

DEMBA

a film by MAMADOU DIA

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Encounters

DEMBA

a film by
Mamadou Dia

SENEGAL, GERMANY, QATAR
FICTION / FULAH / 2024 / 116'
FORMAT: 2.39:1 / SOUND 5.1

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Synopsis

Demba is about to retire after 30 years of service at the city hall in his small town in Northern Senegal. That hot summer, as the 2-year anniversary of his wife's passing approaches, he realizes he just can't "shake it off." As his mental health deteriorates, he discovers a new connection with his once estranged son. Can Demba recover from his loss without losing himself?



Director's note

One of the most vivid memories from which this project sparked is the morning I learnt of my mother's death. I woke up and my house was filled with neighbors sobbing, crying. What struck me was the silence when I walked out of my room. I am in part this kid with whom the adults didn't know how to talk to. I remember their looks and their unease, as I instead wanted to know. I received awkward hugs, caresses on the head.

"Boys don't cry" was the sentence I remember from that day. I was 12 years old. I steadily scanned faces until I found my older cousin's familiar one. Surprisingly, the 30-year-old Saydou had tears in his eyes. I hugged him as tight as I could, but no tears ran through mine. When I think back about that episode, all that comes to mind is "they got me." I, too, a rural, straight, Black male from Sub-Saharan Africa suffered in silence unable to express that indescribable pain. We take it all in and maintain a stoic appearance. As a matter of fact, my elder siblings and I went back to school that same week.

Demba explores the tension between grief and healing, belonging and estrangement, mental health, and psychiatric disorders through the life of a middle-aged man. The idea originated from a genuine question: how can a society that doesn't have a word for "depression" deal with it?

Surveys and research are showing around the world a major increase in the number of people who report symptoms such as depression during the pandemic, compared with surveys before the pandemic. In the US for example, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation, about 4 in 10 adults have reported symptoms of anxiety or depressive disorder, a share that has been largely consistent, up from 1 in 10 adults who reported these symptoms from January to June 2019. During this period also, many people have lost loved ones. In some moments the "usual" mourning and goodbyes weren't possible. In this group, thousands of children have lost a parent, or community member who provided them home and basic needs, including love, security, and daily care.

With Demba, I want to start a serious discussion about mental health which is still a taboo. Even within societies where therapy is widely accepted, researchers have agreed that it takes on average up to 10 years from the first signs to seeking help.

I have been working with therapists both in the US and Senegal to better understand my own struggle. In Senegal, a therapist specialist on grief suggested having group sessions through her contacts with people who lost loved ones and haven't been able to "shake it off" (a local expression). This film will also be a community work where my house, and my neighbor's house will be used for filming. This presence will be a smooth contribution to introduce my community into talking about therapy, healing, and mental health. The community as a whole and what they live is part of the film.

With my previous film, Nafi's father, I witnessed firsthand the power that a movie can have in facilitating difficult conversations. When we toured Senegal with a rental minibus, a generator and a 3-meters high inflatable screen, Q&A sessions sometimes would last for more than two hours. If this film makes one person open up and seek support, then we will have succeeded.

Mamadou Dia



Interview

with Mamadou Dia

How did the Demba project come about?

Mamadou Dia : In 2021, during the COVID pandemic, I wanted to try therapy (offered by my health insurance). From the first sessions, my experiences with grief came out. I lost my parents and other family members. After describing my mother's death and how I felt at the time - alone and misunderstood - the therapist told me bluntly that had been depressed at the time. And that depression (as a phase) is part of grief. The simple thing was that I did not know this word at the time because, to my knowledge, it has no equivalent in my mother tongue. While all grieving people

experience depression, how do they heal from an illness that has no name? It became an exploration of techniques for managing depression and to some extent mental health management.

You are based in the US. Why did you need to go back to Matam, your hometown in Senegal, to shoot Demba?

The story is very personal. We filmed the entire film in Matam. This is where Demba (interpreted by Ben Mahmoud Mbow) and I both grieved. We had already shot my previous film *Baamum Nafi* in that city, there was a certain ease in recognizing the locations, in carrying out certain procedures. So, there was a certain confidence in filming at home, in my hometown. We felt like we were better equipped to deal with any challenge that surfaced. For example, we had authorization from the city mayor and his team to spend a week in the town hall.

Indeed, except the mother (Awa Djiga Kane), all your actors come from the region. How did you work with them ?

