

DELPHINE'S PRAYERS

a film by ROSINE MBAKAM

Press kit



INTERNATIONAL
SELECTION
2021



SYNOPSIS

This film is the portrait of Delphine, a young Cameroonian girl who, after the death of her mother and the abandonment of her father's parental responsibilities, was raped at the age of 13. She sinks into prostitution to support herself and her daughter. She ends up marrying a Belgian man who is three times her age, hoping to find a better life in Europe for her and her daughter. Seven years later, the European dream has faded and her situation has only gotten worse.

Delphine, like others, is part of this generation of young African women crushed by our patriarchal societies and left with this Western sexual colonization as the only means of survival. Through her courage and strength, Delphine exposes these patterns of domination that continue to lock up African women.



TECHNICAL DATA

ORIGINAL TITLE : Les prières de Delphine

ENGLISH TITLE : Delphine's prayers

DURATION : 90 min

LANGUAGE(S) : Pidgin and French

SUBTITLES : French, English and bil. FR/NL

PRODUCTION : Tândor Productions

CO-PRODUCERS : L'Atelier Cinéma du GSARA,
CBA, Indigo Mood Films, Tândor Films.

DIRECTOR : Rosine Mbakam

DIR. PHOTO : Rosine Mbakam

EDITOR : Geoffroy Cernaix

SOUND : Rosine Mbakam, Loïc Villiot

SOUND & MIX EDITOR : Loïc Villiot

COLOUR GRADING : Studio Charbon

POSTPRODUCTION DIR. : Sahbi Kraiem

PRODUCTION : Geoffroy Cernaix

Produced with the help of the *Centre du Cinéma et de l'Audiovisuel de la Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles*

With the support of the *Service public francophone bruxellois*

TRAILER :

<https://vimeo.com/508582112>



FILM CONTEXT

« Delphine and I arrived in Belgium the same year two months apart, she in May 2007 to meet her husband and I in July to study cinema. We didn't know each other. She is from the English-speaking region of Cameroon and therefore does not speak French well. Having both just arrived in Belgium and having no friends, a teacher from INSAS and friend of her husband put us in touch. Very quickly, we sympathized and we started to see each other at her place.

Delphine ran a hairdressing salon in Cameroon. Here in Brussels, she sometimes does hair at home to make a little money. From time to time, she would ask me to help hairdressing and spend time together. In the beginning, our relationship had a nostalgic vibe. We recalled the memories of our home country. She would tell me the stories of the Nigerian movies she used to watch all day long. These films permeated Delphine's personality a lot. She very often act out when she speaks. She takes the turns of phrase from the lines in the Nigerian films and adapts them to what she wants. All this gives her a sometimes comic side.

Our relationship has evolved over the years, but what I know about Delphine is what she wants me to know and what I can myself perceive in her family life here in Belgium. I notice very quickly that the age difference between her and her husband weighs on their relationship. He is three times Delphine's age and sometimes treats her like a child. This situation revolts Delphine who often expresses it to me in our exchanges.

Throughout my relationship with Delphine, making a film was always out of the question. She knew that I was studying cinema but we never talked about making a film about her. I often had her support when I had difficulties in my studies. She encouraged me not to give up and very often reminded me why I came to Belgium.

Seven years after we met, I finished my studies. My first feature-length documentary is in production. I wanted to set up a new project that I've had in mind since I arrived in Belgium: African immigration and the other side of the coin. I went to see Delphine to introduce me to the gallery of Matongé, the African district of Brussels, which she knows better than I do. Delphine tells me that she has a friend in the gallery who would do the trick. At the same time, Delphine asks me if I can't also make a film about her. Surprised, I tell her that I don't see what I can tell about her that would make a film. At that moment, Delphine sits me down and gives me part of her story. I realize that her story centralizes all the questions related to our common origins that brought me to cinema and that I wanted to address already in Cameroon. This is how I understood the need for Delphine's words and story to be heard. »

- Rosine Mbakam



MEETING WITH THE DIRECTOR

Rosine Mbakam grew up in Cameroon. **She chose cinema very early on and trained in Yaoundé** thanks to the teams of the Italian NGO COE (Centro Orientamento Educativo) where she was introduced to image, editing and directing in 2000. She collaborated and directed several institutional films for this structure before joining the STV (Spectrum Television) team directed by Mactar Sylla in 2003. For 4 years, she worked as an **editor, director, anchor and program manager**.

