

FILM REVIEW

Akuol de Mabior, director. *No Simple Way Home*. 2022. 85 minutes. English. South Sudan. LBx Africa, streaming on Vimeo. No price reported.

No Simple Way Home is an honest and intimate documentary about a family that devoted its life to the nation, more specifically South Sudan, and its journey toward independence and peace. The director is the daughter of the late Dr. John Garang de Mabior, the father of the nation. Through Akuol's camera and narration, *No Simple Way Home* presents a compelling story of the history, people, and most of all the decades-long struggle for liberation in Southern Sudan. Akuol de Mabior manages to take us through the past and present through conversations with her mother, Rebecca Nyandeng de Mabior, who is often called the mother of the nation. Rebecca narrates how she stood by her husband's side fighting a liberation war for years and now feels the responsibility of and duty to the nation, sharing its dreams and fears.

Akuol was sixteen years old when her father died in a helicopter crash after having held office for twenty-one days as the vice president of Sudan after the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement between the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) and the National Congress Party (NCP) in 2005. She narrates calmly how her father founded SPLM in 1983 and led an armed struggle against a fundamental Islamist government for democratic transformation, placing the nation before his family. Old family photographs visualize what is very hard for outsiders to understand, a daily life of conflict and uncertainty, constantly on the move. The photographs show a happy family in scenes of military uniforms, naked walls in rooms furnished with cheap plastic camping chairs, and AK 47s. There is little that reminds us of the luxurious life we read about for corrupt African leaders who steal their country's resources.

The film gives the audience hope as well as perspectives on tradition and modernity in South Sudan after ten years of independence, yet it situates the images amid a conflict that is more devastating than ever. The daughters of Dr. John Garang represent this hybridity, valuing the cattle-herding Dinka culture at a distance, sitting in the blue plastic chairs enjoying chai (tea) in

local coffee shops run by women, surrounded by a scenery of abandoned constructions. The place of local tradition is underlined when Rebecca Nyandeng de Mabior insists that her daughters learn to cook, clean, and take care of children in order to be good wives and mothers. At the same time, we learn that Akuol does not speak Dinka to the local people in her homeland; she grew up in exile and she is well-educated. The fact that both daughters represented in the film have had access to higher education is not representative of the state of female education in South Sudan, where women and girls are more likely to die in childbirth than to finish primary education.

No Simple Way Home includes film clips showing speeches by Dr. John Garang debating whether Sudan is an Arab or a Muslim country. Furthermore, we see clips from Independence Day 2011, picturing people with great hope for the future. Dr. John Garang speaks of a country with great ethnic and religious differences that are also central to the current conflict. A central question is whether the film manages to touch upon these sensitive and highly divisive causes of the renewed conflict that erupted after two years of independence. The answer is that it does. The ongoing conflict is presented as a power struggle within South Sudan's government. Rebecca Nyandeng de Mabior describes how it started with Kiir accusing his deputy Riek Machar. Not until we follow her to the hairdresser do we get more information about the accusation, when she says, "There was not a coup." As the former advisor for Salva Kiir Mayardit, she was not happy with the way he was taking things. After this, Rebecca was forced into exile again for speaking out, not returning home until 2019. With this, the film briefly and wisely touches upon the current realities of conflict and uncertainties, however in a very respectful tone and frequently referring to forgiveness and the will of God. This respectful tone is nicely captured by the accompanying sound mix and design throughout the film: quiet, tranquil string music, sometimes overlapping with bird calls authentically emerging from a forest.

In February 2020, South Sudan's current president Salva Kiir appointed five vice presidents, one being Rebecca Nyandeng de Mabior. After spending large parts of her life in exile due to the conflict, Rebecca Nyandeng de Mabior is stepping into her husband's former role. With tears in her eyes, she admits that this is a challenging assignment: "The people are watching us." As she explains to Akuol, she was part of the struggle and she also wants to be part of the nation-building. Throughout the conversation, we get the impression that the widow and daughter of Dr. John Garang are left alone in their commitment to the nation that won its freedom but yet lost everything. In a country where female leaders are few, Rebecca Nyandeng de Mabior admittedly understands her role as a woman and a role model to the young ladies; she wants to let them know that anything is possible. Summing it all up in an

utterance reflecting hope and despair, Akuol states, “I still do not know what it means to be South Sudanese.”

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