

ARC EN CIEL/RAINBOW PROJECT

Article by Lise Blom, photo Fatoumata Diabatè

Malian Children Change Their Future

Strong feelings, humour and a sense of justice prevail when children perform on stage

By Lise Blom, photo Fatoumata Diabatè

The atmosphere is tense at the finale as thousands of children are waiting for the results from the five judges. Which school will win the contest about the best tale, and who will be elected best actor, best dancer and best singer?



Sikasso, southern Mali, January 2011. This is the second year that Moussa Diallo has taken the initiative for the project Arc en Ciel. This year 12 schools are competing about telling the best tale through acting, singing, music, set design and dance. But the event is something beyond an ordinary school comedy; it is about expressing yourself. The pupils, aided by their teachers, have strived to find the means to use a tale to send a message and express their views on a number of issues in today's society. And you can tell from the audience's reaction that they are doing pretty well.

The audience boos in protest when the greedy madam bosses the little girl in her worn clothes around. Cook food! Go and get food! Wash up! The orphan girl is struggling to live up to the woman's demands. And she is given nothing but an empty casserole after the madam and her spoiled daughter have finished eating. Later on in the play, the audience cheers when the girl exposes the madam's greediness in a very imaginative way.



Modern Cinderella

The Cinderella tale about the orphan girl and the family that exploits her is a well known theme in fairy tales all over the world. This is also a popular theme in Mali, where no fewer than three schools have their own way of telling the tale. In Mali the tale is not just about a grim fate from a distant past, but a sad and true story about orphans in poor families. So it is not surprising that African children can come up with practical ideas about how the girl can change her future herself instead of being saved by a prince on a white horse.



Another story has a lot to say about life today and shows how important it is to collaborate in a democracy. It is an animal fable portraying the strong lion and the popular monkey, that both want

to be king. Fortunately, they reach an agreement, which is the opposite of what is happening in Mali's neighbouring country the Ivory Coast less than 100 kilometres from Sikasso. At this point in time two rival candidates for the presidency insist on having won an election.

A third school focuses on good and evil. A disabled boy is abandoned by his sister, who was supposed to look after him. The boy then sells his soul to the devil to get rid of his disability and become rich. In a humorous story the village elders deny the girls in the village the chance to go to school. But when a girl manages to go to school anyway and sends money back home, they change their attitude.

The winner of Arc en Ciel 2011 is a play that contains many ideas, one of which is the message that you should not lose hope. A kingdom is constantly plagued by war, and the women are ordered to give birth to sons only for them to become warriors in the king's army. A woman gives birth to a daughter and hides her in a hut deep in the forest until one day her daughter is abducted. Years have passed, and the woman has gone mad because of the loss of her daughter. But when the mother is taken to a king in a distant kingdom, the young queen turns out to be the abducted daughter.



No finger wagging

Tales like these give children a voice in a traditional yet rapidly developing African society. Everything from gender roles through to the environment, health and human rights is at play, and these are not just theoretical concepts; children are confronted with these issues every day.

The tales' themes are well known in Mali, but this is the first time that the audience sees things from the point of view of the children. Usually, however, such problems are discussed by adults. The children's versions contain no finger wagging. The tales are told by the help of humour and tragedy, and the children act so convincingly, that the audience laughs one minute and sheds a tear the next.

The title of the contest is 'Let pupils express themselves through tales.' The telling of tales is important in Malian culture, but this tradition is in danger of being extinct. Children are increasingly entertained by TV and computer games, and their role models are sports and TV stars. The result is that children are finding it difficult to express themselves and their social standing is not improved because they can tell stories.



Facts:

This is how the contest works

Arc en Ciel (The Rainbow Project) is for pupils in the third to the sixth grade from public and private schools. 12 schools from the Sikasso area in southern Mali took part in 2011 and 25 schools from Bamako, Koulikoro, Kati and Segou took part in 2010.

Before entering the contest, pupils and teachers were coached by Makan Kamara. He is a dramaturgist and coordinates the project. He taught pupils and teachers how to communicate a story from the stage in a way for it to come across clearly and captivate the audience.

The requirements of the contest are:

The story must be a new one and must have been written for the contest

It must have a message

The pupils must tell the story by the help of acting, singing, playing music, dancing and their own choreography

The local teacher centres (Centre d'animation pédagogique) have selected the schools and appointed the judges. Arc en Ciel is supported by the Danish Centre for Culture and Development. Mali's Ministry of Education has donated prizes and gifts for the schools in the shape of books and booklets.

