

# FACE TO FACE

*Documentary Short*

© 2008, 8 mins.



Eric and Denis, Dubai, October 2008.

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## SYNOPSIS

This short documentary is set primarily in Cameroon, but also takes place in locations as varied as Dubai, Libreville and Geneva. The subject concerns transnationalism and the contemporary African diaspora. We have used the means of new digital media to record correspondences between estranged friends and family in Cameroon and in their respective places of immigration and exile. As the exchanges develop, we gain insight into the conflicts and affections of the individual participants, as well as some understanding of their perceptions of their places of relocation.

Our stories include those of Hamme and his grandmother Hadi who have not communicated face to face for the past five years. While Hadi is expressing her concern and longing for her grandson, Hamme is telling about success, drawbacks, disappointments, hope, and police corruption. But not all exchanges are as harmonious. Sali and his four wives are mad at their younger brother for neglecting his elderly parents...

Many of our characters are members of the Mbororo pastoral group, which has been recognised as an indigenous people by the United Nations. But despite international attention, the Mbororo are under political and economic threat.

As regards location, we see cities, such as Dubai, Libreville and Geneva, from a quite different perspective. While Dubai aspires to be the globe's new economic and cultural capital, it hosts not only rich business people and tourists, but also vast Asian and African populations in search of opportunity and employment. Their take on Dubai inevitably is very different from tourist leaflets, and may give us a more varied idea of this place of unbound imagination. Europe and the US are seen as "bush", a place of danger, mystery and potential riches. To become a successful "bush faller", moral and spiritual fortification is needed, and often provided by relatives and friends at home. In addition, we look at the impact of emigration and exile on the sensibilities of those left behind.

FACE TO FACE deals with recent developments in the global labour market, as well as the plight of political dissidents who have been forced into exile in Britain and the United States. It brings together glimpses of the everyday life of African migrants in Africa, Europe and the Arab world. It is also about the new-found interpersonal challenges and intimacies made possible by recent digital technologies, about the cultural impacts of long-distance dialogue, the overcoming of time and distance itself.

Above all, FACE TO FACE is a very human story with inevitable political qualities. It is also an international and sophisticated take on reality television, and an up-to-date look at contemporary African society.

## CHARACTERS

### 1. Opening sequence from Cameroon: Kabo addresses her son Sarli in Britain

*Salaam aleikum. I greet you. (Kabo)*



Kabo is in her late fifties. She lives in Bamenda, the capital of Cameroon's Anglophone Northwest Province. She belongs to the ethnic group of Mbororo (pastoral Fulbe) and speaks Fulfulde. Her son Sarli left Cameroon some ten years ago. They used to live 'in the bush', herding cattle. But Sarli went to school, and later to university. He got involved in party politics in the 1990s, siding with the opposition. He eventually made it to Britain where he was granted political asylum. Sarli continued studying, took up a job with a town council, and has been instrumental in international lobbying on behalf of his people back home, the Mbororo pastoral community. He is now a British national, and a few years ago went back to Cameroon to marry a Mbororo girl. They now live in Britain and have a son. Sarli cares for the livelihood of his mother and his aunt, and they pray for his and his family's well-being.

## 2. From Cameroon:

### Lum addresses her older brother Eric who seeks fortune and success in Dubai

*She says that she is in the kitchen preparing plantains, but there is no means to send the plantains. Now she prays for you to be well, and that all you do goes well. (translation by Denis)*



Lum is Eric's junior sister and still in secondary school. Their father is a farmer and the head of a large polygamous family. They live in Bafut, a village in northwest Cameroon. Standing outside of their family home, Lum prefers to address her brother Eric in their mother tongue, the Bafut dialect. She speaks alongside their father, brother, and stepmother. Their message entails mainly moral and spiritual support to Eric whom, they know, is still struggling to establish himself. They instruct him to be respectful and truthful, and remain faithful to God who should lead his way.

