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PRESENT



FESTIVAL DE CANNES
2021 OFFICIAL SELECTION

ABOVE WATER



A FILM BY
AÏSSA MAÏGA

LE GÉNÉRALISTE, 2021, 110 min, 16/9, couleur, sous-titré en français

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FESTIVAL DE CANNES
2021 OFFICIAL SELECTION

ABOVE WATER

A FILM BY
AÏSSA MAÏGA

Based on an original idea by **GUY LAGACHE**
Written by **ARIANE KIRTLEY** and **AÏSSA MAÏGA**

A coproduction **BONNE PIOCHE CINÉMA - ECHO STUDIO - FRANCE 3 CINÉMA**
in coproduction with **PANACHE PRODUCTIONS & LA COMPAGNIE CINÉMATOGRAPHIQUE**
with the participation of **OCS - FRANCE TÉLÉVISIONS - BETV**
in association with **AMMAN IMMAN**

Original music **UÈLE LAMORE**

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LES FILMS DU LOSANGE
22 avenue Pierre 1^{er} de Serbie - 75116 Paris
Tel. +33 (0)1 44 43 87 15 / 17 / 25
www.filmsdulosange.com

Photos and press kit can be downloaded at www.filmsdulosange.com

PRESS

Florence ALEXANDRE
ANYWAYS
1 rue du Chevet - 75011 Paris
Tel. +33 (0)1 48 24 12 91 / +33 (0)6 31 87 17 54

SYNOPSIS

A victim of global warming, the village of **Tatiste** in northern Niger is trapped in a constant struggle for water. Every day, 14-year-old **Houlaye** and other children walk many kilometres to fetch water, which the village needs to survive. This daily task makes regular school attendance impossible. The lack of water also drives adults to leave their families each year and cross the borders in search of resources for their livelihood. Yet, beneath this region lies an aquifer spanning several thousand square kilometres. Drilling a well would bring precious water to the centre of the village and ensure a better life for everyone...



ÄSSA MAÏGA

How did the *Marcher sur l'eau (Above Water)* project come about?

Actually, two projects came about at the same time. In May 2018, the collective book *Noire n'est pas mon métier* was released and, in its wake, I wanted to make the documentary *Regard Noir (Black Gaze)*. At the same time, producer Yves Darondeau (Bonne Pioche) showed up. He asked me to write a film based on the scouting carried out in West Africa by journalist Guy Lagache. The story of a village community fighting for water in the context of global warming and with the promise of a well. In the end, I made two films almost at the same time.

What made you decide to accept this project?

My grandmother! I was wondering what I really had to say about this subject, what it really meant to me beyond the fact that I was born in Dakar and come from West Africa. But, very quickly, it brought back memories of holidays at my paternal grandmother's house in Mali. The first thing that came to me was images of daily life. The jars placed along the walls of the square Sahelian houses with their terrace rooftops. When I was thirsty, I would crouch down by a jar, lift the little terracotta lid and serve myself some water. This water came from the well where I went countless times with my aunts. The well belonged to our family, but the water was for everyone. We met so many people there...

It also brought to mind the Niger River. The place where I spent my holidays was close by, just a 5- or 10-minute walk. All of these memories of the end of the day, when bathing – which wasn't a passion of mine when I was six – became my FAVOURITE thing. Because we washed ourselves in the river and it was also a time for games, conversations, warmth... The question of water, even though I didn't really understand this as a child, was extremely crucial. All of this came back to me. I started setting this down on paper and the text just flowed out of me and wrote itself.

How did you choose to film in Niger?

Yves Darondeau told me about several possible places: Togo, Burkina and Niger in a Fula community... And it just so happens that my paternal grandmother was a Fula from Niger. It's like I was meant to do this project: I felt that I had something to say about this



Photo © Sylvia Galmot

question of water and its consequence, the destruction of the family unit. So I set my sights on the village of Tatiste in the Azawak region, a 15-hour drive from Niamey, the capital of Niger.

