

FILM REVIEW

Edkins Teboho, director. *Days of Cannibalism: Of Pioneers, Cows and Capital*. 2020. 78 minutes. Sesotho, Fujianese, Mandarin, English, with English and French subtitles. China and Lesotho. Produced by KinoElektron, Day Zero Films, Kepler Film.

“Africa is too far,” an African importer tells his Chinese suppliers, to justify his request to check his sunglasses order again. “Sometimes you guys pack something that I didn’t need!” We are in Guangzhou, somewhere in the Xiaobei district, where thousands of traders from Africa, the Middle East, and South America converge to purchase the low-end commodities that are produced by the countless factories scattered around the Pearl River Delta. The opening of the documentary *Days of Cannibalism* bears a striking resemblance to another recent documentary on China-Africa relations “from below,” Christiane Badgley’s *Guangzhou Dream Factory* (2017). But if the two films share the same critical look toward global millennial capitalism, the parallels end there. After the short Cantonese prologue, Edkins Teboho’s film plunges us into the cold and arid mountainous setting of Lesotho, a small kingdom embedded in the belly of South Africa. Here too, China is very far away, embodied by a few migrants who have come to make their fortune in the retail or wholesale trade, in the restaurant business, or in the mining sector.

Filed in Cinemascope like a western, *Days of Cannibalism* questions the Chinese presence in Africa in an original and *sui generis* way. While it takes from the western genre the harsh and austere settings, the presence of pioneers in search of a better life, cattle rustling, strict and expeditious justice, and a scene of rare violence (which we will not reveal), the film is not focused on the clash between two communities. Thanks to his knowledge of Lesotho, where he grew up, and his privileged relationship with some Chinese families living in Thaba-Tseka, the town where the story takes place, Teboho was able to render with finesse the ambivalence of the relationship between Chinese migrants and indigenous Basotho.

The main focus of the film is the transformation of a pastoral society by the forces of economic globalization. Traditionally considered by the Basotho as the “wet-nosed god,” the cow is now becoming a simple commodity, which can be sold... or stolen. Some of the local farmers have become

employees of Chinese merchants who buy cattle at high prices. They deplore the fact that their employers know nothing about cows except for their economic value.

Perhaps unknowingly, Teboho filmed his documentary in the same community studied by James Ferguson in the early 1980s. In his famous and controversial book, *The Anti-Politics Machine: Development, Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho* (The University of Minnesota Press, 1994), the American anthropologist documented the failure of the Thaba-Tseka project, a World Bank program to modernize livestock farming in Basotho country. He devoted a central chapter to the same “bovine mystique,” that is, the strong cultural attachment to the herd, that informs Teboho’s film. But Ferguson showed that there was nothing traditional about these practices. Rather, they were the result of the migration of Basotho men to the mining areas of South Africa. Herd hoarding, far from being the classic example of contemplative herding popularized by anthropological literature, has long been a means of supporting the extended family back in Lesotho and of securing one’s own retirement at the same time. Teboho thus captures longstanding social and economic changes; the economy of Thaba-Tseka has long been more dependent on wage labor in South African mines and factories than on agriculture and livestock. Similarly, the Chinese presence in Lesotho is not recent, but dates to the 1960s. It has spread in successive waves and has already provoked aggressive reactions among the Basotho.

Edkins Teboho’s “directed reality” ultimately shows two communities mired in the same crisis, victims of the same forces of global capitalism. It is true that the inhabitants of Thaba-Tseka and their Chinese hosts communicate with difficulty. This leads to misunderstandings and fears. Curious, the customers of a small shop run by a Chinese man ask him where Chinatown is. The man explains that he is from Fujian. In a local bar, an accordionist sings a song with lyrics that say, “The Chinese are abusing us.” This echoes a conversation between two Chinese entrepreneurs, who lament that in Lesotho “everybody steals.”

Teboho films these migrants far from their country with empathy and respect. They live a reclusive life, with no distractions except for sad karaoke nights and the consolation that in Africa one lives well because there is nowhere to spend the money one earns there.

In this context of apparent incommunicability, the announcer of a local radio station plays the role of cultural broker, encouraging the natives and the Chinese to learn from each other: the Chinese to look after the cows, the Basotho to trade and make money. The filmmaker shows that it is possible to describe Sino-African interactions in a more nuanced and sensitive way, without the mediation of a Western gaze and, above all, without falling into clichés about Chinese predatory neocolonialism. In the final scene of this beautiful, strange, and unclassifiable film, emaciated

cows munch on the carcasses of their fellow creatures. In the final analysis, who are the cannibals?

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