

# FILM REVIEW

**Elvis Sabin Ngaïbino, dir. *Makongo*.** 2020. 72 min. Aka, Sango, French, with English Subtitles. Central African Republic, Italy, and Argentina. Makongo Films. No Price Reported.

In his first feature-length documentary, *Makongo*, filmmaker Elvis Sabin Ngaïbino presents a glimpse into the quotidian struggles of two Aka men to uplift themselves and the youth of their community through education. At the same time moving and troubling, this film operates in an observational mode to chronicle the bond of the two main subjects, André and Albert, between survival and seizing a different future. The film was produced within the framework of the Ateliers Varan and depicts the lead-up to and actualization of the yearly harvest of caterpillars which gives the film its title. Ngaïbino's perspective offers a window into the tense social and economic circumstances which heighten the significance and potential impact of both the harvest and education for the pair, centering on the minority status and difficult conditions of the Aka in the Central African Republic.

Over ambient sounds of the rainforest, the film opens with intertitles that announce the geographical and societal marginality of the Aka, noting that André and Albert are the only individuals from their community who are still pursuing their studies. These sounds soon coincide with images which situate André and Albert within their specific milieu, showing them bidding farewell to family at their encampment on the edge of the forest before trekking into dense foliage. Much of the film is marked by similar moments enshrouded by trees, wherein André and Albert are shown in long shots completing physically strenuous tasks, such as traversing muddy terrain, wading through deep water, whacking down branches, and climbing high into the forest's canopy. If the pair's visible doggedness to survive is not compelling enough on its own, Ngaïbino rapidly invests viewers emotionally in Albert and André's relentless drive by incorporating sequences where they interact with those outside of their community. One of the first of these scenes, wherein the two receive the good news of their passing grades and ability to continue their schooling the next year, takes on an uncomfortable tenor as they awkwardly endure stereotypical and prejudiced comments from non-Aka school employees about their culture. In the face of intolerance from other Central Africans, an

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element which reoccurs throughout the film in a variety of contexts, André and Albert appear as beacons of resilience and determination, notably in taking on the additional arduous labor for continuing to finance their education and, by extension, for potential future social mobility.

Albert and André's apparently unwavering faith in education is placed parallel to the very physical, concrete harvesting activities which make their education and the materials it requires obtainable. While neither the director nor his subjects explicitly address the relationship between work and education in a critical manner, Ngaïbino's combination of these topics highlights the duality required of the pair: the specialized knowledge of caterpillar harvesting and other skills to be able to provide for oneself and one's community in the present moment and the mastery of traditional French-language education which is understood to offer the possibility of an improved set of circumstances in the long-term. But it is not simply for their own futures that they indefatigably harvest, shlep, and barter. André and Albert begin to leverage their personal progress to help prepare Aka children for school as traveling volunteer teachers. Both the drive and the heart of this film are situated in the contexts of marginality and intentions of community betterment, especially past the mid-point of the film, when the pair announce to their students that they will temporarily stop their lessons to raise money to pay as many school fees as possible by selling caterpillars in Bangui. The film's multiple sequences of schooling, and, often relatedly, community music-making, are what help bring some brief instances of lightheartedness to this at-times excruciating watch.

Indeed, between the labor sequences and moments of social hardship, whether it is in-laws requesting increasingly more funds, interminable sequences of bartering with disdainful buyers, or the community mourning a stillbirth, Ngaïbino demonstrates a knack for immersing the viewer in profound unease. His unflinching use of long takes and sequences assists in communicating this weight that is carried by the two subjects as they work toward their objectives. *Makongo* thus joins his 2017 short film *Docta Jefferson*, about a self-taught pharmacist in Bangui, in bringing to light the everyday lives of Central Africans navigating the pressure of impossible situations. However, the present documentary emphasizes more strongly the agency with which André and Albert confront these circumstances, by turning themselves and their community to schooling in hopes for a better life. Though drawing on a very specific and visually striking way of life intimately connected to the rain-forest and what happens at its edges, Ngaïbino's feature-length debut speaks to issues of education and labor, of belonging, and of responsibilities to others, none of which could be confined to only one nation. And despite the disarming perseverance of André and Albert, they remain larger than all of us.

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