



A Report of the 2nd

African Women in Film Forum

23RD - 25TH SEPTEMBER, 2013

ACCRA, GHANA



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Many thanks to Grace Aba Ayensu who was the rapporteur for the 2nd AWIFF and put together this report.

Our sincere gratitude goes to all the film makers who have participated in the AWIFF over the years. Together we hope to unleash the power that film holds for gender equity.



Nana Darkoa Sekyiamah,
Communications Specialist, AWDF

FOREWORD

In 2008, the African Women’s Development Fund (AWDF) launched a Popular Culture Project at the 6th African Development Forum, held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. In 2010, AWDF in conjunction with the Lufudo Academy of Performing Art (LAPA) convened the first African Women in Film Forum (AWIFF) in Lagos, Nigeria, on the theme, The Dynamics of Women and Representation. Then, in 2012, AWDF added a new thematic focus - Art, Culture and Sports – to acknowledge and support how women are transforming communities within these fields. This sequence of efforts is an explicit expression of the importance that AWDF has given to the study and practices of African women in Arts and Popular Culture. AWDF believes that by making effective use of cultural productions to shift attitudes about African women, we can better accelerate gender equity.

In 2013, the 2nd African Women in Film Forum is themed Creating Compelling Social Justice Content for Film and Television. It brings together filmmakers and other cultural producers from across the continent and the diaspora to deliberate on storytelling as a way to foreground African women’s stories. For these filmmakers, producing creative audio-visual content has emanated from a desire to tell radical and evocative stories. Consequently, speakers, panelists and participants described the conversations and discussions to be “thought-provoking,” “revealing,” “inspiring,” yet “agitating” and “challenging”. For many, the forum offered an opportunity to engage creatively about process and develop strategic alliances with fellow filmmakers and cultural producers, both within and across borders.

This dialogue, however, highlighted several prevalent obstacles to progressive cultural production in Africa. These obstacles disproportionately hamper women on the continent and in the diaspora. For instance, those in the film industry shared their experiences of being confronted with a lack of institutional and commercial infrastructure, an insufficiency of financial support, short supply of quality scriptwriting, and the pervading weakness of production, distribution and marketing competencies. All of these factors have impeded the growth of a sustainable, progressive African film enterprise.

In spite of these real challenges, open, lively and insightful exchanges proceeded. Foregrounding the importance of “telling our own stories”, these writers, producers, directors, and organizational representatives shared and strategized on how to produce exemplary African filmmaking. The mandate of this second African Women in Film Forum continues the global conversation around African representation and gender equity in cultural production.

Throughout the forum, live updates were relayed via Twitter #AWIFF and #AfricanWomenInFilmForum and on Facebook.

**DAY
ONE**

WELCOME ADDRESS

Sarah Mukasa - Director of Programmes, AWDF



Sarah Mukasa (left) with Yaba Badoe during the opening session for the AWIFF

At the start of the forum, Sarah Mukasa, on behalf of the African Women's Development Fund (AWDF), warmly welcomed all of the attendees, thanking all those who had travelled from near and far, to participate in the 2nd African Women in Film Forum.

Outlining the work of AWDF, Sarah reiterated the organization's commitment to support women in the arts to drive a progressive agenda for women and to change dominant patriarchal narratives, depictions that reinforce repressive images of African women. The medium of filmmaking, she affirmed, is an important vehicle to advance women's rights and to challenge notions that compromise the dignity and autonomy of African women.

In 2010, AWDF created a sixth grant-making thematic area, entitled, Arts, Culture and Sports. This expansion of focus propels a mobilization of additional resources and support to African women cultural producers. The support comprises financial and technical investment in women professionals of the creative industry.

This is matched by a bolstering of infrastructural and functional capacities needed to sustain African women's participation in filmmaking on the continent. As discussed in the forum, African filmmaking currently faces a number of challenges. These obstacles include the marginalization of cultural producers who explore progressive agendas; the lack of good scripting and material to support these alternative voices in film and television; the need for greater investment to strengthen capacities, creative and technical skills within the industry; and the lack of financial support to fund projects.

Over the three days of this forum, AWDF will facilitate dialogue around the theme Creating Compelling Social Justice Content for Film and Television. The presentations, panels, master class and film screenings have been curated to urge forward a conference of ideas, strategies, and technical know-how that is, essentially, creative. AWDF is keen to listen to and learn from the fruitful deliberation that this congregation affords.

While hopeful and progressive action forms the setting for this event, we cannot but express our deep distress at the tragedy that took place two days prior to the forum. AWDF, on behalf of all the participants of the forum, offer sincere condolences to the family of Prof. Kofi Awoonor who lost his life during a vicious attack by Al-Shabbab on Westgate Mall in Nairobi, Kenya. His leadership in the literary and political arena of Ghana and Africa has left an inspiring legacy that will never be forgotten.



Maame Adjei, Actress (left) and Nanahemaa Awindor

PRESENTATION: AFRICAN WOMEN IN FILM

Setting out the central theme of the forum, the address by Yaba Badoe raised fundamental concerns for this meeting of African women and men producers who regularly engage with patriarchal stereotypes in their work.

She began by reflecting on how women's cultural productions underpin rites of passage in southern Ghana. In a traditional Akan marriage she attended, two very articulate, dynamic, and humorous Okyeames, or spokeswomen, orchestrated the ceremony. These women danced, and sang from an extensive repertoire of ancient and modern hymns, songs from the Caribbean and local work songs. Badoe's account of the ceremony clearly highlighted the integral role women's stories, artistic and cultural contributions in the form of song, dance, textiles, food culture, architectural design and decoration, play within the extraordinary diversity of African cultures.

Through the work of many African women writers, we come to appreciate the enormous contribution of African women to the oral and literary cultures of the continent. Moving beyond literature, the question of relevance to the forum was how women's cultural expressions - our performances and productions, orchestrations that are highly visible in transactions between families - could feed into mediums such as film and television.

In a twist on the more conventional perspective, Badoe pointed out that African cinema has been unique historically in producing work that upholds the value of women and critiques patriarchy. Citing the work of Lindiwe Dovey, in *Feminist Africa* 16, "Feminist Engagements with Film," she argues that African-authored film production on the continent from the 1960s to the present has been consistent in a focus on strong women characters, powerful and progressive matriarchal cultures, and a critique of tyrannical, patriarchal cultures - whether colonial, neo-colonial or postcolonial.

In spite of this remarkable body of work, women have not enjoyed a sustained presence in the cinema industry. While there are many women involved in film administration, in the running of film festivals, and work as actresses, there are far fewer working as film producers, screenwriters and directors. We need to understand why that is and why many of the great women directors who emerged on the continent in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s – such as Sarah Maldoror, Safi Faye, and Anne Mungai – have made very few films.

As Badoe elaborated, Dovey observes that women-produced films have not been widely screened, and sometimes, do not exist in modern, digital formats. For instance, Sarah Maldoror's film *Sambizanga* (1972), the first feature-length fiction film to be made in Africa by a woman, exists on one, sole 35mm copy with French subtitles. A film such as *Sambizanga* should be available in abundance. Unfortunately, the reality is that access to this film, and most other films by women, is severely limited. This begs the question, why is it almost impossible for African audiences to watch the best African films? Critical attention must be applied to why it has been so difficult for leading female filmmakers to create as many films as their male counterparts.

Borom Sarret
Director - Sembene, 1963

Black Girl
Director - Sembene, 1966

Emitai
Director - Sembene, 1971

Sambizanga
Director - Maldoror, 1972

Ceddo
Director - Sembene, 1976

Sarraounia
Director - Hondo, 1986

A World Apart
Director - Menges, 1988

Finzan
Director - Sissoko, 1989

Flame
Director - Sinclair, 1996

Fools
Director - Suleman, 1997

Taafe Fanga
Director - Drabo, 1997

Karmen Gei
Director - Ramaka, 2001

Sia Sia, le rêve du python
Director - Kouyaté, 2001

Kare Kare Zvako
Director - Dangarembga, 2004

Moolaadé
Director - Sembene, 2004

U-Carmen eKhayelitsha
Director - Dornford-May, 2005

For Yaba Badoe, the success of her documentary, *The Witches of Gambaga*, has afforded her the opportunity to attend African film festivals in Sweden, the U.S., Brazil, Berlin, Egypt, as well as FESPACO in Ouagadougou. Having built relationships with quite a few women directors and writers, she explained how, through these women she has become aware of recent developments in gender equality within African media industries. Women are at the forefront of the contemporary rebirth of filmmaking in Kenya, where young female directors such as Hawa Essuman, Wanuri Kahiu, Judy Kibinge, and Zipporah Nyaruri have been pioneers of this movement. A shift has occurred in the past decade that has seen many new, dynamic African and African diasporic women filmmakers appear on the screen media scene.

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*Left: Yaba Badoe (left) in conversation with Ama Ata Aidoo
Right: Grace Aba Ayensu, rapporteur for the 3rd AWIFF*

A shift has occurred in the past decade that has seen many new, dynamic African and African diasporic women filmmakers appear on the screen media scene. Badoe's film, *Witches of Gambaga*, was co-produced with Amina Mama, the Nigerian feminist scholar. It was completed with support from AWDF, NETRIGHT, the EU's Cultural Support Initiative, FORWARD [a UK-based African women's NGO], the West African Hub of Pathways for Women's Empowerment, and WorldView, part of the Commonwealth Broadcasting Trust. The documentary was released in July 2010. It took five years to complete.

One learns quickly in the industry, however, that the success of a film does not guarantee access to funding for the next film. This has been Badoe's experience, as well. She and Amina Mama are currently in the process of finalising a documentary film, *The Art of Ama Ata Aidoo*, about the iconic African feminist writer whose plays, novels, essays, short stories and poems has laid the foundation for the likes of Chimimanda Adichie, Sefi Atta and NoViolet Bulawayo to share their stories with the world. Already, parts of the documentary have been shot in Ghana and in Santa Barbara, California. At the time of the forum, Yaba Badoe and Amina Mama were seeking funding to edit and complete the documentary.

The difficulties Badoe and Mama have faced in making this film that celebrates one of Africa's cultural heroines suggests that African women filmmakers should put structures in place to develop, fund and distribute documentary films made in Africa by African women.

Badoe mentions DocuBox, the East African-based, Ford Foundation initiative under the leadership of Judy Kibinge, that develops the skills of documentary filmmakers in East Africa and gives talented individuals the opportunity to tell unique stories. Docubox also distributes the films it funds. The strap-line on their website reads, 'A country without documentary is like a family without a photo album.'

In Ghana, due to the negligence of successive governments of all political shades, our family albums and our historical treasures of feature films and documentaries, have been burnt down and trampled on, making it almost impossible for young filmmakers to have a sense of what came before them.