Was the Amman Imman NGO involved in the project from the very start?

The producer wanted to make the film in connection with a drilling project driven by an NGO. Then, there's this strange step in documentaries where you have to write the development of a project that you don't know very well yet. So, I contacted Ariane Kirtley, the director of the NGO Amman Imman (which means: "water is life"). She's an anthropologist and knows this region very well. We did the writing together and saved a lot of time.

Did you do location scouting?

As soon as it was written, the producer gave us the green light and I went to Tatiste in autumn 2018 with the NGO director and the director of photography Rousslan Dion. It was pretty much expected that I would come home without having actually filmed anything. I didn't think that I could just set down my bags as soon as I arrived and start intruding in their lives with a camera. But this village community was already aware of the situation due to the previous scouting. They knew that there was the possibility of having a well drilled, so they gave us an incredibly warm welcome and accepted us very quickly... It was beyond our wildest hopes, because the very first meeting of the villagers took place on the day we arrived and we were able to film it. This let us set down the story, context and stakes right from the get-go. They said yes and we took out the camera. I didn't



understand the language – I still don't, actually, apart from a dozen or so words. Luckily, Houlaye's aunt Souri spoke French and she was really inspiring. I managed to find out what was being said, who was who, who was going to take the floor, to try to capture this moment without even being sure I could use it in the documentary. I kind of felt my way through as we went along. Some of the people there had never seen a camera before and most had never watched a film. And I didn't realize that until several days had passed. There are some things that you just take for granted and assume to be true, but it's not always the case.

All the themes that you wanted to cover were right there in that very first scene?

That's right. It was all there. But, because I was aware of some obstacles and the obvious social hierarchical norms that meant that only men could speak in certain situations, I insisted that the women talk too. And the children. I told them that I wanted to film them and hear what they had to say. Most of them really wanted to be filmed, so I was lucky.

How did you choose to focus on Houlaye, the 14-year-old who we see change, gain confidence and grow in front of your camera?

It was an initial decision that I had made during the writing process. After the scouting in this village, I knew that there was a teenage girl who often had to care for her two little brothers on her own because her parents were



gone a lot – her mother to sell the medicine that she made and her father to find pastures for his cattle. I thought it would be interesting to focus the tale on a young girl who isn't a woman yet but who has enormous responsibilities that are huge hurdles in terms of her schooling. Because it's clear that if she doesn't go to school regularly at this point, if her schooling is interrupted, then she will probably stop completely. And then it's her entire life as a woman, citizen and mother that is impacted. Houlaye was very shy at first. The first day, I would sneak glances at her and then I discreetly filmed her with my mobile phone. And I saw a striking grace and depth in her. If my hunch had been wrong, it could have been complicated, but she was the one and she took part in the process. After a while, she had really gotten a grasp of everything. She would even give instructions to others, telling them not to look into the camera or reminding them that whispers could be heard by the microphone. She was my first assistant director! Houlaye was a big inspiration for me.

You combined a documentary form with fiction?

I couldn't stay in Niger for a year and a half nonstop. It wasn't possible, mainly for safety reasons. So, I would come back to Tatiste at each change of season and I drew up specifications so that the story would be coherent. The idea was to film reality and, at the same time, provoke this reality by inducing situations. So, I had to direct Houlaye and her little brothers, as well as the other villagers, her aunt Souri and the teacher, who were real people. And I had so much fun doing that.

My approach remains deeply documentary-focused, even though I recomposed certain scenes. I was very careful. I spent a lot of time talking with them, asking questions to see what they were or were not ready to do, culturally speaking. And a lot of them suffer from malnutrition and get tired quickly, so I would have to stop shooting. There were so many restrictions in terms of respecting their identity and well-being and I had to constantly take these into consideration...

Which scenes did you have to organise?

