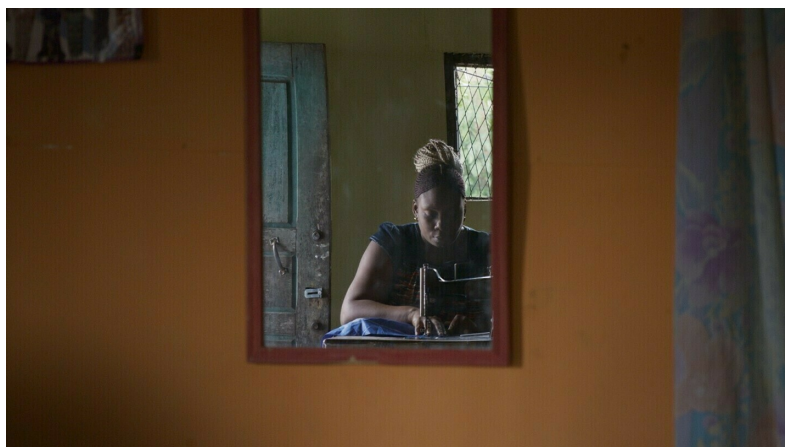


## An Epiphany of the Real: Rosine Mbakam's *Mambar Pierrette* (2023). 61th New York Film Festival

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After its inclusion in the Filmmakers Fortnight's selection at the 2023 Cannes Film Festival, Rosine Mbakam's first fictional work of 93 minutes, *Mambar Pierrette*, is one of the most refreshing revelations from the latest New York Film Festival. During a question-and-answer-session at the Film Society of Lincoln Center, Mbakam explained that her turn from documentary to fiction is meant to increase the narrative impact of her cinema. The result is nothing preachy, but a quietly political analysis of African life filtered through the vicissitudes of a seamstress, *Mambar Pierrette*. Immediately picked up by Icarus Films for distribution, Mbakam's first fiction is aesthetically impressive, since she has a special photographic eye which does not aestheticize poverty, but values color, internal framings, and the blurring of backgrounds to increase intimacy with characters.

Played by Pierrette Aboheu Njeuthat, Rosine's cousin and a non-professional performer, like most of her casting based on friends and relatives, the fictional Pierrette radiates pride and talent in her profession of *couturier*. The only professional performer in the whole film is Calvin Zeguou in the role of a handicapped

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clown and a former classical dancer. This kind of insider's casting makes plausible how the dialogue's intimate conversations are based on people who know each other very well.

In keeping with the authenticity and banality of daily life, the verbal exchanges between the seamstress and her friends/clients are comparable to the script of a telenovela with the customary personal and financial topics. This comparison with a popular narrative mode conveniently fits the middle-class home of one of Pierrette's clients. There the partial framing of a French TV series with white actors looks all the more ironic because the very same stories of heart-break and financial ruin, are discussed in Pierrette's shop. As far as this filmmaker's political consciousness, Mbakam's references to government corruption bear witness to the failure of decolonization. This is why a white female mannequin stands right outside the threshold of Pierrette's workshop. As the lingering presence of a colonial past, the mannequin helps Mbakam to think through the potential model of spectatorship posited by her fiction.

Considered to be the best female filmmaker of her generation, between 2003 and 2007, Mbakam was the director of programs at the Spectrum TV private Camerounian channel. Her training in media, however, started out at an Italian non-governmental organization, Centro Orientamento Educativo, between 2000-2004, in Yaounde, Cameroun's political capital. Later on, she specialized in film-making at the Institut Supérieur des Arts (INSAS) in Brussel. The credits of *Mambar Pierrette* include a reference to Tandor, an organization set up by Mbakam with other filmmakers as a sort of "travelling cinema" showing their films across Cameroun. This solution is a very common form of African distribution. Electricity is not always available or extremely expensive. Thus the electric generators supplied by the "travelling cinema" are crucial in villages without a movie theatre.

After two well-received documentaries, *The Two Faces of a Bamileke Woman* (2018) dealing with her mother under French colonialism, and *Chez Jolie Coiffure* (2018) about a hair salon in Matonge, the Congolese district of Brussels, with *Mambar Pierrette*, Mbakam has consolidated her artistic reputation for community portraits centered on struggling African women.

In *The Two Faces of Bamileke Woman*, mother and daughter share insights about husbands, children, pregnancy, and personal happiness. By contrast, in *Chez Jolie Coiffure*, gossip, love stories, and painful tales of immigration dominate the *mise-en-scene*. In these two documentaries, the viewer can sense that Mbakam thinks of the cinema as a dot of light pointing out the darkness we live in. This dot of light is the moving camera which takes her back to her own African past and culture left behind for a professional and family life in Europe. Mbakam's metaphorical view of cinema as a dot of light in the landscape or as a flash-light probing the night comes from her opening sequence for *The Two Faces of a Bamileke Woman*.

