

Rain in a Dry Land

82 minutes (52 min. version available), 2006 Kenya/U.S.A.

Bullfrog Films

Director: Anne Makepeace

Language: Somali Bantu and English

Rain in a Dry Land brings together the realities underlying the everyday transactions of the individuals living in the developed world and those from underdeveloped regions. This is done in a fascinating eighteen month account of the immigrant experience of two Somali Bantu families and their integration into American society.

Arbai (a mother of nine) and Aden and Madina (parents of seven) are members of the Somali Bantu ethnic group. At the beginning of the Somali civil war in 1991 their families were targeted by armed groups, dispersed and forced to flee to the refugee camp in Kakuma, Kenya. Rape, murder, displacement, poverty, and illiteracy are a few of the experiences they bring to the United States in 2004 as part of a 13,000 Somali Bantu refugee program of resettlement. Madina especially finds it difficult to adapt at first as post-traumatic stress disorder and depression haunt her. Things the average English speaking residence takes for granted become a tour de force for Arbai, Arden, Madina, and their children. For instance, Madina and one of her youngest try to order chicken at Taco Bell but she will not pay for it unless she can see the product since she is used to haggling for prices of products in markets, and unless she pays for it first the staff in the U.S. will not give her the chicken.

Conflicts and frustrations emerge as the illiteracy resulting from the lack of primary education due to discriminatory practices against the Somali Bantu leads to a challenging school integration for the children. Illiteracy further complicates the parents' progress in learning enough written and spoken English to obtain jobs. Managing bills and rent, the pressure of government agencies providing aid to get employment, and culture also add stress to the assimilation process of these families. Arbai, for example, faces the generational gap between her thirteen year old daughter (Sahara) who sees no need to follow her culture and instead wants to adopt American practices (e.g. moving out of the home at the legal age), and herself who sees cultural traditions and family dynamics as the only way not to get "lost" in the midst of American culture.

Cultural and religious practices, however, are not discarded just as a negative aspect that must be dealt with in a new context. The film demonstrates how they both enable the creation of the necessary support networks that aid with the difficult process of immigrating in the bond that unites the Somali Bantu as a community. Cultural perceptions are also shown through interviews of the American neighbors, classmates, teachers, and social workers that interact with these families. Taking into account their points of views helps the audience to understand where assimilation is made easier and worse by cultural differences.

By the end of the film the viewer understands why it is titled Rain in a Dry Land. Coming from regions where water is a blessing, especially after drought and harsh periods, the phrase embodies the rebirth of the families portrayed after they begin to adapt positively into American life without losing their own identities. This film should be of interest to students, scholars, or the general public interested in immigration, African and cultural studies in general.

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