

Interview

Making *The Art of Ama Ata Aidoo*:
An Interview with Yaba Badoe¹

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Abstract: British-Ghanaian documentary filmmaker Yaba Badoe's 2014 film *The Art of Ama Ata Aidoo* focuses on the life and career of one of Africa's most influential women writers. Badoe's films have won several prizes and received international acclaim. Her versatile career also includes her work as a producer, fiction writer, and journalist. In this interview, she discusses her fictional work as well as her documentary films, including *The Art of Ama Ata Aidoo*.

Keywords: Ama Ata Aidoo, Yaba Badoe, Ghanaian literature, feminist writing, documentary film

Yaba Badoe is a prominent British-Ghanaian documentary filmmaker and fiction writer. Badoe's film *The Art of Ama Ata Aidoo* (2014) focuses on the life and career of Ama Ata Aidoo, one of Africa's most influential women writers. Badoe's other documentaries, which focus on feminist themes in Ghana, include *Honorable Women* (2010) and *The Witches of Gambaga* (2010). At the time of this interview Badoe was working on a film for the organization WoMin that focuses on extractivism as experienced by working-class women in different regions of Africa. Badoe's films have received much international acclaim and won several prizes.² Her versatile career also includes work as a producer, fiction writer, and journalist. In her literary career, she has written in different genres. Her first novel, *True Murder* (2009), is a psychological thriller in the Gothic mystery tradition. In September 2017, her debut novel for young adults, *A Jigsaw of Fire and Stars*, was published by Zephyr.

A month later Cassava Republic published *The Secret of the Purple Lake* (2017), a collection of stories written for younger children.

In this interview she discusses her fictional work and her documentary films. Part of this interview was conducted at the Gothenburg Book Fair in Sweden in September 2010; it was later finished over email between 2015 and 2017.

All of your recent work—fiction writing, documentary filmmaking, journalism—seems to more or less focus on the lives of Ghanaian and other African women and on the challenges they face in different historical and cultural situations. Is there a certain type of feminist/womanist agenda that runs through your work?

Badoe: If I were to describe myself as anything, I'd call myself a feminist-socialist. I use both feminism and socialism to try to understand the particularity of women's lives over time. The British novelist Joanna Trollope once said, "The human heart hasn't changed, it goes on and on as mores change. We [writers] are re-portraying the clichés of life and death and sexual betrayal" (qtd. in Gibbons). Trollope writes popular fiction for women. I'm interested in the same terrain but from the perspective of middle-class women living in West Africa or in Europe as part of an African Diaspora.

I'm especially interested in the various ways in which past experience and histories inform our take on the present. I'm fascinated by the difference between an apparently Western rationalist take on reality and a view of the world informed by African religious beliefs. My interests have developed in part because, throughout my life, I've inhabited two cultures and been forged by a synthesis of them. Consequently, my experiences of dislocation, recreation, and cultural synthesis are part and parcel of the themes and stories I explore in fiction. All the same, my intention is to produce fiction and documentary films that relate to the lives and experiences of women and girls—no matter where they live in the world.

Today the world knows you best as a filmmaker. How did your career as a filmmaker start? And are there some political incentives behind the themes you select for your films?

Badoe: I started making films when I worked for the BBC. I was recruited as a General Trainee with the BBC. I worked with them for seven years and later became a freelance documentary film director and producer. I've made films for the BBC, ITV, and Channel 4. I've also made films for charities such as Amnesty International, the BBC World Service Trust, and Christian Aid.

Do your documentary films mainly focus on Ghana?

Badoe: Not always. I've filmed all over Africa and in other parts of the world, such as Mongolia, Vietnam, the USA, and Europe. In Ghana I've made films through my NGO, Fadoa Films; for the Institute of African Studies; and the Centre for Gender Studies and Advocacy at the University of Ghana. In 2010, I made *Honorable Women*, a film for the Centre for Gender Studies and Advocacy about assembly women—politicians at the district level—that documents the lives of three assembly women: how they got into local politics and what challenges they face.