Driven by the desire to develop her cinematographic vision, she joined **INSAS** (Institut National Supérieur des Arts du Spectacle et des Techniques de Diffusion) in 2007. **Graduated in 2012**, she directed her first short fiction film « *You will be my ally* » which won awards in several international festivals.

In a desire for independence, **she founded Tândor Productions in 2014 with Geoffroy Cernaix**. By producing her films, she seeks to defend the singularity of her vision. She directed « *The two faces of a bamileke woman* » her first feature-length documentary in 2017 which will be selected in more than sixty festivals (IFFR Rotterdam, Fespaco...). Her next film « *Chez jolie coiffure* » will have an even larger audience (Dok Leipzig, True/False, AFI Fest Los-Angeles, Fespaco...). Both films are acclaimed by critics (New-Yorker, New-York Times, LA Times, Variety...)

In order to develop cinema in her country **Cameroon**, she founded the production company **Tândor Films** in 2018. At the same time, she initiated **Caravane Cinéma**, which ensures the distribution of African films in the working class neighborhoods of major cities in Cameroon through open-air screenings. She now seeks to perpetuate this experience in the years to come.

She shot a short film « *La majorité invisible* » for the « Cinetracts '20 » project of the Wexner Center for the Arts (Columbus, Ohio) in 2020.

Today, she is completing her third feature-length documentary « *Delphine's prayers* » which will be released in 2021. She has also just completed in collaboration with An Van Dieren and Eléonore Yameogo the feature-length documentary « *Prisme* » on the subject of filming black skin. She is also preparing the shooting of her second short fiction film « *Pierrette* ».

She divides her time between her production structure (Tândor Productions in Belgium and Tândor Films in Cameroon) where she works on several projects and **teaching at the KASK in Ghent** (Belgium).



INTERVIEW WITH ROSINE MBAKAM

***Delphine's prayers* is the first film you made after your cinema studies. However, it was made after your two feature films *The two faces of a bamiléké woman* and *Chez jolie coiffure*. Why is that ?**

Delphine is the first person I filmed after school. It's my first film although it's the third to be released. Five years ago, I wasn't mature enough to tackle this subject. I was angry when I started filming Delphine. I was angry because of her history and my culture that prepared the context in which she found herself exposed; I was angry with Europe as well, which is pursuing a policy of discrimination that I was suffering from in full force at the time. I needed to express this anger that I felt. My prism for approaching this film was not the right one. I was taking a selfish look at Delphine's story. I was taking power by wanting to express my emotions through her without really listening to her story as it presented itself. When I look back at the

first edited versions, I'm horrified. That's not how I see filmmaking: taking over the stories of the people I'm filming. I'm always looking for a way to tell a story in a way that is fair to me and to the person I'm filming. I think Delphine has allowed me to film others with more confidence and my other films have allowed me to come back to Delphine's Prayers by approaching it in a global way and not as a singular story.

You are used to opening your films on the question of the cinematic apparatus. Is it essential for you ?

The apparatus comes from the story of people, from the encounter and from how the narrative is transmitted. It is the interaction that is at the center. In my opinion, it is in this way that the cinematic apparatus can see the day and not the other way around, where one puts cinema before people. It's always a dialogue. With my mother, I ask her: « Do you know what I'm doing? For you, what is cinema? » I don't force myself. When Sabine says to me: « Rosine, come in! » when I was filming outside, I accept that reality imposes itself on me. The narrative imposes itself on me. Here, I asked Delphine where she wanted to talk to me. She told me she wanted to stay in bed. Okay, we stay here and talk. If I had decided to film her somewhere else, it wouldn't have been Delphine's story but what I would have wanted to tell about her story. We are together and we are both in control by defining a common language: our friendship. It is only then that cinema can be built.

