

Both Omars face the same issues of youth, and *Madame Courage* shows that the problems of unemployment, poverty, prostitution, and, most important, the scourge of Islamic fundamentalism, have in fact only worsened. Both Omars are also incapable of expressing their feelings for the women they love; the best that the later Omar can do is to stalk Stella and wait for hours outside her building just to catch a glimpse of her. One should also note, finally, the symbolic presence of the Mediterranean Sea in both films, as indeed, in most of Allouache's works. The viewer is aware constantly of its presence in the background—placid, sky blue, and watching from the other side as if it were a witness to what goes on. Unfortunately, all the characters, without a single exception, turn their backs to the sea and pay no attention to it as if it were not even there, despite its godlike presence.

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DOCUMENTARIES

Shaun Kadlec and Debb Tullmann, directors. *Born This Way*. 2013. 85 minutes. French, English. United States, Cameroon. \$299.00. College and University Educational DVD. \$129.00. K–12, Public Library, and Nonprofit DVD.

Before sodomy laws were introduced by colonialists, nonheterosexual practices certainly existed in Africa—among the Nilotico Langa men in Uganda, for instance, in the Azande community of northern Congo, and among the Dan Daudis in northern Nigeria. Of course, single-sex relationships still exist, and as Christian and Muslim fundamentalists promote homophobia on the continent, the members of the LGBT community in Africa are fighting for their survival. The documentary *Born This Way*, directed and produced by Shaun Kadlec and Debb Tullmann (www.bornthiswaydocumentary.com), captures the resilience and activism of such individuals by tracing the lives of four gay Cameroonians: Cedric, Gertrude, Pascaline, and Esther. All are defendants in a legal action in which they are being represented by Alice Nkom, a famous Cameroonian gay rights attorney.

The film is impressive in many ways, not the least of which is its portrayal of the “hustle” of gay life in a Cameroonian city against the general bustle of the urban scene. But it also is successful in portraying the challenges of these four individual lives, inspiring a respect and compassion for them that indeed is sometimes experienced by those around them. In one scene, for instance, Pascaline has an interesting conversation with the male taxi driver who is transporting her to a temporary safe space provided by Alice Nkom. The driver asks why she prefers not to have sex with men, and her response—that she does not like being dominated—interests and amazes him,

rather than infuriating him. Because Pascaline has made the effort to educate him, the man seems to experience an actual moment of epiphany. In another scene Gertrude visits the convent where she was raised after being abandoned by her abusive father at age six. During this visit she struggles to reveal that she is a lesbian, and the mother superior who had raised her as her own child reacts calmly. The sister talks about the need to respect all people's lives, even if some people do not accept all forms of sexuality. Gertrude and the nun tour the convent and Gertrude stumbles upon a gun, which at first startles her. But the sister explains that it is just an air gun for scaring away the crows. It is striking here that the lives of these nuisance creatures are respected and spared, whereas homosexuals face violence and even death.

Other scenes are equally powerful. In the flickering candlelight of a romantic encounter, Gertrude tells her lover about her experience of rape. Leaving church one day, Gertrude and three friends were approached by several men, who called out to them and then, when they were ignored, taunted them as lesbians. The women were then attacked and raped, and though Gertrude woke up in the hospital five days later, her friends did not survive. The shadowy background lighting of the scene captures not just the intensity of the narration, but also the shadowy lives of LGBT Africans: both the gloom that surrounds them, and the ignorance and darkness that stalk them. In another scene we follow Cedric as he walks toward home through a series of narrow paths, perhaps symbolic of the tight route that gays must navigate in Cameroon. At a night club he meets Gertrude, his co-worker at a nongovernmental LGBT organization called Alternatives Cameroun. He recounts a number of harrowing experiences to her: how a group of homophobic men slit his stomach and left him for dead, and how he has received a threatening note calling him "dirty faggot" and instructing him to leave the neighborhood. Later he goes to visit his mother and shudders at the possibility of coming out to her. In his words, "family is everything."

Nevertheless, there are moments of joy in the film. In one scene Pascaline and Esther are delighted to learn about the existence of Alternatives Cameroun, which functions as a haven where they can breathe freely and affirm their sexuality. The center also becomes a symbolic refuge, particularly when Alice Nkom loses the legal case. Despite this defeat, the documentary ends on a positive note with a party at the center.

The film thus speaks to the challenges faced by the African LGBT community as its members are stripped of their humanity. A similar documentary entitled *Veil of Silence* was produced in Nigeria by Habeeb Lawal in January 2014, the same year and month that the Nigerian government criminalized homosexuality and passed a law imposing a punishment of fourteen years of imprisonment for homosexual behavior. But *Born This Way* is particularly effective for its vivid representation of the lives of LGBT people in a Cameroonian city. As the camera pans across street traders, artisans, and party scenes, it reveals everyday activities pulsating with life. It is a well-structured

film that presents thought-provoking questions without being preachy or patronizing. Especially now that the wave of homophobia is sweeping across the continent of Africa—from Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Cameroon, Uganda, and Gambia to Kenya—it is a particularly timely documentary.

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Joseph Gaï Ramaka, director. *Plan Jaxaay!* 2007. 25 minutes. Wolof with English and French subtitles. Senegal. Observatoire Audiovisuel sur les Libertés. Available on Vimeo.com. No price reported.

Joseph Gaï Ramaka was born and raised in Saint Louis, Senegal. After completing his university studies in visual anthropology and cinema in Paris, he established production companies in both Paris and Dakar. Ramaka is best known for his feature film *Karmen Geï* (2001), an innovative adaptation of Prosper Mérimée's nineteenth-century novella *Carmen* and George Bizet's opera which was screened at film festivals throughout the world. *Karmen Geï*, the first African adaptation of the myth, is a modern story that takes place in the urban capital of Dakar, a setting that underscores the eponymous heroine's quest for freedom. Ramaka's lesser-known documentary, *Plan Jaxaay!*, also features Dakar, but with a focus on the disastrous social problem of chronic flooding faced by the city's densely populated suburbs.

Plan Jaxaay! opens with the date February 26, 2007, displayed on center screen, one day after the Senegalese presidential election that secured Abdoulaye Wade a second term in office. The film is composed of a series of interviews with male and female residents of Médina Gounass who share their personal stories about how they have been negatively affected by the floods in the region and lack of response by the Senegalese government. The filmmaker himself is never heard, and the film therefore prioritizes the voices and experiences of the residents themselves, several of whom thank Ramaka for allowing them to speak about their challenges and frustrations.

The film begins with a scene of a man standing in front of a pool of water. He states that the flooding problems began in 2000, and that "since then, we have been living in distress, dirt, and water." Many residents were forced to evacuate their homes and find lodging elsewhere, while those who stayed have suffered from health problems such as malaria, cholera, and other gastrointestinal illnesses. The title of the film, *Plan Jaxaay!*—which can be translated roughly as "the bird that flies the highest"—derives from President Abdoulaye Wade's urban development plan of the same name intended to deal with the flooding disaster. The principal goals of this project were to relocate individuals from flood-prone neighborhoods and