

FILM REVIEW

Rosine Mbakam, director. *The Two Faces of a Bamiléké Woman*. 2016. 76 min. French and Bamiléké, with English subtitles. Cameroon and France. Icarus Films. \$348.

The Two Faces of a Bamiléké Woman, a feature-length documentary by Rosine Mbakam, takes up a familiar theme in African cinema and literature, the return of the African artist, educated and now living abroad, to her home and family in Africa. In this touching film, Mbakam, who has been away for seven years, comes back to Cameroon with her small son Malik from her new home in Brussels. During those years abroad, she attended film school, married, and started a family. In her opening voiceover, Mbakam explains that she is returning to “discover what was hidden in this darkness.” The metaphor of darkness refers to Cameroon, where Mbakam travels from the village of Tonga to the capital city Yaoundé and then to the coast to learn more about the lives of her mother and her aunts. With her camera, she says she has returned to this “elsewhere” to bring light to darkness, which seems to imply that the filmmaker aspires to enlighten, but instead of mere enlightenment, something more complicated and interesting happens. The documentary provides a space for Mbakam’s mother to narrate her life and for the daughter-turned-filmmaker to reconnect with home.

The documentary features a series of conversations between Mbakam and her mother, employing a participatory mode. Although the filmmaker remains largely out of the camera’s frame, her voice—which addresses viewers directly in an extradiégnetic voice-over in French, while questioning and speaking to her mother in Bamiléké—renders her fully present. Mbakam intends, perhaps, for this double voiced-ness to enact her doubled subjectivity; she is a French-speaking filmmaker and Bamiléké daughter, simultaneously narrator of and character in her own film. In this, Mbakam is as much a subject of her documentary as are the women she interviews, with her camera providing the impetus for this exploration into the experiences of her mother and her aunts as young brides, co-wives, mothers, and widows.

Mbakam’s questions compel her mother to discuss a variety of personal, even sensitive, topics, but the exchanges never seem forced or scripted. When asked about her second marriage, the filmmaker’s mother explains that, after the death of Mbakam’s father, she took her co-wife’s son as

her second husband so that her father's cousins would stop pursuing her. "I choose him because I didn't want another man in my life." Later, filming her mother as she washes a large stone used to crush pepper, Mbakam remarks that when she was small, "you massaged my breasts with that crushing stone." Yes, her mother explains, to stop your breasts from growing too large, too soon. "It hurt," she tells her mother. Seated side-by-side and peeling plantain, Mbakam's mother and her sisters talk about their marriages to husbands chosen for them by their father. Completely at ease, the women reflect, laugh, and advise. "You have to be able to get by, with or without a man," says one of the filmmaker's aunts. In one of the few scenes in which Mbakam appears in front the camera, she and her mother crowd into a narrow shower stall with a bucket of steaming-hot water. Mbakam wears only her undergarments because she has asked her mother to give her the massage she would have received after the birth of her child, if she had given birth in Cameroun. Her French voiceover admits that she, as the youngest in the family, has waited for this ritual for years. Her mother sponges her stomach with the hot water, and when the filmmaker flinches, her mother asks, "Did you think it was some kind of joke?" She explains that after giving birth, the new mother is given this treatment for seven days, to help her body heal.

Mbakam is a cinematic artist who composes shots with great care. She is drawn to depopulated spaces as well as to close-ups of her mother's and aunt's hands at work, usually preparing food. These images, often of extended duration, use form to express affect and often render Mbakam's voice-over redundant. Threaded throughout the film, too, are many beautifully wrought, quiet moments involving the filmmaker and her mother. In one of these, the director is alone with her mother in her mother's modestly furnished bedroom. The old woman tells her daughter that while she has been away "many people have died." One by one, she displays her mourning dresses for her daughter, who stands behind the camera, before laying them in a line, flat on her bed. "The first to die was the husband of my little sister in Douala. This is what I wore to the funeral," she explains, holding up a brightly patterned dress. Then there is the dress she wore to collect the body of her mother, another for the funeral of her son-in-law, and finally the dress worn for her niece. In another scene, Mbakam uses long-distance shots of her mother walking among the bare rooms of her mother's (now abandoned) childhood home. She points to where her father and his wives used to sleep, to where the sofa sat. The empty rooms, like the row of mourning dresses, evoke a sense of time's passing and of loss.

Like Idrissou Mora-Kpai's *Si-Gueriki* (2002), *The Two Faces of a Bamiléké Woman* contemplates the filmmaker's newfound awareness of her mother's life and strength. Rather than inhibiting intimacy between the filmmaker and her mother, the camera seems to encourage it. The documentary offers viewers access to everyday conversations that reveal much about gender and family relations in postcolonial Africa.

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