### Eric and Denis watch Lum's address and make comments



*I promise them, I will never let them down, I will never fail them. They should keep up their hopes. I am going to be successful. It's a matter of must. (Eric)*

*This is something very nice. It's been a long time since I have seen walls like this, places like this. (Denis)*

Eric is a young man in his mid-twenties. After high school, he left the village to go to Douala, Cameroon's economic capital at the coast. He was employed in a factory producing corrugated printing paper as a quality controller. For two years he worked as much overtime as possible to save money to realize his dream of joining his cousin Denis in Dubai. He first came with a two-weeks visiting visa and, with the help of Denis, found a company willing to employ him. But because of visa constraints he was required to return to Cameroon and reapply for a longer term visa. When he finally got it, the company had resorted to employing another person. However, Eric did not give up. With the financial support of his father he returned to Dubai and, after a few weeks, found a job in a soil testing company. He started a six-months training programme, hoping that after the training, he would be fully employed and salaried. However, the recent financial crisis has defied his expectation. He has just been informed that he will be laid off. The struggle continues.

Denis has lived in Dubai for the past eight years, and has witnessed the city's stunning development. As he claims, he was among the first Cameroonians to come to Dubai, and has experienced the good and the bad. He worked as an accountant, attended evening classes, ran his own import-export company with several employees, went bankrupt, and finally resorted to informal activities, such as taxi-driving and assisting Cameroonian traders. Denis also went through all the different housing experiences, from "sleeping under flowers" (on park benches), to sharing accommodation with eight to fifteen people (commonly known as bed space), to being able to afford a room on his own. He currently lives with his Ethiopian girlfriend in what is locally called a villa, i.e. a family residence shared by several tenants, a rare achievement among African and Asian labour migrants. In Cameroon Denis was able to import a few cars and, most importantly, to construct an impressive private residence, which was the source of Eric's dream of coming to Dubai. Denis supported the idea, and facilitated the journey of Eric and two other relatives. Yet among the three, only Eric seems to be up to the task, while the other two have either given up and returned to Cameroon or resorted to illegal activities.

When watching the images from Cameroon, Denis was emotionally touched. Seeing his relatives and listening to their counsels to Eric affirmed him in his conviction that Dubai is not a place to stay, but should be treated as a trial and spring board to other, more promising destinations in Europe or the US.

### 3. From Cameroon: Hadi greets her grandson Hamme in Gabon

*This is Hadi from Babanki Sabga.  
I greet him, and wish him all the best  
for his stay. I miss him a lot. (Hadi)*



Hadi is Hamme's grandmother. She lives in Sabga, a Mbororo settlement close to Bamenda. She is a bit worried about Hamme. Although he is in regular phone contact with his father who reports the news to Hadi, she would very much like Hamme to return home for a visit, so she can see him "with her own eyes" and make sure that he is well.

### Hamme responds to his grandmother Hadi



*I went by road. At the frontier, they took  
my money. And everything I had was  
gone. I returned to Cameroon. My father  
helped me. He sold one of my cows.  
(Hamme)*

Five years ago, at the age of 21, Hamme decided to leave for Gabon, following the advice of a friend who had successfully established himself in Libreville. Hamme arranged for his passport and a one-month visa, and hit the road to Libreville. But at the Gabonese border he was intimidated by corrupt police officers and ended up spending his entire capital of more than 200'000 FCFA (approximately 305 Euro/457 CHF) without reaching Libreville. Hamme did not give up. He returned to Sabga and sold a cow to finance his journey. This time he opted for travelling to Libreville by boat. He reached his destination with a meagre 6000 FCFA (9 Euro/14 CHF) in his pocket and offered his services to a Cameroonian cattle trader. After a few days, he left the job, as his employer had no money to pay him. Hamme decided to enter Libreville and try his luck in playing Tierce (Lotto). He invested 500 FCFA and won 280'000 FCFA (427 Euro/628 CHF)! He now was ready to start his life in Libreville. Hamme moved together with his friend Adamu, and found a job in a meat factory working as a cleaner. But after one year, the manager ran away with the company's money and Hamme lost five months' salary. He stayed for two years without finding a proper job, just managing from hand to mouth. Finally, he decided to enter the phone card business. Standing at a busy crossroad he sells phone cards to passing cars, making a profit of 10% on each card. Hamme has applied for Gabonese nationality and is waiting for the papers to come out soon. These will enable him to visit his family in Cameroon and return to Gabon freely, without falling pray to corrupt law officers who capitalize on foreign migrants.

