



1080 Film and Television Ltd

presents

The Man Who Stopped the Desert

*A High Definition Documentary Film
Narrated by Hugh Quarshie*

Filmed & directed by Mark Dodd

Produced by 1080 Films

www.1080films.co.uk

Running time 64 minutes
Acquisition format DVC Pro HD 1080P
1.78, 25fps

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Introduction

**"Today more than six billion people rely on food grown on just
11% of the global land surface"**

Soil is essential to life on earth. But much of the world's soil has become degraded and useless. As the global demand for food grows, millions of pounds and the latest technological advances have been invested in attempts to improve soil quality. Leading scientists and agriculturalists from around the world strive against growing world hunger to find the means to bring exhausted soils back into production but it seems that an illiterate peasant farmer from one of the poorest countries on the Earth has finally begun to reverse the process known as desertification.



***"Those who treated him as a madman in the beginning realise today that he
is a genius"***

The Prime Minister of Yatenga, June 2008

***"Yacouba single-handedly has had more impact on conservation than all
the national and international researchers put together"...in this region tens
of thousands of hectares of land that were completely unproductive have
been made productive again thanks to the techniques of Yacouba."***

Dr. Chris Reij, Amsterdam University, October 2008

Synopsis

As early as the 1970's the word 'Sahel', a word that describes that bleak land between the Sahara desert and the wet forest of tropical Africa, had become synonymous with famine and poverty.

Year by year desert conditions continued to creep southwards, extending ever further into the once agriculturally productive lands of the Sahel. People began to abandon their traditional homelands, turning their backs on once thriving villages and moving towards a new life in the cities. By the 1980's the region, which then had a population of some 30 million, suffered from regular droughts and starvation. Many villages became deserted, yet Yacouba Sawadogo, a farmer living right at the heart of this crisis decided he would remain steadfast against the creeping desert.

Yacouba's family is large, with three wives and thirty-one children; he has many mouths to feed. But by reviving and adapting an ancient farming technique known as *Zai* Yacouba began to grow crops successfully on previously abandoned land. Rejoicing in his own triumph against the desert, Yacouba used the traditional communication hub -the market, to spread word of his innovative agricultural techniques.

But Yacouba Sawadogo's twenty year struggle is not simply an agricultural story, it is pure drama. Yacouba's hardest battle was not with the elements, but with the people around him. On every side he faced opposition to his new techniques. Many thought his ideas were crazy:

"At the beginning, people thought Yacouba to be a madman. I heard a lot of people saying Yacouba was mad. But today we have proof that even if it is a madness, it's a madness that suits a lot of people."

Prime Minister of Yatenga Region

Over cinematic reconstruction Yacouba narrates his incredible life story. We learn how, as a young man, he fought the accepted wisdom of the traditional land chiefs who opposed his new farming techniques. But Yacouba was undaunted. He perfects his technique, and today his name is synonymous with reversing the process of desertification. So much so that in November 2009 he was invited to Washington DC to share his story with policy makers on Capitol Hill.

Central to the film is the realisation that if the poorest people of the world can't afford to live in their own countries then the reality of mass migration and food conflicts will impact on us all.

Pre-release acclaim

“I think Yacouba's story is both incredibly timely and important given the current crisis in many parts of the world with desertification. It is also rare to find a conservation story with such an upbeat and inspirational ending.”

Diana El-Osta, Development & Production National Geographic Channels International

“At last a film we have been waiting for. Not the 'basket case' Africa of HIV headlines and aid relief but a real story about real people to inspire us all. Africa is not all bad news and here is the proof. If this is the man who stopped the desert, perhaps this is the director who can stop the stream of tired clichés that clog our television screens about the continent of Africa. Fabulously filmed with a masterful narration to match.”

Sally-Ann Wilson, Deputy Secretary General Commonwealth Broadcasting Association

In April 2010 *The Man Who Stopped the Desert* was premiered to an invited audience of TV industry specialists, environmental experts and the general public. Here is a taste of the feedback:

“One of the most inspirational films for many months from a director surely destined for even greater success. Perfectly pitched cinematography and a heart warming story combine in a winning formula. In a television world where mediocrity is often universal here is a film that really matters. It must be seen - and soon”

Dick Meadows, BBC TV documentary producer

“Yacouba is wonderful and the story is amazing, it ticked all the boxes in terms of drama, pathos, jeopardy and in the end a hopeful conclusion. I particularly loved the 'going to harvest' scene and for me the most poignant moment was when he discovered his father's grave was to be sliced in half. The resilience of the man is truly astonishing. The cinematography gave a real sense of place.”

