



SEED OF THE FUTURE: REFLECTIONS ON A
FILM ESSAY ON A WEST AFRICAN FAMILY
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I was born in 1958 in Ouessa, Burkina Faso. After earning a B.A. and a M.A. at the Université de Ouagadougou and a Diploma in Film Studies at the École Supérieure Libre d'Études Cinématographiques, Paris, I completed a Doctorate in Information and Communication Sciences at the Université Bordeaux Montaigne in 2006. I published the monograph *Film africain et compétition: Les Etalons de Yennenga de 1972 à 2005* (Saarbrücken: Editions universitaires européennes, 2010), and a number of articles. The films I directed comprise *Les peintres Kasena* (1990); *Koligure, la gardienne des champs* (1989); and *L'eau, fruit du travail* (1985). As a civil servant, I was appointed Managing Director of the National Film Board, Burkina Faso and of the Institute for Training and Research in Arts, Culture and Tourism, Burkina Faso. Later I worked as Chief Director and Secretary General of the Ministry of Culture, Arts, and Tourism of Burkina Faso. I was awarded the title of Chevalier, then Officier and finally Commandeur of the Ordre des Arts et des Lettres of the Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication of France. – Address: 13 BP 108 Ouagadougou 13, Burkina Faso. E-mail: lawbemile15@yahoo.fr.

I had already visited Berlin twice in 1989 for some short periods, but my stay in this city since 16 September 2017 has been memorable, for two reasons: spending an entire academic year at the Wissenschaftskolleg instead of brief visits before and being a scholar after leaving the civil service. It had been a challenging decision to take and was a somehow adventurous enterprise. But there was no way of turning back, and I would have to manage.

The first meeting with the Wiko staff and Fellows could have been routine if the Rector would not have explained, a few minutes after the meeting started, that one of the Institute's

rules was to pay attention to the other Fellows during their colloquium and the discussions. While he was talking, I was busy manipulating my smartphone, reading messages of acknowledgements from the staff of my Ministry that praised me for what I had done for the youth of the institution and the country and replying to their kind salutations. The Rector's exhortation was the main lesson I retained that day as a newly admitted alumnus who would spend ten months with nearly seventy Fellows and partners coming from an enormous diversity of countries, languages, disciplines and careers. Diversification ultimately became an important theme in our Focus Group discussions and one that I had to explore in depth in order to construct a narrative for my Wiko project, a film essay on a West African family.

The film essay was part of the family history project that the Focus Group pursued, with Carola Lentz, Isidore Lobnibe and me as members. Isidore and Carola's book project on family memory struggled with challenges similar to those my film faced, namely whose history to tell and how to deal with the lack of sources from earlier periods. In my film project I looked for solutions to these challenges by editing existing and creating new visual and sound material, then assembling all these materials into a coherent narrative.

How family history is being remembered, in the context of an increasing diversification of life trajectories, depends on the family members' level of education, their social position and the different purposes that they associate with the family history. For my film project, this posed several challenges. My first challenge was to define a substantial narrative: which family history should the film portray? Should I construct a unified version of "the family history"? My first intention was to build a story that would focus on one ancestor. I wanted to show how far our family had come since 1865, the approximate birth year of my great-grandfather. But eventually I found it more convincing to widen the narrative to include stories about his offspring. This would allow me to capture the increasing diversification of careers, lifestyles and future projects. Furthermore, the different versions of this ancestor and his descendants' stories told among family members over several generations would hardly fit into a monolog. I also reconsidered the place of the non-literate of the family, as well as the youngsters' expectations in my film essay, and decided to do more justice to them by balancing the existing documentary footage on family celebrations by filming some supplementary shots.

A second challenge was how to combine different footages, formats and media to yield an aesthetically satisfying product. Will there be fictional shots and how are they to be combined with documentary footage? How will my film cater to commentaries and other sounds beside the reportage shots, and who will be the narrator? How can new

devices like selfies with smartphones or tablets be integrated to broaden the points of view of family members represented in the film? Many of these questions still remain unanswered. However, I realized that easy access to equipment – and I finally decided to buy my own film camera – would help to ensure that the project can continue.

A third challenge concerned the audience. The film recounts the memories of an African family. On which materials can I base my story to make it compelling or attractive, and for whom? European audiences seem to be indisposed towards stories that do not focus on conflict, but rather praise the family and try to promote its cohesion. Will my optimistic narrative meet their expectations? Or should I rather find a way to narrate the story that fits in the paradigm of a wider audience? Or should I just contextualise my narrative, and go ahead with my praise of the family? After all, through the literature review that we undertook in the Focus Group, I have come to the conclusion that human beings share more similarities than the differences residing in their cultures – and that this is also true for questions of family.

The title of my film *Bio bir: Seed of the Future* summarises my understanding of family: creating virtual links with “home” and fuelling family cohesion, no matter how dispersed its members are. The growth of the family in the future depends on what seed the present generation sows. Among the Dagara people, to which my family belongs, names often express visions of the future. And the names that my grandfather Yob gave to his offspring deal with cohesion, knowledge, evil, injuries and confidence; they conveyed his life experience and his spiritual beliefs.

Developing my film essay was inspired not only by examining our family history in the Focus Group and by analysing the documentary footage that I had brought with me, but also by our review of some of the existing scholarly literature on family history, genealogy and memory. From our discussion of case studies and theoretical approaches to families worldwide, I retain these useful assumptions: the structure of family is progressively changing worldwide, but there is no clear-cut trend towards the nuclear family; family history has been constantly reframed in the course of time; and myths are an omnipresent part of family memory.

Finally, spending ten months at Wiko allowed me to make acquaintance with various staff members and many Fellows. That has been a wonderful experience. The discussions during the colloquiums, the Focus Group meetings and encounters with scholars from outside helped me to broaden my concept of family. My project, which was merely about an ancestor and a handful of children, became more diversified.