*Your much-acclaimed documentary film *The Witches of Gambaga* approaches the theme of witchcraft. How did you come across the topic? And how was this film perceived in Ghana?*

Badoe: Within twenty-four hours of meeting women condemned to live as “witches” at Gambaga, when I was working in Ghana as a stringer for the BBC World Service in 1995, I knew that I had to make a documentary about their lives. I got to know some of the women at the camp at Gambaga over twelve years. In 2003-04, I was finally able to tell their stories with the help of my collaborator, Professor Amina Mama, who invited me to take part in a pan-African research group, Mapping Sexualities. This enabled me to spend time in Gambaga as a researcher interviewing and recording some of the women. The more I listened to their stories, the more determined I became to use film as a way to challenge beliefs that demonize women. Asana Mahama was tortured by her brother, who threatened to pluck out her eyes if she didn't confess to witchcraft. Bintook Duut was on the run for her life for three months before she found refuge at the camp. Nobody knows the number of alleged witches who never find sanctuary, but I wanted Ghanaians and

other Africans to hear [about] what has happened to women who have lived to tell their tales.

I. Making *The Art of Ama Ata Aidoo* (2014)

When discussing her experiences as a writer in Ghana, Ama Ata Aidoo says in the film that as “a woman writer you are always an afterthought.” What do you think about this? Have attitudes changed during the last couple of decades, or does this still hold true?

Badoe: When Ama Ata Aidoo started writing in the late '50s and '60s, women were an afterthought in the African literary canon and were often ignored or overlooked in criticism. Later on in the film, Ama Ata Aidoo acknowledges the success of a new wave of African women writers such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie to illustrate the point that attitudes in the world of publishing have changed. Ama Ata Aidoo was a pioneer of African women's writing, and hopefully, thanks to feminist literary criticism and the success of writers such as Adichie, Sefi Atta, NoViolet Bulawayo, and Taiye Selasi, publishers are now aware that women writers in Africa and the Diaspora can be every bit as successful as their male counterparts.

*Ama Ata Aidoo also importantly emphasizes the significance of solidarity between female writers, as she stresses the importance of the work of such West African authors as Mariama Bâ, Buchi Emecheta, and Flora Nwapa. This solidarity among female writers and artists also traverses cross-generational borders. At the screening of *The Art of Ama Ata Aidoo* in Bayreuth in 2015, Aidoo expressed great respect for your film and work. What do she and her work mean to you as a fellow Ghanaian woman writer?*

Badoe: I really enjoy Ama Ata Aidoo's writing. She's a playwright, poet, and novelist, as well as a feminist activist. I love her novel *Changes*, one of the first to place an African woman's sexuality at the centre of a narrative, and I believe that her play *Anowa* is an African classic. Most importantly, Ama Ata has been extremely supportive, not only to me but to many other African writers. It was through her NGO, Mbaasem, which provides space and encouragement to Ghanaian women writers to prac-

tice their craft, that I was able to attend a writing workshop in Uganda organised by FEMRITE in 2008—an experience I treasure to this day.³

Your short story “The Rival” appears in the collection African Love Stories, edited by Ama Ata Aidoo. So you have been collaborating as writers and also via this film. Could you tell me how you discovered each other? How has your collaboration emerged throughout the years?

Badoe: I first met Ama Ata Aidoo several years ago at a Christmas party thrown by mutual friends. Another mutual friend, Nana Ayebia Clarke, asked me to submit a short story for a collection of stories, *African Love Stories*, which Ama Ata Aidoo edited.⁴ I submitted a short story—“The Rival”—that was published in the collection. Although we were acquaintances for a long time, I only got to appreciate Ama Ata’s writing when another friend of ours, Nii K. Bentsi Enchill, asked me to interview her for his literary website. I quickly read as many of her short stories and novels as I could lay my hands on in Ghana, and then recorded an interview with her to mark the twentieth anniversary of the publication of *Changes*, a novel which won the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize, Africa, in 1992.

When did the idea of making this film occur to you? What was the major motivation behind it—educational, biographical, political?

Badoe: I’ve always been interested in making documentaries that explore themes that are relevant to the developing world, especially themes that resonate with African women. Perhaps due to being a writer myself, I thought it would be interesting to do a series of films about African women writers—women writers of an older generation and also the new generation of writers that are making quite a name for themselves.

I spoke with my friends Amina Mama and Abena Busia about the idea of making a film series.⁵ In 2010, during an African Feminist Forum in Dakar, we came together, brainstormed, and devised the concept for a series. We found it difficult to secure funding for a series of programmes, so we decided to focus on a single writer. Ama Ata Aidoo, one of the great pioneers of African women’s writing, was the obvious choice for the first film. Moreover, she’s someone we all know. Amina is Nigerian,

and Abena and I are Ghanaian. I approached Ama Ata, and she agreed to be the first of what we hope will be a series that celebrates the alternative histories African women writers tell.

