

Yaaba/Grandmother (1989)

Idrissa Ouédraogo (1954-2018)

OVERVIEW

Auteur Idrissa Ouédraogo was a Burkinabé filmmaker whose work critically examined the interplay between tradition and modernity within his country's evolving social landscape. Born on January 21, 1954, in Banfora, Burkina Faso, and raised in Ouahigouya, a northern town, he was the son of farmers. His rural upbringing profoundly shaped his artistic sensibilities, influencing his portrayal of social hierarchy, communal life, and cultural transformation in Burkinabé society. Ouédraogo pursued film studies in Ouagadougou, Kyiv, and Paris, culminating in his graduation from the Institut des hautes études cinématographiques (IDHEC) in 1985. His cinematic work offers nuanced explorations of identity, tradition, and societal change, frequently challenging established norms. His filmography includes *Yam Daabo* (*The Choice*, 1987), *Yaaba* (*Grandmother*, 1989), *Tilaï* (*The Law*, 1990), *Karim and Sala* (1991), *Samba Traoré* (1993), *Le Cri du cœur* (*The Heart's Cry*, 1994), *Kini and Adams* (1997), *La Colère des dieux* (*Anger of the Gods*, 2003), and *Kato Kato* (2006).

Film Yaaba film explores themes of tradition, superstition, empathy, and societal change. *Yaaba* earned several prestigious awards, including the FIPRESCI Prize at the 1989 Cannes Film Festival, shared with *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*, as well as the Prize of the Ecumenical Jury - Special Mention at Cannes (1989). It also won the Gold Award at the Tokyo International Film Festival (1989) and ranked fifth in *Cahiers du Cinéma*'s Top 10 Films of 1989.

Background *Yaaba* was filmed in a small village in Burkina Faso, capturing the authenticity of rural life. The cast consisted of local, non-professional actors whose natural performances added to the film's realism. Several later appeared in other works by Idrissa Ouédraogo. The dialogues are in Mooré, the language of the Mossi, the largest ethnic group in Burkina Faso.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Sana/Yaaba	An old woman accused of witchcraft and ostracized from her village community
Bila	A young boy who befriends Sana and calls her "Grandmother" (Yaaba).
Noaga	The village drunk who defends Sana against people's prejudice

SYNOPSIS

Yaaba (meaning "Grandmother" in Mooré) is an elderly woman who lives in isolation on the outskirts of a village in Burkina Faso. Because of her age and appearance, she is accused of witchcraft and cast out by the villagers, excluded from all communal life and support. Despite this, a young boy named Bila and his cousin Nopoko defy the village's taboos and befriend the old woman. While other children are taught to fear Yaaba, and even throw stones at her when they see her pass, Bila seeks her out for conversation, games, and laughter. Moved by her poverty, Bila secretly steals food, chickens, milk, from the village to bring to her, earning punishment from his parents. One day, after being harassed by other children for their friendship with Yaaba, Nopoko is injured by a rusty knife and contracts tetanus. While her parents mistake the illness for malaria, Yaaba recognizes the true danger. At Bila's urging, she sets out to find a friend who is a healer. The villagers, still hostile, reject her help and turn instead to a fraudulent charlatan. As Nopoko's condition worsens, they finally turn to Bila, who rushes to Yaaba. She gives him a remedy prepared by the healer, and Nopoko recovers. Yet even after saving the girl's life, Yaaba remains ostracized. One day, Bila finds her dead in her solitude. She is buried near her hut by the village drunk, the only adult, besides the two children, who had ever dared to defend her against the accusations of sorcery.

SCENES

The realm of childhood The film *Yaaba* opens with ten-year-old Bila and his cousin Nopoko joyfully chasing each other across the sundried terrain of a rural Burkina Faso village. Bare-chested and barefoot, their glistening skin hints at a recent dip in a nearby lake.



“The old woman is watching us.” Moments later, Nopoko kneels at her mother’s grave in the village cemetery. She pours water from a small jar onto the earth. Beside her, Bila stands silently. A few graves away, an old woman named Sana kneels by another tomb, her jar of water mirroring Nopoko’s quiet ritual. As she turns her gaze toward the children, Nopoko notices her, and visibly alarmed, whispers a warning to Bila: “The old woman is watching us.” The children quickly exit the cemetery.