#### 4. From Cameroon:

##### Sali and his wife communicate their objections to their brother Jabbe in Gabon

*He shouldn't think he has left me alone with our parents. I am trying my best. Now that times are difficult, I am the only one. Doctors, clothing, food: everything is on me, even their matches! This is very annoying. (Sali)*



*I greet Jabbe who is in Gabon. I want to tell him about his parents. Will he come only when they have died? Since he left, he has not called, he has not come. They have been sick. Has he forgotten that he has parents? (Yadiko)*



Sali is Jabbe's elder brother, Yadiko his sister-in-law. They live at the outskirts of Bamenda. Sali is working as a bus driver and, with four wives and a dozen of children, has a sizeable family to support. Sali and his wives are okay with Jabbe being in Gabon. They also supported the decision of their son Huseini to join him there. However, being abroad does not imply being relinquished of family responsibilities. Over the four years of Jabbe's absence, expectations have accumulated, and they wonder if Jabbe is voluntarily abandoning his family. His lack of communication confuses them. Not knowing the reality in Gabon, it is difficult for them to imagine the challenges Jabbe is facing. When watching the response Jabbe sent to Sali and his wives, they are relieved to see him in good health, although he seems a bit pale, and appreciate the gifts he sent to his parents. They look forward to his visit planned for January.

##### Jabbe responds to the criticism from his family in Cameroon



*Tell my family, I haven't forgotten any of them. I greet them. They should be patient. By January, Allah willing, or by the end of this year, I'll come. (Jabbe)*

While in his childhood Jabbe used to look after his family's cattle, he later decided to learn a profession. Like so many Mbororo youths, he opted for becoming a driver. He moved to the coastal city Douala where he worked as a bus driver for four years. When he lost his job, he decided to move to Gabon where, he was told, life was a bit easy. Jabbe left Cameroon four years ago, without passport or visa. He slowly made his way to Libreville, with lengthy stopovers in several towns along the road. He worked for a Gabonese Hausa man, also a Muslim, who adopted him as a son and helped him in getting Gabonese citizenship. Finally, Jabbe arrived in Libreville and started working as a taxi driver. He later transferred to Ntoum, a small town outside of Libreville with a sizeable Cameroonian and Mbororo migrant community. Life went on smoothly, and Jabbe planned to save money for a visit back home. He then decided to invest in the business of his nephew Huseini, who was dealing with mobile phones in Gabon. But Huseini's business partner ran away with all the phones, and Jabbe was faced not only with the loss of his capital but also a huge debt, as he had borrowed money from a saving group for this purpose. A few months later, Jabbe's papers were stolen and he had to spend considerable money on renewing his documents, before he could continue working as a taxi driver. It is now four years that Jabbe has not returned home to see his parents and extended family. He is slowly recovering from his losses and hopes to visit them the coming year. Because of disappointment and shame he could not inform them of his misfortunes, but preferred to keep silent.



## 5. From Dubai: Martha describes life in Dubai to her family in Cameroon



*It's good to dress like this. So they love you when you dress like this. You look like the Arabic woman. It's not good to show your body for people to see. Not in this country. They say, when you come to Rome, you do what the Romans do.*  
(Martha)

Martha is in her thirties, and has a husband and child in Cameroon. She is a nurse and has worked in her profession for many years. But as the health sector in Cameroon is gravely neglected, Martha – like many of her colleagues – was obliged to work in the government hospital without payment. Martha has long dreamt of leaving Cameroon and making a better living elsewhere, preferably in Europe or Canada. She tried several times to get a visa for Greece, Britain, Sweden under the pretext of attending a seminar or furthering her education. She spent several million FCFA (approximately 7'000 Euro/10'000 CHF) on migration brokers, but with no avail. Finally, she was offered the option of travelling to Dubai for a fee of 1.5 mio. FCFA, including visa, flight ticket, accommodation and assistance in finding a job. Supported by her husband and her mother, she paid the money and, together with three other Cameroonians, left for Dubai in October 2007. Upon their arrival in Dubai airport, it turned out that their visas were not registered in the immigration computer system. Only after several calls to the migration broker in Cameroon and after one week of waiting around in the airport, were they eventually allowed to enter Dubai. They were lodged in a hotel for two days, instead of two months, and subsequently urged to find accommodation and a job on their own. Accommodation in Dubai is expensive, and finding a job is difficult. After several months of struggling and asking her husband for financial support to pay for lodging, transport and the renewal of her visa, Martha found a job in a bank where she earned a modest salary. But after some time she had problems with her employer and had to quit the job. She was lucky to eventually be recruited with the newly opened City Hospital in Dubai's Health Care City, where she is working on the ultramodern maternity station. Martha is very happy with her new job and hopes that, in the future, she will be able to work in a government hospital where salaries are even higher. She has adapted to life in Dubai, including wearing an *abaya* and *shela*, a black gown and scarf commonly worn by Arab women, while remaining a staunch Christian. The only thing bothering her for now is her accommodation provided by the hospital: a well-equipped apartment, which she is forced to use on her own. Sociability in Dubai is limited and Martha feels lonely in her apartment: no one to talk to apart from the television, no one to share food with, or on whom to rely when coming home after work, late and tired.

