

# FILM REVIEW

**Rosine Mbakam, dir. *Chez Jolie Coiffure*.** 70 minutes. French with English subtitles. Belgium. Icarus Films. \$390. 2018.

In the wake of Paulin Soumanou Vieyra's pathbreaking *Afrique sur Seine* (1955) and Ousmane Sembene's classic *Black Girl* (1966), African and African diaspora feature fiction films such as Moussa Touré's *Toubab Bi* (1991), Mweze Ngangura's *Pièces d'identités* (1998), and Alain Gomis' *L'Afrance* (2003) poignantly depicted the complex and difficult lives of Black African immigrants in Francophone European cities. Rosine Mbakam returns to and expands Vieyra's documentary focus as she joins this overwhelmingly male tradition with *Chez Jolie Coiffure*, her second feature-length nonfiction production, released just two years after her equally powerful *The Two Faces of a Bamileke Woman* (2016). Featured at festivals on three continents, including FESPACO, DOK Leipzig, True/False, and AFI Docs, *Chez Jolie Coiffure* has brought Mbakam international recognition as an accomplished director with strong personal and professional ties to both Africa and Europe.

Mbakam's film begins outside a hair salon, in the hallway of an indoor shopping mall in Brussels' Matonge neighborhood. Matonge is home to Belgium's sub-Saharan African immigrants, the majority of whom hail from the Democratic Republic of Congo. The heroine of *Chez Jolie Coiffure*, however, like Mbakam herself, is from Cameroon. Mbakam filmed Sabine and her colleagues and clients in their salon over the course of a year, then edited the footage into a concise and moving portrayal of immigrant life in a former colonial metropole.

Only the opening images of *Chez Jolie Coiffure* show the salon from the outside, as Sabine sweeps up piles of hair. Opening the door to the hallway, Sabine calls out to "Rosine" to come in; Mbakam joltingly films her way through the doorway. Watching and listening, she uses the salon's multiple mirrors to frame Sabine, her stylists, and their customers in shots that add depth to the small space and reflect the warmth and complexity of their relationships (Figure 1). Thanks to carefully calculated angles, Mbakam and her camera are never visible in these mirrors, and her documentary is in

Figure 1. Still from *Chez Jolie Coiffure*, courtesy of Icarus Films.



many ways an observational one, with no authorial voice-over. Yet Mbakam's film is at the same time interview-based, and her perspective is adamantly internal, aligned and allied with that of her subjects and interlocutors; once inside their space, she does not leave.

Inside Sabine's salon, Mbakam films a group of African women in Europe who discuss life, love, and work. They talk about the damage done to Black women's skin by skin-lightening products. When one stylist shares that a white man had invited her to accompany him on a trip to Luxembourg, Sabine responds that everyone has a white guy, and they both laugh. Sabine recruits new members to invest in her *tontine* and attend monthly meetings. The impossible expense of traveling home comes up again and again, and even a client with papers and a good job must ask for donations to send her mother's body home for burial.

Looking out through the salon's windows, Mbakam also films groups of white Europeans walking through the mall, touring African Brussels. Just as scholars Nicolas Bancel, Pascal Blanchard, and Sandrine Lemaire have described how, from the second half of the nineteenth century, Africans were brought to Europe to be put on display in "human zoos," Sabine comments, "Move along, white people. If you go to the zoo, you pay. When we go to your zoos, we pay." Later, after more spectators pass by, including several school groups, Sabine says with a big smile, "Rosine, you need to film them. Film them!" So doing, Mbakam turns or at least balances the tables; at the same time as these tourists peer in at the African women whom they consider to be exotic foreigners, they themselves are put on display, on screen, for us.

Although Mbakam never appears in her film, she regularly converses with her main character from behind the camera. Sabine twice tells the story of a young woman's emigration odyssey from Cameroon to Lebanon

to Belgium, initially in the third person and then, more intimately, in the first. The experience was so difficult, she says to Mbakam—after being trapped in Lebanon, she escaped on foot through Syria, Turkey, and Greece—that she would not do it again. But women who leave Cameroon encourage others to leave, and Lebanese agents pay for their tickets and arrange their employment. “You do it because you want to get to Europe,” Sabine concludes, and Mbakam continues, “and then you get to Europe, and it doesn’t stop.”

Sabine is undocumented, having tried and failed twice to obtain asylum in Belgium. In the last ten minutes of *Chez Jolie Coiffure*, a commotion in the mall signals a police raid. Sabine turns off the lights and moves off camera, while Mbakam keeps filming in the dark salon. Alone, she answers a call from Sabine and asks what to do should the police appear, abandoning the role of interviewer to implicate herself directly in the action. The police officers pass by this time, filmed by Mbakam through the salon windows, and recounting the raid the next day, Sabine expresses her frustration with the unending pursuit; “This little Matonge is where we earn a living, and they want to take it away.” Mbakam reminds us of the price paid to earn this living as Sabine speaks the last words of the film, responding to a client who asks if she will go home this year. Braiding, Sabine shakes her head: “I don’t know.”

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