There the opening travelling shot coincides with Mbakam's voice-over narration about her return to Cameroun. She goes back home to introduce her first child born in Europe to her widowed mother in the village. One may object to this metaphorical definition of the cinema, for it seems to validate the nineteenth-century idea of Africa as a continent of darkness. On the contrary, here, Africa is not the equivalent of darkness. Rather Africa, just like any reality in general, is unknowable and, as such, it can be narrated only through ever-changing subjective perceptions. Mbakam's dot of light is not only a lamp illuminating a shack-like shop along a dirt-road, but also her filming camera probing the darkness of the world she thought she knew and now she has become ready to rediscover from a different perspective.

Whereas in her documentaries the more experienced, but also expatriate filmmaker interviews her relatives and friends left behind back at home, in *Mambar Pierrette*, the seamstress shares conversations with people who have known each other all their lives. Her shop becomes a porous space where the Western division of a private and a public sphere makes no sense. After all Pierrette's female clients are her friends, neighbors and relatives. A few stand out: the owner of a sweet-shop; a generous antie who helps her nephews; an ailing mother with old-fashioned values; a woman who prefers to return to Cameroun instead of working as a prostitute in Belgium; a female client in need of a mourning dress for a village funeral; a girlfriend abandoned by her lover. The male characters are as helpless as their female counterparts. Pierrette's unemployed husband has been working for years in a dangerous job without a contract. Due to an injury, a former classical dancer has become a clown for street children; an old technician specialized in repairing sawing machines is the only

male with a profession comparable to Pierrette's. Even the young meter-man in charge of the electricity bills is so utterly destitute and depressed that he barely speaks.

After making good money by sawing new uniforms at the very beginning of the school year, Pierrette drowns in one problem after another. She becomes the victim of a robbery; her sawing machine stops working; she cannot work because she has not been able to pay her electric bill; a huge flood in her workshop and in her apartment slows down her work; the brand new school supplies for her children are ruined by the flood water; she is obliged to use her own child's savings to ease her financial problems.

In the middle of so much misfortune, Pierrette and her clients haggle over price and bargain away. As serious as these financial interactions may be, they are not cold-hearted, but part and parcel of an exchange culture based on personal relationships and outside any institutional control. Eventually a "tontine" or an informal loan system run by women enables Pierrette to get back on her feet and send her children to their first day of classes.

Pierrette's story highlights a network of relations influenced by money, but not exclusively predicated on financial power. Obligated to sleep on a sofa, because her bed is occupied by her sick mother, the protagonist works constantly: cleaning, sawing, repairing, fixing and helping others as if she did not have worries of her own. Put another way, the struggle for economic survival is extreme, but Western individualism or even Pierrette's entrepreneurial spirit cannot prevail in a society where the government does not care for its citizens. Due to the absence of any legal network, one must compensate by relying on friends and relatives.

One episode, however, stands out as a demonstration of this state of alienation between citizens and the social services they are entitled to through the payment of taxes. Desperate for some help, Pierrette decides to speak with a government administrator about the fact that the father of her children gives her no money for their upbringing. Of course, this decision is criticized by the elderly women in Pierrette's life who are used to grin and bear patriarchal mores. We see Pierrette in a static and extended medium shot sitting in front of an invisible female government official. The latter is even more authoritarian, because it is abstracted into an off-screen judgmental, God-like voice.

By lingering exclusively on Pierrette's face, Mbakam's camera brings back to mind Antoine Doinel's isolation during his interview with a psychologist, at the very end of Francois Truffaut's *400 Blows*. In a way reminiscent of the young boy sitting in front of an off-screen psychologist, Pierrette speaks to someone who does not only remain faceless, but also whose voice blames her for having had three children out of wedlock.

Pierrette's misfortunes are not the result of an irrational curse. On the contrary, Mbakam is telling us that, in the midst of poverty, when something goes wrong, the effects are not numerically negative, but massively exponential, thus increasingly difficult to contain and resolve. One could say that Mbakam's subtext, here, is about an exponentially plural dimension prevailing over a singular notion of causality. Such a thesis is not new, for it previously appeared in a documentary shot by Mbakam's Francophone Camerounian colleague, Jean-Marie Teno. In his *Vacances au Pays* (2000), Teno explains that the collapse of a bridge in Cameroun is a much more difficult problem to solve than in any Western country. Cameroun's general infrastructure is so frail that any *ad hoc* solution is inadequate. Thus any minor adversity explodes into unpredictable corollaries.

