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UN CERTAIN REGARD
FESTIVAL DE CANNES

BEN'IMANA

A Film By MARIE-CLÉMENTINE DUSABEJAMBO
Starring CLÉMENTINE U. NYIRINKINDI, ISABELLE KABANO, KESIA KELLY NISHIMWE

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SYNOPSIS

Rwanda, 2012. In the years following the Genocide against the Tutsi, community-led trials for justice and reconciliation continue across the country. Vénéranda, a survivor, leads dialogue between victims and the families of perpetrators, helping others rebuild their lives and look towards the future. But when she learns of her daughter's unexpected pregnancy, she is forced to confront the limits of her own convictions.

AN INTERVIEW WITH THE MARIE-CLÉMENTINE DUSABEJAMBO

What's your background?

I was born and raised in Kigali, and I was destined for a career in electronics before my involvement in film came about.

In 2008, during a gap year between high school and university - where I was due to study electronics - I went to a you center in Kigali to learn traditional dance. There I met some young people in a theater group who told me they had been in a movie that had played at Cannes - it seemed incredible to me, but it was true! Lee Isaac Chung had shot his *Munyurangabo (*Un Certain Regard, 2007) in Rwanda, and they had been part of the cast and crew.

After the shoot, they formed their own small production company, Almond Tree Films, they were supported from afar by Isaac who helped them with some equipment etc, and they started teaching themselves how to make short films. They invited me to join the group and I started learning alongside them. All the while I was studying electronics and communications at university - just in case!

In 2010, Isaac sent us a call for projects from the Tribeca Film Institute for a scriptwriters' contest about resilience. I won it, and, supported by the Tribeca FIlm Institude, Isaac came back to Rwanda to teach us filmmaking. From there my first, twenty-minute short film *Lyiza*, was born. It was presented at the Tribeca Film Festival in 2011, and won a prize at Carthage Film Festival, in Tunisia, in 2012.

Carthage was where I really became more aware of African cinema. There were films, debates, conferences and I started to become truly passionate about the history of the African 'seventh art'. I met Haile Gerima there, he was very inspiring and offered feedback and guidance as I wrote my next script.

The relative success of my short film allowed me to earn a bit of money and make a second short, *Une place pour moi* (*A Place for Myself*), in 2015. Then a third, *Icyasha*, in 2018. From there, I won a number of awards that encouraged me to continue.

How was the *Ben'Imana* project born?

For a long time, I hesitated between documentary and fiction, because I was searching for the most judicious form to broach this subject, it was the result of a slow and constant evolution. Once I'd set my sights on fiction, I wanted to break away from traditional narrative schemas to offer a film where the plurality of stories would lie at its heart.

At what point did you know it would be a fictional story, rather than a documentary?

By working with filmmakers on documentaries concerning the Tutsi genocide - like research for the documentary series *Why We Hate?* by Geeta Gandbhir and Sam Pollard (which was executive-produced by Steven Spielberg and Alex Gibney) and as Assistant Director for *Faces We Lost* by Piotr Cieplak, I saw the shy modesty of the women and I thought that it wouldn't be easy to place a Rwandan woman in front of a documentary camera. Rwandan culture demands a great deal of silence. A mother once told me: you do not say "I love you" to your child, not because you don't love them but because there are things that are so powerful that they must not be diluted in words. Not talking about your suffering is also a way of maintaining your dignity, not losing the value of your pain.

Words are nevertheless powerful vehicles for reconciliation…

In this film, I had to find the balance between saying too much and succumbing to the unutterable. I learned to tame this silence that women inhabit; this silence that they render more vibrant than any spoken words. For them, staying silent is a sovereign form of communication. It is an affirmation of being: "I am here, and my life is the proof of my truth." Trauma is something collective, striving for peace remains an individual odyssey. But, addressing trauma requires collective work and dialogue.

In your research, did you set out to meet many women?