In its broadest sense, the documentary provides a platform for Ama Ata Aidoo to talk about her life and work. The film situates her artistic vision in the historical and cultural context of post-independence Ghana and explores recurrent themes in her plays, poems, and novels. These themes are of particular relevance to Africans everywhere: the issue of slavery and its repercussions on relations between Africa and the African Diaspora, relations between men and women and how these contribute to national development. The documentary is full of ideas articulated by Ama Ata about affirming relationships between women writers and critics, and how, in the end, it tends to be *women* who validate the creative work of women writers.

The film intriguingly catches Ama Ata Aidoo's positive energy and often humorous attitude towards life. How did you like working with her while shooting the film?

Badoe: I enjoyed working with Ama Ata Aidoo very much. Although she was initially ambivalent about being the subject of a documentary film, I think overall she found making the film an intriguing process. One of the best moments for me was showing Ama Ata the rough cut of the documentary. Her response was one of incredible humility and gratitude. It was a great pleasure presenting her with the gift of herself and the incredible range of literary work she's completed to create a space for women in African literature.

I would like to briefly talk about the structure of the film. It moves smoothly from one topic to another while simultaneously creating an overall picture of this daring, gifted, and courageous woman writer. Yet I would think that it must have been a challenging task to bring together all these various elements concerning her life and career: seven decades of her life, political changes in Ghana, her different works (fiction, poetry, and drama), as well as her role as a public intellectual and as a Minister of Education. Can you tell me a little bit about the structure of the film and the decisions or selections you made concerning the structure?

Badoe: In many ways the film is a traditional documentary in which we travel with Ama Ata to significant places in her life and she gives us the background to these places and her impressions. The documentary is really an extended interview, intertwined with readings of Ama Ata's work. It gives Ama Ata Aidoo time to tell her own story in her own words. We really wanted to provide her with the space to talk about her writing and the inspiration and cultural innovations that contribute to it. It is her testimony about what writing means to her, what she tries to achieve in it, and what other people make of it. At the same time, we try to provide a historical context to her work to better understand how she engaged creatively with issues of concern to citizens of Africa and its Diaspora.

We filmed throughout 2012, which was a very important year for Ama Ata Aidoo. She turned 70, and there were various events held to mark the occasion. We started filming in Ghana, where we returned with Ama Ata to her ancestral village and filmed her interacting with traditional storytellers, as traditional orature is a major influence in her writing. We then filmed interviews with her in Accra and at the University of Ghana, where her first play, *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, was performed in 1964. Later we filmed her in the USA, at the University of California-Santa Barbara, where the schools of Literature and Theater and Design held a colloquium to celebrate her work. The students at the University of California-Santa Barbara also put on her play *Anowa*, so we filmed a rehearsal of the play and the opening night, with Ama Ata Aidoo in attendance, which was very emotional indeed.

Once the creative arc of the documentary was clear, the challenge was to decide which of her works to include. She's written many stories and poems for children, but in the end, I decided to focus on her plays, novels, and the best of her short stories and poems.

II. Revising the Genre of the Gothic Novel: *True Murder* (2009)

Women and girls are also the focus of your first novel, True Murder (2009). It is a fascinating novel and so gripping that it is difficult to put it down. If I have understood correctly, the theme of the book also relates to a story in your own life. Can you tell me a little bit about that?

Badoe: When I was about fourteen years old, a girl who had been in my class at prep school was murdered. When I heard the news, I was so shocked that I knew that if I were ever to write anything at length, it would be about the death of a child. *True Murder* is narrated by a Ghanaian woman, Ajuba Benson, who, in remembering her childhood at prep school, tries to come to terms with the murder of her best friend. The book is an account of how the murder happens and Ajuba's struggles to make sense of an utterly devastating act of violence.

Let's not reveal too much about the plot of the novel, but it seems to me that also in this novel, you continue to examine the difficulties and pains women face during different times of their lives.

