

FILM REVIEW

Elvis Sabin Ngaïbino, dir. *Le Fardeau*. 2023. 80 minutes. Central African Republic, Congo Kinshasa, France. Makongo Films. Available to stream on myCANAL.

In Boy-Rabe, a district of Bangui, the capital of the Central African Republic, Reine and Rodrigue are fervently taking part in the prayer and deliverance sessions led by Apostle Jean of the Apostolic Church *Les Affranchis* (“the Freed”). Rodrigue is even thinking of becoming a pastor in this church himself, which would have the added benefit of enabling the couple to support themselves and their children. However, Reine and Rodrigue are hiding the fact that they suffer from AIDS: it is a secret they dare not talk about, especially to Apostle Jean, who thinks that the French acronym of the disease, *SIDA*, is made up of the initials of the words *Seigneur* (“Lord”), *interdit* (“prohibition”), *débauche* (“debauchery”), and *adultère* (“adultery”). According to a recurrent interpretation found in these churches and regions, AIDS—which is most often talked about euphemistically and whose symptoms tend to be concealed—is either a divine punishment or the shameful mark of reprehensible behavior. Because they explain misfortune as the result of persecution by others or of individual guilt, the worlds of witchcraft and divine healing remain well in the background, including in this film where witch-finding and deliverance sessions are opportunely shot in a sober, nonvoyeuristic way.


The internalized stigma leads Reine and Rodrigue, who fear being found out by neighbors, to get rid of their precious antiretroviral medications and constantly intensify their prayers. This all-encompassing religious commitment does not preclude the couple from talking to patient support groups or seeking help from doctors, despite their inability to cover the costs of the care they are prescribed. As their situation worsens, Rodrigue decides to reveal his and Reine’s condition to the gathered church members and Apostle Jean. Freed of this “burden,” the couple draw new strength to increase their prayers and the offerings they collect in public places: their proclamation of God’s word now includes an anti-stigma message, urging people to submit solely and completely to divine judgment.

The Central African director Elvis Sabin Ngaïbino has already been noted for his film *Makongo* (2020), which focused on the efforts and humiliations of two Central African youths from an Aka Pygmy community as they fought to open a school in their home village. The theme of the destructive force of stigma is again present in *Le Fardeau* (*The Burden*). This latest film goes further, showing not only an individual struggle against the crushing gaze of a society’s majority, but also the contradictions that lie behind Reine and Rodrigue’s commitment to the very circles and ideas that help to marginalize them. Christian faith and feelings of

guilt, insufficient means and existential uncertainty, but also the limitations and failings of medical services drive the couple towards these assemblies where the disease is most strongly stigmatized. It is therefore by talking about their condition in front of the faithful, and then endeavoring to convey the apostolic message with renewed vigor, that Reine and Rodrigue manage to at least assuage their inner torments. In these contexts, having faith also means being faithful to a group with whom they choose to share their religious commitment and the weight of the innumerable difficulties of daily life. And they only really feel relieved of the greatest “burden” when they find or rediscover their place within the assembly, turning to a god whom Reine and Rodrigue call “the doctors’ doctor.”

Elvis Sabin Ngaïbino’s closeness to this world and its protagonists has enabled him to capture on screen touching moments of human intimacy and fragility, but also a religious exaltation that is relentless, even—or, according to the logic of these assemblies, especially—in front of the children who, in the Central African Republic, are so often accused of being “witches.” In all these situations, the director refrains from making any judgments, preferring to follow the thread of a couple’s love and solidarity that contribute greatly to the strength that Reine and Rodrigue show in the face of adversities. Also worth noting are some beautiful outside scenes shot in Bangui’s markets or during the spectacular pilgrimage that takes place every year at Ngoukomba’s Marian shrine where, according to some, a cross appeared in the sky in 2008.

Le Fardeau has won awards and has been selected for many festivals. Elvis Ngaïbino thus continues his international career which, as with other Central African filmmakers, was propelled by the first “Varan workshops” (*Ateliers Varan*) on making documentaries, organized in Bangui in 2017, during one of the most tragic decades in the country’s history. One merit of this generation of Central African filmmakers is that they help show a human and dramatic side to their country that could not have come out of the torrent of reports, videos, and images to which we became accustomed during long years of conflict and disorder.

Andrea Ceriana Mayneri 

National Centre for Scientific Research,
Institut des mondes africains (IMAF), Aubervilliers, France
andrea.cerianamayneri@cnr.fr
doi:10.1017/asr.2025.17