I listened to these women for a very long time, because I wanted to grasp the mystery of their words. How do you express the unimaginable? How do you convey, aloud, what you've experienced in silence? This journey to meet them enabled me to come as close as I could to

the truth of their emotions. I was not only looking for facts; I was trying to capture the beating heart of a mother, sister, grandmother, daughter, when confronted by history.

I wanted to inhabit their everyday life to grasp the way in which they manage to transform pain into serene, free speech. I had to find the right tone to get a mother's heart to resound. It is like singing in a choir while keeping each identity intact. The tale of *Ben'Imana* thus becomes universal: it reminds us that women constitute the foundation on which our societies are built.

This creative process demanded more than a simple presence from me; I had to learn to feel beyond words. With cinema, you do not film a concept, you film a lived experience. You can't stage forgiveness or pain without first having felt them inside.

Vénéranda does not manage to forgive her daughter Tina, even though she says that it's a journey of self-discovery for which the key is forgiveness

Because forgiveness is a pathway, not an instantaneous act. It is a resolution that radically alters our logic and that, in order to last, must take root deep within us, beyond language. That is what makes Vénéranda's situation so human and so difficult: the heart cannot be forced. It is the body that speaks, and the body has its own clock, its own language, much slower than that of the will.

Ben'Imana **is also less a film about forgiveness than it is about an intangible generational transmission that occurs, despite parents' desire to stay silent.**

Ben'Imana is a film about survival. Through Vénéranda, I tell the story of a woman whose body has been a battlefield. Rape as a weapon of war leaves traces that the legal system has trouble naming or remedying, due to a lack of tangible 'proof'. I was interested in filming that "weight", that constant presence of the past. How do you transmit life when you carry a wound inside that society does not yet know how to look in the eye?

My concern was to understand the ramparts that our parents have built up around us, their children, to spare us. Our parents traversed the unutterable of genocide, then the confrontation of the Gacaca courts attempting to foster truth and reconciliation. But between their experience and our generation, they erected a wall of silence. What I wanted to shed light on was the paradoxical nature of this: while it has not protected us from the perception of their pain, it has acted as a filter against hatred.

Everything is intertwined in this story and you manage to show how the genocide affected all strata of the country. Every element – Tina's love, the destruction of Madeleine's house, Suzanne's struggle – all seem to be a metaphor for or a direct consequence of the past.

Everything is intertwined. Emotion is not an accumulation of statistics or events.
In Suzanne's house, the walls are marked by the blaze, testaments of the messages left by the survivors. This wall embodies the living memory of the country. It symbolises my refusal of cold statistics: I do not film debris; I film the indelible traces that history has left on our lives and under our roofs.

Where did you shoot the film?

We left the hum of Kigali for the heights of the hills of Kibeho. In Kibeho, we found much more than a location: we found a soul. The landscape there is a living metaphor for the characters in the film. In this part of the country, the cold and the morning mist sketch out an in-between world, a limbo of captivating beauty. It is a place of extraordinary evocative power, in which the landscape itself seems haunted by memory. Between the casting and this immutable setting, the script came to life in an almost supernatural harmony.

Tell us about your cast

Isabelle Kabano (Suzanne) is an award winning Rwandan actress and brings a wealth of experience. Her performance in Eric Barbier's *Petit Pays* (*Small Country: An African Childhood,* 2020) was so memorable. She was also the bridge towards the other women as well as playing her role she introduced me to Léocadie Uwabeza (Madeleine). She also spent two weeks coaching our non-professional actors, as well as offering guidance on set. As for Clémentine Uwimana (Vénéranda), she joined us at the last second, we had been looking for our perfect Vénéranda for so long and when we were introduced to Clémentine and she was perfect, it felt like the most natural thing in the world.

But the true beating heart on location was the presence of the women whose lives inspired this story, the non-prefessional actors who made up so much of the cast. By being there, at our side, they blurred the boundary between memory and cinema.

Why did you situate the film in 2012?

