



# AYA

A FILM BY SIMON COULIBALY GILLARD



Michigan Films & Kidam  
present

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Still's and Presskit are available on [www.michiganfilms.be](http://www.michiganfilms.be)  
Feature film – Colour - 90 min - 2021

## CONTACT

### PRODUCTION (BE)

#### **MICHIGAN FILMS**

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### PRODUCTION (FR)

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### PRESS

#### **MAKNA PRESSE**

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### INTERNATIONAL SALES

#### **TASKOVSKI FILMS**

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## SHORT SYNOPSIS

Aya is growing up with her mother on the island of Lahou. Joyful and carefree, she enjoys picking coconuts and sleeping on the sand. However, her paradise is doomed to disappear under the water. As the waves threaten her house, Aya makes a decision : the sea-level may rise, she won't leave her island.



## ABOUT THE FILM...

*With her feet stuck in the sand, her head held high and her cheerful eyes, Aya declares that she will never leave. However, the peninsula of Ivory Coast where she lives with her mother and younger brother is being gradually eaten away by the ocean, pushing its inhabitants to move towards the capital.*

*With its beautiful photography and sensorial editing, this fiction that borrows largely from the documentary style, makes us feel the sand, the salt and the overpowering presence of the sea in which dreams and reality, the visible and the invisible mingle. But the great strength of the staging is to bind us to the carefree footsteps of its heroine, to her jolly obstinacy, to her terrifically alive and sunny remains of childhood, to travel with her across this land that is disappearing. At night time, she explores it like in a dream, in a semi-darkness haunted by ghosts. For if the film delivers the chronicles of a simple happy life, it also tells the story of a tearing away that reminds one that all exile starts with sacrifice – that of paradise lost confused with childhood.*

Philippe Fernandez, Pascale Hannyoy & Ina Seghezzi, filmmakers (ACID)



## ORIGINS OF THE FILM

« I set foot on the African continent for the first time in 2005. I then went back in 2007 with a camera, and have returned about ten times since then, with ideas of films to make and realities to document. The way I make films is a physical experience before an intellectual one, and this starts with the action of moving around.

Every time, I have worked in distant rural areas with ethnic groups with specific languages, history and religion: the Dyula in Burkina Faso, the Fula in Mali, the Mossi of Burkina Faso and now the Avikam of Ivory Coast.

One film leads to another and it was during my first film shoot in Burkina Faso that I met Lassina Coulibaly, who became my assistant and collaborator on each one of my films. At his side, I also gained a name – Coulibaly – which everyone calls me now, in the West-African tradition of “joking relationships”.

Lassina had lived in the Ivory Coast and told me stories of the coast that made me want to go and find my next film there. I was interested in the Ivory Coast in that it shares with Burkina Faso the same French colonial history and two shared languages: Dyula and French. Aya follows the movement of films and meetings which started with Anima, my first short film.

But it was the finger of God which brought me to Lahou. Having left from Brussels, I had drawn an itinerary with a red pencil on a road map, to explore the country along the coast and to meet my film, especially the character in my film. When I arrived in Abidjan, I bought a second-hand car, and the next day I left for a 6,000 km drive. After 250 km, my car broke down. As I was stuck for 10 days, I started to explore the surroundings. That is how I found Lahou.

I arrived there one evening. I discovered a place like no other: no electricity, no road, the night was lit up by candles and the powerful light of the moon on the sand. It was magnificent. The next day, I learned of the tragic reality of this place and felt an even stronger need to make this film. »



## A DISAPPEARING VILLAGE

Sadly, the circumstances of Lahou described in the film are real: the coasts of this thin strip of sand, caught between the ocean and a river, are eroding gradually. In Lahou you can see the effect of the water rising: the isthmus which used to be 2 km wide is now only 200 meters wide.

The historical village of Lahou is disappearing day by day. I saw with my own eyes a neighbourhood of more than 150 houses disappear. On Google Maps, you can still see Aya's childhood neighbourhood, which has been submerged since the last shot was taken, like so many others. Only the cemetery still stands up against the sea's progression, and when the cemetery will have totally given in, the village as it used to be will have entirely disappeared.

Lahou was a former French colonial trading post, then a touristic peninsular with hotels, a clinic, a town hall, a lighthouse... None of which remain today.