Sana joins the game. Nopoko and Bila play hide-and-seek. While Nopoko counts with eyes closed, Bila darts off to find a hiding spot among the bushes. The old woman quietly watches their play unfold. As Nopoko begins her search, Sana discreetly gestures toward Bila’s hiding place. Nopoko follows the signal and finds her cousin. Catching sight of Sana’s smile, Bila suspects she helped Nopoko and accuses Nopoko of cheating..



False Accusations The children scatter along the dusty path and return to the village. There, flames have engulfed the communal granary, and the villagers scramble to put out the fire. Sana is accused of being the cause. Bila steps forward and declares that Sana was with him and Nopoko at the cemetery. His father reprimands him for having gone there.



Noaga is dismissed Noaga, the village drunk, adamantly claims that Sana is not responsible for the fire. He insists he saw a village child ignite the barn. Yet his account is swiftly dismissed as the incoherent ramblings of a drunkard. The village women echo the men’s accusations against Sana. They warn their children to stay away from her, calling her a witch to avoid.



Razougou comes to see Koudi A man from another village, Razougou is the lover of a woman named Koudi. He waits for her at the edge of the village. When she arrives, she urges him to leave her in peace, reminding him that she is now married. But Razougou insists that he loves her and tells her she deserves better than her drunken husband. He asks her to leave her marriage and come live with him.



“Here comes the witch!” The children, caught up in mimic Noaga’s drunken antics with exaggerated gestures and laughter. Their game takes a cruel turn when Sana appears. One boy shouts, “Here comes the witch!” and they begin



hurling stones. A sharp blow strikes Sana's face, causing the old woman to bleed.

Bila defends sana Bila and Nopoko lash out at the boys who threw stones at Sana. A fight breaks out. Then Tibo, Nopoko's father, arrives and separates the children, reprimanding everyone involved. The stone-throwing children's mother intervenes, furious that Tibo has scolded her children.



It is a family matter Koudi tries to rouse her husband Noaga, whispering that she wants to make love. But he's too drunk, lifeless on the bed. She sits into a corner of the bedroom, muttering, calling him impotent. Then, Koudi hears a familiar whistle. It's Razougou, her former lover. Koudi rises quietly and tiptoes out to meet him. Razougou urges her to leave the drunkard behind. But Koudi tells him not that it is not that simple, and that her marriage is a family matter.



Bilal steals a chicken Bila wakes up while his parents are still asleep. He washes his face, then pauses for a moment of reflection. He goes to the family chicken coop and steals a chicken. The clucking of the birds wakes his father, who catches him just as he's running off with the animal. Bila's father curses him and blames the child's mother for having given him a bad upbringing.



Bila calls Sana "Yaaba" Bila wanders into the area where the elderly woman lives, calling her "Yaaba". She appears. Bila offers her the chicken he stole from his family's coop. Yaaba asks gently how he acquired the bird. Bila insists that it is his, claiming his uncle gave it to him. Yaaba accepts the gift.



Yaaba is touched Bila begins sneaking away to visit Yaaba, bringing her small gifts like food and milk. She tells him stories, and he shares jokes with her. Sana confides in Bila that it is the first time that someone refers to her as Yaaba (Grandmother), and that it pleases her.



The women disapprove of Yaaba The women of the village see Bila playing with Yaaba, and they warn their children to stay away from "the witch". Bila's father punishes him for speaking with Sana. Koudi defends Yaaba against the other women, telling them that she did nothing wrong by befriending Bila. Bila's father punishes him for visiting Yaaba.



She must have her reasons Bila goes to milk a cow to bring Yaaba some fresh milk. While in the bushes, he unexpectedly comes across Koudi and her lover Razougou locked in an intimate embrace. Shocked, Bila later shares what he witnessed with Yaaba. Yaaba responds calmly, saying that if Koudi is cheating on her husband, she must have her reasons. Days later, Koudi packs her belongings and flees the village.



Nopoko is wounded The children of the village attack Bila and Nopoko for being friends with Yaaba. During the fight, Nopoko is wounded with a rusty knife. Yaaba picks up the knife and looks at it with apparent concern. Nopoko's wound seems minor at first, but it quickly becomes serious. As the infection spreads, and Nopoko grows weak and feverish, her parents mistake her symptoms for a bout of malaria and try treating her with traditional remedies. But Bila tells them that he has learned from Sana that Nopoko has contracted tetanus.



