



FROM HISTORY TO MEMORY: WRITING
ABOUT A WEST AFRICAN FAMILY
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I was born in 1965 in Hamile, a town divided by the Ghana-Burkina Faso international boundary. I attended the University of Cape Coast in Ghana, where I obtained my B.A. in History and French. I proceeded to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign to pursue my M.A. and Ph.D. degrees. I am currently Associate Professor of Anthropology at Western Oregon University. – Address: Department of Anthropology, Social Science Division, Western Oregon University, 210 HSS Building, 345 Monmouth Ave, Monmouth, OR 97361, USA. E-mail: lobnibe@wou.edu.

My project at the Wissenschaftskolleg was situated within the framework of the theme “Family History and Social Change in West Africa”. I was one of three researchers who constituted the 2017/18 Focus Group convened by Carola Lentz. Although we all worked around the theme and held regular meetings, we had different potential substantive outcomes in mind. Carola Lentz and I worked on a joint book project that draws on several years of collaborative fieldwork with members of our own extended family in northern Ghana; the other member, Stan Meda Bemile, for his part, worked on a film essay entitled *Bio bir: Seed of the Future*, using documentary footage of many family ceremonies that he and his media colleagues have filmed since the 1990s. The extended family that we study comprises some five hundred persons, depending on how one defines family membership, and belongs to the ethnic group of the Dagara. Carola was adopted into the family in 1987 while Stan and I were born into it, albeit we belong to different lineages. The family’s original homestead is located in Hamile, in northwestern Ghana, close to the border with Burkina Faso. About a century ago, the family had moved from a nearby village in Burkina

Faso, where most of its members were still farmers. Today, family members are dispersed throughout the major cities of Ghana, Burkina Faso, and beyond and pursue a wide range of professions. The central questions our book project is seeking to address is what keeps the family together in light of the increasing professional diversification and what role does memory of the family history play in maintaining cohesion and a sense of belonging?

Before coming to the Wissenschaftskolleg, Carola and I had contemplated writing a monograph on the history of the family and conceptualized a chapter outline with that great transformation in mind. But once we started to review the extensive literature on family history, family sociology, memory, and the new kinship studies in anthropology, we began to foresee some challenges. Among these was the question whether to use family history as a window to understanding larger processes of change, or rather to analyze these processes and their impact on family members in order to better analyze the family history. Related challenges concerned the book's conceptual framing, its periodization, and whether to organize our chapters chronologically or thematically. Furthermore, we struggled to organize the sheer amount of material in our possession. Whose stories or version of the family history were we going to write? Because we are members of the family with differing backgrounds and situatedness, we were also confronted with ethical dilemmas regarding our positionalities as simultaneously scholars and members of the family under study. It took discussions with several guests whom the Focus Group invited to Wiko, our own internal deliberations about the differential perspectives we brought to our task, and insights from conversations with Daniel Schönplüg and Alice von Bieberstein for us to begin to address these challenges.

A turning point in dealing with these dogged problems came when we decided to shift from writing a family history to exploring the changing forms of memory making. This shift helped mitigate the challenge of claiming to write a unified history and authoritative account. Focusing on practices of remembering the family history, we felt we were able to explore the ways narrative accounts and remembering by family members are shaped by the politics of memory. We received good feedback from other Fellows during and after our colloquium in March with the pivot from history to remembering family history. To be sure, by the time we left Wiko, a lot of writing still needed to be done to complete our eight-chapter book, but I nevertheless felt confident that the time we spent together in Berlin turned out to be a very productive one on several levels. For one thing, we have been able to engage with a wide variety of scholarly literature on family, family history,

and family memories worldwide, which enriches our perspective on the West African case with which we deal. Furthermore, we were able to complete the analysis of the material gathered in our case-study family in the 1980s and subsequent years. Finally, we submitted an edited book proposal to a university press with the tentative title *Imagining Futures: Memory and Belonging in an African Family*, and we were able to produce two installments for the Transregional Forum Blog that document our collaborative work process (“Family History as Family Enterprise?” <https://trafo.hypotheses.org/>).