It is possible that answers to the problems we're facing on the funding and distribution of films made on the continent could be found in the private sector. Perhaps with prompting, wealthy benefactors and corporations will see that there's money to be made in informative, entertaining films with high production values.

During a 2011 CODESRIA symposium at FESPACO on "Film, Video & the Social Impact of New Technologies," Nigerian filmmaker and Nollywood producer, Tunde Kilani, argued for the greater use of African literature in filmmaking. Who knows, perhaps now that a film version of Chimimanda Adichie's *Half of A Yellow Sun*, written by Biyi Bandele, is about to hit screens in America and Europe, this UK/Nigerian co-production will whet the appetites of local capitalists and encourage them to see that investment in high-end films are hugely profitable. Let's hope that this will indeed be the case. Ultimately, what is important is that we combine our considerable talent and energy as formidable women to tell our stories the way we want.



*Alexandra Ayirebi-Acquah,
an aspiring filmmaker, talks
with other forum
participants*

AFRICAN WOMEN IN CINEMA – AN INTRODUCTION



Jihan El-Tahri
Egypt



Wanuri Kahiu
Kenya



Sara Blecher
South Africa



Rungano Nyoni
Zambia/UK



Osvalde Lewast
Cameroon/France



Judy Kibinge
Kenya



Zina Saro-Wiwa
Nigeria/UK



Fanta Regina Nacro
Burkina Faso



Branwen Okpaku
Nigeria/Germany



Hawa Essuman
Kenya/Ghana



Akosua Adoma Owusu
US/Ghana



Tsitsi Dangarembga
Zimbabwe



Taghreed Elsanhoury
Sudan



Minky Schlesinger
South Africa



Yaba Badoe
Ghana/UK



Dyana Gaye
Senegal



Ariane Astrid Atodji
Cameroon



Zipporah Nyaruri
Kenya



Caroline and Agnes Kamya
Uganda

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

“Getting funding for film is an extremely difficult thing. It is almost as though it is impossible.”

- Anita Afonou



*Facilitated by Sefi Atta,
Writer and Playwright*

This roundtable opened with a few words of welcome by the facilitator, Sefi Atta, who also acknowledged the sad event of Prof. Awoonor’s passing in Nairobi.

The discussion on funding opened with reference to the situation in Ghana. At the start of independence, Ghana had a vibrant film industry that had the full support of the first President, Dr. Kwame Nkrumah.

He heavily invested in infrastructure for the film industry; for example, building then what is considered one of the largest sound stages in Africa today. President Nkrumah is said to have watched every new film coming in and out of Ghana before it was premiered to the public. In spite of its auspicious beginnings, the Ghana film industry, since then, has seen public investment in film projects plummet. The industry is deteriorating. Unfortunately, local private funds have also not been forthcoming to replace this financial vacuum.

Except for Nigeria and South Africa, most Sub-Saharan African countries experience a dearth of private sector funding. As a result, obtaining local funding for films has become difficult as investment in filmmaking has almost ground to a complete halt. The situation appears to be widespread throughout Africa (with the notable exception of South Africa). Participants from Nigeria, Cote d’Ivoire and Zimbabwe shared their own accounts of how dire the situation was in their respective countries. This persistent lack of adequate funding was widely acknowledged by participants as a crucial issue for African women filmmakers.

For new film school graduates who are aspiring to a career in the industry, one major consequence of the withdrawal of local funds is that they are often unable to make an adequate living, thereby, further deepening the vicious cycle. Generally speaking, filmmaking as an art is no longer deliberately cultivated and nurtured locally.

However, where public funds no longer support the industry, foreign donor institutions have picked up the slack by becoming the primary source of funding for films in Ghana, as is the case in many other African countries. In spite of the contribution of these organizations, nevertheless, for both experienced and emerging filmmakers alike, obtaining adequate funds to make films is a steep uphill battle. As Anita Afonu, a recent award-winning graduate of the National Film and Television Institute (NAFTI) describes, “Getting funding for film is an extremely difficult thing. It is almost as though it is impossible.”

Aside from South Africa, it seems that the one country that has escaped the fate of inadequate private funding, is Nigeria. Because of a large market and the preponderance of mainstream commercial films that have mass appeal, Nollywood filmmakers are able to attract private investment. In this case, marketability and access to alternative platforms for showing films, such as DVDs, TV and the Internet, are used to reach a wider audience and draw in willing backers.

“He who pays the piper calls the tune?”

The sources of funds for filmmaking are crucial to the main concern of the forum – i.e., creating social justice content. The source of funds can and do affect the creative freedom of African women filmmakers who privilege social justice themes. As the old adage goes, “He who pays the piper, calls the tune.” As such, these filmmakers are not just preoccupied by accessing funds, but also by the potential influence the source of funding could have on the finished product.

The two primary sources of funding for filmmakers on the continent were discussed in this regard – international donor organizations from the West and local private investors. Participants agreed that contractual arrangements with both donor organizations and private commercial entities typically carried stipulations that could and often did influence the character or content of the films they were supporting. Through narrating their experiences with funders, it became clear that several participants had experienced the imposition of added conditions, that could affect aspects of their films, such as subject matter, setting, character choice, or even plot lines. This was experienced as interference by donors and an over-determination of commercial considerations in the creative process.

The general consensus was that in spite of the glittering example of Nollywood, it was not desirable to allow commercial interests to unduly influence the theme, character or agenda of the films being produced. In the same vein, African filmmakers' dependence on foreign donors essentially means that their stories need be approved by these organizations. Consequently, donor funding must also be handled with prudence, so that problematic representations of Africans are not reinforced. Obviously, this dependence on foreign organizations is less than ideal, and Sefi Atta suggested that while it may be the case that filmmakers whose work had been funded by foreign organizations, and whose work had been hailed in the West were better respected, that kind of thinking needed to be eradicated. We need to, as Africans, take pride in our own cultural production and fund our own projects in order to properly develop our indigenous industries. In Atta's words, "we don't need to gain respect from foreigners. If we respect ourselves we will go a lot further."

"A lot of the time South Africa is the exception to the rule. That's a consequence of history...We are lucky and unfortunate at the same time"

Lodi Matsetela

South Africa stands out as the exception in Sub-Saharan Africa when it comes to discussions about infrastructure and development. While it may seem that this is only an advantage given how developed the film industry is. But on closer examination, the developed infrastructure can often be a burden for local, small-scale and independent film producers. Rather than fostering the development of these local filmmakers, the industry can often be a hostile environment as filmmakers are forced to compete against big-budget Hollywood films to justify commercial viability when sourcing for funds. Additionally, increased costs of production often put a strain on relatively smaller budgets. Given this context, it can be argued that the existence of a developed infrastructure, platforms and funding institutions, are not necessarily the answer for developing African women filmmakers. A commercially motivated industry does not always work. We must foreground cultural production and value film based on the medium's capacity to create a national identity.

Beyond that, co-productions with filmmakers from across the continent and in the diaspora can help develop not only the stories we have to tell, but can also increase the audience size and impact of the films on everyday practices. Related to this is the need to create our own pan-African distribution platform so that we can cultivate our own audience and not be forced to compete with Hollywood film.



Dr Yaba Blay in conversation with Akosua Adoma Owusu

SCRIPTWRITING MASTER CLASS



Facilitator:
Ade Solanke
Screenwriter, Founder of
Spora Stories

“There's a great demand for new stories, and for old stories told from new points of view. We're ideally placed to offer these”

-Ade Solanke

The master class on scriptwriting covered key aspects of cinematic storytelling. The session's objectives were to improve theoretical understanding of the central principles of dramatic writing (characterization, plotting and conflict) and to develop the ability to apply these ideas in practice. Script extracts, film clips and discussion was used to explore, analyse and practice some of the tools screenwriters use to attract, hold and satisfy audiences. The goal for participants was to develop a deeper insight into the constituent elements of a screenplay and to be aware of the contribution each makes to effective storytelling.

Below is an outline of the presentation delivered in the master class:

1 - Cinema Today - Overview of current trends in film stories and storytelling?

- * Stories/plots/characters the world loves? Types of conflicts?
- * SWOT analysis of social justice stories?

2 - Developing the Idea

- * Selecting a viable premise/idea
- * What kinds of stories do you want to tell?

- * Developing the concept
- * Building on your idea/premise to turn into a marketable concept, the basis for a pitch.

3 – Developing the Characters

- * Character design (traits, goals and arcs)
- * Types of cinematic characters
- * Types of dramatic conflict

4 – Developing the Action (drama means ‘to do’)

- * Dramatic situations – characters in reaction to crisis
- * Genre
- * Story design
- * Plot

5 - Developing the Project

Dramatic construction: an overview of the different stages and challenges in the process of your screenplay and development documents required to tackle each.

- The premise and the logline - the 50 word logline
- Expanding the logline into a one-page outline
- The treatment
- The sequence breakdown
- The scene breakdown

6 – Developing the scene, the sequence, and the act

- Planning the scene and sequence
- First draft of the scene
- First draft of the sequence
- First draft of the act

7 - Writing first drafts

- Managing the writing process
- Rewriting

PANEL: FUNDING FOR THE FILM INDUSTRY



Sarah Mukasa
Director of
Programmes, AWDF



Korkor Amarteifio
Associate Director,
Institute for Music
and Development



Stephanie Soleansky
Cultural Affairs
Attaché, Institut
Français du Ghana



Facilitator: Tsitsi
Dangaremba - Writer,
Filmmaker and
Founder of the
International Images
Film Festival for
Women



“A challenge for all of us is how we’re going to manage the project of raising resources from the continent itself.”

- Sarah Mukasa

After introductions by Tsitsi Dangaremba, this panel was opened by Korkor Amarteifio, who approached the issue of donor funding by presenting two main questions: How do we as African artists and cultural operators tell our own stories? What is needed to enhance the way we tell our stories?

She argued the importance of Africans taking responsibility for the support of African art. African governments, she said, need to adopt policies that are holistic in their support of the cultural sector.

As an example, in Ghana, the Ministry of Education must incorporate cultural production in the educational curriculum. However, she warned, policy proposals remain on paper if artists themselves do not lobby government to create funds that they can access. In Ghana, although most public funding for art originates from major Western donor agencies, there have been improvements where some agencies now have Ghanaians administering the funds. These administrators have better knowledge of how to cultivate local audiences. Effective strategies can be implemented to achieve this, such as showcasing art in public spaces frequented by people who may not ordinarily have access to traditional spaces of presentation [museums and private galleries]. Amarteifio emphasized that Africans must find ways to fund our own art and not give up control of our own representations to those abroad.

With regard to Western donor organizations, she suggested that donors take into account the specific socio-economic environment within which the would-be recipient operates, so that funding opportunities could be taken advantage of more effectively. She also suggested that funds and resources may, at times, be more appropriately utilized during the distribution phase of a film project - an area which is typically overlooked by funders.