The charlatan The men of the village ignore Bila and instead turn to a charlatan. He demands offerings of a chicken and money. The charlatan claims that Nopoko's affliction is caused by an old woman from the village who has stolen her soul. He advises that the old woman be cast out of the village and that sacrifices be made. Noaga warns the villagers that this man is a charlatan and a swindler who seeks to deceive them. Bila's father tells Noaga to be quiet, claiming his words are those of a drunkard.



Bila seeks Yaaba's help Bila runs to Yaaba and pleads for her help. Yaaba boards a pirogue and crosses the river to seek help from a renowned healer of her friends. The healer selects plants and barks and prepares a remedy. He arrives in the village with Yaaba, but the villagers refuse his help because of his closeness to Yaaba. Bila return to Yaaba. She gives him the medicine prepared for Nopoko. After taking Yaaba's medicine, Nopoko begins to recover. Her fever breaks, and her strength returns slowly. Nevertheless, the villagers refuse to accept Yaaba in their midst. Yaaba returns to her hut on the outskirts of the village.



Yaaba's death Bila's mother sends food to Yaaba through him, but his father disapproves. He insists that Yaaba had nothing to do with Nopoko's recovery and that it is the gods who deserve thanks. One day, as Bila visits Yaaba. He finds her dead, in crouching position. Bila seeks the help of Noaga, who buries Yaaba near her hut.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

SANA Despite the villagers' rejection, Sana demonstrates resilience, turning solitude into a form of self-sufficiency. Her compassion remains evident in her care for Bila and Nopoko, offering warmth and aid even when she herself is excluded. Guided by wisdom, she responds to scorn with understanding rather than resentment.

Resilient Sana's displays great fortitude, which allows her to withstand the villagers' insults without losing her dignity. Though ostracized, she embraces solitude as a form of self-sufficiency. Her ability to thrive independently challenges their prejudice. In resisting the villagers' scorn, she turns exclusion into strength.

Compassionate Despite being cast out by the community, Sana does not let their rejection harden her heart. Instead, she extends kindness to those who need it most. Her bond with Bila and Nopoko reveals her innate generosity as she offers them warmth. When Nopoko falls ill, Sana steps in without hesitation, seeking the help of a renowned traditional healer, proving that her compassion transcends societal judgment. Her quiet acts of kindness challenge the villagers' prejudices.

Wise Sana's wisdom is rooted in a deep understanding of human nature that contrasts with the villagers' narrow-mindedness. While the villagers cast her out based on superstition and fear, Sana sees beyond their hostility, choosing compassion over resentment. Her bond with Bila reflects this. She makes herself available as a grandmother figure for Bila.

BILA Driven by curiosity, Bila questions the villagers' superstitions and forms a bond with Sana. His loyalty and courage protect both Sana and Nopoko from hostility. Empathetic, he meets exclusion with compassion.

Curious Bila's curiosity sets him apart from the villagers, as he refuses to be guided by their superstition and fear. His open-minded and inquisitive nature leads him to form a bond with Sana, recognizing her kindness rather than the stigma imposed on her. Through his willingness to seek understanding beyond societal norms, he challenges societal prejudices.

Loyal Bila's unwavering loyalty defines his relationships. He remains deeply devoted to both Sana and Nopoko despite external pressures. He stands by Sana even when the entire village rejects her, defending her against hostility and trusting her wisdom without hesitation. He is overwhelmed by Sadness when his cousin Nopoko falls ill, and he fights the adults' superstition and seeks help with Sana to heal his cousin.

Brave Bila's courage is evident in his firm loyalty to Sana, defying the villagers' scorn and superstitions with quiet determination. Unshaken by hostility, he confronts their prejudices, choosing trust over fear and compassion over conformity. His bravery is not merely symbolic. When faced with the village bullies, he refuses to back down, standing his ground and fighting to defend both himself and Nopoko.

Empathetic Bila's empathy shines through his care for Sana. He refuses to see her as an outcast and instead treats her with genuine warmth and respect. He seeks to bring joy into her life, offering her companionship and thoughtful gestures, such as providing her with milk and food to ensure her well-being. He actively defends Sana against the villagers' cruelty, standing as her protector and challenging the injustices she faces.

