

FRANCOPHONE FILM: *PIÈCES D'IDENTITÉS*

Using a film in French by an African director has brought a new dimension to my third-year, university-level course that includes both advanced conversation and composition activities. Although I have used numerous films before, all of them focused on French culture. Selecting a film produced outside of France with an African theme required some Francophone cinema research, which turned up a winner. The Congolese filmmaker Mweze Dieudonné Ngangura won the most prestigious prize in African cinema, the "Étalon de Yennega," at the 1999 *Festival Panafricain de Cinéma de Ouagadougou* in Burkina Faso for his feature film *Pièces d'identités* (1998). Ngangura first became known to international cinema audiences as director of *La Vie est belle* (1988), a film based on the romantic success story of a Congolese musician played by the African music star Papa Wemba, who makes a cameo appearance in Ngangura's recent film.

Pièces d'identités, a modern fairytale with realistic and historical elements, is entertaining while presenting major issues concerning identity at several levels. In the opening scene we meet Mani Kongo, respected king of the Bakongo, a region located in the present-day Democratic Republic of the Congo, formerly the Belgian Congo until 1960, when it gained independence and became the Republic of the Congo. Renamed the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 1964, it became the Republic of Zaïre in 1971; in 1997 it returned to the 1964 name.

After consulting with his council of elders, Mani Kongo decides to travel to Belgium in search of his daughter Mwana, whom he sent to study in the European country fifteen years earlier when the child was only eight. Mani Kongo's recollections of the "mother country" are based on a trip he made to Belgium in 1958 when King Baudouin was courting the allegiance of local African chiefs in hopes of discouraging the movement for independence. Mani Kongo's memories are presented as flashbacks, actual black-and-white news-reel scenes taken in the 1950s. The flashback scenes are very effective in preparing the viewer for Mani Kongo's humiliating arrival in Belgium forty years later. In order for students to grasp the historical and geographical contexts of the film, I have them prepare brief oral presentations (with maps) on the Democratic Republic of the Congo and on Belgium, where most of the film takes place.

Students are not generally aware that Belgium was a colonial power in Africa.

The first challenge to Mani Kongo's identity takes place in front of the Sabena Airlines office in Kinshasa, where two young, urban Congolese make an impertinent remark concerning his appearance: "C'est le dernier cri, en direct du village?" His regal headdress, necklace, and staff, symbolizing authority among his own people, are ridiculed by his compatriots in the capital. This scene is important early in the film because it shows that the theme of identity is not limited to the African/European experience; even in one's own culture there are different concepts of identity. We also realize that Mani Kongo's personal identity is closely attached to these fetishes. Arriving at customs in the Brussels airport, he is told that he has to pay an exorbitant tax on these items (considered art objects in Europe) or they will be confiscated. The frantic look on Mani Kongo's face reveals his panic at the thought of being stripped of the outer manifestations of his authority. Through a series of misadventures while searching for his daughter Mwana, the venerable African king becomes homeless, is robbed of his money, visa, and passport, and is tricked into pawning his sacred relics. Ironically, it is when he is stripped of these exterior elements of identity that Mani Kongo becomes an interesting character as we discover his profoundly human qualities of basic dignity, forgiveness, and love for others.

The problem of identity for Mwana is even more complex. An African educated from a young age by Catholics in her native country, she is sent to a convent school in Belgium on the advice of the clergy, who convince Mani Kongo that he is acting in the best interests of his daughter, whose goal is to become a doctor. It is not clear in the film whether the desire to go into medicine comes from her own conviction or if it has been imposed on her by her father and educators. After spending ten of her formative years in the Belgian school, Mwana is dismissed when tuition payments fail to arrive. She is released into the custody of her "cousin," in reality her Congolese boyfriend who gets her involved in drug running, thus imposing on her an identity she never would have chosen. Arrested for possession, she falls into the hands of an unscrupulous police inspector who promises not to send her to prison if she will become a dancer in an erotic bar

and inform on the clientele. To ensure compliance, he threatens to take away her passport and visa. Not only does Mwana risk losing her official proof of identity, she is blackmailed into taking on still another persona against her will.

When we first meet Mwana, she is being pursued by Viva wa Viva, the ex-boyfriend who got her into trouble. For Viva, identity is based on one's clothing; he is the epitome of the idea "the brand makes the man" ("la griffe fait l'homme"). He sees himself as a respectable "Mister Cool," but his fashionable duds thinly disguise a despicable character who has to commit crimes in order to pay for his outer trappings. The villain of the plot, he meets his downfall in the end.

I used the term "fairytale" to describe this film. So far we have met the king, the princess in danger, and the villain (actually, there are two villains, Viva wa Viva and the police inspector). Now we need a prince charming, who appears in the character Chaka-Jo. While helping both Mani Kongo and Mwana without knowing they are related, he eventually brings them together. Chaka Jo's identity problem goes back to his birth. The son of an African woman and a Belgian colonial administrator, he grew up in a Belgian orphanage. Describing himself as a "false Congolese, a false Belgian, and a false cab driver," he illegally transports passengers in his old white Volvo, the white horse in this modern fairytale. Playing the role of a modern-day Robin Hood, Chaka-Jo robs bars disguised in an African mask and calling himself "le Sauveur de l'humanité." Although he commits petty crimes, he has a heart of gold that wins the respect, love, and release of Mani Kongo and Mwana. A series of unbelievable coincidences brings the film to a happy end with a surprise, which, appropriately, is based on mistaken identity.

