

# MAMBAR PIERRETTE

A FILM BY ROSINE MBAKAM

QUINZAINE  
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CANNES 2023



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# MAMBAR PIERRETTE

A FILM BY ROSINE MBACKAM



PIERRETTE  
ABOHEU

KARELLE  
KENMOGNE

CÉCILE  
TCHANA

FABRICE  
NDJEUTHAT

COPRODUCTION RTBF (BELGIAN TELEVISION), TANDOR FILMS WITH THE PARTICIPATION OF TV5MONDE WITH THE SUPPORT OF FONDS IMAGE DE LA FRANCOPHONIE  
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AND OF THE CENTRE DE L'AUDIOVISUEL A BRUXELLES WITH THE SUPPORT OF THE KASK & CONSERVATORIUM (HOOGENT-HOWEST) INTERNATIONAL SALES: THE PARTY FILM SALES

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FILM SALES

## SYNOPSIS

The city of Douala is in trepidation for the start of the new school year. A long line of customers come to Mambar Pierrette, the neighbourhood dressmaker, to have their clothes ready for imminent social events and ceremonies. More than just a sewer, Pierrette becomes the confidant of her customers, of a generation. But when the rain starts pouring down and threatens to flood her workshop - one of several successive misfortunes - Pierrette will have to stay afloat.

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## INTERVIEW OF ROSINE MBAKAM

***After making several films in Belgium, you decided to go back and make films in Cameroon. The result is a collective and family film experience. Can you tell us about the genesis of the project?***

After making the films I wanted to make in Belgium, I wanted to go back to my first desire for cinema, which was to film my family in Cameroon. I didn't have the connection to cinema that we're used to having in Europe. Generally, we get films that nourish us, grow within us, and ultimately produce a desire to make films. I started by telling myself stories, imagining things about the people I encountered in everyday life. Film came into my life much later when I looked for a way to tell these stories.

Then, via WhatsApp, I could see everything that was happening in Cameroon without being there. Everything my loved ones were going through, I found out about directly through videos. This remote relationship made me want to go back and film their reality. My cousin Pierrette told me about her troubles, her daily difficulties: the coming school year, issues with flooding.

Pierrette and I belong to the same generation, and we were both living, in our respective locations, in a situation of uncertainty about life. I found that inspiring. Pierrette's questions were similar to mine, such as not knowing how to make ends meet. On my side, I didn't have a job and my films weren't bringing in any money. I wanted to tell the story of the uncertainties she and I shared.

***The film follows the character of Pierrette, a seamstress in Douala, faced with a series of difficulties that she tries to overcome in order to make sure her son can return to school. Was it mainly the struggle of your cousin, Pierrette, that you wanted to depict on screen?***

In Pierrette's case, the flood could destroy everything she built the day before. I wanted to tell the story of this uncertainty, which is the one in which I also grew up. An uncertainty that isn't necessarily distressing; it's integrated into the lives of Cameroonians. I found that Pierrette's reaction to the floods made it possible to tell the story of daily life in Cameroon, which can be destabilized overnight, and to show the solutions that are provided thanks to a community that knows how to mobilize itself.

Personally, Pierrette's reaction to the flood that damaged the sacks of rice that allow her to feed her children for a month gave me courage. I remembered my childhood: for my mother, there was constant uncertainty. She could come home in the evening having sold nothing and not knowing how she would feed her children the next day. Talking with Pierrette enabled me to refocus. I always make films based on my own questions. The characters are there to help me overcome what I go through as a woman.



### ***How did your family experience this cinematic adventure?***

The performers and characters in the film realized that cinema was their life. Until now, they thought that cinema was about telling stories with incredible characters, as we understand cinema in the West. Having participated in this collective film adventure, the members of my family can now discover that they, too, are incredible characters. Cinema should enable that relationship. It should restore trust and, above all, an awareness in order to say: “our story is important”. This awareness disrupts the filmic and narrative relationship. The person filmed is ready to open their door and collaborate to tell their story. That’s what happened with Pierrette and with the characters in my previous films. It’s important to me to not impose a way of telling the story on the people I film.