Families leave Lahou one after the other, because there is no local economy. You can fish and grow cassava but not sell it, only exchange it. Everything has gone. It is extremely difficult to experience this situation every day and people lose hope. The question of moving away is at the heart of all the inhabitants' preoccupations. Parents send their children to town to get an education. These issues are at the centre of my film, where a mother must encourage her daughter to leave to ensure her future.

Faced with this tragic fate, Aya and her mother are independent women confronting the situation with strength and courage. I have always been driven by the desire to depict a community of women. I was brought up in a home of exclusively feminine "authority". Raised by an inseparable mother and grandmother couple, I saw what being responsible for someone's life means. Very early on, I knew that I wanted to talk about a story of filiation between a daughter and her mother, two fighting women in a tragic and hostile environment.



## A MEETING

I did not choose Aya, the camera chose her. I was filming fishermen who were tugging on a rope together and singing when a young girl appeared at the back of the frame carrying a baby: this was Marie-Josée (Aya) and her little brother Eli. The lens was attracted to her, a silent silhouette. I filmed her and she entered the camera. I didn't know yet how she would take part in the film, nor which role she would play.

For two weeks, I prospected around the village to find the face for my film, but none were right. When I went through the rushes, I found Marie-Josée and realised that she was the one. We did some tests together and everything worked well: her cheekiness, how she enjoyed playing, her desire to be in the film.

By choosing this young girl, I chose a family of characters: with Aya come her mother, her little brother and the “grandmother”.

## A FICTION OF REALITY

I choose my characters for who they are. The film is created in contact with their character, their experience, their social relationships and the stories they share with me. Together, based on their life, we build the story, we imagine scenes, we shoot them. From these exchanges and strong relationships, I re-stage reality. This type of hybrid approach, borrowing at once from documentary and fiction tools, gives the tale a form of authenticity. Characters become actors of their own life. The setting, the environment, the everyday gestures are integrated into a simple and strong narrative structure that can welcome reality and its unexpected turns of events.

The film's dramaturgy isn't written in advance, it's an “instantaneous scenario”. I grasp the background and daily life of the people I film, and put them back into similar situations. I write the film throughout the film shoot, through the stories and information I gather in the village, and from what really goes on during shooting.





# THE CRAFT OF FILMMAKING

I make my film like a craftsman creates a chair, with know-how. I can't make films in any other way. I cannot conceptualise a film and have it made by someone else. I must practise this know-how and resolve myself to it, limit myself to it. Where my field of expertise stops, so does the film. This limit is important because it's what makes my films singular. I look after the photography, but also the sound, costumes, choices of hairstyles and settings. I don't have any other method to make a film than to carry it myself, to make it. This notion of craftsmanship is important to me because that's also how I can create a relationship with the people I meet and place in front of a camera for the first time. I need this direct, physical and handmade approach to install trust.

I don't film much every day, but over a very long time period. I went back three times on location over one year and half, for two to three months every time.

With this method, we end up with a material that is filled with accidents. I can't stop people from entering the frame, and becoming characters of the scene. This actually happens very often. People want to be represented, to exist through film in a place where there usually aren't any cameras.

That was the promise between the young girl and myself, between the village and myself: to make a film in Avikam. To make their identity, their faces, their languages travel – this is the most fantastic thing that films can do.



## LAHOU, AT THE FOREFRONT OF CLIMATE CHANGE

At the crossroads of the Atlantic Ocean, the Bandama River and the lagoon, the town of Lahou was occupied by French colonisers as an important trading post and fishing port in the early 20th century. Today, the strip of sand on which the city used to reign has reduced inexorably. The sea progresses by two meters every year.

Coastal erosion is eating away the entire west-African coast dramatically. In Lahou, the tragedy is such that in 1973, Ivory Coast authorities decided to relocate the town and founded Grand-Lahou a few dozen kilometres away, on the other side of the lagoon. The administration settled there, and the inhabitants were strongly encouraged to move. Today, around 100,000 people live there. Others decided to stay whatever the cost, so as to not abandon their roots and ancestors.

In the old village of Lahou, the prison and part of the cemetery were gradually submerged. Nobody builds solid houses anymore; houses are made of bamboo and coconut

tree leaves, which are easier to move when the water laps at the walls of dwellings.

