

Documentary Storytelling

Making Stronger and More Dramatic Nonfiction Films

Second Edition

Sheila Curran Bernard



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Onyekachi Wambu

Onyekachi Wambu was born in Nigeria and, following the Nigerian civil war, moved with his family to the United Kingdom. His publications include *A Fuller Picture; Empire Windrush: Fifty Years of Writing about Black Britain* (Ed.); and (forthcoming) *Under the Tree of Talking—Leadership in the African Context* (Ed.). He is a former editor of the *Voice* newspaper. His documentary credits for the BBC, Channel 4, and PBS include *Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, *Africa Out of Darkness*, *Deadly Bliss*, and the series *Hopes on the Horizon*, on which I also briefly worked.

Onyekachi is currently information officer at the African Foundation for Development (AFFORD), which supports the African diaspora in the United Kingdom in its efforts to contribute to wealth and job creation in Africa. We spoke in 2006.

Why don't we start with something you wrote in an e-mail to me. Commenting on the high-caliber work of some of the others interviewed for the book, you noted that the sort of community projects you're involved with may not quite fit, because of their "poorly funded, rough and ready production values—the key thing is getting the message to people." That's perhaps one of the best reasons we should talk—to explore this other kind of documentary.

I think it's really about stories that are not being covered by the general media. And allowing people to develop their own capacity to tell their own stories, as well as allowing them to have an insight and understanding of how important they are, actually, as change-makers. I think those are the two key things.

When I say that some stories have been marginalized in the media, I'll give you a context. We've been working with African organizations and Africans outside Africa who make contributions to Africa. At the moment there's a perception, if you watch the general media, that Africans lack agency; they're just supplicants who hold out their hands for aid and aren't really concerned about their own continent or, indeed, doing very much for themselves. When actually the truth of the matter is that if you look at who makes the biggest financial contribution to Africa, it's actually Africans outside Africa who are making these huge contributions. Last year, the IMF [International Monetary Fund] estimated that Africans outside the continent had sent about \$32 billion back in. This is way above most foreign financial transfers to Africa, including direct investment and foreign-originated aid going in to Africa. And yet when you watch any of the narratives about Africa and how it's being helped and supported, these Africans outside the continent making these huge contributions are just invisible, and their efforts are not acknowledged. By anybody.

And so the work we've been doing is saying to them, look, individually you're making small contributions. But globally and collectively those contributions add up to quite a lot. You're indeed a kind of invisible social security system in Africa. Many of you are keeping rural communities alive by the money that you're sending. You're paying school fees for young people; you're investing in small and medium-sized businesses; the money that you send to build houses, through the multiplier effect, creates jobs and stimulates the economy. So you're important stakeholders in Africa's development. First of all, you need to recognize that. Secondly, half of the reason that your stories are not being covered is that *you're* silent, as well. And what you need to do is to equip yourselves to release those stories.

How are you helping them to do that?

There are two strategies. One, as an organization, the African Foundation for Development, AFFORD, produces some media around their stories, [which we distribute] through the website, DVDs, and other communication outlets. Two, equipping individuals and groups within these communities to start releasing their own stories. We finished a program recently, called *Aiding and Abetting—Global Image, Local Damage?* And what we did was to

work with some African organizations here, some African artists, and the multimedia department of the University of East London, and talked with them to explore different ways of getting out a message through art. One of the artists was an actor, another did fine art installations, another was a poet. And alongside [their collaborations], each artist also did an independent piece of work, their own vision that emerged from these interactions. Some of the organizations built their own websites, and each had a DVD developed around the work that it did. So that was a unique kind of project.

I would imagine that AFFORD has to speak to a range of audiences, those within Africa and Europe as well as the world community at large. How does that affect either the stories or how you tell them?

With the African groups it's much more about getting them to become a player in releasing their own stories and getting across their own narrative about development, about Africa, which is very different from what the mainstream understanding may be. At AFFORD, we're not really interested in poverty reduction, which is the strategy of quite a lot of the so-called "mainstream" NGOs [nongovernmental organizations]. What we're interested in is wealth creation and job creation. We figure that if people are working, then most of the things that the aid agencies are trying to deal with would be solved, because they would have the capacity to deal with those things themselves. Africans who get engaged are very interested in starting small- or medium-sized businesses.