The main actor Demba came to mind very early on in the writing. Ben Mahmoud Mbow had a small role in *Baamum Nafi*, my previous film. His mom and mine were close friends in life. He also lost his mother. So very early on, I approached him and we talked about the project, the character and the evolution of the script. We had several working sessions in Matam, then we did workshops with the other actors. Almost all are from Matam. These are people I know very well and grew up with. This made the casting work easier because, for more realism, it was about finding a personality for the character that is close to them, and also remaining flexible in adapting the character to the real person. The mayor, for example, played the mayor in the previous film. He has worked at the town hall for over 20 years and has seen several mayors (with different attitudes) come and go. Also, Ben Mahmoud Mbow (Demba) was in tears during and after several scenes because the experiences he interpreted were close to his own. We formed a family in this experience.

In the film, Demba and his son Bajjo (Mamadou Sylla) have a complicated relationship. It seems that, when the mother vanished, the neighbor and girlfriend of the son Oumy (Aicha Tally) becomes the catalyst of the encounters between them.

In a way, that's true. The only person who really loved Demba the way he is, knew him deeply, and didn't care the way he looks and the way he acted was his late wife Awa. Demba was obsessed with the love he had for his wife and is now obsessed with his depression. He is scared his son Bajjo is depressed the way he is, that is why he pushes him to be himself: because it is only then that he can find true love. He wants his son to experience the full spectrum of love he wasn't able to with his girlfriend Oumy, with whom he grew up. She left, but now returns. So, the love he sees between the two young people reminds him of the love he had for his wife and the good memories they shared.

You use many colors to reflect on Demba's face, as well as mirrors at the beginning of the film or blurry images. Flashbacks seem not to be ones and they mingle well with the story. What were your inspirations with your DOP Sheldon Chau?

Sheldon Chau has known the story since its inception. We started working on the script in 2019. So, there was a back-and-forth between us all the time, talking about the imagery. Demba's flashbacks have no visual clues. If you don't know it's a flashback, it's because we are in Demba's perspective all the time. The movie's aim is to show how Demba feels, like the silences, the rhythm, the moments. Demba is disenchanted with life because he lost what was most important to him. The idea of the mirrors is also about looking at yourself, seeing yourself. At one point, he tries a big smile because he wants to show people his happiness. The use of blurry images and the lack of focus also reflects Demba's mind: he is going through so many things and sometimes his mind blurs, is cloudy. And the flashbacks transform into illusions at the end, as what Demba initially believed to be his memories, he now perceives differently. So, by the end of the film, it's something which is happening before him, right now. We shot with a lot of focus, Sheldon and I discussed it a lot because Demba sometimes comes into focus. He is no longer depressed but the shape becomes hazy, and this comes from a personal experience. When we lose someone, we start forgetting who they were or what they looked like as the years go by. So that's Demba's fading memory. Demba is disenchanted with life because he lost what was most important to him. The idea of the mirrors is also about looking at yourself, seeing yourself. At one point, he tries a big smile because he wants to show people his happiness. The use of blurry images and the lack of focus also reflects Demba's mind: he is going through so many



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here is also a man attached who is possessed. How does reality influence fiction?

Reality influenced us a lot. This scene is called a shackling. It exists everywhere in the world. While I was researching for the film, I saw a Human Watch report, and shackling even exists in the US but maybe people don't talk about it. Shackling means when you have a loved one going through a mental issue and you are scared for their own safety, you lock them up or you attach them in your own house. One of the main protagonists, Pekane (Mamadou Bayo Sarr), is shackled by his own father. And at night, his father unlocks him and massages his foot and his neck, just to feel better about it. This idea of shackling already exists, and it comes from my childhood memory. When I was young, I went to a village next to mine and I saw a guy who was attached to a room. When I asked about it, his mother

with tears in her eyes, told me that they were doing that for his own safety and the safety of the people around. There was no institution, there was no other way to take care of him. When Pekane is in this space, singing so loud but all he wanted was his people to sing back to him. This is why Demba is coming. At the end of the scene, there is a ceremony, and they give a key to him meaning: "now we sang, and we are ready to let you go and be who you are". Pekane represents what Demba doesn't want to become, that's why he continues to visit him.

Pekane is the end of the spectrum.

The film ends with Tajabone, a Senegalese ceremony, in which men can disguise themselves into women. Why?