Steve Clinch, Ex BBC freelance picture editor

“I can honestly say that after the hour we were both speechless - well not really the case as we couldn't stop talking about it! A fascinating story line that most would know nothing about, quite challenging emotionally. Or in other words, bloody marvellous!”

Roger Cox, Community Police Officer

“Are you going to make a sequel? I've a feeling this story has only just begun!”

Marion Seagar, Film & TV Librarian

Narrative Outline

Yacouba's life story, as told by him, provides the backbone of the film. It is a gripping, personal narrative through which the current global issues of desertification and food scarcity are explored.

Dramatic, cinematic flash-backs reconstruct the trials of Yacouba's early years. We see the boy Yacouba being handed over to a Koranic school far away in Mali. Here he endured an endless regime of learning the Koran, hard physical labour and the realities of poverty:

"My main problem at the school was hunger. Sometimes we managed to beg a lot of things to eat and sometimes we didn't get anything. There would often be fights amongst us students. This is just how it is, and as the smallest of the group I really was the whipping boy."

But despite the bullying, Yacouba is destined for greatness. When the time eventually comes for the young man to leave school, Yacouba is summoned to meet the school's spiritual leader, the Sheik. The meeting is at night, and over background sounds of crickets chirping and the slow crackle of an open fire, Yacouba is told that one day he will become a great leader.

Baffled, Yacouba returns home and starts his own business selling motorcycle parts in the local market. This goes very well. But one day he decides money is no longer his motivation.

"I earned a lot of money but I knew it would not last. So I put the money I had earned to one side and left the market to live different experiences that weren't dependant on money. The people didn't understand my decision. They weren't at all happy I had my money and a good business, yet I decided to leave. They were very confused."

But Yacouba's apparently crazy decision to leave his trade and work in the fields is about to be vindicated. Back at the market, his friends are in serious trouble. A dispute between the local government and the stallholders comes to a head when the police are sent in.

"The traders refused to obey the government. The government took reprisals and a lot of people suffered the consequences. A few escaped and came looking for me in my fields. They hadn't eaten for days. They said that people were looking for them which is why they had to run away."

Yacouba began his 'new career', and his struggle to find a way to stop the encroaching desert at the time when many had given up on farming and were leaving the area. Dutch Scientist, Dr Chris Reij, a world expert on soil conservation describes the scene back then:

"I think that whole period between 1975 and 1985 was a period that villages were increasingly abandoned by many families who decided to go to the southwest where there is more rainfall and more fertile soils. So this really was a time of substantial out-migration. I think often in those days 25% of the village population left the villages."

Chris Reij has studied Yacouba for many years. His testimony forms a counter-balanced, parallel thread to Yacouba's back-story. We see them together assessing Yacouba's forest. This vast area is now home to an incredible variety of species, all planted from seed by Yacouba. What was barren desert land is now fifty acres of mature forest. Chris Reij is awe-struck by what Yacouba has achieved:

"I've brought many researchers to the fields of Yacouba and they were all incredibly impressed by what they observed. I think that most of the researchers will recognise that they themselves have never been able to design such an efficient package as Yacouba has done."

So how did he do it? How did Yacouba succeed where so many 'experts' such as foreign aid agencies failed? We show how by reviving and adapting an ancient farming technique known as Zai, Yacouba managed to grow crops successfully on previously abandoned land. Chris Reij:

"Zai is what we call planting pits. They are just pits which are dug in a hard barren crust. Usually they are 30cm diameters and 20cm deep, Zai are big pits in which water can concentrate and in which farmers bring some manure or other organic matter to increase soil fertility."

It is a simple idea but one that can be easily copied for the benefit of all. The problem for Yacouba is that this technique goes against the local traditions.

His new ideas produce incredible results, but as news of his success spreads, opposition turns to envy. One fateful afternoon all his hard work is destroyed when jealous neighbours set his fields ablaze. Over ten acres of crops and newly planted forest are destroyed. But Yacouba is far from defeated. He continued with his work, replanting and more importantly, using the local market to spread knowledge of his techniques.

Today Yacouba is a highly respected figure. Farmers and officials come from miles around to learn his techniques. Excellent filming access has uncovered a fascinating insight into the life of Yacouba and his family. We have been on his farm from dawn to dusk recording their daily routine. It's a tough existence, but as the year progresses we see real hope for his community and the people in this region.

We are taken to a village where Yacouba's methods have breathed new life into a once desperate people. This thriving community used to be a ghost town. Yacouba has never visited this village so for him it is his first chance to see what has been achieved. The villagers are in no doubt as to the reason for their survival.