*Sarah Mukasa with Tsitsi
Dangarembga*

As a representative of the French government through her cultural work here in Ghana, Stephanie Soleansky delivered a short presentation on French funds available for African cinema. According to her, the French government's interest in African film emanates from a belief in the value of cultural diversity. They support the structuring and professionalization of cultural productions, especially emerging generations of filmmakers and technicians. The presentation included the history of France's support of African film, various funds that filmmakers could access currently, eligibility criteria for the funds and multiple festivals where African filmmakers can submit work.

Sarah Mukasa's contribution to the panel outlined the purpose of AWDF's support of women artists. She provided an overview of the organization and how financial grants and technical assistance are offered to more than 1000 women's rights organizations on the continent. She emphasized the importance of dedicated funding to amplify the voices of African women working to tell our stories through the arts. Although there may be concern about art being instrumentalised, AWDF's mission is to give grants to film and other artistic projects that advance the agenda of women's rights and challenge patriarchy.

In spite of the concerted effort to offer financial support to African women in the arts, sometimes the particularities of different genres of art cause recipients to face practical challenges such as reporting to donors on an annual basis. This might not parallel the film's production cycle. Nevertheless, films receiving funding do get completed and the resulting partnerships formed through collaboration, lend incredible richness to the work of funders. As an example, the partnership between AWDF and the producers of Yaba Badoe's film, *The Witches of Gambaga*, has made an enormous difference to advocacy around the rights of these exiled women in the northern regions of Ghana.

DISCUSSION: IDENTIFYING PRODUCERS, CO PRODUCERS AND PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

Facilitator: Francois d'Artemare - Producer and founder of Le Film de l'Après-Midi

“All the good stories have already been told. What is interesting for me is who will tell the story and how?”

- Francois d'Artemare

Francois d'Artemare's presentation explained his work method as a film producer, and his own perspectives on producer/director relations. He offered advice on how African directors could identify appropriate producers, how to meet people in the industry and how to gain recognition.

He emphasized that in his career, his main interest is in preserving the integrity of the director's vision for the film. As such, when choosing film projects, he looked for stories that had specificity, and where one could perceive the singular voice of the director. For him, what he looked to create in a film, through a relationship with the director, was sincerity in the subject matter. It is the director's unique vision that excites him and motivates him to work with one director over another.

He argued that African film directors need not fear that European producers would try to impose direction on films simply because they could access the resources to complete the project. Legally, the director is protected in Europe – the final cut of a film is the director's decision. Even if the European producer wanted to work with African directors on the continent, he or she would have to adhere to the law.

Beyond that, another factor that often hinders African film directors from working with producers in Europe, was language. He suggested that this was not an insurmountable problem. If the producer was not going to be giving creative direction, then the language barrier would be worked around, especially if the two parties are meant to work together. He also suggested that a good way for first-time directors to find producers to partner with is to create 3 to 4-minute shorts to use as a calling card.

These shorts could even be made with a phone camera and a computer. d'Artemare has seen a new generation of young African film directors with real talent whose work strengthens bonds with their communities. Finding producers who could help realize their film projects was critical to getting their stories told. In his experience, d'Artemare added, scriptwriters are often also the directors of films pitched to him. He's never had to find a director to execute a screenplay, as the scriptwriters knew very clearly how they wanted their stories to be told.

“New” stories or “untold” stories?

d'Artemare's presentation engendered a few debates and discussions among the participants. Contrary to the premise of the forum, he argued early in his presentation that essentially there are “no new stories”. The uniqueness of the director's vision is what lends ‘newness’ to a story; however, d'Artemare believes originality is dead.

Ade Solanke responded specifically to that sentiment, arguing that it was precisely because there are many new stories - our stories - that haven't been told that the forum was important and taking place.

Beyond the obvious difference in how d'Artemare and most of the participants define “new”, the debate did spark a discussion of the importance of being context-specific in telling one's story. Emphasizing context gives the story and film character - making it more compelling for the audience. In African film, focusing on the specificity of the story moves it away from a European dramaturgy where “there are no new stories”. Sarah Bouyain made the point, essentially arguing that “telling our own stories” required a paradigm shift in both the form and content of our storytelling.

Another debate that ensued was about the importance of the audience in making the film. Again d'Artemare said, “I don't care (a little bit) about the audience. My main concern is to make a good movie.” His position was simply, as a producer, he believed it was important to protect the integrity of the creative product by allowing the process to be, as much as possible, free from “contamination” by extraneous factors.

However, Ade Solanke argued that there is no problem with identifying a particular audience for your film or with having a very clear sense of the audience that you are connecting to. In the production of film there are very many considerations, and taking into account one's audience needn't get in the way of the telling of the story, or of being true to the story. While it would be a weakness to try to second-guess the audience, it is important to consider with whom you might want to tell your story. It would not be any more or less a consideration, Solanke argued, than who the director would be. What is important is that we are true to the story we are telling and to not allow any of those considerations to compromise us as filmmakers.

In reference to the cultivation of local audiences, Stephanie Soleansky spoke of a desire to see more public screenings of African movies. She also stated that it was our responsibility to push local businessmen to support screenings of African films. She argued that we need to promote cinema on the big screen as a social experience because feelings evoked from the big screen are more encompassing than those in front of the TV. Soleansky also highlighted the possibilities of co-production within the sub-region. She suggested that filmmakers in the region take advantage of platforms such as the 2nd edition of the Francophone Film Festival, which takes place in Accra in February and March, 2014. Perhaps, she put forward, another forum could be held to network among artists in the sub-region. Sarah Mukasa concluded the discussion by explaining why it was that a white European male filmmaker had been chosen to speak at this forum of African women working to dismantle patriarchal and frankly, racist depictions of African women in film (often by white male filmmakers). She argued that AWDF was motivated by the desire to bring a wealth of experience and perspectives from different parts of the continent to share what works and what can move us forward. Francois d'Artemare had a great deal of experience collaborating with directors from the continent, South America, as well as Europe. He had, therefore, acquired insight into how African filmmakers can collaborate with European filmmakers to tell their own stories.

**DAY
TWO**

CONVERSATION: A DIALOGIC IMAGINATION OF WOMEN IN FILM



Yaba Badoe
Writer and Documentary Filmmaker



Sarah Bouyain
Writer and Director



Lodi Matsetela,
Writer, Producer and Director



Dr. Beti Ellerson
Director for the
Center for the Study
and Research of
African Women in
Cinema

*“It doesn’t matter how far apart we are,
we all have very similar stories to tell.”*

- Lodi Matsetela

Beti Ellerson, facilitator for this panel discussion, suggested that this conversation act as a starting point for a continued discussion, between participants and others, on African women’s engagement with the craft of filmmaking. Screenings of Lodi Matsetela’s *Society*, Sarah Bouyain’s *Children of the White Men* and Yaba Badoe’s *The Witches of Gambaga* served as entry points for the conversation.

Lodi Matsetela was quite emotional while watching Yaba Badoe’s film, *The Witches of Gambaga*. The film resonated deeply for her because the women “looked exactly like [her] grandmother”. In South Africa there are also women being ostracized and labelled as witches because they are independent. An image of an old women grinding corn on stone took Matsetela back to a time with her own grandmother, sitting with her while she did the same. Being able to recognize as “vividly familiar,” a way of life and culture in a place that is geographically diverse from her home, moved Matsetela greatly.

It was a powerful reminder that in spite of differences in place, time and experience, our stories, fundamentally, are very similar. She experienced a similar reaction to Sarah Bouyain's film *Children of the White Men* because as a South African, she could draw parallels between the context of the women's lives and coloured people's experiences in South Africa. The separation of people based on their race, the erasure of personal and family histories, the attempt to reclaim identity - the political and social dynamics that were the backdrop of the women's experiences - all resonated with *Matsetela*. Not only because she had witnessed her own coloured friends grapple with these conditions, but because those histories had also intersected with her own family history as a black person in South Africa.

Sarah Bouyain, for her part, said she appreciated *Matsetela's* film because although the film addressed negotiating with longstanding cultural traditions, it went beyond the clichés and dichotomy between history and modernity. Bouyain found the style of narrative and articulated stories of contemporary African women to be told in a refreshingly smart way. Because of this, she thought the series had mainstream appeal and a critical edge. *Matsetela's* film, stated Bouyain, had changed her perception of the ability or effectiveness of more mainstream genres to portray 'serious' African stories.

Bouyain also spoke about her response to Badoe's *Witches*. She found the documentary captivating, enabling her to empathise with the women whose realities and experiences were so far removed from her own. She commented on what was learned about Badoe's struggle to get the film made - the length of time it took to complete, the changes that had to be made, such as appearing in the documentary herself when she had not intended to originally. As a fellow filmmaker, Bouyain understood the compromises that had to be made in order to complete their work. Often, the journey of making the films - the backdrop of the documentary - is fascinating enough to make a feature-length documentary of its own!

“I definitely occupy various positions and depending on which is most advantageous to occupy, I negotiate those positions.”

- Yaba Badoe

When Beti Ellerson asked the panellists to reflect on how their divergent but common transnational experiences informed their work and impacted their own identities, Yaba Badoe began by sharing that the *Witches of Gambaga* was possible because she found international feminist organizations that were just as committed to the story as she was. These groups helped her to complete the film. With her current project, a documentary on Ama Ata Aidoo, Badoe takes off from a Ghanaian and pan-African perspective. Using the life of this African woman writer, Badoe will invoke an incredible story about the relationship between Ghanaians and the African diaspora. An example of this is the theme of slavery Ama Ata Aidoo has examined, which many African writers have not had the courage to do. Badoe believes this sort of pan-Africanist and internationalist perspective, expressed through the life of a woman, should be documented. This is not only for the posterity of Ghanaians, but also for viewings for a pan-African audience.

For Badoe, this is how Aidoo’s internationalism was expressed creatively. As she put it, “I definitely occupy various positions and depending on which is most advantageous to occupy, I negotiate those positions.” Furthermore, there is also a practical aspect to her internationalism that powerfully impacts her work. As a dual citizen of Britain and Ghana, Badoe is able to travel in Europe and North America without having to obtain a visa and also to Ghana and around West Africa without need for visas. This affords her a freedom of international movement that is available to only a small group of Africans and obviously has real impact on the kinds of networks she has is able to develop.

Sarah Bouyain’s experience is markedly different, although also, quint-essentially transnational. As a “mixed-race” person of Burkinabe and French parentage,

who “looks white” and was almost entirely socialised in France, she cannot help but bring an intense grappling with social identity to her creative work.

