

# INTIMATE REVOLUTION

How two African filmmakers – Milisuthando Bongela and Akuol de Mabior – are rewriting cinema's memory

WORDS: EUGENE YIGA

Two women, separated by a continent but united by vision, are fundamentally reshaping how African stories are told on screen. Milisuthando Bongela from South Africa and Akuol de Mabior from South Sudan represent a new generation of filmmakers who refuse to conform to Western expectations of what African cinema should be. Their debut documentaries *Milisuthando* and *No Simple Way Home* have garnered international acclaim at festivals from Sundance to the Berlinale. But their true achievement lies in something more profound: the creation of an entirely new language for African storytelling.

Instead of trying to explain Africa to the world, their films are intimate conversations between African voices and use the camera as a tool for healing, memory-making and collective reflection. Both filmmakers have discovered that the most powerful African stories may be those that refuse to justify themselves to outside audiences, but rather create spaces for internal dialogue and transformation. ➔



From left to right:  
Filmmakers Akuol de Mabior  
and Milisuthando Bongela

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### BEYOND THE TRAUMA LENS

For decades, African stories on international screens have been dominated by narratives of suffering and victimhood. It's something critics call "poverty porn". Both filmmakers consciously reject this approach and instead choose to interrogate the systems that created suffering rather than fetishising its effects.

"My concern with apartheid is not about the exhibition of black pain as a way of understanding why apartheid happens," Bongela states. "My work is to look at white society and say: why do you do this?" This shift in perspective from victim to analyst represents a fundamental challenge to how African experiences have traditionally been mediated for global consumption.

The reception of Bongela's film illustrates this tension perfectly. While *Milisuthando* found enthusiastic audiences in North America and Asia, it initially struggled in Europe. "It felt as if Europe said, 'Oh, racism is not a problem here. That's an American thing,'" she explains. The film's refusal to centre Black suffering disrupted comfortable narratives about where racism exists and who is responsible for addressing it.

De Mabior faces similar challenges when representing African leadership. "There's a tendency to cast the experience of African leadership outside of humanity," she observes. "African leaders are either demons or saints." Her approach deliberately resists these binaries. Instead, she presents complex human beings rather than heroic or villainous archetypes and, in doing so, challenges the solemn iconography surrounding liberation leaders. "If he were here, he would be making jokes, you know, [because] that's also his personality," she says of her late father John Garang, the revolutionary leader who founded the Sudan People's Liberation Army and became South Sudan's first vice president.

When Bongela's film eventually found its European audience, something had shifted. "When a story is able to be itself and wear its own spirit, it can say, 'we are actually very, very profoundly okay as a people, and we don't need your help. In fact, you need our help'." And that's exactly what the film does." This inversion of traditional aid narratives represents a radical reimagining of cinematic power dynamics.

### FILM AS RITUAL AND MEDICINE

Perhaps the most distinctive aspect of both filmmakers' practice is their understanding of cinema as a form of healing ritual rather than mere entertainment. This approach draws directly from African traditions

where art serves specific social and spiritual functions within communities.

"The film itself is a ritual," Bongela explains. "When people are watching it, they are participating in the ritual, whether they like it or not." During the making of *Milisuthando*, she worked with traditional healers who guided the process. "You need to be cleansed after you watch this footage," one healer advised, "so that you don't take this toxicity and give it to the audience."

This required completely rethinking the relationship between filmmaker, subject, and audience. "We have to be able to tell people very, very difficult things, but make them feel like they are held," Bongela says. "We love the audience, even the ones we don't like, even the ones who don't agree with us."

De Mabior developed her own intimate methodology through what she calls "morning conversations" with her mother. These weren't formal interviews but recreations

of comfort sessions that began after her father's death. "She would want to talk to us early in the morning when things are quieter," de Mabior explains. "This is when it's just her and me, before you start thinking about what the whole world is thinking."

Both filmmakers discovered that when prose failed to capture emotional complexity, poetry became essential. "Poetry is language against which we have no defences," Bongela reflects. "True poetry, when it's really good, melts you." This understanding connects to African oral traditions where historical events

were preserved through song, poetry, and movement rather than written documentation.

### REWRITING HISTORY THROUGH PERSONAL ARCHIVES

Central to both films is the radical act of using personal materials to challenge official historical narratives. Rather than relying on institutional archives, both filmmakers mine their family collections to tell more complex stories.

Bongela's exploration of apartheid-era Transkei reveals how official segregation could create pockets of relative cultural autonomy. Growing up there, she had no awareness of living under apartheid until the system ended. "Nobody told me I was black," she says. "Nobody told me there were white people who didn't like me. I had no idea until the end of apartheid."

This experience challenges simplistic apartheid narratives. "I don't like it when apartheid images only show us in pain," she says. "In my film, most of the archival footage is me looking at white society." Studying perpetrators rather than victims reveals →

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AKUOL DE MABIOR

**Left:**  
In conversation with South Sudanese filmmaker Akuol de Mabior; background images show screenshots from her debut documentary *No Simple Way Home*

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apartheid as a system that damaged both oppressor and oppressed.