With the broad population, the mainstream, what we're trying to do is to convince them that the only way Africa is going to move forward is if Africans themselves are centrally involved. If you're going to get any kind of sustainable development in Africa, it has to come because Africans are driving it. If Africans are not driving it, it's not going to be sustainable. So this means increasing African agency, African capacity. So that's the central message, the need to support the effort that Africans are already making. One of those, for instance, is a program to see if we can get tax relief for the remittances that are sent. At the moment, if you send a pound to Oxfam to do development work in Africa, you get 28 pence back on your pound. That's 28 percent. But if you send that pound straight to Africa, you get nothing, even though you may be supporting a school, building a well or something that

is considered development work. We're arguing that remittances that are going towards productive development—and criteria for defining that would need to be found—then it too should be able to attract tax relief.

How important is media to the work that you do, and what kinds of media?

We use all media. We have to get the stories across, and so you go to anybody who will give you a platform, essentially. In terms of the really effective media that we've been using, what we've found is that the viral platforms, e-mail and web-based platforms, are very important. Obviously they are platforms of choice for many Africans, because they're so cheap and lots of people have congregated around them.

It's been quite interesting. I went to talk to senior officials at the BBC when they were planning their big *Africa 2005* program, which coincided with the G8 summit and also the "Make Poverty History" campaign, out of which grew the *Live 8* concert. When the BBC was first considering *Africa 2005*, they invited lots of different stakeholders to meet, including AFFORD. And I made the point that 10 years earlier, both internally [as a producer] and externally as an independent, I was always badgering senior people at the BBC for more programs on Africa. I used to get really annoyed, because there were so few outlets if you were here, in the U.K., trying to find out what was going on in Africa. But in the last five years I hadn't been contacting the BBC at all, and did they know why? I said, "Because every morning now, I can read every single newspaper from Africa online."

The days when you had to rely on the BBC as your source into Africa has gone. What's been exciting has just been the way that all these African organizations and news media have populated the web; it's a great source of information. You've got the official media and then a lot of blogs as well, and a lot of portals, such as *Ghana Today*. If you're interested in discussions or information from Ghanaians outside or in the country, you just go to that portal.

There's another kind of work you do, which is to bring more popular films about Africa, both documentary and drama, to British audiences—most recently through From Nollywood to Hollywood—Africa Mine,

a 10-part theatrical screening series co-sponsored by AFFORD and Screenstation with support from Film London. According to the website, the series “explores Africa through the eyes of Africans alongside visions of the continent packaged primarily for western viewers.”

The film series grew out of *Aiding and Abetting* and another project that we did with some young Africans here, many of whom have grown up in the U.K. and have never been to Africa. We questioned about 144 of them, between [ages] 18 and 30, and the responses we got back from them about Africa were absolutely amazing. What came through very clearly was that in many cases their own perceptions of Africa were being shaped by the usual sources, the usual suspects—the mainstream media and what the NGOs were putting out. People tend not to recognize that the NGOs have been one of the biggest sources for shaping the image of Africa, certainly in the last 20 years. And their demands for fundraising are driven by what many people would regard as negative images. We can understand *why* that happens: If you show pictures of a well-fed child who’s doing well, no one’s going to give you money, whereas if you show the negative picture obviously people are moved to send money. But what it ends up doing is putting across a one-dimensional perspective of the continent, and the young Africans here have been picking up on that. Those who have not been to Africa, what they see—which is what their peers see as well—is this strange continent that’s full of trauma and tragedy and famine and pestilence and wars. And many of them, quite frankly, have developed—I think an *alienated* relationship with the continent would be too strong, but I would say quite an *ambivalent* kind of connection to the continent. And they desperately wanted different sources of information about Africa.

The other major source of information about what they’d seen about the country was from their parents. And for many of them, Africa was this place that they had escaped from, so they were also looking back with a kind of anger. And when their children misbehaved they would threaten them with sending them back, as punishment! So as far as some of these kids were concerned, Africa was this traumatic space, and if they misbehaved, they’d be sent there.