Badoe: Yes, I am definitely interested in the lives of women in *True Murder*: the constraints, the difficulties, and the challenges women face. The novel is mostly written from the perspective of an adolescent girl. In part, it is a very intense story about female friendship at that age, but it is also the story of a narrator from outside the British countryside who gets to know an English family that she perceives to be rather strange and exotic.

So it is the story of a Ghanaian and a British girl.

Badoe: Yes, Ajuba Benson is from Ghana, and her best friend Polly Venus is an English girl, even though her family has spent time in America. Polly is fascinated with a comic strip magazine called *True Murder*, which is a comic strip of the world's most sensational killings. What happens is that when Polly Venus and her school friends—Ajuba and Beth—clear up the attic of the new house where the Venus family lives, they come across what they think are the remains of kittens. It turns out that these are in fact the remains of children, babies. Inspired by *True Murder* magazine, the friends decide to launch an investigation to find out how the remains got into the attic. The novel takes the reader on a journey into very disturbing and unsettling terrain.

Did you think about the genre of murder mysteries while writing the novel?

Badoe: I think *True Murder* could be described as both a crime novel and a coming of age story. I'm a huge fan of American "detective" writers—from Raymond Chandler and Ross Macdonald to Denis Lehane, Chester Himes to Walter Mosley. Discovering the flexibility of the detective genre, its huge emotional range and resonance, helped in the creation of *True Murder*. Most important of all, it made the writing of the novel, despite the darkness of the subject matter, enjoyable. The idea was to use this most malleable of forms to equip an unlikely protagonist. Ajuba Benson, the narrator of *True Murder*, is an awkward outsider intent on unraveling a mystery that is as much about herself as her best friend.

If I were forced to slot *True Murder* into a particular genre, my preference would be to describe it as a psychological thriller in the Gothic mystery tradition. A nervous heroine determined to resolve a mystery as it unfolds in the English countryside is the stock-in-trade of gothic melodrama. However, once the heroine is an African, another layer is added, which I hope enriches the genre, making it very much of today.

It is a great point of view to show how white culture, the so-called normal culture, has to deal with its own dark secrets. You mentioned to me earlier that you really like Victorian writing, especially the nineteenth-century women writers Emily, Anne, and Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell, and George Eliot. I was wondering if True Murder is a take on Jane Eyre. In Jane Eyre the hidden secret in the attic is the non-white woman who haunts the English Victorian family structure, whereas in your novel the hidden secret in the attic is the remains of (most probably white) babies, which reveals that something is rotten in the English countryside.

Badoe: Ellah Wakatama Allfrey, my editor at Jonathan Cape, the publisher of *True Murder*, mentioned that one of her bosses saw similarities with *Jane Eyre*. I'm sure that everything one reads and the stories we love inform the stories we choose to tell. My intention was to tell a tale in the English Gothic tradition from the viewpoint of an African narrator.

Can you talk about the main character? She is the outsider looking into British culture, but what happens to her?

Badoe: It was my intention to give Ajuba space to inhabit the story completely, so that her positioning would disrupt the usual accretions projected onto black characters, which at times can reduce them to vehicles representing issues of social injustice. Instead, the gaze depicted throughout the tale is Ajuba's. As a result, her best friend's family appears exotic, even as she yearns to become a fully-fledged family member. Hopefully, by undercutting the usual perceptions of race and framing Ajuba's story as an investigation, universal themes of love and betrayal, as well as the age-old struggle to attain happiness within a family context, are probed, irrespective of nationality, culture, and gender.

The way in which you write about teenage girls and their lives makes me think of Toni Morrison, too, and her novels, particularly Sula. That novel is also about two girls growing up together, and there is also a murder/killing in that novel, although the context for it is very different. Like Morrison's novel, yours brings up the theme of female aggression and violence, which is still often a taboo subject. Is it still difficult to write about it?

Badoe: If the story of *True Murder* is about anything, it's about an intense friendship between two adolescent girls—both outsiders, both with a load of baggage that they're humping around. Polly and Ajuba's friendship is what holds the story together and gives it its power. Their passionate friendship accommodates ambivalence and attachment in equal measure. It may be a "girl thing" but it seemed to me that the only way to convey the full emotional horror of a child's murder was to ensure that that child was loved intensely by another child—Ajuba in this case. Once I identified that this type of intense friendship between two adolescent girls was the overriding theme in the novel, writing the story was easy.

I wanted to talk about the theme of witchcraft, as this is also a theme that interests you. Does it have a role to play in the novel?

