

# FILM REVIEW

**Jide Tom Akinleminu, director. *When a Farm Goes Aflame*. 2021. 112 minutes. Danish, English, Yoruba, with English subtitles. Germany. Film Five GmbH. No price reported.**

As the winner of the African Studies Association Film Prize (2022) as well as other international awards, *When a Farm Goes Aflame* is an enlightening example of how documentary can not only narrate reality but also reconstruct it. One can recognize the director's expert aesthetic eye, as he is also the director of photography. In fact, Jide Tom Akinleminu, after training in music and sound engineering, studied photography at the Fatamorgana Danish School of Art Photography and then cinematography at the German Film and Television Academy Berlin (DFFB).

In this film, Akinleminu returns to his own family history scattered over two continents. His parents, Greta (a Danish librarian) and Akin (a Nigerian farmer), met in the 1970s in Denmark; after their marriage, they moved to Ikorodu in Nigeria, where the director grew up. In 1991, due to deteriorating political and social conditions, they moved back to Copenhagen, but failing to find his place in society, Akin left the following year. Since then, the family has lived separately, the distance only punctuated by annual visits. For three years, on repeated trips between Europe and Africa, Akinleminu filmed his father, to tell the story of his work on his farm in *Portrait of a Lone Farmer* (2013, 76 min.), but perhaps also to recover part of his own identity. During the shooting of that film, he learned that for more than thirty years his father had been secretly leading a double life with another family. From this shocking discovery comes *When a Farm Goes Aflame*.

As the Yoruba proverb suggests, "When a farm goes aflame, the flakes fly home to bear the tale." In this story, Akinleminu bravely digs up his own history, and allowing unspoken words to emerge, he weaves a family tale. The opening sets the narrative style: in Nigeria, the director asks an oracle, "Why was my father never able to tell my mother the truth?" and "Why did she never ask?" The skillful camera then lingers on the caged poultry, before focusing on the sacrificial rite of the director himself slaughtering a chicken. This is followed by a dog howling behind bars and blood flowing on the road, as if to depict the suffering, not in vain, of his obstinate search. Then his mother

appears, enigmatic and proud, framed face-on, medium close-up, her back to the wall, motionless, with her eyes closed, while blurred images flow in overlays, which then come into focus in the next scene. Here, the 8mm family archive footages take us back to Nigeria in the 1970s. A chicken scurrying in the center of the image seems to allude unintentionally to a carefree unawareness of what was to come. With incisive editing, the film returns us to the present time in Denmark, where his sister tells of revealing their grandfather's double life to her children, simultaneously exposing it to the audience. It is not only a narrative turning point, but it is from this consciousness that a future can be reconstructed.

The film moves back and forth naturally through time and space, in its effort to uncover the motivations and emotions of the various people involved in this shared story. The director's first-person narration is interwoven with interviews with family members, with the letters Greta wrote to her parents (read by actress Inez Bjørg David) and with Akin's loving letters. The epistolary tale in voice-off introduces situations, love, intimacy, and brief sociopolitical analyses. The camera homes in close-up on the protagonists, and then offers breathing time for reflection as it explores places and skylines. Akin and Greta are isolated by the camera, he in Nigeria usually in his sunny backyard, she in Denmark often in her almost wintery house. Both hold back, but eventually give in to their son/director's relentless off-screen questions. Without forcing, he urges his mother—an excellent accomplice in the making of this particular film—to express her feelings. When from behind the camera he reads the court record, we learn more details. The film is also disrupted by his mother's struggle with cancer.

Akinleminu leaves eloquent silences, but he simultaneously searches for words; the camera, somehow, protects him, and his plural identity gives him strength. As his father had reassured him in *Portrait of a Lone Farmer*: "Children of mixed marriages are like birds with two pairs of wings. If one pair should break or weaken, they would use the stronger pair to fly." Akinleminu seems to be the only one of the children to enter into any real dialogue with his father, and he even disobeys the latter's warning not to meet his half-brother Bunmi. The scenes with his half-brothers in Canada and the United States also become a way to explore masculinity, polygamy, cultural traditions, affections, and everyone's place in society. From Bunmi he discovers that he and his half-brother were born within months of each other. As the film unfolds, the camera captures reality as events happen naturally, but it also serves as a mediator. In fact, in one scene toward the end, Akinleminu places it in front of his brother, who has not spoken to his father for years, and exclaims: "So Bunmi, if you imagine right now that this camera is Daddy, what would you want to say?"

In this brave and generous film judgement has no place. The convincing editing stitches together fragments of lives, allowing the protagonists to reflect on their experiences, to tell their stories, in a cathartic process. From a deeply intimate and personal story, it becomes a broader contemplation of

differences in cultures, conceptions of love, family, identities, and cross-cultural and postcolonial relationships.

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