What we tried to do with *Africa Mine* was to have a space where we could offer a three-dimensional perspective on the

continent, and then follow that up with discussions with people from those countries, the filmmakers and people who have some degree of engagement with the culture. Part of the criteria for raising money [for the series] was that we'd show some old classics, films from the 1960s and '70s, and some newer fare. So we got to *Totsi* [a South African film about gang violence], which had just won the Oscar, and also what Nollywood, the Nigerian industry, was doing, looking at their storytelling techniques and the kinds of stories they were putting forward. And then in terms of documentaries, we looked at ones that we felt would engage with issues around identity, the local and the global, migration. It's easier now to talk about yourself being African-British or a black British person, but it's still quite loaded. Even the kids who are now second or third generation here are trying to resolve who they are, still want to be able to talk about that, what it all means.

In your experience, does the storytelling have to follow western narrative conventions in order to appeal to western or westernized viewers? The documentary The Boys of Baraka, for example, was part of the Africa Mine series—it's a strong film, but its narrative style seems very American.

We've got Ousmane Sembene's film, *Ceddo* [about pre-European colonialization and enslavement of African people], which is unconventional in many ways. It was released in 1977. Part of what people talked about, when we had the discussion afterward, was around how slow it was—and ironically, how much they enjoyed it, being so slow, in terms of the cutting. It allowed you almost to be transported to another world. There was a sense that the times we're in are quite frenetic, and to just stop in that cinema and watch something so slow was wonderful for people, so that was an interesting reaction.

But the American narrative style is now so dominant, that here you watch something like *Totsi* and really, there's no African storytelling in there. What we discovered was that the Nollywood stuff [dramatic fiction] worked fairly well. The discussions were quite intense, about the different ways that people see the world, between Nigerians who are here and Nigerians who are in Nigeria. In terms of accessibility, the documentaries were the most successful.

*In an interview I read, you said that in making documentaries, you used skills you'd gained growing up in an Igbo village without a chief. That people would gather information from a range of sources—village elders, their own family, other families, knowing that each group might have its own interests—and then construct the truth for themselves. It reminded me of how we would approach evidence when making documentary series at Blackside (which did *Hopes on the Horizon* as well as *Eyes on the Prize*).*

Yes. A lot of what informs what we've been doing here at AFFORD, the watchword is just diverse and multiple images, multiple perspectives. Which is what the world is, really. And we say to people, look you've heard one story. But it's possible to imagine that the typical or the biggest aid donor to Africa is not Bob Geldof, it's the African lady who everybody ignores, who's the office cleaner, and who might send back 20 to 30 percent of her wages every month to relatives in Africa. It might be possible to see *her* as the biggest aid donor to Africa. This isn't an image that anybody would associate with African development aid, but the reality is—she *is*, or at least people like her are. And so the idea is to get people to understand that what is out there is not necessarily the truth all the time. And that the truth itself is a lot more complex.

Do you ever have to consider that line between journalism and advocacy and propaganda and polemic, when putting together media or working with producers?

Part of the problem I always had at the BBC was that I never really understood all of those different lines. I mean, we're advocating on behalf of Africans here, and what they're trying to do in Africa. And in the early days we kept meeting people from the "official" aid industry, the NGOs, and they would say, without any irony, "Oh, but you guys are biased, you aren't neutral." This is somebody who is generally white and middle class working from the U.K. and engaging with a poor third world country, which usually has a historically complex and sometimes torturous relationship with the imperial center, and you have a whole industry dominated by such people, and there's never a sense that they themselves are not neutral. That they're not just another class (or constituency) that's engaged in this process with their own baggage. So I have never really bought that stuff that journalism is what we do, and propaganda or polemic is what the others do.

People bring baggage, perspective, history, bring a whole lot of things to the table when they're mediating the truth. I've never been convinced about those lines being as clear as everybody else seems to think they are. I think you try the best you can to be objective and fair. But in the end you have a perspective. And as a human being that perspective is important and needs to be acknowledged for good or bad.

Let's get back to community work, the films that demand to be made, whether or not there is money or experience or high production values.