Coastal ecosystems are subjected to intense pressure and tropical countries like those of West Africa are particularly exposed. Yet 80 % of the economy of countries in the Gulf of Guinea (Ivory Coast, Ghana, Togo, Benin, Nigeria) takes place on the coastal strip, where the population is growing. These mechanisms make these areas and populations particularly vulnerable and exposed, fated to becoming climatic refugees.

*“In Africa, we cannot afford the luxury of doom-mongering, because we have experienced disasters for such a long time. However, we are still here. The fact that we are still here should be the subject, not of astonishment, but of a new critical thinking.”*

Achille Mbembé





# FILMOGRAPHY

## 2017 \*BOLIBANA\* (medium-length film)

IFFR, IndieLisboa, Cinéma du réel, France & more than 30 festival selections

\* Heritage Awards CINEMA DU REEL \* Special Distinction at DOCVILLE \* Best director award at GOLDEN TREE \* Special Distinction at FESTIVAL DEI POPOLI \* Night Award at SIGNES DE NUIT \* Best film award, young jury, FAITODOC

## 2014 \*YAAR\* (short film)

Dei Popoli Festival, Lussas Etats généraux du film documentaire & more than 50 festival selections

\* Photography award, FIFF \* Best ethno-anthropological film award, POPOLI \* University of Syracuse award, POPOLI \* Best film award, SIGNES DE NUIT \* Best international direction award, FFEQ \* ‘Signs’ award, READING ROOM \* Best documentary award, FESTIMAGES \* Best short documentary award, SKEPTO \* Best film award, BRUSSEL SHORT FILM FESTIVAL \* Best film award, 20 MIN MAX \* Best film award, SAARBRUCKEN SIGN OF NIGHT \* Best film award, MONTENEGRO FILM FESTIVAL \* Best documentary award, FAITODOC

## 2013 \*ANIMA\* (short film)

FIDMarseille, FIPA, Traces de Vies, Bilbao....

\* Short film award & WIP-CBA workshop award, FILMER A TOUT PRIX



# DIRECTOR’S BIOGRAPHY

Born in Bulgaria, Simon Gillard grew up in Brittany. After studying mechanical engineering, he did a U-turn and decided to live of his love for film. Throughout his master’s degree in film-directing at INSAS, Simon developed a strong relationship with the people and territories of West Africa where he lives and works part of the year. He made all his films there, alone with his cameras and microphones, accompanied by his assistant, Lassina Coulibaly.

# TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

WITH	MARIE-JOSÉE DEGNY KOKORA (AYA) PATRICIA EGNABAYOU (PATRICIA) JUNIOR ASSE (JUNIOR) MARIAM TRAORE (COCO)
IMAGE & SOUND EDITING	SIMON COULIBALY GILLARD MARIE-HÉLÈNE MORA BERTRAND CONARD SIMON COULIBALY GILLARD
SOUND EDITING MIXING	CLÉMENT CHAUVELLE
COLOR GRADING	ANTON VODENITCHAROV
PRODUCED BY	REDA BERBAR
	MICHIGAN FILMS SÉBASTIEN ANDRES & ALICE LEMAIRE KIDAM
CO-PRODUCED BY	FRANÇOIS-PIERRE CLAVEL & ALEXANDRE PERRIER
WITH THE SUPPORT OF	RTBF, FRANCE TÉLÉVISIONS, CANAL + AFRIQUE, SHELTER PROD, DÉRIVES CENTRE DU CINÉMA ET DE L'AUDIOVISUEL DE LA FÉDÉRATION WALLONIE-BRUXELLES TAXSHELTER.BE AND ING, TAXSHELTER OF BELGIUM'S FEDERAL GOVERNMENT, SABAM, FIRST CUT LAB, BELGIAN DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION





# PROGRAM

**Cannes Film Festival 2021 - ACID**

## **Screening with the team**

Thursday 15th July – 9 am - Studio 13

Thursday 15th July – 9 pm - Olympia 2 (closing)

## **Additional screenings**

Saturday 10th July – 3 pm - Alexandre III

Monday 12th July – 1:30 pm- Le Raimu

Sunday 11th July – 4:30 pm - Palais G (market screening)



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