One of the best films of the year now playing in N. America

Souleymane's Story: "I don't know why I came to France"

David Walsh
5 August 2025

Souleymane's Story (written and directed by Boris Lojkine) is an excellent and moving work from France, one of the best films of the year.

It opened August 1 in New York City and will show up on screens in other cities across North America in the coming weeks, including Los Angeles, Boston and Cleveland in the US, and Halifax, Toronto and Hamilton in Canada.

Lojkine's work has won prizes at the Cannes film festival, César awards (top French film awards), European film awards and collected other honors internationally, including the audience award at the San Francisco film festival. These are well-deserved.

Governments throughout the world have declared war on immigrants and refugees. The Trump administration's agenda may be one of the most brazen, sadistic and transparently illegal, but the pursuit and persecution of the most defenseless members of the human community is the policy, stated or unstated, of every capitalist regime and leading party, far-right or nominally "left."

Everywhere governments frame their racist and chauvinist anti-immigrant programs as the defense of native-born workers, but nothing could be further from the truth. The policies are merely meant to divide the oppressed and pit one section of workers against another in a scramble for the crumbs that the billionaires let fall.

The conditions facing Souleymane Sangaré (Abou Sangaré), a Paris food delivery worker, in *Souleymane's Story* (*L'histoire de Souleymane*) are ghastly, but typical. The phrase "precarious work" may be metaphorical in some cases, but in the unstable and perilous existence Souleymane leads the "precariousness" is real and ever-present.

The fiction work treats two desperate days in the life of this undocumented Guinean immigrant, as he struggles heroically to make a living and simultaneously prepares for an all-important asylum application interview, which will go a long way toward determining his official fate in France.

He pays cash, something he is terribly short of, to get tutored by a fellow Guinean in a fake account of political persecution. He has to remember (falsely) that he was arrested for resisting evictions, that he is a member of the UFDG (Union of Democratic Forces of Guinea), the bourgeois opposition coalition, etc., etc. This is intended to qualify Souleymane as a political refugee. In fact, as we learn, his actual circumstances are far more devastating than the story he shakily learns by heart.

Souleymane delivers meals, but in fact he "rents" an UberEats account from another African immigrant, who takes half or more of the earnings every week. The undocumented are frequently reduced to this. In the end, his "colleague" refuses to pay him what he's owed and even pushes him down a flight of stairs.

A tiny episode is enough to propel Souleymane toward disaster: a minor accident while riding his bicycle damages a bag of food, which a customer refuses to accept. Life is harsh. Souleymane is always rushing, running, chasing after people who owe him money or favors. A missed bus means losing out on a bed in a homeless shelter and a night on the cold, wet streets of Paris.

Director Boris Lojkine notes that the absence of music in the film

> was my decision from the start. No artifice. The point wasn't to stick to some documentary aesthetic, but rather to make the most of the city's sound score, the horns and sirens, the clatter of trains, the roar of engines. The absence of music forced us to be more radical when it came to editing—there was no room for empty, pretty, peaceful moments. We always move forward, shadowing Souleymane, holding our breaths, tirelessly, until the final scene that has us trapped in the small bare office.

Souleymane phones his girlfriend in Guinea in the middle of the night, while huddling on the street, only to tell her she should marry an "engineer" who has asked for her hand. He has no future to offer her. "The pain of leaving you burns … I wish you a happy life. I'll never forget you." It's an affecting, difficult sequence.

"I don't know why I came to France," Souleymane says forlornly, but without self-pity, at another moment.

The final portion of the film is devoted to the frightening, all-important asylum application interview with a government official "in the small bare office." She is perfectly sympathetic, but she knows his story about membership in the UFDG and so forth is phony as can be. What will happen when he tells the truth?

Souleymane's Story is very strong, sympathetic. It cuts through a lot of rubbish and sets out the nightmarish, exhausting, debilitating circumstances undergone by the undocumented, friendless, isolated immigrant.

Lojkine explains that he and a collaborator

> met many food delivery workers. They told us about the behind-the-scenes aspects of their work: the problems with their account holders, the scams they'd fallen victims to, their interactions with customers; they told us about their difficulties to find accommodation, their relationships with their fellow deliverymen, colleagues who aren't necessarily their friends. In all their stories, the issue of papers occupied a special place. It was particularly the case with the Guineans we talked to. Almost all of them were or had been asylum seekers, and they were obsessed with the application process, because being granted asylum could radically change their lives.

Lojkine observes that he and his co-writer, Delphine Agut, "built a dramaturgy closer to a thriller than to a social chronicle." Here are "the efforts of a character struggling like a fly in a jar, prey to an oppressive system."

> During these two days when he should be resting before his interview, our protagonist doesn't have a minute to catch his breath. He runs around, trying to sort out problems that are piling up, grappling with the merciless system of a European society that we think is gentle, but which is terrible for those who aren't citizens.

Interviews and research do not by themselves produce an aesthetically accomplished work. Far from it. But the filmmakers in this case bring sensitivity, thought and artistry to their effort.