She recounted a story of meeting a French female producer when she was trying to make her first movie. The producer peered at Bouyain as she narrated the story she hoped to produce into a film, then said, “Oh, it must be strange to be a mixed-race person.” Sarah immediately quipped back, “It must be strange to not be mixed.” Needless to say, Sarah chose not to work with this producer. What the anecdote points to is the constant negotiating Bouyain has had to engage with to navigate her bi-racial and bi-national identity - especially since Burkina Faso is a former French colony. Because this was her reality, Sarah knew that her work would always address issues of identity, whether from one angle or another. She incorporates elements of her life into her films and, in turn, internalizes the lessons she’s learned from making them. This cyclical process started out unconsciously, but as her awareness grew, she began to make it a deliberate practice.

Thinking about future film projects, Bouyain acknowledged that the theme of miscegenation might not necessarily need to be expressed through a character’s identity struggle, but could perhaps be articulated in more abstract terms, like the way the story would be told. She expressed surprise that there are not more African films about mixed-race experiences when it is becoming a more common occurrence.

Another theme that Bouyain would like to explore is exceptionalism. As a child, she was made to feel exceptional among her peers because she was ‘the one with a black father’. Now, as an adult living in the same neighbourhood she grew up in, there are mixed-race children everywhere. Her own daughter - whose father is Burkinabe - does not experience being exoticised in the same way.

Additionally, her daughter's ability to speak Duala pleases Bouyain so much because it has helped ground her Burkinabe identity even further. Growing up in France, Bouyain hadn't been taught language, so in adulthood she learned Duala. This was done in a bid to reclaim her African identity, particularly, after her Burkinabe father died and she felt that she had lost her primary anchor to her father's land.

Lodi Matsetela also uses her profession to work through personal considerations. She spoke about having moved to filmmaking from a career in advertising because she wanted to tell stories about Black cosmopolitan women like herself. While her series *Society* was inspired by the U.S. series, *Sex and the City*, she was also very aware that the characters in the highly popular show did not represent her even though she could identify with some of the themes in the storyline. *Society* also deals with themes such as how young urbanites navigate the pressures of consumer culture and modernity, and dealing with one's sexuality. However, the series is set in Johannesburg with the particularities of that African cosmopolitan context – family and tradition, racism, and social hierarchies, all coming into play.

Prompted by Beti Ellerson, Matsetela elaborated on the importance of developing filmic language and style elements that would give fluency to African stories. In her opinion, although the television and film industry in South Africa is more mature than elsewhere in Africa, film has not been utilised extensively as a mode of storytelling by Black South Africans. She described the frustration she felt when first discovering Ousman Sembene's films. Sembene, in the 1960's and 1970's, was able to produce culturally relevant African stories. And yet in South Africa today, Matsetela feels the exploration of filmic language as a medium of expression was not being encouraged when it's clearly an influential and creative representational vehicle. Even television, though it can seem to be very mechanical, at its best, provides a space for exploration. Yaba Badoe agreed, remarking that many well-known filmmakers began their careers doing television.

Yaba then briefly turned to her documentary project on Ama Ata Aidoo. She embarked on this project because she felt it our responsibility to make sure that a writer, storyteller and a pan-Africanist such as Ama Ata Aidoo is celebrated. Badoe argued that we can not continue to allow a scarcity of funding to hold us back from our obligation to tell important stories. Otherwise, we might as well just throw up our hands. Story writers, filmmakers, playwrights and television producers are all important because “without a family album, we don’t have a history.” We must gain the confidence to tell our own stories.

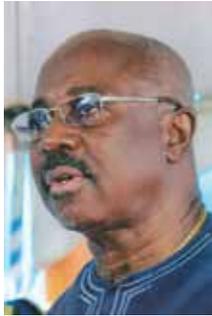
Turning to the future, Badoe asked Matsetela and then Bouyain where they would like to be with their careers ten years from now. Matsetela spoke about wanting to develop her voice through the craft of filmmaking. She’s exploring new ways of employing technical styles to convey narratives. She also said she would like to work in a more pan-African context to develop and nurture African creative networks.

Bouyain looked forward to exploring a number of thematic areas. She hoped her new films would reflect a more mature voice and perspective. Because of her own history, she wanted to explore African stories in France. Growing up, her own African-ness had always been tied to the continent – specifically, Burkina Faso - but now she’s interested in examining diasporic experiences. As a mother, she’s considering exploring perspectives from motherhood, as well. With all these ideas in mind, Bouyain would like to concentrate on projects that she is interested in creatively and not just because she needs a pay check. It’s important for her to encourage her daughter, by example, to embark on any career that she might want in the future.

“Without a family album we don’t have a history.”

-Yaba Badoe

THE GHANAIAN FILM AND TELEVISION INDUSTRY: CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES AND THE WAY FORWARD



Kwaw Ansah
Writer, Director and
Producer



Anita Erskine
TV Host, Producer
and Communica-
tions Specialist



Veronica Quashie
Writer, and Film
Director



Facilitator:
Vincentia Akwetey
Dean of Studies,
National Film and
Television Institute,
Ghana

*"This is all I know. I do no other
business than making films"
– Veronica Quashie*

Vincentia Akwetey led the panel discussion by identifying opportunities in the industry, rather than the challenges that are so often debated. However, this proved difficult, as each speaker expressed frustrations with the television and film industry in Ghana, often echoing one another.

First up was Veronica Quashie, who began the conversation by declaring that the film industry and its surrounding issues were matters close to her heart. She pointed out that while there have been many opportunities over the years to discuss issues and new prospects for the industry, not a lot has been achieved. Ghana, for instance, is one of the countries in Africa that, historically, has taken the lead in film production. According to the Oxford History of World Cinema, some of the best studios were in Africa were located in Ghana even before Ousmane Sembene made the classic film, *Black Girl*, in 1965. Ghana also took the lead in building the African video film industry, a little ahead of Nigeria. Today, Nigeria has overtaken Ghana in this market. In spite of having started out so well, neither the government nor the corporate sector has taken the film industry very seriously. Although locally produced films are popular, recognition of the industry has been a major challenge to accelerating development.

A prime example of this situation was Mr. Kwaw Ansah's experience making *Heritage Africa*. Banks in Ghana would not support the project even though he put forward a proposal that made good business sense.

We cannot lay the blame for stalled development of the industry solely at the feet of institutions such as banks. There is also the problem of the inability of local filmmakers and film production professionals to mobilize in order to support each other to embark on or complete projects. It can be difficult to get even minor support from fellow writers who would commit to review a script. Additionally, it is also very challenging to get private funding for straight-to-video films. This is especially the case with potential backers from older generations who do not regard film not meant for celluloid as "real art".

Scripting is another area where the Ghana film industry seriously falls short. Very often, movie producers come up with the "scripts". Their screenplays are sometimes as perfunctory as two-page outlines of a story, in prose form. This happens when local producers originate independent film projects with their own funding or with privately obtained financial backing. These producers then attempt to squeeze out the most profit possible by shortcutting the creative and production processes. For instance, they may not hire scriptwriters, they dictate which actors should play roles based on perceived popularity with viewers, and producers may keep erratic filming schedules. All this happens in a bid to make a profitable film using the shortest space of time with as little money as possible. This kind of situation frustrates film directors intent on producing good quality films. Unfortunately, too often, the combination of small budgets and the desire for profit at all costs means that directors are forced to work with producers in this stressful environment. While the marketability of films and their profitability are vitally important, the lack of adherence to viable, creative production processes hurts the industry in the long run.

“Filmmaking is actually a 360 degree process that starts from the inception of the idea and ends when you have an auditorium filled with people” – Anita Erskine

Anita Erskine opened her address with an amusing account of her parent’s career expectations for her as a child and how she made the unlikely entrance into a career in television. Her parents had attempted to steer her into a “real profession”, such as one in administration, law, medicine or in the diplomatic service. Having studied French to allow her more career options in the future, she nurtured aspirations of becoming the next UN Secretary General, but alas, that did not happen. Once she found herself in the television industry, however, she had to overcome certain obstacles because of gender expectations.

First, she did not have a “commercial” look. Female actors who did not fall within dominant (read Western) standards of beauty had a more difficult time breaking into the television industry. Secondly, in her experience, women in general are often not taken seriously as professionals and their work often gets side-lined as amateur. Given the importance of women’s contributions to the television industry, it is unfortunate to view a continuous history of repressive images of women. Such visual campaigning against women compromises the healthy maturation of the film industry.

Beyond that, most television shows produced in Ghana do not exhibit original content. The majority of shows are about celebrity lifestyle, fashion, music and entertainment or copies of Nollywood-style storylines. While content celebrating contemporary popular culture has its place, she argued, it is important that we use television, film and video to address issues of social concern.

In response to Veronica Quashie's comments about untrained producers creating a negative image of the film industry due to a greedy drive for profit, she suggested that while profit-making was fine in practice, part of the reason for the poor quality of production of these films was because the importance of branding had not been embraced. Filmmakers must see their projects as a representation of their unique style of filmmaking, she contended. Audiences would then be encouraged to go watch films in anticipation of a certain distinctiveness of style. This differentiation would make for a more powerful crowd-puller than simply depending on the popularity of particular actors or actresses.

She went on to argue that the fundamental challenges experienced by the film and television industry stemmed from a broader systemic problem in society than with the industry, specifically. There is great difficulty in building the skills capacity of professionals in the media industry. Furthermore, many professionals possess a general deficit of critical skills sets in accounting, storytelling, branding, marketing, and even public speaking.

For Erskine, film projects encompass more than just the production of the films themselves, and should also be understood to include the processes that lead to filling auditoriums to see the film. Typically, when the marketing of a film is taken seriously, producers often only consider the local Ghanaian market. Not many producers are creating stories with the intention of resonating with wider, international audiences. If Ghanaian and other African television producers and filmmakers take greater ownership of our representations domestically and abroad, we can create depictions that reflect the pride in our identities. When we finally decide to utilize television and film to build our esteem as a community, we will then be properly motivated to address and overcome the challenges we experience as an industry.

“Pride in our African identity must shine through our filmmaking...Our golden story is still waiting to be told by ourselves.

“There is no more effective tool that can touch and affect people than audio-visual media”

– Kwaw Ansah

Mr. Kwaw Ansah was the final speaker on this panel. He entreated fellow participants to take advantage of the medium they had at their disposal to represent Africa in a way that would edify audiences. “Our golden story is still waiting to be told,” he said. He expressed sadness that in Africa’s project of self-development, the film industry should be relegated to the dessert cart and not the main menu. He made the point that film had played an important role in the generation and construction of the United State’s national identity; and that we could learn from this example.

He acknowledged that in an effort to tell Africa’s story differently, filmmakers came up against very real challenges that were not easily dealt with, practically and ideologically. To illustrate this point, Ansah narrated how it took him eight years to complete the film *Heritage Africa*. It took that long to source the funding needed to see the project to fruition. At that time, filmmaking was not seen as the business of Black people. The images of Black people depicted in Hollywood films have seeped into popular consciousness over the years and greatly affected how Africans saw themselves. Portrayals of African people that fell outside of dominant representations were not easily absorbed by the mainstream. This was done to the extent that there was even public reluctance to back his project. Ansah recounted the story of Paul Robeson and the 1935 film, *Sanders of the River*. The prominent African-American singer, actor and civil rights activist played the lead African role in the film.