NOAGA Mocked and dismissed as the village drunk, Noaga lives in isolation. Yet he remains remarkably sensible, rejecting superstition and exposing deceit with clarity. His compassion endures despite exclusion, as he defends Sana and ensures she is buried with dignity.

Isolated Noaga's role as the village drunk subjects him to constant mockery, with his words dismissed as incoherent ramblings unworthy of consideration. This rejection, as Nopoko's father notes, deepens his isolation, reinforcing his marginalization and trapping him in a cycle of neglect and detachment. Stripped of any real social standing, he becomes a reflection of the village's unwillingness to engage with those who exist on its fringes.

Sensible Despite his condition as a drunk, Noaga exhibits a rare clarity of thought, often demonstrating more rationality than the villagers who scorn him. He refuses to succumb to their prejudices, rejecting the baseless accusations against Sana and resisting the superstition that dictates their fears. His sharp intuition allows him to see through deception, immediately exposing the fraud of the charlatan who masquerades as a healer.

Empathetic Noaga's empathy sets him apart as the first to defend Sana, refusing to let superstition dictate his judgment. When the granary burns, he boldly speaks the truth, revealing that a boy—not Sana—was responsible, challenging the villagers' eagerness to blame her. His compassion endures even after her death, as he takes it upon himself to dig her grave and bury her, ensuring she is laid to rest with dignity despite the village's rejection.

THEMES

SOCIETY

Patriarchy Patriarchy is a hierarchical social system in which men disproportionately occupy positions of power and authority across political, economic, and cultural spheres. It operates not only through formal institutions but also through deeply embedded norms and values that define masculinity as dominant and femininity as subordinate. Patriarchal structures legitimize male dominance by framing it as natural, moral, or traditional, thereby discouraging critical scrutiny. These systems often marginalize women and gender minorities, restrict their autonomy, and limit their access to resources and decision-making. Moreover, patriarchy perpetuates itself by socializing individuals to internalize gendered expectations, making inequality appear inevitable or even desirable. Its resilience lies in its ability to mask power imbalances as cultural continuity, often equating dissent with social disruption. As a result, patriarchy not only enforces exclusion and control but also resists transformative change under the guise of preserving social order.

Illustrative moments: *Yaaba* offers a pointed critique of patriarchal authority, revealing how male-dominated structures can enforce exclusion and injustice under the guise of tradition. In the village, elder male figures monopolize power, and their judgments, such as branding Sana (Yaaba) a witch, are accepted without question as communal truth. This patriarchal order not only marginalizes Sana but also dictates how others, particularly the younger generation, must relate to her; children are taught to fear and shun her, even going so far as to throw stones at her. When Sana offers a life-saving remedy for Nopoko, the village men reject her intervention, not out of reason, but because accepting her help would undermine their authority. Their response reveals a deeper investment in preserving male dominance than in seeking truth or protecting life. Only Bila, a child, and the village-drunk dare to defend Sana, highlighting how patriarchal power suppresses both the vulnerable and those with the moral clarity to challenge it.



Tradition Ouedraogo explores the tension between tradition and modernity in *Yaaba*, depicting how tradition can be both a source of wisdom and a vehicle for prejudice, ultimately questioning its place in a changing society. Tradition serves as the foundation of cultural identity, shaping values, customs, and social structures within a community. It offers continuity and stability, preserving practices passed down through generations. Yet, tradition is not static. It evolves, adapts, and sometimes faces resistance when its norms clash with changing perspectives. While it fosters unity, it can also impose rigid expectations, particularly in areas such as marriage, medicine, and social hierarchy. In some cases, tradition protects collective wisdom; in others, it reinforces exclusionary beliefs. The challenge lies in balancing the preservation of cultural heritage with the necessity for growth and progress. *Yaaba* suggests that true evolution does not always require rejecting tradition but rather integrating it into modern contexts.

Illustrative moment: *Yaaba* showcases several traditions rooted in Burkinabé village life, particularly those related to oral storytelling, communal living, and respect for elders. Koudi's arranged marriage to Noaga reflects the lack of choice women have in matters of love. The young woman states that her marriage is a family decision she cannot challenge. Sana's treatment of Nopoko using local plants highlights the Mossi people's knowledge of traditional medicine. However, the way Sana is treated, the insults directed at her and the violence of children throwing stones at her due to suspicions of witchcraft tied to her old age, reveals the extent of superstition that influences village life. Yet, Bila's defiance, as he befriends Sana and gives her hope, demonstrates that the Mossi people also look toward modernity while drawing strength from their age-old traditions.