It was an absolute conundrum trying to juggle everyone's schedules, because the villagers had real financial imperatives, so they weren't necessarily there when we would come back to shoot. So, to film the departure of the mothers, the women showed me what it was like: I pack my bag, I take a little kettle, I say goodbye to the children. The camera followed them. Then, it was up to me and my D.O.P. to keep the story on track and capture the emotion that could simply express this reality. Of course, I showed up with my baggage as an actress: I know the sets, the distribution of roles behind the camera and the difference or closeness that can exist between the writing, the filming and the editing. This helped me to understand the actors, because you learn to look at people, to observe verbal and body language, to hear the silences. And you also learn to adapt. All of the characters functioned differently, so I didn't address Houlaye in the same way I did the little ones or the teacher. I arrived with a storyline, but nothing was set in stone. The main thing was to make them understand the idea, what I was trying to capture about their life.

So, the screenplay changed a lot?

I filmed *Regard Noir (Black Gaze)* for TV while I was shooting *Marcher sur l'eau (Above Water)*. I discovered who I was as a director during these two very different documentaries. I wanted to be very meticulous, but I had to let go and not be afraid. I had to trust the situations and people.

How did you get the shot of Houlaye's little brother wasting water and getting scolded by his sister? He is so mischievous that it looks like a candid moment.

This film is a happy marriage of genuine candid moments and others that are suggested. There were a lot of sensations that I wanted to

touch on. Amongst them, the frustration that these people, both the children and adults, have at not being able to wash themselves. I often saw this little boy, Damana, take care of himself, wash himself. I saw him do these things regularly. He allowed me to film him and Houlaye told him to stop, but he continued. He did it right away with this mischievous air, this power and this determination in his eyes.

Didn't filming every three months complicate things?

When I would come back, sometimes the people I wanted to film weren't there. The mothers had left to go work or one of them was on her way back but without us knowing when she would arrive. Some of the villagers, like the little boy Barka, cut their hair... We had to deal with all sorts of unplanned and unknown elements. But having such a reliable D.O.P., both technically and artistically – and on a human level too, was an incredible help. Rousslan Dion had the relational intelligence necessary to be there, to let go or to warn me about certain things. I owe him a lot. The work by Matthieu Mangematin, our sound engineer, who has since passed away, was also so important. His humanity and creativity built bonds with the protagonists. We miss him so much. Seeing our film released without him is heart-wrenching.

The technical crew was limited, but in the credits, we see that you were surrounded by people...

We were accompanied by 14 soldiers, civilian policemen, several drivers, two armoured vehicles and big cars. We brought everything we needed, from food to camp beds. It wasn't a rich film, but it was an expensive film!

At the same time, you show drone shots worthy of a super-production!

It was the D.O.P.'s idea at first. And when I watched the first rushes, I thought that this was something that we had to keep seeing, in terms of the perception of the seasons. And this allowed us to understand where we were, because Tatiste is completely lost in the steppes. It's not at all like the geography of a typical African village with the huts and the baobab in the middle. These are nomads. They don't live one on top of another. They are spread out over a group of campgrounds that form the village. On screen, you only see a small part.

How did the editing go?

We had about 150 hours of rushes. It was colossal and labyrinthine. Isabelle Devinck, whose incredible talent I had discovered in *Swagger*, did painstaking work and gave the film its identity and tone. The characters took on new depth and the situations became real scenes. It was magical. When she was no longer available, Linda Attab Apenouvon took over and was able to keep the soul of the film alive while bringing her own vision. The film really took off thanks to the work of these two editors, who never even met each other. And then there was the time spent on the translations. It was kind of a huge machine, but on the scale of a low-budget film! Towards the end of editing, there were some things that weren't totally clear, so I went back to the rushes. I loved that moment, even though it was overwhelming. It was a return to the source of the film and, at that stage, obviously, you see in two seconds what makes sense, whereas it's more complicated in the beginning. There are things that are self-evident and, sometimes, little jewels that never find their place and that you have to give up. That's the most difficult part...

Interview by ISABELLE DANIEL





THE FILM CONTEXT

About 2.2 billion people worldwide do not have direct access to drinking water. Every day, 10,000 people die due to lack of water or an illness caused by ingesting contaminated water (cholera, dysentery, typhoid and even polio).