### ***How did you go about writing the film?***

At first, I’m plagued with questions that, little by little, become stories. For *Mambar Pierrette*, I wanted to take a look at my generation in Cameroon. What questions does she have? What challenges does a woman like me face in Cameroon as a mother, a worker or someone looking for work? It’s about sharing my own questions with the people I film. To do that, I look for

those characters among my loved ones. In my family, we call each other, check in, talk. All these exchanges made it possible to write the script for the film. Pierrette is my cousin and there are things about her that I recognize in myself. Telling Pierrette’s story is also telling the stories of other women. *Mambar Pierrette* is, in a way, the story of a generation.

### ***And what about filming?***

I gave indications about the acting intentions, the emotions to put into this or that scene. Fatigue, anger, harshness, coldness... I had to find a language that was appropriate to my family members, that stemmed from their reality and their way of doing things. There was an important place given to improvisation; Pierrette could add elements of her daily life and, as such, change the script.

The relationship between the different characters in the film played out naturally because there was a pre-existing relationship between them. And I drew inspiration from family ties to write the story.

### ***Your previous films were all documentaries. Why choose fiction for this film?***

The story of the film is based on Pierrette’s life journey. The fictional dimension, on the other hand, balances the story without transforming it and brings density and complexity to the character without overpowering her story.

But there were questions couldn’t be answered in Pierrette’s own daily life, namely political questions. From the moment the political aspect wasn’t directly linked to the reality of Pierrette’s life, I’d have been obliged to ask her about it – a situation I wanted to avoid at all costs. Of course, she would have answered me, but it would have been artificial and therefore disconnected from her daily life. But this political dimension does exist and has very concrete consequences on Pierrette’s life.



***You often say that it's your cinema that must adapt to people and not the reverse. Why?***

I don't create cinema, I can provoke it through my way of organizing things, my plan, but the cinema is already there, and I just have to receive it. My work consists of finding the right way to see it, of being in the right place without smothering it or crushing it. In other words, I mustn't dominate it.

***Don't you recognize yourself in a certain cinema that proposes, above all, a specific theme?***

They say you have to look for a story, write it and then film it. Except that that kind of cinema doesn't offer the possibility of seeing anything else and doesn't allow people to express themselves beyond what is expected of them. Beyond the place or position in society that they're assigned. When we see Pierrette, I want us to keep having the feeling that she is much more than "that". In a certain kind of cinema, we're told "this is the story" and this cinema has confined and continues to confine people. When you film a migrant, it's the migrant's story and nothing else. In my cinema, I want to show that we're more than the role we're assigned.

***Throughout the entire film, your camera follows Pierrette in a body-to-body encounter, roaming her workshop and the streets of her neighborhood. The shots are close-up. You seem to avoid wider shots of Pierrette's environment. Why?***

For this film, I want to tell Pierrette's story, and what I'm proposing is tied to Pierrette's movement, to her character, to her way of moving. I'm not interested in anything else but her. We can hear what's going on around her, we can feel it, but the most important thing is that the viewer puts himself or herself in her place. The camera movements and aesthetic choices are linked to the character, to her reality; they must emanate from Pierrette's movements.



***Apart from the clown character, you work with non-professional actors, all members of your family. Why did you rule out the possibility of using actors for your first fiction film?***

Why would I look for actors who are going to enact the experiences of people whose only need is to be able to express themselves? These people are neither seen nor heard. We all need to feel that our story matters to others. On the other hand, the people filmed are afraid of being manipulated when they give their testimonies. They're afraid their words will be transformed because, for a long time, a certain kind of cinema betrayed them. When I go back to my family, the only thing my mother wants is to have a conversation with her daughter. If I tell her that the conversation is filmed, that won't change her desire to speak to me. If there is trust, there is a desire to talk about oneself, to be heard and to be seen. That being said, I have an even greater responsibility in working with non-professionals. I need to be even more careful because I have to live up to that trust. My desire for cinema began with my family. There are generations of stories to tell and that need to be told. These stories need to "contaminate" the existing cinema. No one knows them in Europe. Who will take the risk of telling them? It's becoming necessary for cinema from elsewhere to feed western cinema because the latter has fed the rest of the world for decades.