"Yacouba's technique is the very best one. He planted trees that we'd never heard of before and other plants that we use for medicine which would otherwise have disappeared completely. Yacouba has done all this and it is good."

As stories of global food shortages continue to make headlines in the West, we follow Yacouba through the seasons preparing the soil, sowing, and then reaping a huge harvest with the help of neighbouring villagers. The scene is almost Biblical, On his moped, Yacouba leads a small army of locals through the bush. Young men and village elders, riding bicycles and on horseback. Emerging through the dust is Yacouba, out in front. It is time for harvest.

As Yacouba reaches old age, and begins thoughts of retirement, we discover a dramatic new twist in his tale. Urban expansion now threatens to destroy everything Yacouba has worked for. Local government officials have sunk a network of concrete plotting stakes all over his farm, in preparation for house building. Nothing is safe. There is even a boundary line slicing through the grave of Yacouba's father. We see Yacouba in his seed store, the hub of his operation during the day and where he sleeps at night, giving a heart felt plea for help to change this desperate situation, for the very building in which he stands will also be demolished:

"I've no idea what I've done to deserve this. My father's grave split in two on plots that don't belong to me. I don't think this is a good thing for society. I can only see there being problems if this kind of thing repeats itself everywhere else because nothing more than injustice turns man nasty. I ask that this situation be sorted out because the world only wants goodness. It's not only me who will suffer, everyone will because injustice, without exception, causes everyone to suffer."

The tension comes to a climax when in November 2009 Yacouba travels to Washington DC as a guest of Oxfam America. This is a landmark event in his life and an incredible finale to the film as we are suddenly transported to the streets of downtown DC. We follow the peasant farmer from Africa as he presents his case to Obama's administration on Capitol Hill. Yacouba's whirlwind tour of Capitol Hill is regarded as a success. On his last night in the US, he is an honoured guest of the Ambassador of Burkina Faso.

Finally, we see Yacouba back home in Burkina Faso. It is late afternoon as he gathers his family for a group photograph. Despite concerns about the proposed urban expansion, Yacouba finds reasons to be optimistic:

"I feel very good about my present situation. If I ask God for something He gives it to me. Today I can say that the Sheik's predictions have come true because every morning when I wake up and ask God for something I'm confident that He will help me do it. As long as I have got good students my work can be taught to future generations... even after I have gone."

Production story by Mark Dodd

Spring 2007. I was on a visit to Burkina Faso to meet Ashley Norton, an old college friend. He introduced me to Yacouba Sawadogo, the peasant farmer at the centre of the film. Yacouba showed me around his farm and forest, then under the shade of a tree we sat down and he told me his story. It was a turning point in my life, and when he had finished I knew I had to make a film about his life. Here in front of me was the perfect story. It had all the elements of a drama; pathos, jeopardy, resolution, and the ingredients of a doc; timely subject matter, character driven and a great narrative thread.

At the time I was a successful cameraman working for the BBC. My obvious first point of call was to the various internal production departments. But the idea was not taken up. So the following year I resigned my post after 22 years' service and started 1080 Films. The country was about to dive into the deepest recession since the 1930's. This could have been seen as a somewhat crazy decision, but BBC commissioners did not want to take on a film of this nature and I felt that the story of Yacouba Sawadogo just had to be told.

After receiving a small bursary from The Commonwealth Broadcasting Association, I returned to Burkina Faso to make a 'taster' film. Things moved quickly after this. In spring 2009 I secured full production funding from a London based company which has a charitable fund supporting environmental work in the Sahel. This was the dream scenario -I could now make the film I wanted.

I made two more filming trips to Burkina Faso. My friend Ashley became the location manager and all the setting up was done over a dodgy email connection to a sweaty internet café in Ouahigouya. When it finally came to filming I can honestly say this was one of the smoothest shoots I have ever done. The local people were incredibly patient and understanding. I could not have wished for more.

The final shoot was in Washington DC. We were following Yacouba on his visit to the USA where he was to make a series of presentations on Capitol Hill. Oxfam America had invited him as part of a small delegation of farmer-innovators from the Sahel. This made an incredible, powerful climax to the film as we see Yacouba walking the streets of downtown DC, then presenting his story to the staffers of Obama's administration.

Credit roll

We wish to thank the following people for their generous help and support during the making of this film:

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Ouahigouya Police Force
The residents of Ranawa

Director of Photography
Mark Dodd

Location Manager and Sound Recordist
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Narrator
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Original music
David Poore

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