Niger, a semi-desert country at the heart of Sub-Saharan Africa, is representative of the problem, but also promising. On the one hand, it has been hit hard by climate change and repeated drought. On the other hand, it is one of the places in the world where the fight by rural communities and their inhabitants to resolve this problem, with the support of the government, is the most determined and dynamic.

The Azawak region is a plain measuring 180,000 square kilometres, located between Mali and Niger. It is home to about 500,000 people, mainly of Tuareg and Fulani-Wodaabe ethnicity. Azawak is characterised by a 99% illiteracy rate and a 98% lack of health resources. The uncertainty of water access, linked to climate change, has increased the infant mortality rate, which is now over 50%.



**A WELL BRINGS WATER AND.
WITH WATER, HEALTH, EDUCATION
AND THE EMANCIPATION OF WOMEN.**

WATER WORLDWIDE

Water use has been increasing worldwide by about 1% per year since the 1980s, driven by a combination of population growth, socio-economic development and changing consumption patterns. Global water demand is expected to continue increasing at a similar rate until 2050, accounting for an increase of 20 to 30% above the current level of water use, mainly due to rising demand in the industrial and domestic sectors. Over 2 billion people live in countries experiencing high water stress, and about 4 billion people experience severe water scarcity during at least one month of the year. Stress levels will continue to increase as demand for water grows and the effects of climate change intensify.

(Excerpt from the UN World Water Development Report 2019)

KEY FACTS

- In 2017, 71% of the global population (5.3 billion people) used a safely managed drinking-water service – that is, one located on premises, available when needed, and free from contamination.
- 90% of the global population (6.8 billion people) used at least a basic service. A basic service is an improved drinking-water source within a round trip of 30 minutes to collect water.
- 785 million people lack even a basic drinking-water service, including 144 million people who are dependent on surface water.
- Globally, at least 2 billion people use a drinking water source contaminated with faeces.
- Contaminated water can transmit diseases such as diarrhoea, cholera, dysentery, typhoid, and polio. Contaminated drinking water is estimated to cause 485,000 diarrhoeal deaths each year.
- By 2025, more than half of the world's population will be living in water-stressed areas.
- In least developed countries, 22% of health care facilities have no water service, 21% no sanitation service and 22% no waste management service.

(Source: WHO)

The world's water: an increasingly stressed resource

LACK OF ACCESS TO WATER

On a global scale, half of the people who drink water from unsafe sources live in Africa.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, only 24% of the population have access to safe drinking water, and 28% have basic sanitation facilities that are not shared with other households.

Unequal access in Africa is also linked to gender disparity. The burden of collecting water lies mainly on women and girls, many of whom spend more than 30 minutes on each journey to fetch water, a situation that prevents them from attending school.

Significant discrepancies in access exist even within countries, notably between the rich and the poor. In urban areas, the disadvantaged housed in makeshift accommodations without running water often pay 10 to 20 times more than their neighbours in wealthier neighbourhoods for water of similar or lesser quality purchased from water vendors or tanker trucks.

The right to water, the report's authors explain, cannot be separated from other human rights. In fact, those who are marginalized or discriminated against because of their gender, age, socio-economic status, or because of their ethnic, religious or linguistic identity, are also more likely to have limited access to proper water and sanitation

(Source: UNESCO Info)





Access to water supply and sanitation

Three out of ten people do not have access to safe drinking water. Almost half of people drinking water directly from unprotected sources live in Sub-Saharan Africa. Six out of ten people do not have access to safely managed sanitation services, and one out of nine practice open defecation. However, these global figures mask significant inequities between and within regions, countries, communities and even neighbourhoods.

Global cost-benefit studies have demonstrated that water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services provide good social and economic returns when compared with their costs, with a global average benefit-cost ratio of 5.5 for improved sanitation and 2.0 for improved drinking water. It is likely that the benefits of improved WASH services for vulnerable groups would change the balance of any cost-benefit analysis that accounts for changes in these groups' self-perceived social status and dignity.

