



dir. Rosine Mbakam. *The Two Faces of a Bamileke Woman*. New York: Icarus Films, 2019. 76 minutes.

Reviewed by Alexandra M. Thomas

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Commissioned by Robbie Aitken (Sheffield Hallam University, Humanities Research Center)

The Two Faces of a Bamileke Woman is an exciting contribution to the canon of contemporary African cinema, in which filmmakers challenge the dominant Eurocentric and masculinist gazes upon their communities that are often a result of ethnographic and neocolonial visions of a so-called “hopeless Africa.” In filmmaker Rosine Mbakam’s representation of Yaoundé and Tonga, African women are self-fashioning; they navigate the pleasure, politics, and sorrows of their quotidian lives.

In a series of moments wrought with bliss and wonder, *The Two Faces of a Bamileke Woman* captures the politics and aesthetics of a Cameroonian woman’s homecoming in the wake of extended absence. Mbakam documents her return to Cameroon after seven years in Belgium. She explores her relationship to her birthplace through a progression of encounters with her mother, Mâ Brêh’s, daily life and the landscape of Tonga and Yaoundé. In so doing, she explores the personal, political, and communal essence of her return—reminding us that the barriers between those realms are blurrier than one might assume. Mbakam grapples with the fraught nature of her return in the midst of Mâ Brêh and the local aunts, who gossip while conducting household rituals; with memories of Cameroon during the country’s war for independence; and with passionate

criticism of patriarchy, alongside recollections of Mbakam’s childhood.

Quiet meditations on the aesthetic and social life of color are represented throughout *The Two Faces of a Bamileke Woman*. Within the first moments of the film, we hear Mbakam speak in a balanced tone, confronting literal and metaphorical darkness: *It is nighttime; It is dark; I like this darkness; I’ve missed this deep darkness*. After voicing several reflections on darkness against the jet-black sky of the mise-en-scene, the lights of the City appear, as Mbakam gestures—visually and verbally—toward the role of light as her guiding medium. *A dot of light guides me toward the unknown*. It is striking to witness Mbakam describe her return to Cameroon as plunging into the depths of darkness—reminiscent of dominant representations of Africa as the “Dark Continent” in the Western imaginary. It is apparent that this uncanny parallel is not simply reproducing the violent discourse of the “Dark Africa” trope. Instead of disavowing darkness, Mbakam employs it as a motif that frames the explorations of representation and color throughout the film. In essence, I contend that the theorization and representation of color throughout the film is a recurring motif that unveils the deep affective bonds, Afro-European politics, and aesthetic considerations that undergird *The Two Faces of a Bamileke Woman*.

In contrast to the darkness is the vibrant multitude of colors of the cotton batik prints in the women's fashion. Most notably, Mbakam's mother embodies this sartorial flare. In one scene, Mâ Brêh shows Mbakam the different outfits she has worn to recent funerals. Mâ Brêh lays the colorful dresses out across the bed. *Many people have died since you left.* The metaphorical darkness presents itself again as Mbakam reflects on the fear of receiving a phone call while in Belgium, knowing that someone in Cameroon might be unwell or deceased. Despite the heaviness of her mother listing the family members who have passed away since she has been gone, the colorful blues, reds, and yellows in the mourning outfits are a remedy to the darkness. Self-fashioning, particularly in the most extravagant patterns on cotton batik, becomes a site of a shared joy between Mbakam and her Mâ Brêh after years apart.

The most beautiful scenes in *The Two Faces of a Bamileke Woman* are the quietest ones: shots of the dark night sky, the repeated gestures of cooking *koki* stew, a Cameroonian grandmother bathing her Afro-Belgian grandson for the first time. For Mbakam, where there is darkness and loss, there is also a deep capacity—or rather, commitment to—the lovely, simple, precious things in life: a grandmother and grandson sleeping on a bed next to each other, a successful day selling goods at the marketplace, women's collaborative acts of self-advocacy. Women in the community, gloriously adorned in their vibrant dress, discuss how they set limits with their husbands, always advocating for themselves and their children.

The Two Faces of a Bamileke Woman not only represents the colorful landscape of Cameroon from metaphorical darkness to glamorous fashion, but the film also explores the equally varied political and personal landscape of Cameroon through the lens of Mbakam. Visual markers of familiarity elicit Mbakam's nostalgia: the television, the pathways, the walls. *The world came to me here. Here, I laughed, I cried, I imagined.* For

Mbakam, the landscape of the village, the city, her birthplace, is replete with the memories from her childhood. Archived within the landscape are also the traces of the revolutionary past: Mâ Brêh recalls taking refuge in the forest during the war for independence from France. A landmark boasts fifty years of independence for Cameroon, yet for Mâ Brêh the terror is not so distant. The film does not disavow the violent history of colonialism and Cameroon's war for independence. It is a gentle presence alluded to throughout the film. And yet, it does not take center stage. Contrary to popular representations of Africa as the land of dictators, patriarchy, war, and poverty, what Mbakam represents is an abundance of women's economic and romantic self-determination, the daily joys of household work surrounded by one's community, and most apparently, an affective bond between a mother and daughter that spans space and time.

What, then, are the "two faces" of a Bamileke woman? The film is certainly not a story that makes homecoming into a spectacle. Shock or fear are not the feelings that drive the plot. Instead, what guides us through the film is Mâ Brêh's daily life in all of its beautiful simplicity. If we are to understand the two faces as akin to a Duboisian double consciousness, in this case being African and European, then I would argue that Afro-Europeaness is not necessarily a sociological spectacle of the film. When Afro-Europeaness is portrayed, it is embodied within the figure of Malick, Mbakam's son. Malick's relatively lighter skin serves as a visual marker of his Belgian heritage on his white father's side. Other moments of his difference emerge in relation to his being given one Bamileke name instead of two, or when he speaks fluent French but is beginning to learn Bamileke. For Mbakam, these two faces are seemingly reconciled through reconnecting to her Cameroonian upbringing. I proffer that her immersion, along with that of her young son, into daily life in Tonga and Yaounde is emblematic of her desire to navigate the cultural landscape of her childhood seamlessly—making *koki* stew, lis-

tening to her mother tell stories, speaking Bamileke, and ultimately experiencing an affective attachment to a homeland that seven years of absence cannot erase.

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