

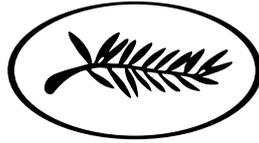


FESTIVAL DE CANNES
COMPETITION
2021 OFFICIAL SELECTION



LINGUI, THE SACRED BONDS

A FILM BY MAHAMAT-SALEH HAROUN



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A FILM BY
MAHAMAT-SALEH HAROUN

2021 - Chad/France/Germany/Belgium - Drama - 2.39 - 87 min

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Cast

AMINA
MARIA
BRAHIM

Achouackh ABAKAR SOULEYMANE
Rihane KHALIL ALIO
Youssef DJAORO

Crew

Written and Directed by
Director of Photography
Editor
Sound
Original Score

Mahamat-Saleh HAROUN
Mathieu GIOMBINI
Marie-Hélène DOZO
Thomas BOURIC
Wasis DIOP

Produced by

Florence STERN, PILI FILMS(France)
GOÏ-GOÏ PRODUCTIONS (Chad)

in coproduction with

Mélanie ANDERNACH, MADE IN GERMANY (Germany)
and Diana ELBAUM, BELUGA TREE (Belgium)
as well as CANAL+ INTERNATIONAL, PROXIMUS

with the participation of
with the support of
in association with

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Synopsis

On the outskirts of N'djamena in Chad, Amina lives alone with her only 15-year-old daughter Maria. Her already fragile world collapses the day she discovers that her daughter is pregnant. The teenager does not want this pregnancy. In a country where abortion is not only condemned by religion, but also by law, Amina finds herself facing a battle that seems lost in advance...

Interview with MAHAMAT-SALEH HAROUN

What does *Lingui* mean?

It's a Chadian word that means a bond or connection. More generally it's what links people in order for them to live together. It is a term that implies solidarity, mutual aid, and keeping each other afloat. I can only exist because others exist, that is *lingui*, that is the common thread, the sacred bond of our social fabric. What it comes down to is an altruistic philosophy. This word epitomizes a society's resilience when faced with terrible trials and ordeals. And when the *lingui* is broken, it forebodes the beginning of a conflict. This notion of solidarity comes from tradition. In the modern world, the notion of *lingui* tends to disappear because the governing class has distorted it. This class pays little heed to *lingui* because it is often driven by short term, selfish interests, misappropriating riches for its own profit even though these very same people in power were raised with *lingui's* values.

It's your first film with women in leading roles. Have you wanted to do this project evoking the condition of women in Chad for a long time?

Yes, it's been a while that I wanted to paint a portrait of a Chadian woman similar to the ones I know. They are single women, widowed or divorced, who raise their children alone. Often looked down upon by society, they nevertheless manage to figure out how to make ends meet. I knew a woman who found herself alone with her children after her husband died. To earn money for the family, she started to salvage plastic bags to make ropes and sell them. I wanted to depict the life of these women who are marginalized, but don't live like or consider themselves as victims. They are the unsung heroines of everyday life. In Chad, there was an attempt to pass family laws that would help women with pregnancy and contraception, something akin to family planning services. But it was never voted in. Abortions are banned. However, some doctors practice it openly, to help women in distress. In the name of *lingui*, of course.

Lingui, the Sacred Bonds is feminine and feminist. Does the idea of feminism exist in Chadian society?

Feminism doesn't exist as a theory or set of beliefs, but it exists in everyday life. I see young Chadian women who have impressive degrees in higher education and want to start a family: they can't because society disapproves of them earning so much money. They



are considered overly independent, too free. These women get together to speak frankly of their lives, sharing their experience, aiding and supporting each other. They are often single mothers. They are poorly considered, but earning a good salary saves them. They are aware of the situation they are living in, of being marginalized, even if they are in the heart of the system thanks to their earnings and their jobs.

It's a feminism that doesn't openly ask for anything but is extremely active. These women frequently organize private organized funds. They regularly contribute to these funds to finance different projects or to help a person in need. Thus they find the ways and means to resist Chadian society's ossified patriarchal order. I have always been very sensitive to women's causes because I was raised by my extraordinary grandmother. A powerful woman who left a lifelong impression on me. When her husband (my grandfather) took on a second wife, my grandmother got on a horse with her son (my father) and fled. My grandfather caught her and took her son away. My grandmother never remarried, nor had any other children. I imagine that she did have a love life all the same, but without getting pregnant. I like to let myself believe that she invented contraception in Chad! This strongheaded woman is always by my side. I wanted to pay homage to all these free-spirited female figures who are full of the fighting spirit, like my grandmother.