Sub-Saharan Africa

The lack of water management infrastructure (economic water scarcity), in terms of both storage and supply delivery, as well as for improved drinking water and sanitation services, plays a direct role in the persistence of poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa.

People living in rural areas account for about 60% of the total population of Sub-Saharan Africa, and many of them remain in poverty. In 2015, three out of five of the region's rural residents had access to at least a basic water supply and only one in five had access to at least basic sanitation. About 10% of the population still drank untreated surface water, and many poor people in rural areas, particularly women and girls, spent a considerable amount of time collecting water.

(Excerpt from the UN World Water Development Report 2019)

CONSEQUENCES OF LACK OF ACCESS TO WATER

The social and economic cost of inadequate access pertaining to several African countries is high. It is estimated that, at any given time, about half of the population in developing countries is sick with one water-related disease or another. Productivity is directly impacted and enormous pressure is placed on the health infrastructure, not to mention the huge economic costs incurred. For example, the 2006 United Nations Human Development Report estimates that Africa loses about 5% of its GDP, or some \$28.4 billion annually, from inadequate investment in water and sanitation, a figure exceeding total aid inflows to the region in 2003.

(Source: African Development Bank Group)

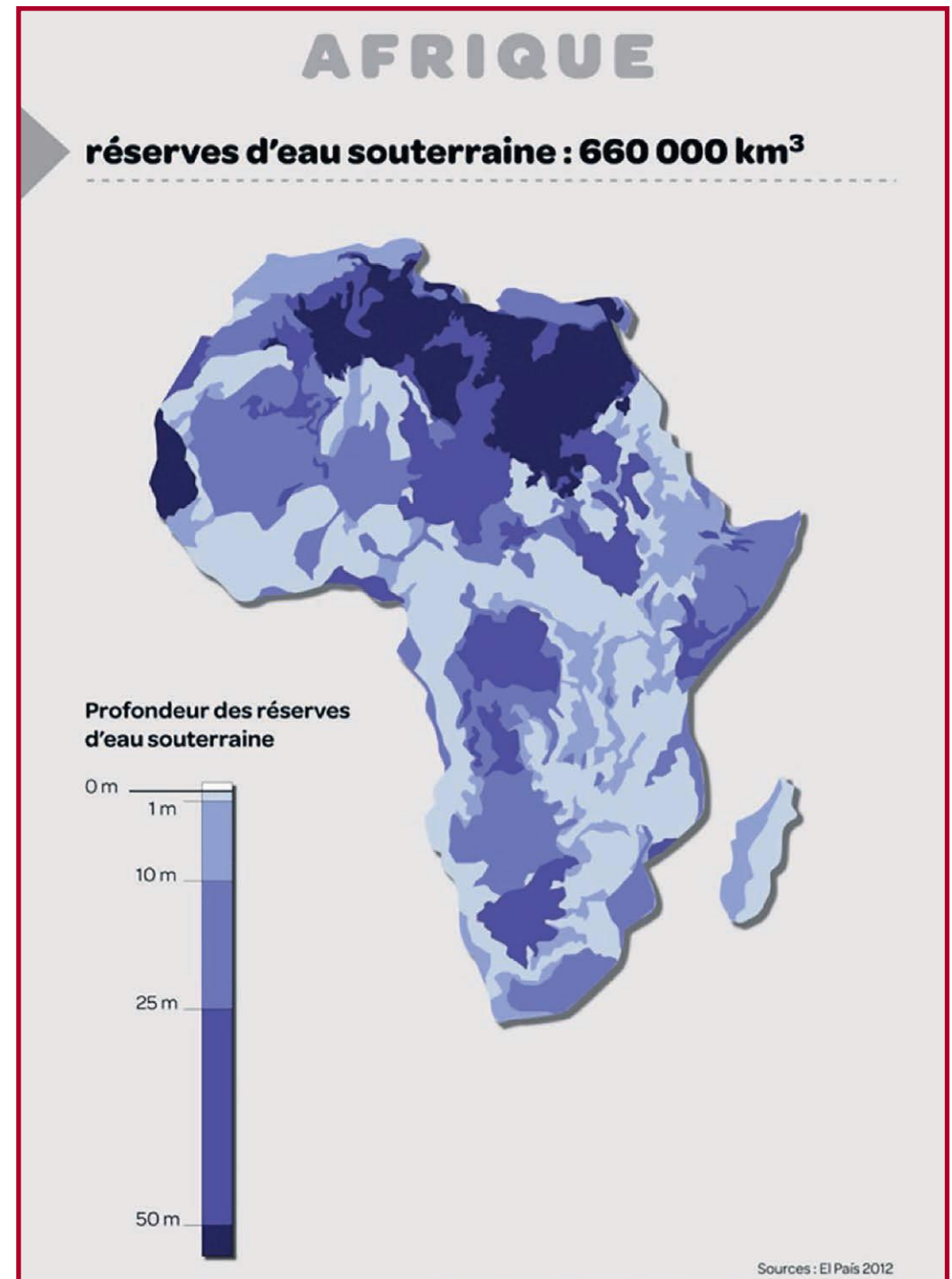
UNDERGROUND WATER RESERVOIR, BUT LACK OF INFRASTRUCTURE

In its subsoil, the African continent holds 660,000 cubic kilometres of water reservoirs. This resource is 100 times greater than the quantity of water on the surface. Yet, 330 million Africans, i.e. 40% of the population, do not have access to drinking water.

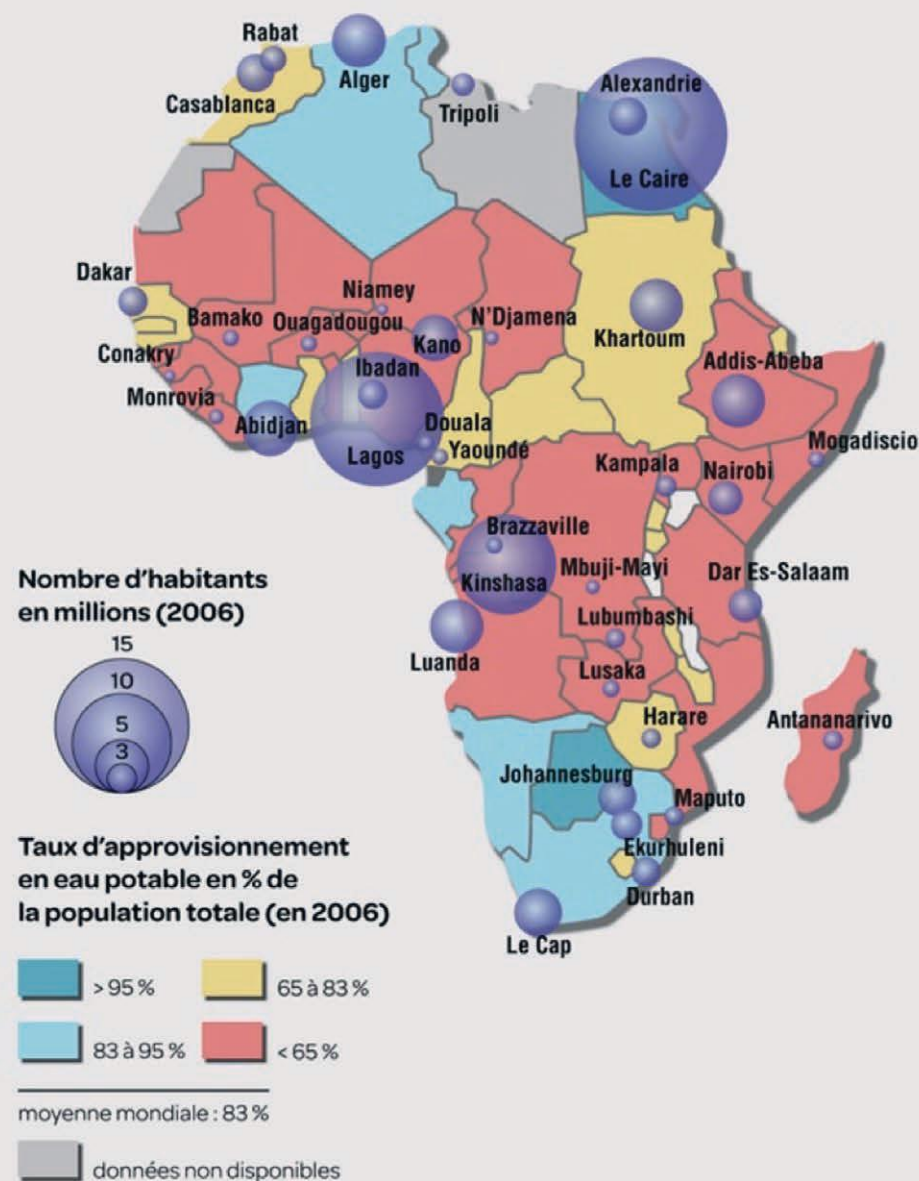
According to the figures provided by the African Development Bank Group, Africa would have to dedicate the equivalent of 11.5 billion euros per year to create or reinforce distribution and sanitation infrastructures. And, although water does exist, certain aquifers are far beneath the surface, making drilling projects difficult and costly. The diagram below shows that enormous aquifers in Saharan zones are located at a depth of over 50 metres. Notably, this is very ancient fossil water (millions of years old) that does not renew itself.