Pièces d'identités is an entertaining blend of serious issues and an engaging fiction that brings in realistic details, such as the humiliation Africans endure in a major European capital where the police constantly check their identification papers. Admirably, Ngangura, who wrote, produced, and directed the film, maintains a balance by presenting white and black characters who love and respect each other along with members of both races who do not have these qualities. The film presents many elements that make up individual identity, the most obvious being race, sex, culture, religion, and nationality, which

certainly play important roles. Going beyond these factors, we also see the importance of self-concept, peer pressure, and the expectations of parents and teachers. The topic of identity, based on this film as a point of departure, has inspired some of the most interesting discussions I have had with students. One student wrote a perceptive composition in which she made a connection between two characters who seem to have nothing in common, the villainous ex-boyfriend Viva wa Viva, and the highly respected Mani Kongo. She developed the idea that both characters are attached to their outer "fetishes" in order to present an image that seeks respect. When these exterior manifestations are peeled away, we discover the true identity of each person. Other discussions and compositions have focused on Mwana, who adopts the name Amanda while living in Belgium. Her character poses some interesting questions: who is she as Mwana? Who is she as Amanda? What contributes to our perception of who we are? To what extent do other people impose an identity upon us? Does each person have, in fact, several identities? Exploring answers to these questions brings philosophical and psychological insights to the discussion that go beyond race and nationality.

On a lighter note, students enjoy the film's music, composed by Jean-Louis Daulne, who also plays the role of Chaka-Jo. The scene at the "fête africaine" introduces us to Papa Wemba, whose performance is a lively blend of African and Western music. Several Web sites devoted to Papa Wemba provide information for student presentations and access to his recordings.

Some viewers might see *Pièces d'identités* as a frivolous representation of the pathetic African diaspora. To counter this point, one could argue that Ngangura and other African filmmakers have produced documentaries that show the stark reality of the tragic situations. (A number of these films are available through California Newsreel/Resolution; see below.) A fictional film with a happy ending is not an attempt to replace the sad reality but to present it in a different form. Another negative criticism of the film is that the Belgians are portrayed as bigoted ex-colonialists who speak with a strong accent in French, a description that fits the police chief and his lackey as well as others. There are several scenes that take place in a bar where aging veterans gather to talk about the "good old days, thus presenting downtrodden characters who are not typical of the vibrant Belgian capital. Most of the scenes take place in an immigrant

neighborhood where one would likely find such a bar, which plays a role in the film as a gathering place for the main characters.

Pièces d'identités had its premiere in Paris on July 26, 2000 and has enjoyed enthusiastic reviews.

Suggestions for Pedagogical Activities

Before viewing the film. Students prepare presentations on the Democratic Republic of the Congo, based on information from Web sites easily found by using the former name Zaïre. They also present a brief overview of Belgium as a colonial power, explaining the role of the king, who appears in the film's flashbacks.

Since the names of characters and some of the vocabulary in the film might be difficult, it is helpful to provide a handout with the following items:

Personnages principaux

- Mani Kongo, roi du Bakongo (au Congo)
- Mwana (Amanda), fille de Mani Kongo
- Mayelé, neveu de Mani Kongo
- Safi, amie de Mwana
- Viva wa Viva, ancien "fiancé" de Mwana
- Chaka-Jo, chauffeur de taxi
- le Commissaire Jefke, chef de police à Bruxelles; ancien administrateur au Congo
- le Sergent Van Loo, un inspecteur qui travaille pour Jefke

Vocabulaire

- la toque: le chapeau the headdress worn by Mani Kongo
- le collier: the sacred necklace he wears
- la cane: the sacred staff he carries
- le Foyer d'Afrique; a welcoming home for Africans
- la griffe fait l'homme: the brand makes the man
- un métis: a person of mixed race
- un dispensaire; a clinic
- une médaille: a charm

After viewing the film:

The following questions give a focus to small group discussions based on the film:

1. Où est-ce que le film commence? Pourquoi Mani Kongo veut-il aller en Belgique? Expliquez sa "douleur."
2. Devant l'agence Sabena à Kinshasa, quelle est l'attitude des deux jeunes Africains quand ils voient Mani Kongo?
3. Est-ce que Mani Kongo avait jamais visité la Belgique? Expliquez.
4. Pourquoi avait-il envoyé sa fille en Belgique?
5. Qu'est-ce qu'il chante dans l'avion? Quand il arrive à l'aéroport de Bruxelles, décrivez la scène à la douane.
6. Qu'est-ce que nous apprenons peu à peu au sujet de Mwana?

7. Décrivez la visite de Mani Kongo au couvent à Louvain.
8. Mani Kongo est victime plusieurs fois à Bruxelles. Expliquez.
9. Expliquez le rôle des chaussures dans le film.
10. Qui est Papa Wemba? Quelle chanson chante-t-il à la Fête africaine?
11. Décrivez Chaka-Jo. Il dit lui-même qu'il est "faux." Dans quels sens est-il faux?
12. L'identité est le thème principal dans ce film. Décrivez les situations dans lesquelles l'identité joue un rôle.
13. Il y a beaucoup de coïncidences dans ce film. Expliquez-en cinq.

Small group activity

Divide the class into five groups. Give each group the name of one of the following characters: Mani Kongo, Mwana, Viva wa Viva, Chaka-Jo, and le Commissaire Jefke. The students have ten minutes to prepare a description of each character's double identity to present to the class.

Additional topics for class discussion

1. The realistic elements woven into this modern fairytale.
2. The meaning of the word "diaspora" in an African context.

The two films by Ngangura *La Vie est belle* and *Pièces d'identités* (in French with English subtitles) can be ordered from California Newsreel/Resolution, 149 Ninth Street, #420, San Francisco, CA 94103; Telephone: (415) 621-6196; Fax (415) 621-6522; e-mail: [contact@newsreel.org]. Price of each film on videocassette: \$195.

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