That whole thing was really reinforced for me while making *Hopes on the Horizons* [a history of pro-democracy movements in six African nations in the 1990s: Benin, Morocco, Mozambique, Nigeria, Rwanda, and South Africa]. There was this whole experience with people who'd been involved in those struggles in the 1990s in Africa, and when we were trying to get pictures to show these struggles, we just weren't able to do it. I came to a conclusion that as well as *doing* struggle, or official action of any kind, you need somebody there to document it. One of the things I said to the Ford Foundation when I was traveling through Africa was that when they were funding all of these civil society organizations, they should include in the budget a line for media, or for one person to have a digital camera just to capture what was going on. Because in the 1990s, these people had fought huge, incredible battles, and there's no memory of it because nobody bothered to film it! I mean, there is a memory, it's been written about, but that sort of disappears into academia, into political science departments. For popular appreciation of it—perhaps it's there in the popular imagination through music, but visually there just isn't very much of what happened. And it's so critical: some things, as you say, just need to be filmed. So that there is a popular memory of them, in a strange kind of way.

It's still not up there on the agenda. Again, what we were trying to do with all that stuff around *Aiding and Abetting* was to bring that through. To convince these organizations that the reason that nobody knows you're doing this work is because you don't tell it, you're not capturing it, you're not finding inventive ways of sharing it with other people. So what happens is that in another five years' time, nobody knows that you made a contribution to Africa's development that's as big as what anybody else is doing.

You know, there's frustration. Sometimes you would like to paint nice pictures, get the time to do things properly, get a higher budget and a professional staff, not get your friends who are professionals to be doing things for no money. They don't mind doing it, but after a while, it's just gets more and more difficult to call them out, if you're not able to pay them properly.

You've worked as a print journalist and also as a filmmaker. Building on your last answer, why is it important that documentary stories get told, with motion picture and sound?

The role that television used to have, that moment when it was all powerful, I think that moment has kind of gone. There was a time when television dominated the sitting room, and there were so few channels. And now we've got hundreds, and there are so many other different sources [of media]. But there is something about documentary film that's extraordinary. It has to do with a kind of reality that that I don't think print does successfully. I'll give you an example; one of the documentaries I've been proud of making is called *Deadly Bliss*. We were beginning to develop a crack cocaine problem in the U.K. in the early '90s, and what we decided to do was to make a kind of two-sided documentary. We went to the States initially, to try to understand what had happened with this drug as it worked its way through, so that we could bring that back to what was an emerging crisis here. This was about '92, '93; we were in Harlem, the Bronx, East New York. And it was just incredible. These communities were being devastated by the drug. We found out that most of the people in the criminal justice system were there as a result of this drug, and thousands of people had been killed either through taking it or through the criminal networks. We spoke to one expert at a rehab center who [said] that between the rehab, the deaths, people in prisons and everything else, this drug may have destroyed as much as a million people. It was just this incredible phenomenon, and we couldn't find any documentary evidence. We went looking for complex rendering from documentaries or other news footage and there wasn't any. What you got were just the usual images of the young black men with their hands on the police car, the emergency of the shootouts with drug sellers. But just subtle, powerful renderings of what was going on—we couldn't find them.

And so what we had were lots of talking heads and no way of illustrating the story from archive material. The one breakthrough that we had was that, going up and down, up and down, we kept seeing all these murals in Harlem and the Bronx. Graffiti murals. And we were interviewing this person with his back to a mural, and it dawned on me: Of course, the story *had* been documented. But it had been documented by all these street artists. It hadn't been documented in a way that we get our information, which would have been through the 9:00 documentary or some other kind of televisual form. And so that was shocking. And then of course, the other space in which all this stuff had been documented very powerfully was music. I'd been listening to this music in the U.K., but listening to the lyrics again, hearing what people like Public Enemy were saying, I realized that these rap artists had captured, during that period between 1987 and perhaps '92, this whole base culture of crack cocaine. Public Enemy had a track called *Night of the Living Baseheads*, which captured the shocking reality we were witnessing in such a powerful way. And I came to a new respect for the art form, as a result of that.

Are you currently making your own films?

No, I'd like to get back. I'm very interested at the moment in the very quick turnaround of the Nollywood people, two-week films, and what is possible within that framework. I'd like to bring some of the sensibilities that I have to that. So if I'm going to do anything next, it would be going to Nigeria to do something like that, with those guys. Incredibly low budget, no budget; they'll do a drama in that time for £10,000. They'll turn it around.