(Source: Courrier International)

<https://www.courrierinternational.com/article/2012/08/06/l-afrique-ne-manque-pas-d-eau>



approvisionnement en eau potable des villes



Sources : Organisation mondiale de la santé (OMS) et Unicef, en 2008

SITUATION IN THE AZAWAK REGION

During the short rainy season, which lasts one to three months, households depend on marshes to meet their primary water needs (drinking, cooking, washing, livestock). This water is turbid and contaminated with weeds, human filth and animal excrement. While this source of water is non-potable, it provides plentiful quantities to support families.

After the rainy season ends, the people of the Azawak rely on water holes dug into the dried marshes, in surface sediment up to 20 metres deep. To access these underground rainwater reserves, men and boys spend hours a day digging into the sediments, essentially chasing the water deeper and deeper as each day goes by. The quality of water lifted out is poor, often turbid and polluted.

Once the marshes dry up, both nomads and sedentary populations travel up to 50 kilometres round-trip to reach the deep wells interspersed throughout the territory. Because water cannot be found at shallow depths, these wells can reach a depth of 175 metres, thus explaining why these deep wells are so rare. Families can spend between 6 to 8 years hand-digging before ever reaching water. There is one functional well every 10 to 50 kilometres. The low number of wells forces everyone – and their animals – within a 25-kilometre radius to share these resources. Severe overexploitation causes the wells to dry out regularly, taking up to three days to replenish themselves again, during which time people go without any water.

Open wells of this depth are far from ideal: manually pulling water at a depth over 50 metres is labour-intensive, time-consuming and requires animal traction (not available to the most vulnerable households). Finally, even these wells dry out and are thus not a year-round source of water.

During the nine- to eleven-month-long dry season, most individuals survive on less than six litres of water per person and per day (whereas the World Health Organization prescribes a minimum of 15 to 25 litres per day and per person) and have difficulty finding time for other revenue-generating activities or school.

(Source: Amman Imman water is life)



THE PRODUCERS

Bonne Pioche Cinéma, founded and headed by Yves Darondeau and Emmanuel Priou, notably produced MARCH OF THE PENGUINS (Oscar for Best Documentary in 2006), THE FOX & THE CHILD by Luc Jacquet, LITTLE GEMS by Xavier de Lauzanne, POLY by Nicolas Vanier and the family comedies WE ARE FAMILY and WHO'S THAT GRANNY?! by Gabriel Julien-Laferrière.