Situating the story in 2012 was an organic choice. Historically, this date marks the end of the Gacaca courts, a crucial phase when the country shifted from legal justice towards a more intimate reconciliation. It was also the moment when Tina reached the age of sitting her university entrance exam, symbolising a new generation ready to fly solo. I didn't want a "reactive" film on the immediate post-genocide; I preferred to explore the long period of sedimentation. The year 2012 gave me that perfect equilibrium: enough distance for hindsight, but enough proximity for the wounds to still be raw.

You were seven years old in 1994; do you remember the genocide?

At seven, you perceive the world in fragments, through emotions and not political analyses. My work as a director, here, is not to unearth childhood memories, but to carry the voice of my characters, with all the maturity I now have. What I have chosen to share with audiences is the universal emotion of the film, not my own past. That is where my freedom as an artist resides.

At seven, I saw a world collapse; today, through my art, I am participating in rebuilding a new one.

Would it be futile, then, to ask which ethnicity you belong to?

This question of Hutu/Tutsi belongs to a lexicon that we have chosen to overcome. I define myself as Rwandan and as an artist. Answering with an ethnic label would be a betrayal of the spirit of the film, which seeks precisely to explore humanity beyond some of the divisions that some have wanted to impose on us.

Ben'Imana was not built on these rifts. It's about destiny, resilience and dignity. Bringing the debate back to ethnicity reduces the artistic scope of a work to a simple sociological equation, which I refuse!

I understand that the public needs historical bearings but, in Rwanda, we learned that these categories are the very ones that have destroyed our social fabric. The film is an invitation to see us differently.

Can you describe how you shot and structured the film?

My mise en scène consisted of finding the appropriate distance. By filming Victoire and Madeleine in profile or in silhouette, I preferred a hesitant evocation, rather than an overly

incisive gaze. The same goes for the judge, who remains off camera during key moments: it's a way of breaking the institutional solemnity in favour of more organic emotions.

The film is built on a triangular structure: victim, criminal, judge, in which each angle questions the other. These sequence shots on faces, prolonged to the point of discomfort, are there to grasp a more eloquent silence than the verdict.

How long did this film take you to make?

Ten years. There was a tremendous amount of research and development. I also had to learn to feel, listen, and speak.

What is the translation and significance of the title *Ben'Imana*?

In Kinyarwanda, Ben'Imana literally means "God's people " or " The Lucky Ones." It's a term we use to describe ourselves in Rwanda, referring to our oneness; we share one single language, a single culture. The journey of making this film on Justice and the journey of reconciliation was a quest for identity, a going back to the source, that oneness that used to be before everything fell apart, that's why I chose the title *Ben'Imana*.

Despite the trauma at the heart of the narrative, the film exudes love and resolve, what was your intention there?

Ben'Imana exudes love and resolve because it is the fruit of an unprecedented collective effort. This film is a Rwandan work of art in the purest sense: our crew consisted of ninety percent local professionals. It is this love of the project that makes the film possible, with a technical team and backers who were invested body and soul, despite limited means. Seeing this film become the first Rwandan feature film at Cannes is a huge victory for our industry and for our country.

Ben'Imana is also the fruit of a powerful encounter between two African women, my two producers, Gabonese Samantha Biffot and Rwandan Marie Epiphanie Uwayezu. This collaboration between Rwanda and Gabon represents a tangible cooperation, in which our forces are united around a story that is necessary. Around this base, the film was built in coproduction with France and Norway, in a dynamic of balanced collaboration. Together, we wanted to cross borders and demonstrate that it is possible to work with international partners while conserving strong African leadership. It is proof that as women and producers from the continent, we can exist fully and affirm our creativity.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

GACACA (pronounced "Gatchatcha"), literally "soft grass" in Kinyarwanda, means "the place where people gather." The Gacaca community courts were adopted in Rwanda between 2005 and 2012 to try thousands of people accused of genocide and crimes against humanity committed between 1990 and 1994.

