

Documentary Film

Interview: Onyekachi Wambu

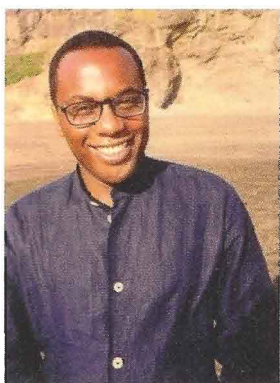


African Diaspora Development Day 2006 at an African Foundation For Development gathering at Royal Horticultural Halls, Westminster, London. / Huw Evans

'You need somebody there to document it.'

Stories of Africa from 'diverse and multiple perspectives.'

BY SHEILA CURRAN BERNARD



Onyekachi Wambu

Bernadine Evansio

Filmmaker and journalist 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.). 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 *Hopes on the Horizon*. He is currently information officer at the African Foundation for Development (www.afford-uk.org).

Sheila Curran Bernard: Why don't we start with something you wrote in an e-mail to me, commenting on the community projects you're [currently] involved with and 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.

Onyekachi Wambu: 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 dial security systems 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.

SCB: How are you helping them to do that?

OW: There are two strategies. One, as an organization, the African Foundation for Development, AFFORD, produces some media around their stories, [which the foundation distributes] through the Web site, 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 Web sites, and each had a DVD developed around the work that it did.

SCB: 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 *Live8* 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 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 UK, 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.

SCB: 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 (summer 2006) through *From Nollywood to Hollywood—Africa Mine*, a ten-part theatrical screening series co-sponsored by AFFORD and Screenstation with support from Film London. According to the Web site, the series "explores Africa through the eyes of Africans alongside visions of the continent packaged primarily for western viewers."

OW: 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 UK 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 twenty years. And their demands for fund-raising 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.

SCB: 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.

OW: We've got Ousmane Sembene's film, *Ceddo* [about pre-European colonization 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.

SCB: 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.

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 Geldoff, it's the African lady who everybody ignores, who's the office cleaner, and who might send back twenty- to thirty 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.

SCB: 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.

OW: 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. [T]hese 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.

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.

SCB: Are you currently making your own films?

OW: 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. ■