Real origin of Tajabone is before Islam and Christianity. This thing happens the night when the Angel of Death comes. It comes every year, at night, and he has a list of the people who will die the next year. That's the belief. So, the people of the community prepare to trick him, first, instead of being sad, by being happy and celebrating. This is why Tajabone is a night where you eat and dance as much as you can. Second, people cross-dress. That is why husbands carry their wives' purses and wives wear their husband's trousers. So, when the Angel comes and looks for Demba, Demba looks like a woman, so the Angel doesn't know how to find him. Demba participates in Tajabone as if it was the end of his life but, in reality, it is a fiction where he acts with the Angel of Death to rebirth. He doesn't want to die. At the end of the day, the film is about the community, about the indigenous way of treating mental reality, about threatening the Angel of Death. Demba needs to die to be reborn because the way he lives is no longer sustainable. So Demba tries to trick life.

You self-produced the film only with the support of the Senegalese funds, Fopica. Wasn't the success of Baamum Nafi (Swatch First Feature Award, Locarno 2020) enough to get more partners for your second film?

Maba Ba and I once again went into production with a 100% Senegalese budget and a largely Senegalese team. So, it is a Joyedidi production. We wanted to make a high-quality film with total freedom to do it the way we wanted. In addition, the few requests for financing that we had made through our company Joyedidi were refused. The only support apart from our executive producers was that of Fopica, the Senegalese public fund.

The script was written directly with the cast, to be close to what they experienced themselves. Despite the success of my previous film, it has been hard to find partners. Mostly because we had to shoot the film at a specific period, and we didn't want to wait for one more year. Indeed, Matam is close to Mauritania and there is only one moment where you can get a big crew there, around December/January. After this period, it would have been too hot. It was too risky for partners to come with us, except a few private Senegalese who believed in us. Though when we were in post-production, we received the support of Doha Film Institute, World Cinema Fund, Canal +International and Vision Sud Est.

You deal with depression in an environment where people do not necessarily talk about it. What are your expectations with this second feature?

For *Baamum Nafi*, we organized with the producer Maba Ba (Joyedidi) and our distributor a tour in Senegal with a minibus, a 3-meter inflatable screen for outdoor screenings. What struck us were the discussions afterwards which often lasted up to 2 hours. With this film, we would like to focus the debate on mental health. It will be a success if we can discuss this taboo with the audience. In my experience of depression, I remember the vicious cycle of confinement and loneliness. The more alone we feel, the less we want to go out and interact with other people. How can we make it known that those who suffer from it are not alone? And that depression can be treated with the right support?

INTERVIEWED BY CLAIRE DIAO, FEBRUARY 2024

Cast

Ben Mahmoud Mbow	Demba
Awa Djiga Kane	Awa
Mamadou Sylla	Bajjo
Aicha Talla	Oumy
Saikou Lo	Salam
Mamadou Bayo Sarr	Pekane



Mamadou Dia

Mamadou Dia is a Senegalese writer/director. His first feature *Baamum Nafi/ Nafi's Father* (2019) is Senegal's Oscar entry for 2021 and has won many awards, including two Golden Leopards for First Feature and "Filmmakers of the Present" at the Locarno International Film Festival. The film was also selected for MoMA/Lincoln Center's 2020 New Directors/New Films, the 2019 TIFF Talent Lab and the 2018 Hubert Bals writing grant. Dia's short film *Samedi Cinema* premiered at the Venice and Toronto International Film Festivals in 2016 and received dozens of awards. Dia is co-founder of the production company Joyedidi, which organizes mobile screenings across Senegal. Mamadou is a 2023 Guggenheim Fellow.

Previous film

2019 *Nafi's Father*

Senegal's Oscar entry for 2021

Golden Leopards for First Feature and "Filmmakers of the Present" at the Locarno International Film Festival.



Joyedidi, production company

Joyedidi is an international media company founded by two Senegalese filmmakers Maba Ba and Mamadou Dia. Their mission is to help elevate artists to tell stories that otherwise might not see the light of day by representing groups and stories that are rarely told. A company focused on artistic vision more than market diktat. Joyedidi believes in sharing more nuanced stories from different perspectives as an imperative for a better world.

Credits

Director	Mamadou Dia
Cinematographer	Sheldon Chau
Editor	Alan Wu
Set designer	Caterina Da Via
Costume designer	Salimata Ndiaye
Sound	Ousmane Coly, Eli Coen
Music	John Corlis
Make up	Anna Senghor
Producers Coproducers	Joyedidi (Maba Ba & Oumy Djegane Niang) - Senegal, NiKo Films (Nicole Gerhards & Johanna Aust) - Germany

Funded by

FOPICA-Senegal, Berlinale World Cinema, Fund Doha Film Institute, Visions Sud Est, Kiné Camara, Mohamed Julien NDAO

Produced by

Joyedidi

Coproduced by

NiKo Film and Canal+ International