De Mabior's film grapples with inherited political legacy and selective historical memory. Her father has become a martyred founding father but this iconography obscures his humanity. The film's most powerful sequence addresses this: "He is our founding father, our departed father of the liberation struggle. What about our mother, who is here?" The inspiration came from seeing news coverage of Patrice Lumumba's widow's death in which there were no images of her.

Both filmmakers also emphasise how diaspora communities connect differently with their work. For South Sudanese viewers scattered globally, de Mabior's film provides a rare glimpse of home not mediated through crisis reporting. "Some people feel very connected to South Sudan but have never been there," she explains.

**GENERATIONAL RESPONSIBILITY**

De Mabior must navigate the complex terrain of being the child of a significant public figure while asserting her own artistic voice. This extends beyond family dynamics to questions about inherited political responsibility and the burden of national representation.

This means constantly negotiating between her father's status as national icon and her desire to humanise him. "People find it difficult to make that distinction," she observes. "Even if they're talking to me as the daughter of this man, they need to speak about him as an icon."

Bongela faces a different but related challenge around cultural expectations tied to her name's meaning. Milisuthando means "bearer of love" and she takes this responsibility seriously. "When we are named, the name means something," she says. "That name usually is the role that you play in life, your purpose." Making a film about apartheid meant honouring this responsibility while avoiding perpetual anger.

"Having looked at apartheid history and colonial history, it is so easy to have made a film that pointed fingers and stopped at expressing anger," she reflects. "But ultimately, I want this document to represent what I truly am: before I was called black, before I was called a woman, my spirit and my soul."

Both filmmakers prioritise truth-telling over protective mythology. De Mabior's film includes devastating admissions from her mother about post-independence failures: "What was being done unto us is we are doing unto our people now, even worse than what the enemy was doing to us."

The weight of expectation also extends to their role representing their generation. "There's a tendency to not allow each other to ask questions, because then your loyalty comes into question," de Mabior observes. Creating space for doubt becomes a form of patriotism rather than betrayal. ➔



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 MILISUTHANDO BONGELA

Above: South African filmmaker Milisuthando Bongela with screenshots from her documentary *Milisuthando*

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## HYBRID IDENTITIES AND CINEMATIC LANGUAGE

Both filmmakers navigate the complex reality of being simultaneously African and global. This means speaking colonial languages while telling distinctly African stories.

"I had to accept that I am a hybrid of the West and of Africa," Bongela states. "There is no such thing as a pure African. I'm speaking English. I dream in English. And I used to think I need to choose between my African side and my Anglo side. But then I said, 'No, actually, I'm a hybrid of both.'"

This fusion becomes a creative resource. Bongela's film couldn't exist without addressing Western audiences because "if I call myself black, I'm calling you white. Every time I say blackness, I'm inventing and inviting whiteness into the room."

The linguistic challenges are acute for de Mabior, who faces criticism from some South Sudanese viewers for not speaking Dinka. "Why don't you speak Dinka, what's wrong with you?" they ask. These questions point to broader issues about authenticity affecting many African filmmakers operating globally.

Despite this, both draw strength from African philosophical traditions while navigating modern complexities. Bongela's grounding in Ubuntu (the belief that "there is no such thing as an individual") informs her collaborative approach. "Our culture does so much to protect, preserve, make sure that relationships are taken care of," she says.

Rather than seeing viewers as consumers, both filmmakers position audiences as participants in ongoing conversations. "What does it mean to call a place home?" de Mabior asks. "I feel like that's a conversation that we can all have."

## A NEW LANGUAGE FOR AFRICAN CINEMA

What emerges from both filmmakers' work is a fundamental reimagining of cinema's possibilities. Their films function as medicine, memory and mirror. This allows them to simultaneously create spaces for reflection and healing rather than simple consumption.

"We're also the last people to really get the tools of cinema to play with," Bongela observes. "The positive thing is that we now get to determine what the camera says, how it speaks in my language and my culture." This delayed access becomes an advantage because it allows African filmmakers to develop approaches unburdened by established conventions.

Both filmmakers emphasise creating work primarily for African audiences while remaining globally accessible. This represents a crucial shift from earlier generations who often prioritised international funding requirements.



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"We need to look at ourselves without feeling the need to emulate the North," Bongela argues.

Their approach challenges Western documentary traditions of objectivity and distance. Both position themselves clearly within their narratives and use subjectivity as strength. This connects to African storytelling traditions where the narrator's relationship to events is as important as the events themselves.

Indeed, the international reception suggests that audiences are hungry for more complex, introspective approaches to African storytelling. "I hope that this creates a space for people to be able to ask questions," de Mabior says. "How do we figure out who we are if we don't talk?"

Bongela feels the same way. "The world is very, very thirsty at the moment," she observes. "We are all desperate for something that can help us make sense of what we're going through as a species, but maybe also create some semblance of hope."

As African cinema evolves, filmmakers like Bongela and de Mabior represent an important shift toward internal conversation and collective healing. Their cameras become tools for exploration rather than explanation. In this way they are creating new forms of memory and possibility. In choosing to centre African humanity rather than African suffering, they point towards a future where African stories exist for African healing first, with global relevance emerging naturally from authentic artistic choices. The revolution, it seems, will indeed be intimate. 

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