Objectification Objectification reduces individuals to instruments of societal, cultural, or familial expectations, stripping them of autonomy and individuality. In traditional settings, this manifests in the treatment of marginalized groups, particularly the elderly and women, whose identities are shaped by deeply ingrained prejudices and rigid customs rather than their intrinsic worth. Ageism plays a significant role in this process, as older individuals are often dismissed despite being carriers of wisdom and cultural heritage. In oral traditions, elders serve as repositories of knowledge, yet they frequently face exclusion when their contributions go unrecognized. Similarly, patriarchal systems dictate women's fates, treating them as commodities rather than individuals with desires and rights. Whether through forced marriage or social ostracization, dehumanization persists, erasing personhood in favor of tradition. In *Yaaba*, Ouedraogo denounces objectification through the treatment of Sana, who is cast aside despite her wisdom, and Koudi, whose personal desires are sacrificed in a familial transaction. Their experiences underscore how societal norms perpetuate exclusion, reducing individuals to mere instruments rather than recognizing them as autonomous beings.

Illustrative moments: Worn down by time and age, Sana is unfairly accused of being a witch by the villagers. Despite her wisdom and the knowledge she has accumulated over the years, Sana is cast aside and marginalized. Women recoil at the sight of her, and parents forbid their children from interacting with her. When the village children encounter Sana, they throw stones at her. Sana is looked upon as an outcast and forced to live on the outskirts of the village, reinforcing her exclusion. In the eyes of the villagers, Sana is no longer human but a feared and despised figure, a monster. However, this dehumanization and objectification extends beyond Sana. Due to a familial transaction, Koudi, who is in love with Razougou, is forcibly married to Noaga, the drunkard. Through this familial exchange that passes her to another person without her consent, Koudi is stripped of individual voice, treated not as an individual with desires and autonomy but as an object of trade.



Appearance Appearance often dictates how individuals are perceived and treated within a society, shaping assumptions about character, worth, and belonging. Physical attributes such as age, gender, and visible differences can become markers for inclusion or exclusion, reinforcing biases that define who is accepted and who is marginalized. Societies frequently equate youth with vitality and competence, while aging is associated with weakness or irrelevance, leading to the rejection of those whose appearances deviate from idealized norms. Similarly, unconventional looks, whether due to disability, poverty, or cultural expression, can fuel discrimination, with individuals being judged not for their wisdom or contributions but for superficial traits. The power of perception often overrides reality, making those who look different vulnerable to mistreatment, regardless of their true value or capabilities. Ouedraogo confronts this issue in *Yaaba* by portraying Sana's unjust exclusion, revealing how superficial judgments based on appearance lead to discrimination and isolation, even when an individual possesses wisdom and cultural significance.

Illustrative moment: An African proverb states, "When an old person dies, a library burns," emphasizing the invaluable role of elders in African oral societies. This wisdom is contradicted by the villagers' treatment of Sana in *Yaaba*. Due to her advanced age and the physical toll of time on her body, Sana is unfairly labeled a witch or a monster. Women warn their children to avoid her, and when a child accidentally starts a fire, she is blamed without evidence, her innocence disregarded even when a witness speaks in her defense. Sana is thus stigmatized because of her old age and her worn out appearance. Even Sana's extraordinary deeds do not earn her the benefit of the doubt. She uses her wisdom to heal Nopoko when the young girl falls gravely ill. Despite that, the villagers, blinded by age-based prejudice, continue to reject her, even though she is one of those who safeguard the community's cultural heritage and ancestral wisdom.



Betrayal Betrayal is deeply woven into the fabric of human relationships and societal structures, occurring when individuals are stripped of agency, abandoned, or coerced into circumstances beyond their control in communities that were based on obligation to protect their members. Betrayal often stems from entrenched systems that prioritize tradition, authority, or collective interests over personal autonomy. Betrayal can take the form of social exclusion, where a community ostracizes one of its own, denying them dignity and recognition. It can also be imposed through forced relationships, where individuals are deprived of the right to make choices about their own lives. In many cases, betrayal is a manifestation of deeper societal injustices, reinforcing power imbalances and perpetuating discrimination. Yet, betrayal does not always result in passive acceptance. Those who suffer from it often find ways to resist, reclaiming their power through defiance or rebellion. Whether breaking away from societal norms, rejecting imposed roles, or violating expectations, acts of resistance can themselves be seen as a form of betrayal, one that challenges established rules and asserts autonomy. This tension is central to *Yaaba*, where characters struggle against rejection and coerced obligations, confronting the systems that have wronged them. Their defiance highlights how betrayal, while painful, can also be a catalyst for change and self-determination.