Teno's insight explains why Mbakam's narrative structure shuns away from climax and resolution. The fact that problems have exponential effects is in keeping with how Mbakam story accommodates a proliferation of characters. Put another way, in this neo-colonial context, the possibility of individual agency is in doubt. Due to how she is eager for autonomy, Pierrette centers herself in her own space. Yet she ends up institutionally isolated, over and over again, due to the general lack of resources affecting everybody around her. In this African tale, linear causality and individual agency would be too artificial and incredible solution. The rags-to-riches narrative typical of the capitalist West would be way too optimistic to be believable. Instead of a narrative based on individual achievement, *Mambar Pierrette* spins itself out into proliferation of stories.

Despite Mbakam's training in Belgium, one senses here the rhizomatic legacy of African oral story-telling. According to this model, the call-and-response format allows for certain plot-lines to dry out. At the same time, the multiple internal narrators (girlfriends and clients) of *Mambar Pierrette* start new stories any listener (or viewer) can further develop in a non-hierarchical fashion beyond the constraints of a first version authorized

by one single story-teller alone. It is as if Mbakam had decided to pass her own story-telling role around her cast of relatives and friends within an egalitarian structure of improvisation comparable to a jam session in jazz.

Although she was victimized during a nocturnal robbery, eventually the night life of Douala recompensates the seamstress with music and dance. With one of her girlfriends/clients, Pierrette decides to take a break from all her troubles. Mbakam's camera work concentrates on the faces and shoulders of the two women dancing away. The director's refusal to frame the entire female body in the night-club sequence is consistent with the rest of the film. A steady attention to face, hands, knees and feet enables the filmmaker to underline labour, fatigue, skills and thoughtfulness. The absence of low angles and high angles is crucial to avoid condescension and idealizing towards her characters. Unless it remains static in front of the *mise-en-scene* to convey attentiveness, Mbakam's camera work and editing are predicated on a female body that bends and cleans, lifts and sweeps instead of posing in search for admiration. This is why the one and only time we see Pierrette framed inside a mirror, she is sitting behind her sewing machine which is literally a proud extension of herself.

There are no causal developments leading from one situation to the next. Accidents, conversations, sudden arrivals, and unexpected encounters prevent the narrative from settling into a linear trajectory of achievement and resolution. One may wonder how Rosine Mbakam manages to tell her story given the proliferation of different characters and the complexity of the socio-political issues lurking under the flood water; the bargaining over money; the humiliation of male figures and the impossibility of a better future marked by the ominous presence of a white female mannequin standing guard outside Pierrette's shop.

Most interestingly, Mbakam organizes her narrative along two sets of concentric circles. One is inward bound and deals with all the visitors in Pierrette's shop. The other is outward bound because it tracks Pierrette running errands in Douala. The result of these two inbound and outbound patterns is that Mbakam makes a film about emotional and mental energy flowing in and out generational, geographical and economic differences. Whether they are negative or positive, the intensity of all these interactions prevails over all binary positions. There are no winners and no losers. All these adult characters know that they cannot prevail over a system that is too corrupt or too difficult to manage. In the end, a certain zest for life, one day at a time, prevails over long-term, competitive Western notions of success.

Well aware that there is no escape out of their miserable lives, a few of Pierrette's friends/clients ridicule the white female mannequin ominously imposing itself on the shop's threshold. A symbol of neo-colonialism, this object does wear African clothes from time to time, thus becoming a surrogate for two kinds of individuals. For Mbakam, race alone is not enough to nurture political consciousness. The clothing of behavior is also a determining factor. Every time the mannequin wears an African dress, it points towards the local, African citizens who behave in a white manner and are open to bribes, thus becoming complicit with dysfunctional Western solutions. In addition, the mannequin promoting Pierrette's outfits stands for us, Western spectators, temporarily empathizing with these struggling, African characters.

Most importantly, the filmmaker's ending to her first fiction film is not just quietly political, but very intensely so, to the extreme of being literally eye-opening. Her ending is so magisterial that it feels as if her film were about to start all over again and make us feel naked in front of our own humanist piety. This reversal of power relations between Pierrette and us, the director and her spectators, is achieved through an editing that makes us *see* ourselves for what we are: privileged spectators. After an entire fiction based on intimacy between the director and her characters, we spectators discover only at the very end what Pierrette's context is really like. A reverse framing shot from our point of view outside the shop looking inside coincides also with the point of view of the naked white mannequin standing outside. In contrast to the rest of the film which always unfolds from the seamstress's point-of-view, this unexpected change of direction away from the former inside-out, but now from the outside-in reveals that the walls of her shop contain no bricks. They are made of card-board with corrugated metal on top. Such an epiphany of extreme poverty leaves us spectators literally as naked as the white mannequin. In the meantime, unable as we have become to wear African clothing, we realize we have lost all our self-congratulatory understanding of the Third World. In Mbakam's own words, her first fiction film has made us really see a non-imaginable and a non-shareable "real," the conditions of daily life in a slum of Douala.