Originally, Gacaca were used to settle neighborhood or family disputes on the hillsides. It was a form of justice of the peace, conducted without lawyers and far removed from modern judicial practices: a village assembly presided over by elders, where anyone could ask to speak. Post-genocide Rwanda chose this judicial policy — a revival of a "traditional" model — because of the singularity of the Genocide against the Tutsi, which was planned at the heart of the political and military hierarchy and whose execution involved the participation of the population on a considerable scale. How to try the full range of those responsible for and complicit in the genocide? How to ensure non-violent coexistence between victims and perpetrators? How to manage this genocidal memory if these horrors went unspoken? How to establish a shared historical narrative? These were the questions Rwandan society faced in the aftermath of the Genocide against the Tutsi. Gacaca thus emerged as a historiographical undertaking — a project of writing the history of the Genocide — beyond its judicial and reconciliation objectives.

BIOGRAPHY

Born in Rwanda, **Marie-Clémentine Dusabejambo** is a self-taught filmmaker. She took her first steps in cinema in 2008, as part of a collective of young filmmakers in her neighbourhood.

In 2010, she won a scriptwriters' competition of the Tribeca Film Institute, which gave rise to her first short film, *Lyiza*, which premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival in 2011 and won the Bronze Tanit at the (JCC) Carthage Film Festival in 2012.

She worked as an archivist on the documentary series *Why We Hate?* directed by Sam Pollard and Geeta Gandbhir, executive-produced by Steven Spielberg and Alex Gibney, and as Assistant Director for *Faces We Lost* by Piotr Cieplak

Her short films (*Lyiza*, *A Place for Myself*, and *Icyasha*) have screened at major international festivals and won numerous awards. Based in Kigali, *Ben'Imana* is her first feature film.

Filmography

BEN'IMANA (2026)
Feature film
Director and screenwriter

ICYASHA (2018)
Short film
FESPACO 2017, Thomas Sankara Award, Prix de la Chance AMAA 2017, Efere Ozako Award
Multiple international festivals

A PLACE FOR ME (2016)
Short film
Carthage Film Festival (JCC) 2016, Bronze Tanit Zanzibar International Film Festival (ZIFF) 2016, Ousmane Sembene Award, Signis Award, Golden Dhow Milano Film Festival 201, CINIT Prize
Other international festivals

LYIZA (2011)
Short film
Tribeca Film Festival 2011,Carthage Film Festival (JCC) 2012, Bronze Tanit Multiple international festivals

CREDITS

Cast

Vénéranda	Clémentine U. Nyirinkindi
Tina	Kesia Kelly Nishimwe
Grandmother	Arivere Kagoyire
Suzanne	Isabelle Kabano
Victoire	Antoinette Uwamahoro

Madeleine	Léocadie Uwabeza
Karangwa	Aime Valens Tuyisenge
Ingabire	Hamida Uwimana
Judge	Adelite Mugabo
Théodata	Clémence Murorunkwer

Crew

A Film By	Marie-Clémentine Dusabejambo
Screenplay By	Marie-Clémentine Dusabejambo
In Collaboration With	Delphine Agut
Produced By	Samantha Biffot, Marie Epiphanie Uwayezu, Pierre-Adrien Ceccaldi, Marie-Clémentine Dusabejambo
Cinematography	Mostafa El Kashef
Editing	Nadia Ben Rachid
Sound	Eugène Safali
Original Music	Igor Mabano
Production Design	Ricardo Sankara
Color Grading	Éric Salleron
Sound Editing	Amélie Canini

Sound Mixing	Mélissa Petitjean
Production	Ejo Cine Ltd and Ogweli Productions
Co-production	Princess M Productions (Gabon), Ejo Cine Ltd (Rwanda), Duo Film (Norway), Les Films du Bilboquet (France)
International Sales	MK2
Distribution (France)	Ad Vitam