Illustrative moments: Sana, the elderly woman, is unjustly labeled a witch and cast out from the village, despite her wisdom and kindness. She is forced into isolation, enduring insults and acts of violence from both children, who throw stones at her, and adults, who throw insults at her. Sana is the subject of collective rejection, a profound societal betrayal coming from a society that promises protection to all its members and yet disregards the cultural knowledge that Sana embodies on account of her age. In response to this injustice, Bila defies the village's rules in his own act of rebellion. He steals chicken and milk for Sana, disobeys his parents, and forms a deep friendship with the old woman, even calling her "Yaaba" (Grandmother). Bila's gesture shocks his family and the rest of the villagers, who turn against him, too. His playmates fight him, and the grownups curse him. Meanwhile, Koudi, who is forcibly married to the village drunkard, sees her arranged marriage as a betrayal that strips her of the right to choose her own path. In an act of defiance, she transgresses the village's strict laws against adultery. She has an affair with her lover in the bush, enacting her own form of betrayal against the collective traditions that have wronged her.



Change: tradition vs modernity Change is an inevitable force that shapes societies, cultures, and individual lives. It is often driven by the pursuit of progress, modernization, and adaptation to new realities. While change allows communities to evolve and innovate, it can also create tension between old and new, tradition and modernity. As societies seek advancement, they sometimes discard the past, failing to recognize its continued relevance. Traditions, deeply rooted in collective memory, provide stability, wisdom, and a sense of identity. However, in many cases, they are rejected in favor of new ways of thinking and living. The challenge lies in finding balance, that is, honoring the past while embracing the future. True progress does not always require abandoning tradition; instead, it can be strengthened by integrating the wisdom of the past into evolving societal structures. In *Yaaba*, Idrissa Ouedraogo explores the tension between tradition and modernity through the characters of Sana and Bila, illustrating how progress can be enriched by preserving cultural heritage rather than rejecting it.

Illustrative moments: Sana is old, and she likes to play with Bila and Nopoko, the children that are often ordered around or scolded by their parents. Thus, Sana embodies ancient wisdom and care. When Nopoko falls gravely ill, it is Sana's understanding of the symptoms of tetanus and her knowledge of traditional medicine and her connection to a renowned healer that restore her health. Yet, this does not prevent the villagers from continuing to treat Sana as a monster, banishing her from their midst. Sana thus represents a fading tradition, rejected by a village eager to embrace modernity. However, it is Bila, a much younger character, who highlights the idea that modernity thrives best when rooted in tradition. Bila forms a friendship with the elderly woman, defying societal norms. Through his actions, Bila ensures Sana's survival. Bila symbolically preserves tradition by bringing Sana joy, calling her "Grandmother" to affirm her significance, and providing her with stolen food from the village, including chicken and milk to

guarantee her sustenance. While the village moves forward by casting aside tradition, Bila suggests that true progress must be achieved in harmony with the past, by reconciling generational differences.

Prejudice Prejudice distorts perception, allowing assumptions and fear to override reason. It arises when individuals are judged not by their actions or character but by societal labels, leaving them unheard and undervalued. Those who deviate from norms, whether due to age, status, or personal history, are often subjected to unfair treatment, their voices dismissed before they can prove their worth. Prejudice is reinforced by collective thinking, where communities cling to familiar narratives rather than confronting uncomfortable truths. Even when evidence contradicts their biases, people are reluctant to reconsider, allowing misconceptions to persist. This dynamic plays out in *Yaaba*, where Noaga, despite his keen observations, is consistently overlooked due to his reputation as a drunk, while Sana is cast as a scapegoat based solely on superstition. Their struggles expose the danger of blind conformity and the cost of ignoring those who challenge popular narratives.