Echo Studio is a studio that produces impact films that inform the public at large of key societal issues: the environment, access to education, human rights... These films, documentaries or fictions, feature films, series or made-for-TV movies, are accompanied by impact marketing campaigns to inspire change and encourage citizen action.



THE PARTNERS

Amman Imman - Film partner and initiator of the drill construction. More information on www.ammanimman.org

Proarti, in partnership with **Artelia and Fonds des Célestins**

The production of the film *Marcher sur l'eau (Above Water)* benefitted from contributions from an endowment fund from Proarti, in partnership with Artelia and Fonds des Célestins. This support is part of the Echo Studio x Proarti endowment fund dedicated to impact films. Created in 2019, this fund aims to support the production of films that raise public awareness about current key issues. The Proarti endowment fund would like to thank Artelia and Fonds des Célestins for their commitment in supporting culture.

Orange Foundation

Marcher sur l'eau (Above Water) perfectly illustrates the water access problem in Africa and the terrible consequences for women and their future. Beyond the precarious living conditions that this situation creates, the problem of water further deepens the inequality between men and women in Africa.

With this in mind, the Orange Foundation created its “Villages” programme in 2012. By equipping landlocked villages with a source of drinking water, a health care centre and a school, it allows families to access essential needs nearby and put their daughters in school, alongside their sons. The Orange Foundation supports the cause defended by Aïssa Maïga to raise awareness and incite new initiatives in support of women in Africa.

Famae

Famae is a family foundation that supports innovation for the environment. Each year, Famae organises a wide-scale international innovation contest to find and support solutions capable of reducing our environmental footprint, while improving our daily lives and reducing our expenses.

Marcher sur l'eau (Above Water) is a winner of the “Precious Water” project, the 2019 edition of the Famae competition, dedicated to water.

THE FILM IMPACT

***Marcher sur l'eau (Above Water)* has the potential and ambition to:**

- Denounce the widespread lack of access to water and its consequences in the Sahel region and globally.
- Spread the message emphasised by field players: water is a human right, yet one billion human beings still do not have access to it today.
- Be the starting point for a global citizen movement to promote water access for underprivileged populations.

By raising awareness and proposing courses of action to viewers, *Marcher sur l'eau (Above Water)* intends to have a major impact on the fight for access to drinking water.

The film has an initial impact as an awareness tool with widespread release of the film everywhere, particularly in Africa, encouraging African populations and notably women to empower themselves. It also serves as an action tool allowing the informed public to contact their governments (Western and African) to urge them to cooperate and take concrete action to improve access to drinking water for everyone.

Upon the film's release, a mini-site will be set up to direct viewers to concrete actions: contact a politician via twitter/e-mail/postal mail, donate to a local initiative in Africa promoting access to drinking water, sign a petition, share the message on social networks, etc. The idea being that viewers, informed by the film, now have all the keys they need to take concrete action in support of access to drinking water, a fundamental human right.





CAST

Houlaye Yidimama
Biguel Boulesey
Souri Malam
Barka Dari
Abdoulaye Dari
Didja Dari
Souri Dari
Djengoudo Guessé
Mariama Yidimama
Fati Yidimama
Jowol Yidimama
Dadi Malam
The Malam sons

And all the inhabitants of the village of Tatiste

TECHNICAL CREDITS

Director.....	Aïssa Maïga
Original idea.....	Guy Lagache
Screenplay.....	Ariane Kirtley et Aïssa Maïga
Production.....	Yves Darondeau, Emmanuel Priou
Coproduction.....	Jean-François Camilleri, Serge Hayat, Raphaël Perchet
Director of Photography.....	Rousslan Dion
Sound.....	Matthieu Mangematin
Editing.....	Isabelle Devinck, Linda Attab Apenouvon
Sound editing and mixing.....	Mélissa Petitjean
Original music.....	Uèle Lamore

The drill was installed by the NGO Amman Imman with the support of the Niger government.