***Your film deals with specific political subjects such as the political corruption of youth or war. Are these subjects important for you today?***

All the things I question in *Mambar Pierrette* are political questions that cross my mind today. Why is it that as Blacks, as Africans, we still live in these conditions when we're submerged in wealth? Why does Pierrette have to struggle to pay for her son's schooling when she's in a country that has resources? As a director, it was important for me to emphasize these political aspects.

***In Pierrette's sewing workshop, we find an odd character in the White mannequin that can frighten customers and residents of the neighborhood. Does it serve as a symbol of the West's view of Africa?***

That mannequin really exists in Pierrette's workshop. When I saw it, I thought it was going to embody all the questions I wanted to raise about North-South relations and the remains of colonization still present in Cameroon. This mannequin can represent a lot of different themes. Nevertheless, I don't want to make a film that confines its message, and I don't want to reduce this mannequin to what I put in as my first intention. I hope that viewers can assign meanings to it beyond what I thought or imagined.

***Can you go back to the title of the film, *Mambar Pierrette*? Why do the two first names appear in the film title?***

You should know that in Cameroon, we have several first names. We get two traditional first names, one from our father's side and one from our mother's side. "Mambar" is the traditional name given to girls that comes from the mother. We're all named "Mambar", and its use is restricted to the family. We also have a French first name that is used in civilian life. At first, I wrote the story for the film under the title Pierrette. But during filming, there was a conflict between reality and fiction – I realized that my family members were still using the name "Mambar". From then on, it became clear that the film should be called *Mambar Pierrette* to show the friction between tradition and modernity that concerns an entire generation in Cameroon.

— Interview by Aurélie Ghalim

## TECHNICAL FILE

### CREDITS

DIRECTOR/ SCREENPLAY Rosine Mbakam  
PHOTO DIRECTOR Fiona Braillon  
SOUND Loïc Villiot, Roger Mboupda  
EDITOR Geoffroy Cernaix  
SOUND EDITOR Loïc Villiot  
MIXING Aline Gavroy  
COLOR GRADING Jorge Piquer Rodriguez

CASTING Pierrette Aboheu  
Karelle Kenmogne  
Cécile Tchana  
Fabrice Ndjéuthat

PRODUCTION Tândor Productions  
COPRODUCTION Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles  
RTBF (Belgian Television)  
Tândor Films – Cameroon  
TV5MONDE  
Fonds Image de la Francophonie  
Coopération belge au développement  
Centre de l'Audiovisuel à Bruxelles

### FILM

ORIGINAL TITLE **Mambar Pierrette**  
COUNTRY OF PRODUCTION Belgium  
YEAR 2023  
RUNTIME 93 min  
LANGUAGES Bamileke, French, Pidjin  
SUBTITLES French and English  
IMAGE RATIO 1,85







## BIOGRAPHY

**Rosine Mbakam** grew up in Yaoundé in a popular neighborhood that nourished her imagination as a filmmaker. After working for 3 years at STV in Douala as a director and producer, she joined INSAS, a Belgian film school. Her graduation film *You will be my ally* is very remarkable.

In order to be independent, she founded her own production company Tândor Productions. She directed 4 feature-length documentaries that were selected in the most important film festivals in the world. She is also a teacher and researcher at KASK in Ghent. The New Yorker defines her as “*an original filmmaker of exceptional sensitivity; one of the greatest documentary filmmakers working today*”. She currently finished her first feature film *Mambar Pierrette*.

## FILMOGRAPHY

**Les Portes du Passé** Docu-fiction, 13 min (2011)

**You will be my Ally** Fiction, 19 min (2012)

**The Two Faces of a Bamiléké Woman** Documentary, 77 min (2016)

**Chez Jolie Coiffure** Documentary, 70 min (2018)

**Delphine's Prayers** Documentary, 90 min (2021)

**Prism** Documentary, 77 min (2021)

**Mambar Pierrette** Fiction, 93 min (2023)





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