Arc en Ciel means 'rainbow' in French, which is the official language in Mali. In the most common language in Mali, Bambara, a rainbow is called 'the sword of the sky.'

Facts:

Arc en Ciel in the future

Moussa Diallo's ambition is for Arc en Ciel to take place all over Mali. The first step was to found the association Arc en Ciel. The association will collaborate with the Ministry of Education and run the project with regional and local authorities. Coordinator Makan Kamara and Moussa Diallo plan to organise conferences, workshops and capacity building over the coming year to provide inspiration for and advance the teaching methods of Arc en Ciel. Their material will inspire people to make a difference.



The entire project will be documented in a film by the director Helle Toft Jensen, a photo exhibition by the photographer Fatoumata Diabaté, and a report containing practical experience and recommendations. Currently, those responsible for the project are applying for funds to finish the film, which will show how people can make use of the idea behind Arc en Ciel and how they can use the concept.

This is why Moussa Diallo has involved himself in schools:



Creativity and good contact with adults enhances children's confidence

Moussa Diallo has taken the initiative for Arc en Ciel because he loves to work with children and

because he would like to contribute to children's development. For the past eight years, he has performed school concerts for thousands of children in Scandinavia. He travels to Mali every year and is aware of how many children are leading a tough life.

"The conditions under which children live concern me deeply. They are not provided with the necessary conditions to be able to develop and stay in school. The reality for many children is that they come from very poor backgrounds and often have to walk miles to get to school. At the same time, many of them have to help their families. Classes are overcrowded, which makes learning difficult and very often children have no educational support at home, as many parents are illiterate. This contributes to a high number of poor attendance and drop outs," says Moussa Diallo.

"During the course of the project many teachers and school leaders expressed their sentiments that schools need better teaching tools for children to be able to develop. The teaching must be changed and become less rigid; you can't simply force knowledge into pupils' heads. The teachers were as enthusiastic as the children, to experience this artistic and cultural process. We had very positive reports from some schools that the project boosted the morale and attendance of the pupils and all the schools express their hopes for more activities of this kind," Moussa Diallo explains.

The idea behind the project is more than simply having a contest and enjoying some entertainment. Arc en Ciel helps create an environment where children may learn in a creative way, which will help them become better pupils. The project is also an opportunity for children to express themselves and improve their self confidence. In the long run, schools would also be able to develop and support young talent.



"Adults see children in a different way when they work together with them in this way and see their potential when they watch them perform. The messages the children convey through these performances are eye opening and can help parents and other adults become more conscious of the issues that concern them," observes Moussa Diallo and mentions issues, such as the environment and child labour as examples of matters children in Mali are concerned about.

Moussa Diallo believes the schools in Mali and many countries around the world conform to old-fashioned rules and norms and that this is part of the reason why so many children and teenagers may become rootless and violent. By the help of Arc en Ciel, his intention is to change schools into places where there is positive contact between adults and children and where there is a focus on good values.

"My work with Arc en Ciel confirms this idea. When I talk to teachers, they agree that there is a lack of tools and courses to train teachers in Creative Arts, which in turn would enable them to organize these kinds of activities. They strongly believe that it would motivate the children to attend school regularly and at the same time would help them develop more harmoniously. Many of them indirectly criticise the old-fashioned school system, but the conditions in which they work mean that they cannot do things in a different way," says Moussa Diallo.



This is why part of the effort is about convincing politicians to improve the teaching environment in the schools in Mali through creative cultural projects like Arc en Ciel. In 2010 Moussa Diallo was received by the President of Mali Mr. Amadou Toumani Touré who was very pleased to hear about the project. In 2011 Diallo together with Secretary of Arc en Ciel, Makan Kamara met with the Minister of Education Salikou Sanogo who showed great interest in the project and supported the second edition by

donating over 250 dictionaries and other books to the schools involved.

“This is a pilot project, and, hopefully, it will spread to other countries. It’s important to provide thorough documentation and develop good tools, because the same problems exist in other parts of the world and therefore we believe it is essential to make this documentary film,” Moussa Diallo adds

.Lise Blom is a freelance journalist and Mali travel guide. She has followed how Arc en Ciel worked in 2010 and 2011 and has been a regular visitor to Mali since 1991.