

FILM REVIEW

Dieudo Hamadi, director. *Downstream to Kinshasa*. 2020. 88 minutes. Lingala/Swahili with French/English subtitles, Democratic Republic of Congo. Distributor: Andana Films. No price reported.

In June of the year 2000, at the height of “The Great African War” (Filip Reyntjens, *The Great African War* [Cambridge, 2009]) that swept across large parts of Central Africa after Mobutu’s downfall in 1996, the armies of Rwanda and Uganda, two of the countries that were heavily involved in this large-scale conflict, violently clashed in the city of Kisangani, now the capital of Tshopo province in the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire). Over the course of six days, Kisangani became the scene of fierce fighting, leaving at least a thousand civilians dead and many more wounded, mutilated, or maimed for life. In December 2005, the International Court of Justice at The Hague condemned Uganda for war crimes and ordered the country to compensate the DRC for the human rights violations it committed in Kisangani and other parts of the DRC. According to this ruling, approximately USD1 billion should have been given to victims and survivors of the war in Kisangani. But two decades later, while the Congolese collective memory about the atrocities of the Six Day War is rapidly eroding, none of the survivors has received as much as a penny.

This is the background of *Downstream to Kinshasa*, the latest film by the acclaimed Congolese documentary filmmaker Dieudo Hamadi. Like his previous four full-length documentary films (*Atalaku* [2013], *Examen d’Etat* [2014], *Maman Colonelle* [2017], and *Kinshasa Makambo* [2018]), *En route pour le milliard* (the original French title of this new film) has been given an enthusiastic international reception since its release, earning Hamadi (a recent Fellow at Harvard’s Film Study Center) an official selection at the 2020 Cannes Film Festival, a first for a Congolese filmmaker.

It is not difficult to understand why Hamadi’s films are so popular with movie goers around the world. The Congolese stories that Hamadi singles out to narrate for film audiences at home and abroad all share the same accessibility and readability. Like other recent documentary films about Congo, such as *Kafka in Congo* (directed by Marlène Rabaud and Arnaud Zajtman [2010]), Hamadi’s films zoom in on the plight of common men and women


who have to struggle against the absurdities and injustices of the Congolese state's institutional systems—systems designed and set up to abuse them and which, against all odds, Hamadi's protagonists try to overcome. Just as in *Kafka in Congo*, which follows one woman's struggle against Congo's corrupt justice system after she was unlawfully evicted from her tiny plot of land, Hamadi's use of anecdotal stories built around intimate and often deeply moving portraits also reveals a deep personal commitment to his chosen subjects.

Contrary to some of Hamadi's previous films, *Downstream to Kinshasa* does not focus on a single character. Instead, the film follows several members of a small association of citizens who survived the 2000 Kisangani atrocities which left them disabled for life. In their effort to seek justice and demand compensation from a state that has completely forgotten them, these war victims decide to board a boat and undertake the long and arduous trip from Kisangani to Kinshasa, in the hope of meeting with members of Parliament in order to claim their share of the "billion dollars" Uganda supposedly paid to the DRC. Turning around the well-worn narrative structure of the upstream journey on the Congo river so often used in novels and films about Congo, from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* to Thierry Michel's documentary *Congo River, Beyond Darkness* (2005), Hamadi invites us to travel together with his protagonists on this downstream boat trip to Congo's capital. Beautifully interlaced with poignant fragments of a theater play in which the protagonists themselves reenact the violence they suffered, Hamadi introduces the spectator to the daily worries, frustrations, and fears, but also the hopes, dreams, and aspirations that animate this small group of vulnerable but courageous people. With small touches, Hamadi paints moving portraits of Sola, Old Jean, Gédéon, Mama Kashinde, and Chairman Lemalema. But above all, he makes the spectator witness to the way in which each of them rises above the small irritations and disputes that this uncomfortable and even dangerous boat trip engenders, and how they manage to become a group, united and strong in their shared struggle for justice. As in all of his other films, Hamadi's deep belief in the power of collective action is the theme that runs throughout this narrative. The fact that he manages to capture the intimate group dynamics from the protagonists' own perspective and in their own voice is an important form of recognition of their agency and resilience, and one of the film's many strengths.

As might have been expected, once this small and ragged group arrives in Kinshasa, nothing goes as planned. They arrive at the worst possible moment in a city that is absorbed by the spectacle of the upcoming presidential elections and pays no attention to their increasingly desperate pleas for justice. No politician is interested in meeting them, their handwritten letters to parliamentarians remain unanswered, and Tshisekedi, whose election as the country's new president briefly resuscitates hopes among the members of the group, remains unreachable.

Weaving the electoral process, a theme that was already explored in *Atalaku*, into his narrative allows Hamadi to more forcefully drive his

underlying political criticism home. The strength of Hamadi's cinema is that he does not do this in a didactic or preachy style; his filmic approach is far more subtle. One shot in which the disabled protagonists try, with great difficulty, to climb the stairs of the national Parliament is all he needs, for example, to illustrate the deep distance between the country's political elites and the little man or woman in the street. Once again, Hamadi's intimate and intensely involved approach, rendered in a straightforward cinematographic language that never becomes voyeuristic but is effective in its simplicity, manages to do justice to stories that deeply matter but all too often remain unheard and unseen. With this film, Hamadi confirms himself as one of the most powerful voices of a newly emerging generation of filmmakers in Congo's vibrant and growing film scene.

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doi:10.1017/asr.2022.109