



Blending French and African Identities

By Whitney Richardson May. 26, 2015

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Nelly Mbonou considers herself French, even if her experiences sometimes strain that bond.

Born in Cameroon, a former French colony in central Africa, she emigrated to France with her father when she was a toddler. When he returned to Cameroon, Ms. Mbonou decided to study in Paris. Although she is a French citizen and has spent most of her life in France, Ms. Mbonou, 36, said she has struggled to find her place within the country's cultural landscape.

And in a nation that sets the pace for luxury fashion and beauty trends, minority women tend to feel most marginalized and excluded from that conversation.

"There are almost no Africans or blacks on television or in politics," said Ms. Mbonou, who started her own clothing boutique in Paris and travels to Cameroon once a year. "It's like we are here, but we don't really exist."

Unlike the United States, where issues around race relations are openly debated, race has remained in France a relatively taboo topic in public conversation. The French government does not take surveys of people's race, but it is estimated that the country has more than 5.3 million first-generation and 6.7 million second-generation immigrants. It was this subtle cultural tension that led Brazilian photographer Carolina Arantes to create "First Generation," an ongoing photo-documentary project looking at the daily lives of young Afro-French women.

When Ms. Arantes moved to Paris, she said she began to notice a community of young women whose parents were immigrants from former French colonies in Africa. Many of them were born in France and have never returned to their parent's home country, yet often find themselves straddling two identities — one French, one African, said Ms. Arantes.

"I wanted to know how it was for them to be living between these two cultures," she said. "They are questioning the principles of the French Republic, which is fraternity, equality, liberty and freedom."

"They don't feel themselves included in these principles," she said.

Unlike many of their parents who encouraged their children to speak only French, Ms. Arantes found that these young women were coming together to create their own French lifestyle, developing small businesses and social gatherings to cater to their needs.

She began meeting girls in her neighborhood, the 18th arrondissement, and asked if she could follow along on their daily activities — in church, nightclubs, birthday parties and weddings. Many of her subjects were from Congo, the second largest country in Africa after Algeria, but as she slowly gained their trust, they introduced her to young women whose families came from the Ivory Coast, Mali, Senegal and Cameroon.

“These girls are creating hair salons for black women and making clothing using African fabric with modern tailoring,” said Ms. Arantes. Because there are so few black pop stars in France, many of the girls look for cultural references to the United States to keep up-to-date on hip-hop culture and fashion.

Ms. Arantes said she was able to relate to the complexities of feeling like an outsider by her own difficult transition to France seven years ago. She moved there to pursue her photography career and in 2011 began working as a photo assistant to Christopher Morris of VII Agency.

Her new life in France hasn’t been easy. At times, she said, “it was challenging because French people can be very closed.”

“As an immigrant, you are always learning and you have to submit yourself to the other culture,” said Ms. Arantes. “I can’t say that I’m completely adjusted, even after living here for seven years.”

But feeling like an outsider in France gave her a slight in with the Afro-French community. Her hope with her pictures, she said, is to portray the quiet strength and belief of that community in eventually weaving itself and its image into a French identity.

“People always ask them, ‘Where are you from?’” Ms. Arantes said. “I want them to feel it’s their country, even if they don’t feel it yet.”