Robeson had agreed to take the part on condition that Africans would be portrayed progressively. However, once the film came out, he disavowed it. The final edit had distorted the original story to portray his character as a servile lackey of British colonial rule. The experience so overwhelmed Robeson that he left the West and emigrated to the USSR.

Nonetheless, Ansah argued, while challenges would always be present, we had a responsibility to take advantage of opportunities to be socially impactful through film, in the stories that we told.

Ansah questioned whether African women were doing enough to tell the stories that matter - stories that speak to the plight of disenfranchised women on the continent. He lamented that he often observed women sabotaging themselves when it came to fulfilling this goal. Often, when fundamental injustices were being perpetrated against women, other women would actively support these abuses. He recited the familiar scenario of widows being harrassed by other females in the family when a married man died intestate. He emphasized the need for women to guard against fighting their own.

He also reflected that when Ghanaians started filmmaking, we helped Nigeria. Crews and artists were sent over...so, what happened? Today, filmmaking is not being consciously developed. In fact, Ghana still has not been able to get a comprehensive film policy ratified by Parliament.

Creatively, much of the work produced in the local industry has been derivative and lacks originality. In this regard, the industry in Ghana has been taken over by Nigeria. He shared a funny anecdote that illustrated this: He had once been honored with a “posthumous award” from an organization that referred to Ghana’s film industry as “Ghallywood”.

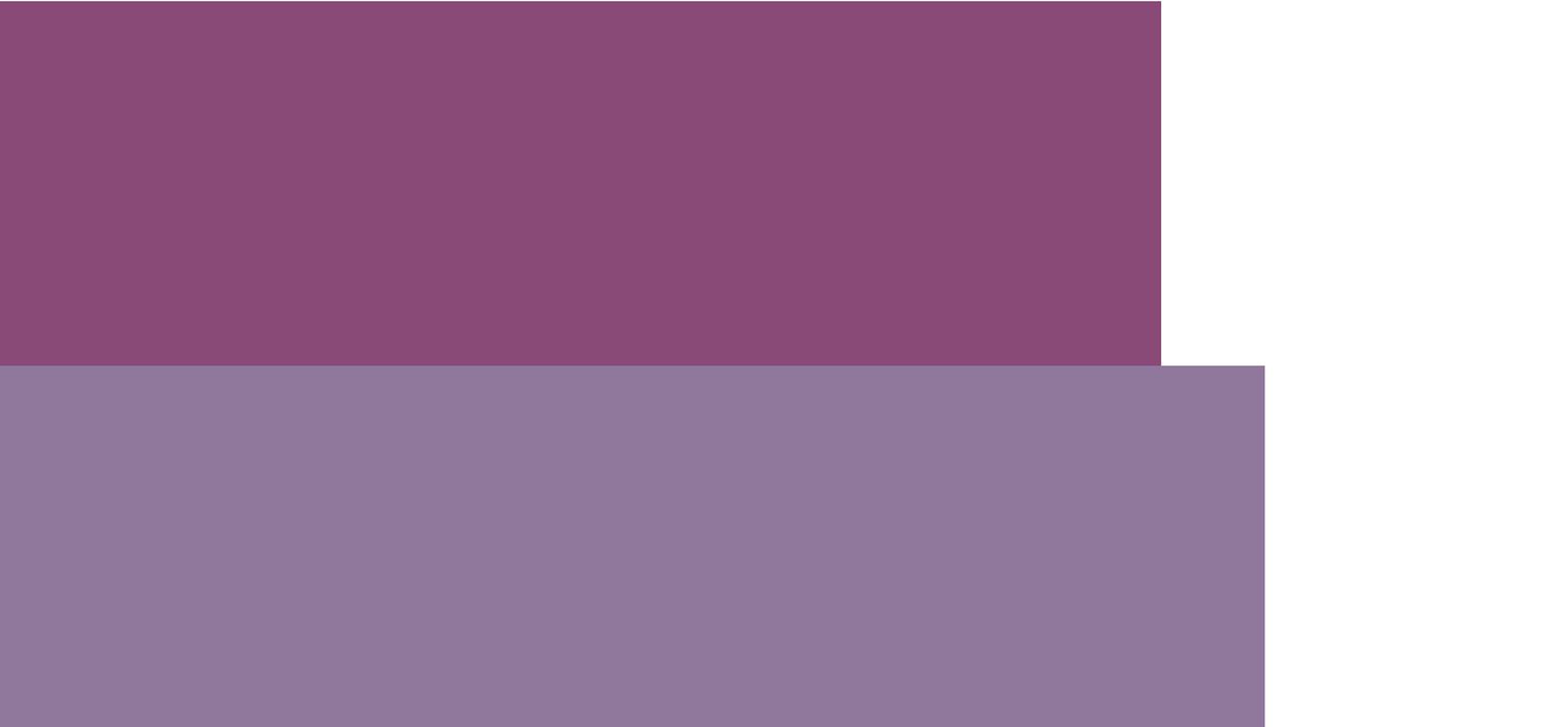
In conclusion, he again emphasized the importance of taking the craft of filmmaking seriously in order to produce good quality films. Both female and male filmmakers in Africa must take advantage of the audio–visual medium. It is the most effective tool to touch and affect the hearts and minds of people.

Each panelist, in their presentation, offered insights into major challenges plaguing the film and television industry. Examining the challenges faced, however, also made evident potential opportunities in the West African film industry.

These insights include:

- How digital technology has increased the availability of platforms that film can be viewed
- The deregulation of airwaves has given more people access to the medium as a means of communication
- The decreased cost, as well as the improved ease of using equipment, has made it cheaper and more accessible to create films
- The media boom taking place in Ghana makes it easier for the industry to accelerate and develop.

The question then is, how are filmmakers taking advantage of these new opportunities in spite of, and in order to defeat the challenges they face?



**DAY
THREE**

ACTION GROUP MEETINGS



An African Women in Film Manifesto
Led by Tsitsi Dangerembga and Beti Ellerson



The Preservation of
Ghana's Film Archive
Led by Anita Afonu



African Storytelling
Led by Sarah Bouyain

DECLARATION

Having met at the African Regent Hotel, Accra, at the African Women's Development Fund (AWDF), 2nd African Women in Film Forum held 23rd to the 25th of September 2013, on the theme "Creating compelling social justice content for film and television" -

Having deliberated on the state of African women in African filmmaking today and

1. Recognising the funding challenges and disparities faced by African women filmmakers in sourcing funding for our work;
2. Acknowledging the need to develop our capacity in writing for the big screen or television in order to tell our stories;
3. Recognising the need for increased collaboration between ourselves in order to produce successful and competitive products;
4. Reaffirming the need for continuous capacity building and enhanced skills transfer to foster the above products;
5. Increasingly aware of the need to harmonise our diversity in the field of cultural production with respect to language and other factors;
6. Reaffirming the need to enhance distribution and exhibition opportunities for our projects;
7. Deeply concerned that the media represent a social voice and position of authority so that that which appears in the media is socially empowered. That which does not appear in the media is socially disempowered with the result that mainstream moving images and media work to continue the subjugation of women, and particularly of African women.

We, the participants resolve to:

Found a Pan-African organisation of African Women Filmmakers that is action oriented and product oriented that will commit to:

- a. Alleviate the funding challenges experienced by African women filmmakers,
- b. Develop the capacity of African women filmmakers to write for the big screen or television in order to tell their stories,
- c. Encourage the collaboration between African women in order to produce successful and competitive products,
- d. Enhance capacity building and skills transfer in the area of production,
- e. Harmonise our diversity in the field of cultural production with respect to language and other factors in order to enhance our production capacity for the big screen and television,
- f. Enhance distribution and exhibition opportunities for our projects
- g. Always recognising, and as far as possible, working with other institutions with a track record in the above fields as they apply to African women
- h. Charge AWDF to
- i. Facilitate the formation of the above-mentioned body of African women filmmakers by facilitating a meeting of representatives, [i.e., selected interested individuals] within the ensuing six months
- j. Facilitate the creation of a database of resources of African women in film for African women in film, also taking into account such resources that already exist

Facilitate our capacity building processes in the above-mentioned areas

Support the setting up of a revolving fund to assist African women filmmakers in their work

We acknowledge AWDF and its partners for their support.

We appreciate the interest and involvement of AWDF and staff in the activities of the programme.

Done in Ghana on this 25th day of September 2013, on behalf of all participants by:

Nanahemaa Awindor
(Ghana)

Beti Ellerson
(USA)

Tsitsi Dangarembga
(Zimbabwe)

PRESERVING GHANA'S FILM ARCHIVE



*In foreground: Anita Afonu.
Left in background: Mamle
Kabu*

Anita Afonu's film *Perished Diamonds*, takes a hard look at the disintegration of Ghana's film industry after independence. After the film was released, a laboratory in the UK where the bulk of Ghana's films are archived, contacted her. The laboratory was threatening to dispose of the film reels stored at its facility because of an outstanding USD14,000 rent payment the government of Ghana had not made. Apparently, because she had made the film, it had become her implicit responsibility to deal with the problem.

Gaining the attention of the government to rectify the issue, however, proved extremely trying. Anita wrote several letters to the authorities, in vain. She wrote to the appropriate ministers of state, as well as ex-President Rawlings, and even to President Mahama in the hopes of getting a positive response. At one point, the situation got so desperate that she went as far as making arrangements for the temporary housing of the archive in case she was unsuccessful at getting the government to honor the debt. Fortunately, her efforts paid off and she, eventually, was able to get the government to make payments for the next two years

It is against this backdrop that the action group considered what can be done about preserving Ghana's film archive. The group members, led by Anita Afonu, arrived at the conclusion that it is imperative the film archive is digitized.

Ghanaians are entitled to see the films as it is a rich part of their national heritage. What is left of the films must be made available to Ghanaians for posterity. Anita had already embarked on this project of pushing the government to digitize the entire collection. She entreated the participants present to support her to do so because she could not pursue it on her own. She did commit to giving feedback to the rest of the group about developments in the future. In fact, she informed us, Reverend Hesse, a retired film director and former President of the Ghana Academy of Film and TV Arts, was on his way to the UK to identify and catalogue newly discovered films at the storage laboratory.

The group discussed strategies to explore such as monetizing access to and usage of the films so that the digitization project could pay for itself. Beyond that, public awareness about the current situation, as well as a public lobby needed to be created to ensure the digitization actually took place. Through social media, support for the cause can be mobilized. Additionally, other solutions such cloud storage were discussed. However, it was agreed that we were still a long way off from considering that as a viable option in Ghana.

