

FILM REVIEW

Rosine Mfetgo Mbakam, dir. *Mambar Pierrette*. 2023. 93 minutes. French with English subtitles. Vimeo. No price reported.

In *Mambar Pierrette*, the image of a mannequin draped in fabric is a hauntingly effective metaphor for the film's central concern. The film highlights the resilience of women, their enforced voicelessness and their capacity to endure the contortions imposed upon them by a society that renders them both decorative and disposable. The protagonist and other women in her community must "wear" the weight of poverty, cultural constraints, and gendered burdens, shaped and reshaped by external forces beyond their control. The film, with a quietly devastating realism, uses the modest life of a seamstress in the heart of Douala's ghetto to expose the undercurrent of suffering and endurance that defines the lives of working-class African women.

The plot revolves around Mambar Pierrette, a mother, daughter, and seamstress whose daily routines show the pressures of survival. She lives with her two children and an invalid mother in a modest home constantly threatened by poverty and environmental vulnerability. As the school term approaches, Mambar and her younger son strive to gather money for school supplies. This seemingly simple goal becomes a Sisyphean struggle, complicated by systemic neglect, financial precarity, and unexpected disasters. Her son saves from his meager earnings while Mambar scrapes together her wages, only to be robbed on her way home. Later, a flood destroys the school materials she had managed to secure through her aunt. These cascading misfortunes reveal the fragility of life for the urban poor, where a single setback unravels months of hard-earned progress.

Mambar herself is a complex and compelling character. Though she does not overtly lament her condition, her silences are heavy with meaning. She listens more than she speaks, allowing others to unburden themselves. Her shop becomes a space of communal exchange, where the private and political blur. One friend returns from Guinea, revealing she was almost lured into a sex trafficking ring under the pretext of obtaining travel papers to the UK. Another customer urges Mambar to attend a political rally to collect 2,500 francs, a gesture she vehemently rejects as exploitative and pointless. Her refusal to endorse such performative political rituals underscores her acute awareness of the systemic failures that disproportionately burden and disenfranchise women. The film subtly critiques the absence of state infrastructure in the lives of ordinary citizens. The lack of reliable support, whether in the form of social welfare, public education resources, or housing protection, forces women like

Mambar to rely on informal networks, personal loans, or exploitative arrangements.

Through these interactions, the film weaves together multiple threads of Cameroonian life: the collapse of family structures, failed political leadership, and the commodification of female bodies. Mambar reveals, in conversation with a customer, that her husband contributes nothing to the upbringing of their children. Despite familial and cultural pressure, she eventually reports him to social services due to his persistent failure to contribute to the care and development of their children. Her decision is not driven by resentment but by a hope that the agency might compel him, however minimally, to fulfil his parental responsibilities. Her widowed aunt and mother urge her to reconsider, not out of support for the man but out of cultural deference to patriarchal norms. This conflict between personal justice and communal expectation underlines the intergenerational weight of tradition that binds women, even in their suffering.

Visually, the film blends fiction and documentary techniques that lend it both immediacy and authenticity. The camera lingers on daily, unembellished moments like Pierrette threading a needle, folding fabrics and walking through flooded rooms. The use of natural light and close-up shots grounds the viewer in the visceral realities of ghetto life. There are no dramatic musical cues, no soaring orchestras to dramatize the suffering, only the ambient noise of everyday life, which makes the “tragedy” more real. This auditory minimalism enhances the film’s verisimilitude, reinforcing its documentary aesthetic and underscoring the banality of hardship. Crucially, Mambar Pierrette herself does not articulate or even appear fully cognizant of the precariousness of her socioeconomic condition. It is the viewer, positioned outside the narrative yet implicated in its moral gaze, who apprehends the structural vulnerability that defines her existence. Mambar’s lack of overt recognition does not indicate ignorance; rather, it reflects the insidious normalization of poverty, wherein systemic disenfranchisement is woven into the everyday and rendered nearly invisible to those most affected by it.

In *Mambar Pierrette*, women are portrayed not merely as caregivers but as the stabilizing forces of a society fraught with instability. They are depicted as constantly adjusting, absorbing, and enduring the compounding pressures of poverty, familial obligation, and cultural expectation, with minimal institutional support and even less personal reprieve. The film exposes how women in postcolonial African contexts are molded into roles that prioritize the service of others, as daughters, wives, or mothers, while being systematically denied the agency to define their trajectories. Through the recurring metaphor of the mannequin in the tailor shop, the film offers a powerful visualization of this condition: women are fitted, measured, and tailored to societal expectations, contorted into forms that are both decorative and functional, yet always replaceable.

Mambar Pierrette is a quiet but piercing indictment of the burdens African women carry. It strips away romanticized ideals of female resilience and, instead, presents survival as a slow, uncelebrated, and deeply human endeavor. The film refuses the viewer the comfort of catharsis; rather, it compels a confrontation

with the relentless grind of subsistence that defines the lives of millions of women across the continent.

This unflinching attention to the interior lives and external constraints of African women is characteristic of Rosine Mbakam's directorial vision. As in her earlier work, *The Two Faces of a Bamiléké Woman* (2016), Mbakam employs a style of observational realism grounded in intimate, slow-paced storytelling. Her films are not driven by dramatic arcs or heightened cinematic gestures but by the rhythms of everyday life. In doing so, she creates space for marginalized voices to emerge organically and with dignity. Mbakam's focus is not only on portraying women's suffering but on illuminating how that suffering is normalized, internalized, and transmitted through cultural and generational structures. Her camera lingers without intrusion, allowing conversations, silences and gestures to accumulate meaning. By centering women's experiences in both the private and public domains, Mbakam's work reclaims narrative authority for those most often rendered invisible, not through spectacle or confrontation, but through attentive, ethical representation.

Omoh Giwa 

University of Lagos, Akoka, Nigeria

victoriagiwa12@gmail.com

doi:[10.1017/asr.2025.10123](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2025.10123)