Delphine used to say to me: « I want us to be as we used to be. That there be no other relationship. If you want us to have the same friends relationship, try to find that place again. Not the place of the director or the one who comes to make a film. » It's a huge cinema lesson for a student who throws herself into life. It was an initiation. Since then, I always ask myself before filming someone « What is my right place here? How can I position myself to be able to look at this person as accurately as possible? » So that those who watch my films can also find their right place to watch Delphine, Sabine or my mother. It sometimes leads me

to constraining choices of scenery, like here with lots of things cluttering up the shot and little recoil. Sometimes I had to take the camera off the stand to keep filming Delphine. But it was the right place that presented itself to me for this story.

We also understand that off-screen is very important in your films. In *Delphine's prayers* we hear the voices of her husband and children but they don't appear in the shot. We also see this choice of direction in *Chez Jolie coiffure* where the outside of the salon is off-camera.

This is how I see immigration. We talk about lockdown today. Yet there is a part of the population that has been living in lockdown for years. Immigration excludes. Delphine leaves her home very little. She hasn't found a job that would allow her to open up to the world. She has only this space. Her perimeter of circulation is not very wide. Even less so for those people in the Matongé gallery who are undocumented. An undocumented person lives in hiding because he is afraid of being arrested. He avoids being exposed as much as possible out of fear of being checked by the police. It is a form of lockdown not to be able to move freely.

The off-camera serves to show this separation of worlds, the partitioning of lives and thoughts. For Sabine, what she experiences consists in the space of her hair salon. For Delphine, her space of expression and freedom is reduced to her bed. The rest of the house does not make her feel secure. She should be a good mother and a good wife, but all the pain she carries does not allow her to be the woman she is expected to be. Everything is biased. That's why the outside characters can't intervene head-on because they don't reassure her. It is not part of who she really is. She is performing outside of her bed. She is pretending with her husband. She is pretending to be in a couple. She pretends when she leaves the house.

Things are easier for me even though I can't indulge in everything. I'm still Black. I can't pretend it doesn't matter. I don't have the

same privileges. I can't act like I'm a White woman who can do whatever she likes. Before anyone realizes that I have my papers, I'm first going to suffer violence because I'm Black. To avoid this situation, I'm going to be careful. I don't have full freedom outside of my house. In spite of my papers, I still have this feeling. Maybe that's why I film Sabine and Delphine this way. Like them, I also feel the fear of the outside world. When Sabine tells me to film inside her living room, it makes me feel safe. I tell myself that no one is going to come and bother me. At Delphine's, it's the same thing. We are protected. It was also reassuring for me to be in that kind of intimacy and not to be outside where I have to get involved with other people on the set.

Are these the reasons why you prefer to remain alone in charge of image and sound ?

Yes, and I don't need intermediaries. My story and the history of Africa have often been told by others. These people do not do what is necessary to tell this story in the most accurate way possible. One sees the opportunities of stories first before building a relationship. One sees Africa first for its opportunities in terms of resources, wealth, and also stories. Many people fantasize about this before building a relationship when it should be the other way around. For me, these two films also sum up how I see myself as an immigrant. I always have this feeling that I don't feel at home, that I don't belong. And this is reflected in my choices as a director.

There seems to always be a ritual before the beginning of each sequence. Before carrying on with her story, Delphine feels the need to change something in her appearance. There is also the particularly intense prayer scene which comes as a moment of relief.

How did you decide to position yourself during this sequence ?

For me, the scene at the end is a baptism, and in order to get there she has to remove layers: that of her childhood, that of her marriage, that of prostitution. Then Delphine asks God for forgiveness because she is a believer. She asks Him to free her

from this burden and anger. I kept almost the entire scene. It is a very important moment. For me, this sequence sums up everything we saw during the film.

She doesn't ask for help from anyone. She doesn't ask me to come and free her. This is precisely where the film is out of phase with the way immigration or Africa are usually represented ; in a position of supplication and dependence. With Delphine, there are always personal decisions that she shares in the film. She doesn't wait for the solution to come from behind the camera. She is not someone who is moping. You can express pain, suffering without feeling sorry for yourself. These are her prayers, they belong to her.

After the prayer, Delphine stands up for the first time in the film. At that moment you decide to break with the direction chosen so far and you move your frame.

We'd expect the film to have some sort of stage direction but it doesn't work because Delphine doesn't obey. I choose to make a *mise en abîme* to say: « Finally, how does staging go? With whom does it happen? » We decided that after the prayer sequence, Delphine would get up from her bed to show that she was turning a page. She expressed what she had to say. She told her story. Now it's done, we're moving on. She can braid my hair again and talk about other things.