Update: In December 2013, Anita Afonu sent an email updating the group participants on developments:

"I have been in talks with Rev. Hesse and Prof. Akosua Ampofo of the University of Ghana... Prof. Ampofo, the director of the Institute of African Studies, has agreed to be a part of this initiative and will represent the University of Ghana... Prof. Linus Abrahams, the director of NAFTI [will] also come on board Things are looking good from my side and I wish to inform you all of this. Rev. Hesse will be going to England in March 2014 to inspect the films again..."

AFRICAN STORYTELLING - WHAT IS AN AFRICAN STORY?



*“Is there an African way of telling a story? ...
If we try to be as honest as we can be in
telling our stories, maybe finally we’ll know
what an African way of telling a story is.”*

- Sarah Bouyain

The participants in this action group considered how to define an “African story” today. They pointed out that this was a difficult question to answer because it required, in essence, an answering of the question, “What makes ‘Africa’ African?” However, many recurring themes came up as participants discussed what they would like to see in African films produced today. The conversations focused on a number of themes, including the following:

- There are African stories about the past, the present and the future. African stories need not be frozen in a romanticized past, outside of modernity.
- African stories must and do transcend the dominant colonialist representations that make up narratives of poverty and deficiency.
- We must not internalize and normalize the characterization of Africa as inferior in the films we produce.
- There are a multitude of African stories, because there is diversity in African realities and experiences.
- We must not allow complacency to take hold and diminish our drive to make good quality films.
- There is a dearth of skills within the local industries that can greatly impact the quality of films that are released.
- African films have not developed, at this moment, into distinctive regional styles or recognizable film languages.
- Globalization exists in Africa, as much as Africa is a part of the globalized world

In the end, as a way to answer what had become a philosophical question, Sarah Bouyain argued that there was only one way we could arrive at an effective definition of what an African story was: if every African woman filmmaker could afford to tell the story she wanted to tell, possessed unlimited funds to produce that story, and had the technical expertise to tell it the way she wanted to tell it. All of these films would have to be shown together in a film festival. Perhaps then, within the great diversity of stories told, we would see emerge a common thread that we could then identify as “African.”

CLOSING ADDRESS



Dr. Yaba Blay

Yaba Blay’s closing address was both earnest and humorous. She told personal stories that captured the aim of the forum: “Creating Compelling Social Justice Content for Film and Television”. Her address emphasised the fact that African stories told through film and television need to embrace the complex range of continental, pan-African and personal histories.

These stories should celebrate the diversity of cultures and experiences that exist on the continent and in the diaspora. Audio-visual media projects enduring representations that are significant for the ability to enhance the ways we understand our social identities. When these images dehumanize, silence and absent African people, sophisticated responses must be articulated. African filmmakers and television producers on the continent and in the diaspora, have the means and the responsibility to counter

the strategies of colonialist discourse, i.e. projection of negative narratives of Africa and the consolidation of Western supremacy.

“[T]he very act of storytelling can itself be an act of social justice,” Blay declared, echoing Tsitsi Dangaremba’s assertion that “any expression from any black woman is an act of social justice.” Filmmaking and television media when placed in the hands of African women telling compelling stories, can effect real change in real people’s lives. She acknowledged that although she was not a filmmaker - like many of the participants present - she understood herself as a storyteller and creator.

This forum was particularly significant to Blay personally because her attendance was woven into her homecoming story. Although born and raised in the United States, and her last visit to Ghana was in 2010, the country is home and the place where her own story began.

Growing up, Blay revealed she always felt she possessed a dual identity. Literally, she was an African-American, raised by Ghanaian parents, in a very Ghanaian home, in America. This double-consciousness of identity influenced her work and the stories that she told.

Blay learned early on that American ignorance about Africa could be confronted with storytelling. Although her first forays into storytelling - fantastic stories about African princesses riding elephants - were admonished for not being truthful, she soon became aware of the effect of the ‘truthful’ stories that American media created around African-Americans on television.

Beyond the effect of these representations on African-Americans themselves, popular imagery also had an effect on how Africans conceptualized African-Americans. In the media, both African and African-American subjects are often dehumanized. Blay recounted a poignant personal experience of hearing the label “Akata” [cotton picker] for the first time. She was hit with the awareness of the powerful impact these images and representations had, not only on the conceptual building blocks of her own identity, but also on the relationship between the two communities.

Her response to this was to embark on projects that would “announce [our] humanity” as Africans and African-Americans. This is what she has done in her research on skin colour - through an investigation of skin bleaching in Ghana for her academic work, through her contribution to the CNN documentary, “Who is Black in America?” and through her book, *(1)ne Drop: Shifting the Lens on Race*, among other projects. For Blay, it was vitally important how she told these stories. Contemplating her aunt’s experiences with the bleaching trend in Ghana made it clear to her that skin bleaching was more complex than Africans “wanting to be white” or exhibiting a “colonial mentality”. Just as with her exploration of colourism and black identity in America, there’s a social context to examine here. What did a lighter skin-colour represent and what function did it serve in society?

Blay ended her address by reiterating that we must tell our own truths if we are to affirm our humanity as Africans. Her presentation highlighted how our own introspection could evoke compelling and truthful storytelling that strengthened the representation of our humanity as Africans on the continent and in the diaspora. We have to ask ourselves, “[w]ho am I and what is my relationship to the stories that I want to tell?”

This was the very imperative that brought together this gathering of filmmakers in the first place. For Yaba Blay, this has also been the driving focus of her work. She concluded by expressing the hope that her address would contribute to the continued elaboration of meaning for her fellow African women storytellers.



“I have always been compelled to tell my own story. Not just for the sake of telling the story but for the sake of announcing my humanity.”

Dr. Yaba Blay

From left to right: Tsitsi Dangarembga, Ama Ata Aidoo and Yaba Blay

CLOSING ADDRESS (FULL TEXT)

Good afternoon.

So I've been tasked with offering a closing address. Somehow, in 30 minutes or less, I should wrap up the past three days of the 2nd African Women in Film Forum. Somehow.

Honestly, it's a task that I have found rather difficult. Usually, under normal circumstances, I would have prepared this address days before boarding the plane from New York to Accra. Normally, I am invited to speak to audiences about my research or about topics for which I have gained a particular level of expertise so to speak. In that way, preparing to deliver such an address follows simple form – I think about it, I make notes, and I write it out. Simple. But something about this invitation was different for me. Somehow.

While most of my work is indeed visual, and while I do consider myself a writer and cultural producer, a filmmaker I am not. Perhaps because I know what it takes to make a film, and because I have an enormous amount of respect and admiration for filmmakers, the idea that I would address a room full of filmmakers from all over the Continent, of YOUR calibre, felt daunting. In fact, when Nana initially invited me, I remember asking her, quite frankly, “Why do you want ME to speak?” And though it made more sense after we spoke, and I of course agreed to come, something in me needed to get here first. Catch the vibe if you will, before having a sense of what it is I would share – what I could share - with all of you in closing.

Thankfully, I was able to connect the dots between you and I fairly quickly. Like me, many of you aren't filmmakers, per se. Some of you are writers, others of you are producers, some administrators, some even students. And yet we all create. We are all storytellers.

Storytellers - a term that I've heard many times over the course of the past three days; a term that I've been reflecting on in many ways since I arrived to Ghana last week.

I haven't been to Ghana since 2010 and the thought of being here for only three days after not being able to come here for three years was crazy to me. So I re-arranged my schedule so that I could be home for one full week.

HOME. The place where my story begins.

Those of you from Ghana may have guessed from my typical Nzema name that I am Ghanaian. However... well maybe I shouldn't preface it with "however" but somehow I've always felt it important to qualify my Ghanaian-ness with "I was born and raised in the States." Because although I may look Ghanaian to some, the moment I open my mouth, my position changes. As does my identity.

In many ways I am literally African-American – raised by Ghanaian parents, in a very Ghanaian home, in America.

My own dual identity has come to influence the work that I do and the stories that I tell. The stories that I feel the need to tell. Though I study and write about many things including African culture and aesthetics and global Black popular culture, what I am most interested in are issues of identity – who we are and what makes us who we are.

Questions that I have long had to develop answers to, not only for myself, but for others.

When I was small, my classmates would ask me all sorts of questions and say all kinds of ridiculous things once they learned that my family was from AFRICA. "Have you ever ridden an elephant?" "Do you like wearing shoes?" "Do you know how to speak African?" "Oh, you must really know how to climb a tree."

Luckily for me, my father, the original Dr. Blay, was himself a product of Nkrumah's Ghana, and so he taught me from before I can even remember that I was African, that I was Ghanaian, and that I was to be proud. Very proud. I knew the meaning of every part of my name and being a girl born on Thursday, the same day on which the Akan believe the earth was created, made me hold my head up just a little bit higher. I always felt so magical.

And it's funny – side story - just yesterday at lunchtime, my friend Maame and I went to the bathroom and there was a woman there bent down doing something to her dress and I didn't see her face. I went to the bathroom, came out, and Maame says, "That was Ama Ata Aidoo." I said, "Are you serious?" She was like, "Yes, I'm very sure." And I said, "Oh my goodness. Do you know she named me?" And I blame my father for these things because everything that he's ever told me about me, I have weaved it into the fabric of my being. And so the story goes that at my outdooring, my naming ceremony, it was Ama Ata Aidoo who served as the Okyeame. Ama Ata Aidoo was the first person to announce my name to our community. And what a gift my father gave to me in making sure that I not only knew that story, but that I knew Ama Ata Aidoo's work. And I promise you, she is the reason that I am a card-carrying African feminist. And so yesterday, the very first time that I met her as an adult, I was sure to tell her our story.

And so anyway, all that is to say that from early on, I confronted American ignorance about Africa with storytelling. My father still has a copy of my first story. Ten typewritten pages by Princess Yaba Amgborale Blay, age 7. The story that I would read in front of my second grade class. The story wherein I told everyone that I descended from African kings and queens, and that yes, I had ridden an elephant, one that wore a gold and pink diamond tiara and would take me wherever I wanted to go in my kingdom.

Needless to say, I got a very early lesson in the importance of telling the truth when telling our stories. Yet still the question was – which truth must we tell? Because interestingly enough, it was my white, French, elderly, Catholic nun teacher, Sr. Winifred, who would pull me to the side and advise me that if I wanted my peers to know about Africa that I would have to tell the truth about Africa no matter how bad it was. While I knew I was wrong, I also knew that she wasn't right.

Fast-forward to somewhere along the timeline of my childhood, during one of the many trips to Ghana that my mother was committed to taking me on. I remember staying at my grandmother's house in Nkawkaw. There was one television for the entire house, and by house I mean compound, because my grandmother used to rent rooms and, essentially, we were all one big family. And so in the evening, we would all gather to watch a little bit of television before going to sleep.

