing.

Risks involved

Women and traders clearly perceive the risks of developing fishmeal plants: “If an export factory were to set up here, it will be terrible for us because we will no longer have fish to trim. It is as if people wanted to kill us. They take what we should consume, throwing toxic waste into the sea that kills us even more. How can we Africans survive? It announces our death.” While the fishermen who deliver these plants have their share of responsibility, the state is also responsible for an inconsistent policy:



fishermen need something, they claim it publicly.” For the carriers, “all workers must be treated equally and the rights of each must be respected.”

The film then plunges us into the smoky world of the ovens. Hundreds of ovens stand next to huge piles of wood and drying tables as far as the eye can

The film ends with the return to the sea of young fishermen, proud and enthusiastic, who confide to the camera.

see. In this world, men and women work several hours a day to earn a little money, as much as the porters. However, some women entrepreneurs may own several ovens that employ several dozen people and earn a little more. A Guinean woman, owner of two ovens, managed to save and invest: “I arrived with 10,000 CFA francs. That’s

THOMAS GRAND AND MOUSSA DIOP



A scene from the film, *Golden Fish, African Fish*, showing a fish smoking area in Casamance, Senegal. Modernizing fish processing is necessary to protect the health of all those who are exposed to smoke on a daily basis.

63

“The capture of juveniles is prohibited while the plants are allowed to buy and process them.”

A few months after the film’s shooting, in 2018, two plants were built by Chinese operators – one in Abéné, in the heart of a marine protected area, the other in Kafountine, on the processing site occupied by women; 1,000 of them were evicted and displaced. The Abéné plant was shut down following the mobilization of the inhabitants, outraged by the odours and waste from the plant. Representatives of fishermen’s organizations are opposed to the development of the factories. But they are struggling to convince some fishermen, particularly those in Saint Louis, who find income-generating opportunities by delivering to the factories in Gambia.

The film ends with the return to the sea of young fishermen, proud and enthusiastic, who confide to the camera. They are aware that they are at the base of Senegal’s wealth, and they know that this represents for them the possibility of social promotion if they can acquire a canoe. “Fishermen are noble because they wear new sea clothes. It is time we

respect the fishermen.” They know that their health is at stake. “The fisherman ages very quickly and suddenly loses his strength because this job is too hard.” However, they conclude: “No wealth can turn us away from the sea.”

The film is devoid of comments from the directors who allow the raw words of the fishermen and all the actors in the sector tell the story. This is what makes it so strong, while the montage makes it possible to grasp the full complexity of a community concerned for its future. It has every reason to be concerned, as the film shows. It also challenges notions on the evolution of our fish consumption, where aquaculture production now exceeds the landings from fishing. We know who pays the price. 📌

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<https://caopa.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Rapport-JMO-2019.pdf>
75 Senegalese boats deliver to two Chinese factories in Gambia

<http://sipanews.org/african-fishers-task-gambian-govt-on-fishmeal-plants/>
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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ueg3ovQQW4>
Golden Fish, African Fish

<https://www.pecheursdumonde.org/>
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