Illustrative moment: A fire devastates the village's granary, and Sana is immediately blamed, accused of having summoned disaster with her supposed evil powers. Noaga, the village drunk, disputes this explanation, swearing he saw a boy (Bilgo's son) start the fire. Yet, his testimony is dismissed, mocked because of his alcoholism. Later, when Nopoko falls ill with tetanus, a stranger claims he can cure her in exchange for money and chicken. Again, Noaga warns the villagers that the man is a fraud, and again, Noaga is ignored. His warning proves correct: the charlatan deceives the villagers while Nopoko's condition worsens. When Sana returns with a renowned healer, determined to save the girl, it is Noaga who, despite the community's distrust, convinces the villagers to accept the healer's help. Time and again, Noaga, the outcast, the village drunk, sees the truth more clearly than those who pride themselves on reason, yet he must fight against collective prejudice to make himself heard. His persistent wisdom amid rejection exposes the irony of a society that blindly follows convention while dismissing those who challenge it.



Empathy Empathy is a transformative force that dismantles prejudice, revealing the humanity beneath social constructs. It requires individuals to move beyond familiar perspectives, stepping outside their comfort zones to truly engage with the experiences of others. This process is often unsettling, as it challenges long-held biases and compels people to reconsider assumptions ingrained by tradition and societal expectations. Yet, empathy is essential to fostering genuine connection. Empathy is not passive understanding but active commitment to justice, kindness, and inclusion. It defies hierarchy, proving that moral clarity is not exclusive to those in power but can emerge from the marginalized and overlooked. *Yaaba* illustrates this idea through characters like Sana, Bila and Noaga, whose compassion and insight counter the village's deeply rooted prejudices. Their actions demonstrate that empathy is often found in the most unexpected places, challenging the notion that wisdom must be tied to authority or social acceptance.

Illustrative moments: While the villagers ostracize Sana, accusing her of witchcraft, Bila sees past their prejudice and treats her with kindness. He befriends her, brings her food, and affectionately calls her "Grandmother," recognizing her humanity where others see only superstition. Noaga, the village drunk, also displays unexpected wisdom and empathy. When a fire devastates the granary, the villagers blame Sana, but Noaga insists he saw a boy start the fire, defending her despite being ridiculed. Later, when Nopoko falls ill, Sana selflessly uses her knowledge of medicinal plants to heal the child, showing compassion even toward those who have wronged her. Meanwhile, Noaga warns the villagers about a deceitful charlatan, once again disregarded until his words prove true. In *Yaaba*, empathy and compassion emerge not from the powerful or respected, but from those society has cast aside.



Intergenerational solidarity Intergenerational solidarity refers to the mutual support, understanding, and cooperation between individuals of different age groups, particularly the young and the elderly. In many societies, this form of solidarity plays a crucial role in preserving cultural memory, transmitting values, and fostering social cohesion. It challenges the age-based hierarchies and stereotypes that often marginalize both the very young and the very old, instead emphasizing reciprocity, empathy, and shared humanity. In contexts where modernity or tradition fractures these bonds, through generational mistrust, neglect of the elderly, or the silencing of youth, intergenerational relationships can become sites of resistance and renewal. These connections offer alternative models of community, grounded not in conformity but in care and recognition. An example of this appears in *Yaaba*, where young Bila and the elderly Sana forge a bond that transcends the village's rigid social norms.

Illustrative moment: The bond between Bila and the elderly woman Yaaba defies the rigid boundaries imposed by the village, where age, appearance, and superstition dictate one's place in the social order. While the adults view Yaaba as a dangerous outcast and instruct their children to avoid her, Bila sees her humanity. His instinctive empathy leads him to offer her companionship, food, and protection, acts that restore a sense of dignity to a woman stripped of it by her community. In return, Yaaba offers Bila emotional warmth, storytelling, and ultimately, life-saving wisdom. Their relationship is not transactional but rooted in mutual recognition and care. In a society that isolates the elderly and dismisses the moral importance of children, their bond becomes a radical gesture, one that challenges the village's values and affirms the transformative power of cross-generational connection.



Innocence and Moral Clarity In *Yaaba*, innocence is not portrayed as naïveté but as a form of moral clarity that cuts through the fog of social prejudice. Bila, the young boy at the heart of the story, sees the elderly outcast Yaaba not through the lens of fear and superstition, but with unfiltered empathy. While the adults in the village teach their children to fear her—labeling her a witch and treating her with cruelty—Bila instinctively recognizes her humanity. His actions, from stealing food to care for her to seeking her help when Nopoko falls ill, are guided not by social norms but by a deep sense of compassion. In this way, Bila becomes the film's quiet moral compass, revealing how children, unburdened by the weight of inherited prejudice, can act with greater ethical clarity than their elders. Through him, Ouédraogo suggests that true morality is not learned through tradition, but through the courage to see others as they are.