Now I'm not sure if this was because it was the early 80s or if it was because we were in the mountains, I just know that there were only one or two channels. And on this one particular night, we watched an American television show. I don't remember what show it was exactly, but I do remember that the way Black Americans were being portrayed was very stereotypical. To the point that my elder male cousin said a word that I had never before heard, a word I have never since forgotten – Akata.

And as often happens when I'm in Ghana, once people have labeled me "American girl," they neglect to consider the fact that while I don't speak it very well, I actually understand Twi quite well. Most times if you speak Twi in my presence, I know exactly what is going on. And on that night, my elder male cousin and his mate, not only called the Black Americans on the television Akata, but they called me Akata as well. In that moment, I didn't know what Akata meant, but just by the way they spat the word from their mouths, I knew I didn't want to be Akata.

When I later got the meaning from my mother – cotton picker - my feelings were so hurt. So very hurt. Not only because A) they were insulting me, or B) they were insulting Black Americans, people with whom, like it or not, I have a connection to, but because in that moment, I was invisible. Not only did they talk about me in my presence but whatever my story was, it wasn't important enough for them to ask me about it. Everything they knew about me, everything they thought they knew about me, came from the television.

Fast-forward another twenty years. I'm a graduate student at Temple University and I am working for the University's Study Abroad program. Myself and another Ghanaian professor bring a dozen or so students to Legon each summer for about six weeks. And me being me, when we bring students to Ghana, I want them to have an authentic experience...and so I take them to the night club. One night we went to whatever club was popular at the time, and we're enjoying. Dancing. I was with three seemingly African-American students and I say "seemingly" because two of them were actually Panamanian and the other was Jamaican. We were dancing by ourselves and here came a couple of Ghanaian guys. They literally walk up behind two of the girls and rather than simply dance with them, they begin groping them. They, literally, walked up to them and began touching their behinds. I of course had to diffuse the situation because the young sistas were ready to fight. But beyond diffusing, I just had to know what they were thinking. And so I asked them, what is your problem? Why would you do that? It's not like it was the latest dance. I didn't see anyone else in the club behaving like that. Honestly. And one of the guys said to me "Oh come on! We see how you Black American girls behave in the club. We see the videos. That's how you party." The guys actually took offense that the girls wouldn't dance with them like that. He asked me "Is it because we're African?"

What those guys knew about Black American women they had learned from the television. And believed it.

Fast forward another five years, I earned my doctorate and I begin teaching Africana Studies at a small, predominantly-White liberal arts college in the middle of Pennsylvania. Student body of about 2,000. Only about 100 Black students, about 20 of whom are from Africa. Every February we celebrated Black History Month, and during this particular year, the Black Student Union decided to decorate the Student Center with national flags from all over Africa. Sounds like a good idea right? Not for the African Student Union. The President, a Ghanaian student, wrote a quite stern letter to the president of the Black Student Union demanding that they remove the flags. In her estimation, African history was not Black history and the Black American students had no business displaying African flags, especially without permission.

Needless to say, me being me, I had to arbitrate a dialogue between the Black Student Union and the African Student Union. Come to find out, the African students were offended that when it was time to all of a sudden be proud to be Black in front of White people, that the Black students would attach themselves to Africa, but any other time, the Black Americans distanced themselves from the African students and were oftentimes disrespectful to the African students. So from the African students' perspective, if you don't claim us year round, don't claim us during Black History Month. And again, what that conversation between the groups demonstrated to me was the power of the media in informing our knowledge of others and our knowledge of ourselves.

The media has long impacted all of us, on both sides of the Atlantic. And unfortunately, I could go on and on and on with yet more examples and yet more stories. But all of this is to say that from very early on, on both sides of my identity – African and American – I have always been painfully aware of the power of the media to tell particular stories. Stories that would come to impact how others saw me and how I saw myself. Stories that would come to impact my relationships with others, and my relationship with myself.

And so I have always been compelled to tell my own story. Not just for the sake of telling the story but for the sake of announcing my humanity. If you think I swing from trees, you are mistaken. I am human. If you think I shake my butt for your pleasure, and not my own, you are mistaken. I am human. Ultimately, in telling our stories, we must remind people of our humanity, especially when those people look like you.

So what does all of this have to do with the theme of this year's forum – "Creating Compelling Social Justice Content for Film and Television?" Everything.

Before coming to the forum, I was thinking that you might be expecting a specific dialogue about creating social justice content. But after being here, having listened to much of the dialogue that has taken place and having watched some of your films, to me it seems, as it always has, that the very act of storytelling can itself be an act of social justice.

Whether it is direct social justice work, like that of Yaba's film *The Witches of Gambaga* – a documentary film supported by AWDF, one that has been useful in affecting real change in real women's lives – OR - what we might call indirect social justice work, like that of Lodi's TV series *Society*, one that although the creators may not have intended for it to do so, inasmuch as it provides a window into realities often silenced by the broader media structures, it too affects real change in real people's lives. THAT is the work of social justice.

At the same time, however, we cannot take for granted that just because we are women, that just because we are, in fact African women, and just because we want to tell our stories, that all of our stories are equally empowering or impactful.

As Sionne mentioned this morning, “storytelling” has been a buzzword of the forum. How many times have we said, “We have to tell our stories. We have to tell our stories. No one else will tell our stories.”

Okay fine, we have to tell our stories but what stories do we want to tell? And why? And HOW will we tell our stories?

I think this is an important point that we must consider whether in reflection or in moving forward.

What stories do we want to tell? And why? And HOW will we tell our stories?

For me, part of the process of determining what stories to tell and how to tell them involves some level of self-reflection. Introspection. Who am I? What makes me who I am? As a woman? As an image maker? As a cultural producer? Who am I and what is my relationship to the stories that I want to tell? Often times, that alone helps me to be clear about why I want to tell particular stories.

As an academic, of course, I approach my work as “research.” And if you’ve ever been trained in research methods, you know that one of the first lessons you will receive is that of “objectivity.” Right? That somehow, in order for the research results to be valid, that you as the researcher must separate yourself from the subject matter in order to study it. Whoever came up with that idea was clearly not an African. How else are you to truly understand something if you do not connect with it? And even in your best attempt to be non-biased or separate from the research, the very decision to research is personal. You are connected to it. Some way, somehow. And so for me, rather than attempt to remove myself from the stories I tell, I actually begin with myself.

And I find that doing so actually creates a paradigm through which I am able to hold myself accountable in the process of storytelling. No more Princess Yaba stories. I'll use the example of my own work to further illustrate the point.

I initially became interested in the topic of skin bleaching in 1997 after the untimely death of my maternal aunt, Sisi Agyeibeah, at the age of 58. She had fallen ill the previous year and her health quickly deteriorated. In a matter of weeks, she went from being seemingly healthy and physically active to being physically weak, no longer able to care for herself, and at times unable to recognize her own children. Medical personnel at the various clinics and hospitals where she received treatment were unable to offer any diagnosis, other than dementia, and within 11 months, she was dead.

Soon after her death, I presented my mother with a photo album full of my aunt's pictures. And as we looked through the album together, I noticed that as a youth, her complexion was dark brown, very similar to my mother's, but as she got older, between the ages of 25-50, her complexion was of an orange hue, noticeably lighter than anyone in my mother's family. Then later, when she fell ill, her complexion was very dark brown, darker than it had been ever been.

When I asked my mother about my auntie's change in complexion, she very casually informed me that for much of my aunt's adult life, she had used skin bleaching products to lighten her complexion. At that point, I wondered if there was any connection between my aunt's long-term use of skin bleaching agents and her mysterious death.

The more my mother and I talked, and the more I started paying attention to things differently when I would visit Ghana, the more I began to realize that in Ghana and in many places across and beyond the Diaspora, bleaching is nothing short of a way of life.

Skin bleaching products are big business, particularly in the markets. There are entire businesses dedicated to selling skin bleaching products. In 1990, one Ghanaian dermatologist, Dr. Edmund Delle, reported that 7 out of 10 market women at Makola use skin bleaching agents.

The more I researched, I learned that upwards of 30% of Ghanaians are estimated to engage in the practice, with 50-60% of adult women having at one time or other used bleaching agents on their skin.

But again, this is not just in Ghana. Skin bleaching is currently widespread throughout much of Africa, with usage among as much as

75% of traders in Lagos

52% of the population in Dakar

35% of the population in Pretoria

50% of the female population in Bamako

In Cote d'Ivoire, it is estimated that "8 out of every 10 seemingly fair-complexioned women use skin-lightening products on a regular basis."

And among Zambian women, ages 30 – 39, as many as 60% reportedly use skin bleaching agents.

Of course, because my research started out as my personal investigation into my auntie's death, I learned much about the physical consequences and health implications of skin bleaching.

When people bleach, they are essentially stopping the production of melanin. If you understand the function of melanin, which is to protect us from the sun's harmful rays, then you understand that people living near the equator, hello - West Africa - we need melanin. Without it, we put ourselves at risk for diseases that under normal circumstances are not genetically our own, like skin cancer.

The process of skin bleaching literally destroys the epidermis, almost as if it peels the top layer of skin. In this way, when someone stops bleaching, the body attempts to repair itself and the new skin contains even higher percentages of the protective component melanin. This is exactly what happened to my auntie. When she had to stop bleaching because she was in the hospital, her skin became exponentially darker than it had ever been.

Did my auntie die from her long-term use of skin bleaching? I may never have a definitive answer for that. But I certainly don't doubt that skin bleaching negatively impacted her health.

I investigated skin bleaching for my dissertation research. In studying skin bleaching, I was going to tell a story. Why did I want to tell this story? Well, because my own auntie bleached her skin, and she died early of unexplained causes. Millions of women continue to bleach their skin despite the health implications and I wanted to know more.

But HOW would I tell this story?

Of course when you embark upon research you have to look at the work that has already been done. You conduct a literature review. At the time, outside of dermatological reports, there was very little social science research conducted on skin bleaching. I found numerous journalistic reports and what I found to be a common thread throughout the report was an extreme level of sensationalizing.

Oh my God! Can you believe what these women are doing to themselves? What is wrong with them? Can you imagine?

And so many people would take what I call a "National Geographic approach" to investigating.

Hovering over, reporting on these creatures in their natural environment, getting just close enough to take pictures and report, but never bothering to actually talk to them.

I read report after report after report from male doctors and male reporters who all, in one way or another, chastised women who bleached their skin. Some went as far as to call them naïve, uneducated, and “foolish African women who want to be white.”

And again, what I noticed, was that no one bothered to talk to them directly and ask one simple question, “Why do you bleach your skin?”