***Lingui, the Sacred Bonds* focuses on Amina, a single mother whose pregnant daughter wishes to have an abortion. It is striking to see all the different strata of society turning against them: the high school, doctors, the neighborhood imam...**

Yes, they've been targeted. Because of her pregnancy Maria becomes an undesirable element in her high school. She's expelled because the institution is worried about its reputation. Added to that are the neighbors who snub them, the doctors who must yield to the law and pressure from the neighborhood imam. The latter represents a type of Islam that is flourishing in Chad, as in many places around the world. Despite these adversities, they never give up. They find daily strategies to face the obstacles put in their way. It's a combat that is lead "discreet" out of necessity because of women's relative lack of power in Chadian society. *Lingui*, functioning as a type of sisterhood, is able to find the paths needed to find a way out of this situation.

Where are the roots of this Chadian patriarchy: in ancestral Chadian culture or in the Muslim religion?

It's a combination. It's linked both to political structures and religion, two phenomena that were imported into Chad. Starting from the moment when religion imposed moral criteria upon society, the latter became stagnant, filled with newly created interdictions and bans.



After freeing itself from French colonialization in 1960, the political power bridled the population instead of promoting greater freedom.

The thirst for power drives politics; dogmas linked to a form of power drive religious leaders, and the two entities have many common interests. But women carry and pass on memory and life experience that is mightier than the dominant discourse and prohibitions. They are acutely aware of their condition, the ordeals they have to face, and they have always known how to manage. They didn't wait for religion to tell them how to care for their bodies, how to not have a child or have one when they want.

The neighbor is an interesting character because he turns out to be very different from expected. He is in fact a concentration of all the patriarchy's hypocrisies.

He has no ethics, no morals, he's a predator. When Amina offers to sleep with him in return for money, he can't accept because it would mean he would no longer be able to carry through his plans to marry Amina and kill two birds with one stone: having at his disposal, under his roof, the mother and the daughter. With certain men, behind *lingui* is a hypocrisy embodied by this neighbor. Yet in Chadian society, neighbors are very important. When the dead arrive in heaven, the first question that is asked of them is how their neighbors are doing? There is an ethical contract between neighbors and this man has broken it.

The *lingui* is also broken by Amina's family, who threw her out because she "dishonored" them. If there is a lesson to be learned, it is that *lingui* only works among people who have the same ethics, the same vision of solidarity, and a shared outlook. Without it, *lingui* is hypocrisy.

In the movie, the *lingui* is feminine. In particular, the sequence where the women have a party where there is great comradery and conviviality.

Here's an example of a silent revolution: how one can count upon the silence of a community of women to make the dominant male figures believe that they are obedient to imposed customs when in reality they aren't.

The irony of this sequence is that Maria, likewise, had a clandestine abortion of which the women are not aware.

Are we sure they really aren't aware? I'm not so sure. *Lingui* imposes silence upon each of them. The secret has to be kept for the sake of the group's unity. I like this scene because it shows the complicity among the women and their awareness that they are sharing the same fate.

Ellipses and suggestion are a big part of your writing and directing style. Many of the story's elements are understood without words, through shots or angles and the way they are sequenced. You are tackling a subject matter, but you never forget that this is cinema.

I believe that cinema teaches us the art of suggestion, and evocation. Ellipses are a vital part of cinematographic writing. One has to know how to use them. When there is room made for the audience, and their intelligence is respected, the ellipsis can appear like a gift. A fun and exciting moment. When I watch a film that has gaps in the narrative, it is like someone has given me an epiphany. I like movies that trust the audience and give them the possibility of constructing the story along with the director. I prefer this cinema to a certain type of cinema that is dominant where the audience is assigned a passive role, forcing us to be subjected to the film as it unloads the whole predigested thing on our laps.

An example of your way of suggesting things is when you make us understand without saying it that Amina, when she was young, was in a situation similar to her daughter's.

Absolutely. We understand that because she is a young mother raising her daughter alone.



She already knows what her daughter is going through because she went through the same thing. It is the reason why she has decided to put an end to this predetermination. In a movie, we imply information which frees us from having to explain everything.

At the beginning of the film, there are very beautiful sequences where we see Amina make stoves with salvaged materials.

These scenes embed the character in a social reality. I place a great deal of importance in filming people at work because I feel that in contemporary cinema, work is not filmed enough. It often comes down to filming someone in front of a computer. There's no reality to it, it's too abstract. Filming someone at work is beautiful, it helps the character to exist, and I very much like the fact that Amina makes her own stoves (in Chad they are called kanoun) with salvaged materials. It shows the economic and social status she's been relegated to, but that doesn't sap her energy, she works to give her daughter a future. I also like to film scenes that can seem banal at first, but take on importance, gradually making sense later in the film. In truth, it's through these supposedly banal scenes that that emotion is quietly developed, little by little.

Another detail that gives information about the context in Chad: Amina's friend who listens to music on her Walkman.