Illustrative moments: Bila's relationship with Yaaba is shaped by an unfiltered gaze that resists the stereotypes imposed by his community. While the villagers see Yaaba as a witch, defined by age, isolation, and superstition, Bila sees her simply as a person. His gaze is not shaped by fear or inherited prejudice, but by curiosity, empathy, and a child's instinctive sense of justice. This moral clarity is expressed through his concrete actions: he approaches Yaaba when others avoid her, engages her in conversation and play, and even steals food to ease her suffering. When Nopoko falls ill, Bila does not hesitate to seek Yaaba's help, trusting her wisdom over the authority of adults. These acts are not grand gestures but quiet affirmations of dignity and care. Through Bila, *Yaaba* suggests that moral insight often comes not from tradition or authority, but from the courage to see others without the filter of fear.



Social death Social death refers to the condition whereby individuals are systematically excluded from the social and symbolic structures that affirm personhood, identity, and belonging. Originating in sociological and anthropological discourse, the term describes how certain people are rendered invisible or treated as non-persons within their communities. Unlike physical death, social death involves the loss of social recognition and participation, often resulting from stigma, marginalization, or accusations of deviance. It is commonly imposed on those perceived as threats to social cohesion, such as, the elderly, the disabled, or individuals accused of violating cultural norms. Though not always irreversible, social death has lasting consequences, severing individuals from the relationships and communal ties that sustain human dignity. *Yaaba* offers a powerful illustration of social death and its enduring impact on the individual.

Illustrative moment: In *Yaaba*, the theme of social death is poignantly embodied in the character of Sana, an elderly woman cast out by her village under accusations of witchcraft. Her identity, dignity, and sense of belonging are systematically erased. Isolated on the margins of the community, Sana becomes a symbolic vessel for the villagers' fears and superstitions. She is blamed for every misfortune, including the destruction of the community's granary by fire, and is both scapegoated and silenced. Yet through the innocent defiance of Bila, who befriends her and affectionately calls her "Yaaba" (grandmother), Sana briefly regains recognition and emotional connection. The boy's compassion challenges the village's collective judgment and restores a measure of her humanity. Nevertheless, Sana is never fully reintegrated into the community and remains in isolation until her death. The film's poignant conclusion underscores the enduring grip of social death: despite Bila's empathy, the community refuses to welcome her back.



Education (early) In many traditional contexts, early childhood education, moral, social, and emotional, is seen as the mother's domain. During these formative years, a child is shaped through maternal influence, and regardless of biological sex, is often perceived as a "feminine being," still enveloped in the social identity of the mother. Gender roles only become distinctly marked later, often during initiation rites or communal recognition of adulthood. Until then, any moral misstep or behavioral failing is implicitly traced back to maternal nurturing, or its lack. The child remains, symbolically, an extension of the mother, and so praise or blame follows that line. This deeply rooted perception finds illustrative expression in moments of crisis, such as when, at dawn, Bila quietly slips out while his parents still sleep and steals a chicken.

Illustrative moment: At dawn, Bila quietly slips out while his parents still sleep. After a brief pause to wash his face, he heads to the chicken coop and snatches a hen. The birds' noisy protest disrupts the calm, waking his father, who catches Bila just as he attempts to flee. The man's rage is raw: He scold his son for stealing, he curses him, pouring out his fury in a torrent of reproach. His disappointment runs deeper than the act itself; he sees it as a sign of failed parenting. Turning his anger toward Bila's mother, he accuses her of having instilled no morals or discipline, laying blame on her shoulders for what he perceives as the boy's disgraceful behavior.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does the film portray the tension between tradition and individual moral judgment, particularly through Bila's relationship with Sana?
2. How does the character of Noaga challenge assumptions about wisdom and social status?
3. How does the film use the perspective of children to critique adult behavior and social norms?
4. In what ways does Sana embody resilience, and how does her response to ostracism redefine strength?

5. How do acts of compassion in the film serve as quiet forms of resistance against communal cruelty?
6. What does Sana's death symbolize? Elaborate your answer.