Badoe: Ajuba comes from a country where people believe in witchcraft, so it is part of her worldview. Witchcraft belief does not play a huge role in the novel at all. However, when Ajuba's mother, Grace Benson, becomes mentally unbalanced, Grace is convinced that her husband's

many girlfriends, whom she calls witches, are trying to destroy her marriage. Eventually, Grace “sees” these witches in her looking glass and tries to foist her delusion onto Ajuba. Belief in witchcraft is certainly part of Ajuba’s story; however, I try to use superstitions surrounding witchcraft in Ghana to reveal a person’s state of mind, psychological trauma, and unhappiness.

III. Complementary Practices: Filmmaking and Creative Writing

Your own impressive and versatile career includes your work as a documentary filmmaker, producer, and writer. Your two recent films The Witches of Gambaga and The Art of Ama Ata Aidoo have received much international acclaim and have won several prizes. Do you see yourself more as a filmmaker today, or do you also still write fiction?

Badoe: I still write fiction although I try to earn a living as a filmmaker. A year ago I completed a young adult novel called *A Jigsaw of Fire and Stars*, a story about migration, dispossession, and people trafficking, which was published by Zephyr, an imprint of House of Zeus, in September 2017. At the time I’d started making a documentary film for WoMin—an African gender and extractives alliance based in South Africa.⁶ The film investigates the impact of extractive industries on women’s lives in Africa. After we finished filming segments of the documentary in Kwazulu Natal, South Africa and the Hoima region of Uganda, WoMin decided to move the production of the film from London to South Africa.

How do writing and filmmaking go together? Do they complement each other as two different lines of creative work?

Badoe: I think the disciplines of filmmaking and creative writing complement each other. Not surprisingly, my writing reflects the fact that I work in a visual medium. Over the years, I’ve also done bits of print journalism: book reviews for *West Africa* magazine and *City Limit*, articles for *West Africa*, *Orbit*, and *The World’s Children*. I’ve written fiction off and on for most of my life—a collection of fairy stories for children, *The Secret of the Purple Lake*, was published by Cassava Republic

in 2017. I've had five short stories published by *Critical Quarterly* in Britain, and as I mentioned above, my first young adult novel, *A Jigsaw of Fire and Stars*, was published by Zephyr, an imprint of Head of Zeus in September 2017.

For me, writing is a protracted process that combines many of the skills I've acquired as a filmmaker—a keen sense of narrative structure, clarity of expression, pacing, nuances of texture, and so on. Film is a dynamic medium, but for a film to work well, you have to work as part of a team. Despite the popular notion of the “auteur”—the person with the vision—film is a truly collaborative medium that brings together the skills of the director, camera-person, sound, and film editor. A good director manages to draw on the talents of others to create something fresh—a difficult task that depends on the goodwill and talent of others. When I make documentaries I'm able to use my sensibility to convey the stories and emotions of other people and forge them into a coherent narrative. I'm not supposed to make the stories up—that's a pleasure I reserve for fiction!

Notes

- 1 Interview edited by the author with Badoe's permission; additional edits for clarity made by *ARIEL*.
- 2 *The Witches of Gambaga* was selected as the best documentary at the Black International Film Festival in 2010 and won second prize for best documentary at the Fespaco festival in 2011. *The Art of Ama Ata Aidoo* was awarded the prize for best documentary feature at the Silicon Valley African Film Festival in 2014 and was officially selected for the Women's History Month Film Festival in 2015.
- 3 Mbaasem was founded in 2001 by Ama Ata Aidoo and supports African women writers in their career development. FEMRITE is the Uganda Women Writers' Association, founded in 1995.
- 4 Nana Ayebia is a Ghanaian-born publisher currently residing in the UK. *African Love Stories* was published by Ayebia Clarke Publishing in 2006.
- 5 Amina Mama is currently on the faculty of the Women and Gender Studies program at the University of California, Davis. She and Yaba Badoe co-produced the documentary film *The Witches of Gambaga*. Mama is also the Executive Producer of *The Art of Ama Ata Aidoo*. Abena Busia is a Professor in the Department of Women's and Gender Studies at Rutgers University and conducted interviews with Ama Ata Aidoo for the film.

6 WoMin, African Women Unite Against Destructive Resource Extraction, is an African gender and extractives alliance that was launched in 2013.

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