

FILM REVIEW

Toumani Sangaré and Oumar Diack, directors. Charli Beléteau, showrunner. *Wara* (television series). 2020. 8 episodes, 45 minutes each. French. Ashtarté & Compagnie, MJP Production, TV5 Production, Fonds Image de la Francophonie, Agence Française de Développement, Centre National du Cinéma. TV5 Monde. No price reported.

A television series set in the year 2024, the first season of the political drama *Wara* is an urgent call for a new political mode of action to bring much-needed change to Tanasanga, a fictitious country located in the African Sahel. Author and director Charli Beléteau is the showrunner, and Toumani Sangaré and Oumar Diack co-directed the eight episodes. Charli Beléteau and Toumani Sangaré are not new to cinema and television series. Beléteau directed the first season of the French *Plus belle la vie* and created, along with Marguerite Aboutet, the successful Senegalese film *C'est la vie* (directed by Moussa Sene Absa). Working between Paris, Bamako, and Dakar, Toumani Sangaré cofounded, with Ladj Ly (director of *Les Misérables*), the Paris-based collective and cinema school *Kourtrajmé*. In Bamako, Sangaré directed the successful comedy series *Taxi Tigui*, along with *Sakho et Magane* (in Senegal), which he described in his 2020 interview with Anna Gomis as a combination of “X-files and CSI set in Dakar.” Oumar Diack, who makes his directorial debut with *Wara*, is a former student of the *Kourtrajmé* school. The *Wara*'s cosmopolitan and diverse team reflects Beléteau's ambition “to create a pan-African television series exclusively in French,” supported by a cast of comedians from Ivory Coast, Senegal, and Burkina Faso.

At a time of political crisis and uncertainty in most Sahelian countries, with concerns over security, territorial sovereignty, and state integrity, *Wara* promotes hope by suggesting in a straightforward manner that much can be achieved by commitment and solidarity, without violence. The first season recounts four months (from January 2024 to April 2024) in the life of Aïcha Diallo (France Nancy Goulian), a talented, tenacious, and committed law student, whose bedroom in her grandmother's house displays books and pictures of former Liberian president and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. Aïcha dominates the eight episodes with her signature Afro curls, casual outfits, and confident attitude in dealing with both romance and

political organizing. Through her dedication to the study of law, her commitment to justice and women's rights, and her effective role in mobilizing market women's resistance to the relocation of the *marché Gare*, Aïcha persuades her professor Moutari Wara (Issaka Sawadogo) to leave the comfort of his teaching life and return to politics by running for mayor of Tanasanga. The whole season is dedicated to demonstrating the power of community organizing, the significance of politics, and the crucial role of youth in supporting Moutari Wara's political campaign. Each episode opens with the subtitle "and if tomorrow," as if to suggest a world that might be as well as the conditions to achieve the necessary change.

Wara insists that change can happen, but only if the playbook on Sahelian politics is modified and youth is finally allowed a chance at full participation. The eight episodes revisit all of the factors obstructing development in the Sahel and impeding its political emancipation, such as widespread corruption, elitism, youth disenfranchisement, and environmental issues. Most importantly, the emphasis is on the potential remedies to these impediments, revolving around the youth, its knowledge, and its energy and determination to search for and implement innovative modes of political action. The youth are seen as leaving the confines of their crowded rooms and courtyards, where heated debates take place and strategies of intervention are imagined, to bring ideas to the streets and the political campaign trail and finally to make an impact.

No one personifies youth activism better than Aïcha Diallo. Her initiatives in support of the market women's resistance expose the corrupt real estate speculation behind the "opération de déguerpissement" and disclose the collusion between rich entrepreneurs and politicians on which local capitalism thrives. Aïcha rejects the predictable statements about the state's failure to honor its commitment and keep its promises because of "poverty and economic crisis." Together with the other key protagonists, she challenges the political and social organization of Tanasanga.

Binta Diop, the journalist blogger, uses social networks and newspapers to document and publicize her investigations about the pollution of the water supplies by the pesticides in the effluent from the local potato-producing company, or to prompt the resignation of the mayor of Tanasanga, who dedicates more time to the local soccer team than to the city administration. Using stand-up performance techniques, Binta addresses issues of citizenry and governance, urging the youth to hold local representatives accountable. In his own association, *Foyer des jeunes*, Bintou's occasional lover, Bachar Koffi (Canabasse) educates the youth about the benefits of participatory democracy and relays the population's concerns about the city's waste management crisis and its associated health hazards. On campus, students organize to demand the scholarships that were promised by the state, linking their own movement to the mobilization of unionized workers in the local factory to get better training and access to safety protocols. Each episode corroborates that organized social movements can indeed "change the world," consolidate civil rights, and impact local politics by relying on "alternative and political

cultural values” to use Thomas Reed and Charles Tilly’s vocabulary (Reed, *The Art of Protest: Culture and Activism from the Civil Rights Movement to the Streets of Seattle* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005, pp. xiii-xiv]).


Contrary to what is often assumed in youth discourses about social and political change, *Wara* asserts that establishing new ties with the older generations can produce better outcomes, since, as one of the protagonists declares, “the young man walks faster than the old man, but the old man knows the road.” Indeed, new possibilities arise when the youth manage to convince the previous generation of militants, represented by Moutari Wara and Yasmin Diallo (Maimouna N’Diaye), to join the fight. While these former militants paved the way for democratization and suffered the consequences for it, they are initially reluctant to re-engage with politics. Flashbacks to Moutari Wara and Yasmin Diallo’s youth reveal a traumatic past with wounds from the harrowing journey of political opposition, explaining why the compromises made with the authorities to end years of exile and suspend prison sentences for the sake of their family still deeply afflict them.

Wara’s first season ends before the results of the mayoral election are declared, breaking off several narrative threads, leaving many questions unanswered, and thus promising a second season. In its exploration of youth political mobilization, *Wara* examines new topics and ideas but does not touch upon themes such as migration and religion. Instead, it makes several recognizable references. The quotes taken from *Les cahiers de bruits et de tambours* refer to Equipop, an NGO based in Saint Louis, Senegal. The recurrent use of the term “pays émergent” (emerging country) speaks to the prevalent glossary and narrative of the international development community in Senegal and other West African countries. The kidnapping of Moutari’s wife during the election campaign and the violence against the journalist Bintou Diop echo some of the tactics that have been used against politicians and journalists in contemporary Sahelian countries. The activities of terrorist groups at the borders of Tanasanga resonate with the security crisis in Mali.

The first season of *Wara* contains a few small imperfections, most of them linked to the limitations and constraints of a television series. The story of Yasmin Diallo is perhaps too abridged, as is the relationship between Aïcha, Bachar, and Gambo. At times, the frequent dialogues of the youth about the “right to citizenry, right to vote, and freedom of expression” sound redundant. In addition, *Wara*’s coproduction by TV5, the Fonds Image de la Francophonie, the Agence Française de Développement, and the Centre National du Cinéma will certainly raise concerns about the ways in which the funding international agencies might rely on the television series to promote policies about development, gender, language, education, and *laïcité* for Sahelian countries. Yet, focusing on such limitations and concerns risks undermining or ignoring what *Wara* ultimately offers, which is a convincing, non-moralistic tale directed by young cosmopolitan directors, who are aware of the pitfalls of postcolonial politics, and who use their experiences between

the Sahel and France to assemble a much-needed reflection on youth, citizenry, and democracy.

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