Do you think this film is somehow therapeutic for Delphine? It allows her to settle scores, especially with her father.

It's a film of liberation where she settles scores, yes. It is therapeutic for Delphine but also for me. It allows me to settle scores with myself, with my way of thinking, with the way I looked at this kind of person. To say to myself: « What have I been doing for years judging or telling myself that I was better? » Maybe I didn't had the strength to oppose the preconceived ideas. In Cameroon, we don't come from the same neighborhood but from the same social stratum. What she describes in her story are situations that I was also confronted with. When Delphine tells her story, it reminds me

of my neighborhood. A slum looks just like another. The conditions of life and existence are the same. I met several « Delphines » in the neighborhood where I grew up. I was in touch with several of them until my family somehow prevented me from continuing to be around them, considering them to be bad company. I respected this prohibition for my father who did what he could to protect me from the violence in our neighbourhood. It was here in Belgium that I ended up becoming friends with someone like Delphine. I was finally able to get rid of this fear of judgment.

Interview by Aurélie Ghalim

Find the full interview in the
Causes Toujours webzine (in French) :
www.gsara.be/causestoujours

PRESS REVIEW

« Amplifying their valuable accounts, which are inherently tied to her own, Mbakam responsibly serves as protector of this collective bond and shared history. Like all great documentarians, Mbakam synthesizes objectivity and idiosyncrasy during the process of extracting meaning from what occurs in front of her or the conversations she engages in. The camera acts as a direct extension of her eyes. She'd seen these women before but not through the revelatory lens of cinema, and what she discovered about them and herself is maybe more truthful than what reality alone can discern. »

– *African expat filmmaker Rosine Mbakam reveals the strength of women through cinema*
in **LOS ANGELES TIMES**

« With a view that is at once intimate and distant, Mbakam shows the duality of diasporic identity ; she is never totally at home, and never totally without it. In both of her films, Mbakam demonstrates a mastery of perspective, a rare ability to include the camera in community. Her films do not give voice to her subjects — rather, she shares with women the chance to speak for themselves. »

– *Two Films From Rosine Mbakam Explore West African Women's Identity*
in **NEW YORK TIMES**

« She delves deep into family history and intimate experience and opens it out into a wide web of societal connections and political implications. "The Two Faces of a Bamiléké Woman," together with her second feature, "Chez Jolie Coiffure" (2018), which are both opening at the Anthology Film Archives today, for a weeklong run, reveal Mbakam to be one of the foremost filmmakers of creative non fiction working right now. Mbakam's compositional sense—her cinematic thought in action—is revealed throughout the rest of the film, and informs all of her work. »

– *Rosine Mbakam's Intimate Documentaries of Cameroon and the Diaspora*
in **NEW YORK TIMES**

FILMGRAPHY

- **Cadeau**, 20 mn documentary (2009)
- **Les portes du passé**, 13 mn docu-fiction (2011)
- **Mavambu**, portrait of the Congolese sculptor Freddy Tsimba, 27mn (2011)
- **You will be my ally**, 19 mn fiction (2012)
- **The two faces of a Bamiléké woman**, 77 mn documentary (2016)
- **Chez Jolie Coiffure**, 71 mn documentary (2018)
- **Cinetracts '20**, 44 mn documentary (2020)
- **Delphine's prayers**, 90 mn documentary (2021)
- **Prisme**, 80 mn documentary (2021)

AGENDA

WORLD PREMIERE at **Cinéma du Réel**
International Competition (France)
03/2021

US PREMIERE at **Documentary Fortnight ; MoMA's**
International Festival of Nonfiction Film and Media
03-04/2021



PRODUCTION

Tândor Productions was born from the envy of two people : Geoffroy Cernaix and Rosine Mbakam. Their motivations were to set up a space for professional creation with respect for authors, their works and to support projects with a singular and authentic point of view. Today, Tândor Productions is also a group of young film technicians who are keen to set up and defend a different way of making films. In 2018 with the idea of broadening our production horizons, Tândor Films was created in Yaoundé, Cameroon.



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