Earlier, I spent the first two months at Wiko developing the broad chapter outlines of my own book project on funerals. I presented this book project at the Tuesday Colloquium as work in progress that dovetails with the broader theme of the Focus Group, but aims specifically to analyze changes in mortuary practices, and funeral rites as constitutive of local people’s response to increased geographical and social mobility and to the opening up of new economic opportunities. Over the past few decades in northwestern Ghana, the lives of families and individuals have been impacted by broad socio-economic forces such as outmigration in search of labor, increased social mobility because of expanded access to Western-style education, amplifying interactions with other regions in Ghana, conversion to Catholic Christianity, and exposure to new discourses of modernity. My colloquium presentation therefore highlighted the ways major institutions such as mortuary practices and funeral rites, which remain one of the few publicly attended traditional events, are being shaped and affected by the region’s changing political economy. The need to maximize the rare opportunity of working face-to-face in the Focus Group did not allow me to make further progress on this particular individual project. As I return to my home institution, I have a clearer sense of how to contextualize my ethnographic material on funerals and how to better frame my theoretical analysis to show how local actors explain why they celebrate their funerals the way they do now. Beyond my initial concern with analyzing how funerals are celebrated in the Upper West Region in Ghana, I now expect to be able to tie the changing funerary and mortuary practices to how regional disparities help to produce the new local funeral. I hope to clearly analyze how the “cultural” aspects of funeral celebrations interweave with those of the political economy. After discussing my work with other Fellows at Wiko, I am excited that this layer of analysis has the potential to also offer fresh insights into the experience of upward mobility and middleclassness.

Living and working together as a Focus Group for an entire year was both challenging and rewarding. For instance, how to harmonize our respective interests and work schedules while finding time to explore the incredible city of Berlin and its suburbs posed

a challenge. At the same time, our stay presented us with a unique opportunity to meet as family members and as scholars; we got to know each other much better than before, and we had the chance to exchange experiences and viewpoints. Frankly, I came to Wiko not knowing what to expect. I had, of course, anticipated a stimulating and congenial academic environment, but not the very lively conviviality created and made possible by both Fellows and the hardworking staff of the institute.

One very early but lasting impression about the Institute that helped ease my adjustment into the Wiko community of scholars stemmed from my initial interaction with one staff member who represented the positive face of the Kolleg upon my arrival at Tegel airport. This impression endured throughout my stay at Wiko and made me feel more comfortable approaching her with my personal problems. After a very long and difficult flight from Ghana via Lisbon, I had run into problems. I missed my flight to Berlin in Lisbon so that I opted to buy my own ticket. In addition, I could not update Andrea Bergmann on the status of the flight. To make matters worse, when I arrived at the airport I could not find one of my bags. When I finally did manage to come out of the airport, it was past 1 a.m. I was then very tired and frustrated and as I turned to walk toward the exit not knowing what to do, I spotted a lady towering over everybody near her. Beaming with smiles, she shouted my name. “Are you Isidore? I am Andrea!” I thought to myself how could Andrea deny herself sleep at this hour to come and look for me when I had not been in contact with her over the past 48 hours? She rushed to me. I then noticed she had come with her partner to the airport. To show my gratitude, I voiced my appreciation, repeating to her the question I earlier thought to myself. Andrea responded calmly that she anticipated that I had missed my flight and did not want me to spend time scrambling to find a hotel in the city. “It would be very expensive!” This response erased all my frustrations. In fact, the fatigue disappeared and signaled to me that I was coming to a great institution with dedicated workers who cared for its Fellows. From Tegel Airport, at 1 a.m., I was sensitized to how far the Wiko staff could go to ease the adjustment of its Fellows and continually facilitate their daily working conditions. My positive impression of Andrea, whom I would later come to jokingly call “my friend the troubleshooter”, held up with many other staff members I had the opportunity to meet and interact with. To all the Wiko staff, I greatly acknowledge your warm embrace that permeated throughout my dealings and interactions during what was a fascinating intellectual journey for me at the Kolleg.