In many ways I was thinking of my own auntie, who I would not call naïve, or uneducated, or a “foolish African woman who wanted to white.” And had she survived, I would have asked her, “Sisi Agyeibeah, why do you bleach your skin?”

Part of the “how I would tell the story” had to do with humanizing my own auntie.

And so rather than making an educated guess as to why people choose to bleach their skin, I asked them directly; and in the summer months of 2003 and 2005, I conducted over 600 surveys among Ghanaians in Accra and Nkawkaw, and interviewed 40 people, over half of whom bleached their skin, both women and men.

And that’s another interesting point. Skin bleaching has been gendered female. There are in fact men who bleach their skin, yet the reportage focuses almost primarily on women. And there are grave consequences for that.

For example, when I interviewed one of the deputy ministers at the Ministry of Health, and asked him what programs they had in place to address skin bleaching, he laughed. He literally opened his mouth and laughed because you see in Ghana we have HIV, infant mortality, malaria and other more pressing health issues for us to be concerned about “Obaasem” – women’s business. And once you relegate skin bleaching to “Obaasem” it gets pushed down the list of priorities.

I’ll come back to that point in a minute. But in interviewing men and women who bleached their skin, what I found was much more complex than what had been previously reported.

Yes, these women were seeking to have lighter skin. That was obvious. But what did the lighter skin represent to them? What function did it serve? Light skin had to be worth something in the social environment. There had to be a reason why people were bleaching their skin despite the health implications. I had a woman who sells plantains along the roadside tell me that this is your natural color. And that when you work outside in the hot sun, the sun makes you unnaturally black. So she used the products not to change her color, but to maintain her natural color. In fact she wouldn’t call what she does bleaching, she called it toning.

I had a woman who is a seamstress tell me that she used the products on her face, shoulders, chest and arms only, so that when she wears nice kaba, especially a black one for a funeral, that her skin will shine and make the kaba look good.

And while no one said anything about wanting to be white, what many of their rationales pointed to was the idea that in order to be seen as attractive in a society wherein most of the people are dark-skinned, you have to stand out. Bleaching allows them to stand out.

This idea that Ghanaian men prefer light skinned women came up over and over again. One student at Legon told me that her boyfriend would give her small chop money just to buy the products. He said that he only wanted to have a light skinned girl. But then he started dating an actual light skinned girl from the States and he broke up with her.

It's interesting because I attempted to connect the dots if you will, and make sense of skin bleaching, specifically in the Ghanaian context, I realized how important skin bleaching was to many women's idea of what it meant to be a woman.

For example, among the Akan a woman is not truly considered a woman until she marries. Therefore, marriage is crucial to a woman's identity, especially for those women who are under-educated and working class. For them, whether or not they marry is critical to their quality of her life. Since in their estimation Ghanaian men prefer women who are lighter skin, in their minds, and in their experience, they HAD to lighten their skin in order to attract a man and a potential husband. To have a husband meant they would be taken care of. So for them, their quest for lighter skin had more to do with their desire to improve their quality of life.

And then there were the men, who like the women, said that they bleached their skin to stand out. But what's interesting is that the large majority of the men that I spoke to were fishermen from the James Town area of Accra. They boasted that the Ga were the first to come into contact with the British, not the Fante or the Asante, but the Ga. And because of that, they picked up a lot of things from British men. British men take good care of themselves. Most African men do not. So they learned that they should take care of themselves and make themselves look good. Bleaching was one of the ways that they took care of themselves to look good.

But unlike the women, they didn't bleach the whole year round. They would only do it for some occasion like Homowo, or Christmas, or Easter. Some two weeks before they would use the creams and get very light, they would enjoy whatever the occasion, attract all the women, enjoy themselves, and then after the festival, they would go back to business as usual. And because of that, they didn't suffer the physical consequences.

Now I could go for hours talking about my work on bleaching, but I don't have hours so, I'll just say that skin bleaching is much more complicated than it appears. Light skin fulfills a function in the social environment, the benefits of which outweigh the risks in the minds of many.

But there is more to the story of skin bleaching than the individuals themselves. Rather than pointing fingers and focusing on the individuals themselves – what I would consider sensationalizing – we would also do well to look at the social environment within which skin bleaching manifests.

So like in many African countries, on paper, skin bleaching is illegal in Ghana. The products are illegal. But according to the Food and Drug Board there is an issue of enforcement. Again “Obaasem” – why would we dedicate resources to enforcing something so foolish?

And when I asked, well if the products are illegal, then why do we allow 60 foot billboards to be erected all over the country? According to the FDB, none of the billboards may say “skin whitening” or “skin bleaching” on them. So long as they don't say that, it's legal.

And even if it's not a billboard for skin bleaching products, what about all those billboards that feature people – men, women, and children – who do not look Ghanaian at all?

So if the products are allowed in the country, and we allow billboards to be erected, why do we ask women why they bleach their skin? Are we asking the right questions of the right people? Why aren't we asking men why they prefer light skin?

And for those reporters who continue to chastise women for bleaching, often diagnosing them with a “colonial mentality,” how are we defining colonial mentality? And who suffers? Don't we all? Think about it - in many schools across the country, Ghanaian children are not allowed to speak their native tongues. They must speak English. Is that not colonial mentality? Or what about the Ghanaian lawyers who still wear powdered wigs? Why is it so easy for us to direct our negative attention to Ghanaian women?

But again, more than anything, I continue to be invested in the HOW of the storytelling.

What story are we going to tell? And to whom? For what purpose?

Interestingly enough, I worked with CNN last year to produce a documentary focused on skin color and Black racial identity in the U.S. This year, I've been asked to consult with CNN International on a documentary on skin bleaching in Nigeria. And as I told the production team in the U.S., I found it necessary to tell the production team for this next documentary that if what they want to do is tell a National Geographic style story, I cannot help them. If you are not going to engage colonialism and global White supremacy throughout the society, then you have no business focusing on skin bleaching. Otherwise, you will ultimately pathologize African people, in general, and African women, specifically. And I can't be a part of that.

And it's interesting, any time I put my foot down so to speak, people are always taken aback. Like who are you? We're CNN or we're so and so. Do you know how many people would jump at this opportunity to work with us?

I do. But I'm not them. For me, part of my duty in storytelling is in telling the truth. More so than money or notoriety, my integrity is at stake. And for me, that is not for sale.

Who am I and what is my relationship to the stories that I want to tell?

Rather than closing, I hope that I've opened something up for you. And perhaps when we meet again in two years time, we'll be able to further engage our stories the what, the why, and the how.

Thank you.



Dr Yaba Blay delivering closing address at the 3rd AWIFF

A SAMPLING: AFRICAN WOMEN IN FILM FORUM ON TWITTER (#AWIFF)

@fiyawata: We the women who tell our stories. We the women who preserve our culture. African Women Filmmakers #AWIFF

@Aba_Ayensu: Any expression from any black woman is an act of social justice - Tsitsi Dangaremba #AWIFF @awdf01 #filmmaking

@fiyawata: Just finished watching #KwakuAnanse by @akosuadoma. Beautiful. We who are the keepers of culture. African women filmmakers. #AWIFF

@kinnareads: Amarteifio stresses that Africa must fund its own art. #AWIFF

@awdf01: Part of my duty in storytelling is in telling the truth. My people, my integrity are at stake. I am not for sale. - Dr. Yaba Blay #AWIFF

@elidot: Really impressed with what @nas009 & the rest of the @awdf01 team accomplished with this year's forum. Impressive & thoroughly worth it.

@awdf01: If we have problems documenting our past how do we digitally transcribe our future? asks Sefi Atta at #AWIFF

@sheroxlox: Following some great live tweets from @awdf01 's African Women in Film Festival in Accra.

@awdf01: Crowdsourcing named as one way to alternatively fund film projects #AWIFF

@iamyaaya: 'On The Border' illustrates that women film makers do not always make films about so called women's issues. It's a refreshing challenge.

LA NOIRE DE...

UN FILM DE SEMBENE OUSMANE

PRIX JEAN VIGO 1968
 "BEST DVD" AU FESTIVAL INTERNATIONAL DE CARTAGÈNE 1998
 PRIX DE MEILLEUR RÉALISATEUR ESPÉCIAL AU FESTIVAL MONDIAL DES ARTS NOIRS DE DAKAR 1998

UNE LUCIDITÉ CRITIQUE CONSTANTE... L'ÉCRIVAIN OUSMANE LE GESTE ET LA PAROLE SONT ENFIN DONNÉS À CEUX QUI EN ONT LA VÉRITABLE MATRIÈRE! JEAN BOUCHÉ GRACE À SEMBENE OUSMANE, LE CONTINENT NOIR A PRIIS ENFIN PLACE DANS L'HISTOIRE DU CINÉMA MONDIAL. GÉRARD SADOUL LE CHEMIN DE L'INDÉPENDANCE ET DE L'ART, AU CINÉMA COMME DANS LA VIE, PASSENT PAR LA MÊME VÉRITABLE LUCIDITÉ.

LOUIS MARGUELLES LE JURY DU PRIX JEAN VIGO, PRESIDENT PAR CLAUDE AUGÉ ET QU'ÉCRIVAIN NOTAMMENT MENI SAOUGET ET PIERRE PÉREZ, A ATTRIBUÉ AU PREMIER TOUR LE PRIX JEAN VIGO À SEMBENE OUSMANE.

LE FIDELISME UN TALENT, UNE SENSIBILITÉ, UNE PRÉCISION QUI FORCENT LE RESPECT.

GOMBAT CE RÉALISATEUR SÉNÉGALAIS, QUI FUT DOCTEUR À MARRAKECH, QUI A TRAVAILLÉ EN EUROPE AVEC LE CINÉASTE MARC DONDOL, EST AUSSI UN ROMANCIER DÉJÀ CONNU.

LE MONDE

A World Apart

BARBARA HERSHEY

BOROM SARRET (THE WAGONER)

THIS FILM FOLLOWS A HORSE-CART DRIVER AND THE CHARACTERS HE MEETS, AS HE STRUGGLES TO MAKE ENDS MEET IN THE CITY OF DAKAR.

DIRECTOR: BOUMARI SEMBENE
CAST: LY ABDOU, ABDOU

Sarronina

An African Queen

Sat 28 Nov 19h00 NS1 @ Studio 7

emitaï

DAZZLING MIRAGE

a film by FUNDE KELANI

IS IT WORTH RISKING IT ALL TO HAVE IT ALL?

SAMBIZANGA

UN FILM DE SARAH MALDOROR

DEBAT AVEC L'AUTEUR

dimanche 6 mai 20h.

WHO'S BLACK? IN AMERICA?

A SOLEDAD O'BRIEN REPORT

SUNDAY DECEMBER 9 8ET/PT

Moolaadé

"Protección"

notre étrangère

À PARTIR DU 2 FÉVRIER AU CINÉMA

Spora Stories



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