## 6. From Dubai:

### Julian tells his relatives in Cameroon about encountering his former teacher

Julian's story introduces a new element into the treatment: the role of the anthropologist Michaela Pelican as filmmaker, acquaintance and interlocutor in the project.



*Some other thing I want to tell you. The person who is filming now: it is a big surprise to me, a real dream. All the time, I have been saying this world is a global village! (Julian)*

Julian is a young man in his late twenties who grew up in a village close to Bamenda. His father is a farmer and, for a short while, enabled him to go to a prestigious secondary school. After completing his education, Julian had high hopes of finding an employment in the public sector. But government jobs had become scarce over the past decades and, like so many of his age-mates, Julian could not make it. Put-off by the idea of being jobless and dependent, he decided to leave the country and look for a better future abroad. Arriving in Dubai, he tried to find a job that matched his qualifications, but to no avail. Desperate to have a job before his visa expired, he accepted employment with a security company. He is now contractually bound to work with this company at a minimal salary for at least two years, without entitlement to home leave. The company provides accommodation: a flat shared with twenty co-workers, without privacy or the possibility of a good rest after work. But Julian does not want his family to know all this. For the video-message he removes his uniform and tells them that he is working in a hospital. He talks about the good old times of hanging out with his school mates and drinking beer, an activity unacceptable in the Muslim environment of Dubai. But his main point is that the world is a global village. As it turns out, Julian and I are old acquaintances from the time when Julian was my student in secondary school!

## 7. From United Nations, Geneva: Rahamatu contemplates about her communication with Aliou

The story of Rahamatu and Aliou is about overcoming distance and separation. In the first instance, Rahamatu remains in Cameroon to further the concerns of her people, the Mbororo minority group. In Aliou's case, he is now a political refugee, resident in the United States.



*I imagine if this opportunity was never there: to see his image or talk to him on the telephone. Just imagine, what could I have done? (Rahamatu)*



*Aliou,  
Mbororo  
spokesperson*

Rahamatu is one of the few educated Mbororo women in northwest Cameroon. She did management training in secondary school, and for the past six years has been working with a non-governmental organisation in Cameroon. Rahamatu has had several opportunities for international travel, such as undergoing a three-months training with the United Nations in Geneva, participating in international workshops in France and Italy, and attending policy meetings in Switzerland and the US. Rahamatu is enjoying her work and the exposure to different people and environments. Yet combining professional and family life is a challenge. Rahamatu is married to Aliou and they have a three-year old son. They built a house at the outskirts of Bamenda, close to Rahamatu's relatives, who help out looking after the child when Rahamatu is away on business trips.

Her husband Aliou has a degree in agricultural economics and rural sociology, and has been working with the same non-governmental organisation as Rahamatu. In his capacity as provincial programme co-ordinator he, too, has travelled widely. Rahamatu and Aliou have been separated for lengthy periods when either of the two went for training in Europe or the US. To overcome distance and separation, they use the phone and e-mails for regular communication. With the improvement of internet services in Cameroon over the past year, they have also been able to communicate over the internet, seeing each other live via webcams while exchanging news. But highly developed web-technology cannot provide solutions to all forms of separation. Because of political problems, Aliou was obliged to leave Cameroon and eventually granted political asylum in the US. He has been in the US for the past six months and won't be able to return to Cameroon for at least five years. Rahamatu may be able to visit him, if they can afford a ticket. While in the US, she may attempt to regularize her stay and get a work permit. The main obstacle, however, is the separation from their child. It may take some two years to arrange for his papers to join them in the US. Parental love, however, cannot be communicated via the internet.