I wanted to show that these women are not ignorant about the world and its evolution. They live in their era. Despite their poverty and marginalization, they have cell phones, headphones. They aren't cut off from the world and its ways, they live right in it. When you stroll around the farmers' market in N'djamena (where the film is set), you see women selling vegetables who have cell phones and use apps to pay for things. They are immersed in modernity but are hampered by politics and religion. Modernity is universal, it concerns everyone, but within this modernity are beings who are kept down, shackled, who have to go through trials and ordeals the extent of which other people can hardly conceive.

How did you find your actresses, Achouackh who plays Amina and Rihane who plays Maria?

There are practically no professional actors in Chad apart from the people who have worked with me and whom I consider to be professionals. Achouackh had already played a small role in *Grigris*. When she read this screenplay, she wanted to play Amina. She said the role was for her whereas I had imagined somebody else. She lived in Los Angeles for a while and is quite familiar with American cinema. She's also a mother and could easily imagine herself in Amina's shoes. She took classes to learn how to make a stove herself. She was truly invested in the part.

As for Rihane, I didn't consider anyone else for the role of Maria. As soon as we met, I felt a strange closeness with her. She's a brilliant girl and did a very good job on the first screen tests. Her older sister had a role in *Abouna*, but I didn't know that they were sisters and Rihane had no idea that I directed *Abouna*! Another surprising coincidence. Sometimes you have to believe in signs, especially when it comes to creation.

For this film, the cinematographer and editor were people who had worked on your previous films.

I had already worked with the cinematographer Mathieu Giombini on *A Season in France* and on the documentary *Hissein Habré, a Chadian tragedy*. He was also first assistant camera on *Abouna*, which was his first shoot in Africa, and he nailed it. He was the only European person I brought with me to Chad who didn't spend his time making comments about local customs and practices.

For *Lingui, the Sacred Bonds*, I had him watch Nagisa Oshima's *The Pleasures of the Flesh* to show him the type of framing I wanted. I also wanted to capture the gold-tinged shades

of light that are typical of N'djamena, the thick night air... Mathieu knew how to visually capture all of it. I trust him, he understands what I want very quickly. A smooth film shoot entails *lingui* as well!

As for Marie-Hélène Dozo, the editor, she's been working with me since *Daratt*. She and I both agree that it is important to give things time. I'm going to be taken for a dinosaur, but I find our era increasingly stressful and fast-paced. Cinema today no longer asks an audience to watch, but to experience extreme sensations. My cinema has more to do with listening than with performance: taking the time to listen to the characters, representing them with dignity to capture their complexity and their humanity. I have the feeling that this point of view is ever less prevalent. Thankfully, there is still a solid community of cinephiles throughout the world that allows films like mine to exist. Indeed, there is evidently an international *lingui* of movie lovers, which is a balm to the soul.

Taking into consideration your perspective which casts a critical look at the country of Chad, did you come across obstacles while making your film?

No. In countries where movie theaters don't exist, movies aren't a threat to the powers that be. The Chadian government has more pressing issues to deal with than keeping watch on my films. I'm looked upon as an entertainer; the prizes my films win are a source of pride. That's it. There are no movie theaters in Chad and if the government television stations don't broadcast my films, the whole question is nipped in the bud. Nevertheless, my films are seen in Chad by movie enthusiasts thanks to video clubs and make-shift theaters where a video monitor replaces a big screen. Once, in a village, my movie beat the record attendance at a local video club which up until then had been held by *Robocop*! I had 5 more people for my film, and I was very proud.

Will women in Chad have the opportunity to see *Lingui, the sacred bonds*?

Yes. We are going to organize screenings in Chad for women, especially because unwanted pregnancies are becoming an increasingly important problem. There are more and more reports of people discovering abandoned newborns, often dead. It's horrible. All of that because of bans and the shame of carrying a so-called "illegitimate" child. Further, clandestine abortions are dangerous, with often tragic ends as many of the people who carry out abortions are charlatans.



Director's Biography

Born in Chad, Mahamat-Saleh Haroun first won critical acclaim for his short films before directing his first feature, *Bye-bye Africa* (Best First Film, Venice Film Festival 1999).

He then went on to direct *Abouna (Our Father)* (Director's Fortnight, Cannes 2002), *Daratt*, *Dry Season* (Special Jury Award, Venice Film Festival 2006), *A Screaming Man* (Jury Prize, Cannes Film Festival 2010), *Grigris* (Vulcain Prize for Best Cinematography, Official Competition, Cannes Film Festival 2013).

Hissein Habré, A Chadian Tragedy, his first documentary film, was selected at the 2016 Cannes Film Festival, Official Selection – Special screening.

A Season in France, is his first feature film shot in France, starring Eriq Ebouaney and Sandrine Bonnaire. Selected at the Toronto International Film Festival 2017 - Special Presentation.

New York paid tribute to Mahamat-Saleh Haroun by hosting two retrospectives of his films: in 2006 at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and in 2018 at Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM).

In 2010, he received at the Venice Mostra the Robert Bresson Award for his complete works and in 2013, the Fellini Medal awarded by UNESCO.



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