

FILM REVIEW

Michel K. Zongo, director. *Pas d'or pour Kalsaka/No Gold for Kalsaka*. 2019. 80 minutes. Mooré and French, with English subtitles. Burkina Faso, Germany. Juno Films. No price reported.

Burkinabe director Michel K. Zongo has already made several documentaries that sympathetically examine some of the social and political issues affecting the people of Burkina Faso. His 2015 film *The Siren of Faso Fani*, for instance, detailed the complex and ongoing effects of the closure of a large textile factory, which had previously been a major employer, on the people of the city of Koudougou. This concern with the human cost of industrial activity and its aftermath in Burkina Faso is developed further in *No Gold for Kalsaka*, a sensitive and insightful film that explores the deeply problematic legacy of gold mining in Kalsaka, a small town located in Burkina Faso's Yatenga Province.

Kalsaka became one of the largest sites of resource extraction in Burkina Faso following a deal that was made between the country's government and the mining company Bouéré Dohoun Gold Operation SA. The mine produced its first gold bar in 2008, but even before it was inaugurated numerous promises were made to the inhabitants of Kalsaka concerning opportunities for employment and education that the mine would generate and compensation that they would receive for the loss of their farming lands. Although the mine did initially provide work for the locals, the gold ore was soon exhausted, and operations ended completely in 2012, at which time any benefits to the local community disappeared. Zongo's film catalogs the multiple deleterious effects of the mine, ranging from the loss of valuable agricultural land to the destruction of sacred sites, injuries incurred by local employees of mining contractors, houses damaged by explosions, and contamination of the town's drinking water supply. One recurring topic is the brazen breaking of the promises that were made to the people of Kalsaka, both by the national government and by the mining company.

Although the beginning of the film includes some archival news footage in order to establish the historical context of the mine, the story is primarily told by the people of Kalsaka themselves, who are interviewed individually

and in small groups. These conversations are interspersed with footage of town life (including an interesting recurring motif involving three horsemen dressed as American cowboys) and shots of the mine itself, often taken from afar due to access restrictions. The participants seem at ease in front of the camera; they speak expansively and passionately about their initial understanding of the benefits that the mine would bring and the subsequent effects that mining has had on them personally and on the community as a whole. The director's decision to forego a voiceover and the lack of any introduction of the contributors (neither names nor roles/job titles are displayed on screen) serves to make the apparatus of the documentary itself unobtrusive. This locates the narrative agency firmly among the participants themselves, leading to a polyphonic and emotionally complex presentation of events. One recurring figure is an oral storyteller, who stands in the center of the town, narrating the history of the mine with impassioned and compelling oratory. There are many striking moments created by the documentary's participants, ranging from the poignant to the humorous, that are worthy of mention, but the discussion of the damage done to a sacred site, the interview with a mother of five who is panning for gold, and a moment when a group of men directly address the mining company representatives who misled them are particularly arresting scenes that linger in the viewer's mind long after the film has ended.

The latter part of the film focuses on the potential contamination of Kalsaka's drinking water. Many of those interviewed suspect that the mining activity has rendered the water poisonous, yet they have no proof that it is harmful. Here Zongo takes an active role in the proceedings, and we hear (but do not see) him making several phone calls during which he arranges for the water to be tested by a laboratory. That Zongo opts to make the nature of his contribution to events transparent, yet does not appear on camera, speaks to his emphasis on making Kalsaka, and not the documentary-making process itself, the center of the film. The final on-screen text at the end of the documentary informs the viewer that the water tested positive for several harmful chemicals and raises the possibility of legal action against those responsible.

The real strength of *No Gold for Kalsaka* is that it provides a platform for the collective telling of the story of the exploitation of an environment and a community. In addition to reminding its audience of the huge range of environmental effects of resource extraction, it also demonstrates the numerous interconnected human impacts—material, social, psychological, and spiritual—on those who still live in the area long after the corporations have left. Zongo's camerawork, which frequently lingers on the facial expressions of the participants, allows them to convey their experiences in a relatively unmediated way, giving the viewer some sense of the complex range of emotions that these events evoke. This is therefore a documentary that centers empathy and understanding in a way that makes for both a highly engaging film and a distinctive contribution to the discourse around the

exploitation of natural resources by multinational corporations in Burkina Faso and elsewhere on the African continent.

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