

Adu: A young African boy on a perilous journey

Joanne Laurier
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Directed by Salvador Calvo and screenplay by Alejandro Hernández

Adu is a hard-hitting Spanish film about the global refugee crisis.

Directed by Salvador Calvo and scripted by Alejandro Hernández, the movie is crafted with immense feeling and compassion. Mediaset Spain produced the film, now streaming on Netflix, dramatizing the vast dimensions of the humanitarian catastrophe through the travails of an astonishing young boy as he makes a life-threatening journey throughout Africa. He hopes to reach Spain and seek refuge with his father after the murder of his mother.

The film opens in the city of Melilla, a Spanish enclave on the northwest coast of Africa. A throng of desperate refugees are attempting to scale a 20-foot high barbed wire fence. One of the refugees, Tatu (Emilio Buale), gets caught on the coil of the barbed wire. He is clubbed by one of the border guards and falls to his death. It is later established that he was a political refugee from the Congo, where he was arrested during a demonstration.

In Cameroon, six-year-old Adú (Moustapha Oumarou) and his protective older sister Alika (Zayiddiya Dissou) are taking a bicycle ride when they witness poachers sawing off the tusks of a slaughtered elephant in an animal reserve. The siblings are spotted by the poachers who eventually murder the children's mother as they escape from the butchers.

Meanwhile Gonzalo (Luis Tosar), a Spaniard who heads up a charity outfit on the reserve in Cameroon, does not work well with his native colleagues and gets ousted from his position. His rebellious, narcotics-loving teenage daughter Sandra (Anna Castillo) has grudgingly come to Africa to be in her father's care. Gonzalo gives her the bike that Alika and Adú were forced to abandon.

Brother and sister then track down an aunt who hands them to a human trafficker in the hope they will reach their father in Spain. The unscrupulous smuggler instructs

Alika and Adú to climb an airport fence and hide in the wheel well of a plane he claims is bound for Paris. While the children miraculously survive the initial suction of take-off, Alika dies in the freezing temperatures during the flight. When the well is open for landing, her small body flies away like a kite, and young Adú is left alone and defenseless as the plane lands in Senegal. It is a scene that leaves one emotionally shattered.

In Senegalese immigration, Adú meets the wily teenager Massar (Adam Nourou), an amateur magician, and they escape from custody. But getting the money to continue on their quest involves the latter prostituting himself, a terrible fate for this innocent, caring young man.

Meanwhile, Gonzalo has left Cameroon with his daughter *and* the bicycle for his luxury villa in Morocco, while he prepares for a job interview and tries to protect Sandra from her bad habits.

Back in Melilla, the border guards are predictably cleared of any wrongdoing in Tatu's death. And in Morocco, Massar, in an effort to circumvent a border fence, attempts a harrowing feat by swimming with the aid of one inner tube while towing his young charge in another through the choppy, deadly waters between Morocco and Melilla.

Adu makes no bones about the stark contrast between the wealthy and, in Sandra's case, spoiled Europeans who can effortlessly traverse borders, on the one hand, and the impoverished Africans who attempt to flee poverty and repression by risking life and limb and are treated abominably at the European frontiers, on the other. The hatred of the authorities towards the hard-pressed refugees is universal, as the US and Europe close borders, imprison, torture and murder immigrants who are made homeless and stateless by relentless imperialist wars and machinations.

The film features committed performances by all the actors, in particular Oumarou as the endearingly resilient

Adú, Nourou as Massar, his courageous guardian, and the remarkable Tosar as Gonzalo, whose character seems to have more empathy for animals than people. Most striking is *Adu's* impressive cinematography with its panoramic view of the African continent's exquisite natural beauty contrasted with the grinding poverty and bare-bones existence of tens of millions of its inhabitants. It is to the filmmakers' credit that the refugee population is portrayed as fighting ferociously against its mistreatment, particularly in the movie's opening sequence.

Moreover, the images of thousands of refugees packed like cattle at border crossings, together with the racism and xenophobia of the guards, serve to emphasize the barbaric inhumanity of walls, fences, barbed wire and military checkpoints.

In an interview with SensaCine, director Calvo described the impulses for his movie. When he was filming *1898: Our Last Men in the Philippines* (2016), there was a CEAR (Spanish Commission for Refugee Aid) center, where his partner was volunteering: "There were many things we saw, but I remember that once a six-year-old boy, the same age as our protagonist, arrived with his mother and two sisters in a *patera* [a boat generally used by immigrants to travel]. They discovered that the child was not her son and that she brought him to sell him for his organs to a network of organ traffickers that has its starting-point in the Canary Islands and is later spread throughout Europe."

Calvo recalls another story of a 15-year-old Somali teenager who had to flee sexual abuse by his uncle and his friends. The teen's father could not defend him because the uncle was a warlord. The young man crossed the entire Sahara desert alone, and had to prostitute himself to get the 3,500 euros that the trip costs in a boat to reach the coast of Morocco. "He had also been a slave in Libya, when he finally came to Europe, a week later he died of AIDS," explains the filmmaker.

Calvo emphatically argues that "cinema is a social weapon and I would love to contribute with this film."

Recently, the International Organisation for Migrants, affiliated with the United Nations, reported that over 500 people have so far died this year on the West Africa migration route to the Canary Islands, with the majority of deaths occurring in October and November. The death toll is already more than double that of 2019, with the actual loss of life feared to be much higher.

The Spanish Socialist Party-Podemos government announced in late November that it would build prison camps across the island chain to hold migrants pending

deportation. The government has refused to allow the thousands of desperate people trapped on the archipelago to be transferred to the Spanish mainland.

Spanish police are well versed in brutal practices. In 2014, Civil Guards repelled migrants swimming around the Tarajal seawall attempting to cross the border at Ceuta, another Spanish autonomous city on the coast of Africa, by shooting them with rubber bullets and tear gas. The state attorney defended the guards, stating that they were facing a "violent avalanche."

Globally, the refugee crisis is catastrophic. According to the UNHCR, the United Nations refugee agency, at least 79.5 million around the world have been forced to flee their home. This includes nearly 26 million refugees, about half of whom are under the age of 18. There are also millions of stateless people who have been denied a nationality and therefore lack access to basic necessities such as education, health care, employment and freedom of movement.

Greatly compounding the problem is the COVID-19 pandemic. The International Rescue Committee states that 34 conflict-affected and fragile countries could witness up to one billion COVID-19 infections and 3.2 million deaths.

Kieren Barnes of NGO Mercy Corps observes: "Social distance is a fantasy in a camp." The UN estimates that more than 25 million refugees in camps around the world face particularly acute obstacles in the fight against COVID-19.

In any event, as the director hoped, *Adu* is a genuine contribution.



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