

*The Art of Ama Ata Aidoo*. Documentary film  
(78 minutes). Directed by Yaba Badoe, Fadoa Films

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*The Art of Ama Ata Aidoo*, a film directed by award-winning independent film maker, Yaba Badoe, is the latest addition to recent efforts to celebrate the renowned literary foremother. The film comes on the heels of the anthology, *Essays in Honour of Ama Ata Aidoo at 70: A Reader in African Cultural Studies*, edited by Anne V. Adams (2012); the colloquium on Ama Ata Aidoo organised by the University of California, Santa Barbara in the same year; an honorary doctorate conferred on her by the University of Ghana in 2013; and a collection of her new and collected poems, *After the Ceremonies*, which I compiled, arranged and edited, and which was due to be published by the African Poetry Book Fund.

Funded through crowd sourcing and produced by Fadoa Films, *The Art of Ama Ata Aidoo* was put together by filming Aidoo's activities over a one year period during which she paid several visits to her hometown, Abeamzi Kyiakor, in the Central Region of Ghana. Also included is footage of the launch, in Accra, of her most recent collection of short stories, *Diplomatic Pounds* (2012), and the recent performance of her play, *Anowa*, by the Theatre Department of the University of California, Santa Barbara.

As with the events preceding it, *The Art of Ama Ata Aidoo* bears testimony to Aidoo's stature – her glaring celebrity as a writer who, as Jane Bryce affirms in the film's prelude, “functions as a front-runner, a forerunner, a person who can put on the table a series of issues which contemporary women can deal with, and continue to deal with.” Like Aidoo herself, the film is understatedly philosophical and bubbles over with new ideas and impressions about the writer and her oeuvre. Yet in its deft synthesis of concept, enactment and observation, the film achieves much more in less than ninety minutes than the earlier honors accorded Aidoo, taking us back

us to Aidoo's beginnings and charting her life as an African woman and as a writer.

The beginning of Aidoo's writerly career, we learn, lies in a number of influences that galvanised her into creativity: from storytelling by her mother and by semi-professional tellers, to the art of itinerant preachers, to her school days at Wesley Girls' Secondary School where, as a third year student, she was asked by a teacher what she wanted to do for a career, to which she responded that she wanted to be a poet. Although the teacher remarked that "poetry doesn't feed anybody", she gave Aidoo an Olivetti typewriter—a symbolic present that adumbrated Aidoo's creative calling.

The film's portrayal of Aidoo's native town and its culture shows the strength of its people to battle the exigencies of daily existence, as well as their good cheer as they go about their daily activities, and the palpable creative energies that accompany their undertakings. In the absence of the "stories, happenings, stuff..." that impinged upon the young Aidoo, the Akokwa Mpanyinsem Kodzifo storytellers demonstrate the wealth of oral tradition that continues to provide Aidoo with inspiration and source material for her works, as well as the network of connections between her and her people.

Another of Aidoo's experiences that stands out in the rich milieu of literary activities presented in the film is her confession that her career was launched by an advertisement about a short story competition in one of Ghana's national newspapers. Determined to acquire a pair of shoes that she had seen in a shop, Aidoo tells that she submitted an entry to the competition, her very first story prophetically titled "Unto Us a Child Is Born". She was surprised to win the prize! From this initial act of sheer bravado, Aidoo has not looked back. Indeed, as the title of one of her poems in *An Angry Letter in January* (1992) boldly declares, "a woman's voice does not break, it gets firmer". In another fortuitous occurrence, in response to a request by the Africanist writer and scholar, Ulli Beier, Aidoo wrote "In the Cutting of a Drink", a classic story later published in her collection, *No Sweetness Here* (1970).

Of great interest and an overriding concept in the film is the liberated (and liberating) "space" in which Aidoo flourished as an artist. Aidoo acknowledges this space as well as her family and her royal lineage: "This whole area is literally my place in the sense that this is the section of Ghana that I can with confidence claim is *my* place". The space to which she refers is manifested

as much in the slave castles that line Ghana's coast, as it is in her father's imposing mansion, which Aidoo admits looked bigger when she was a young girl. It is also evident in the vast coastal landscape, made more impressive by the progressively widening full shot that opens the film.

With each sweep of a wide angle lens, viewers of *The Art of Ama Ata Aidoo* are ushered further and deeper into the author's imaginary worlds, from the rural and national in *No Sweetness Here* (1970) to the urban and global in *Diplomatic Pounds* (2012). And although Aidoo insists in a recent interview with Maureen Eke, Vincent Odamtten and Stephanie Newell (2013) that her stories "reflect not so much my intentions as the period in which they were produced" (163), it is clear that as a writer she has always been far ahead of her time.

One of the great temptations one faces in writing about this film is the urge to emphasise its music and spectacle and its general celebratory atmosphere, of which there is more than enough to arrest one's curiosity. Yet in many ways these aspects reiterate important themes in Aidoo's oeuvre. For example, the first few scenes of the film are accompanied with non-diegetic choral music from the song, "San Befɔ", by renowned Ghanaian musician, Ephraim Amu. Its lyrics tell of a young man, ɔkofo Kwasi Barima who, in his hurried quest for material things, neglects what is most essential— his culture, values, and very identity—for which the singer urges him to return. This song segues harmoniously into the first of several texts that Aidoo performs in the film: the final part of her poem, "Speaking of Hurricanes". Taken from her collection, *An Angry Letter in January* (1992), the poem was written "for Micere Mugo and all other African exiles". "Ow My Sister", it begins:

let me lament  
 my openly beautiful land and her people  
 who hide good things and bad so well,  
 only decay and shame become  
 public,  
 international.

As with Amu's song, this poem laments the political and economic upheavals that have been created on the African continent in the name of progress and development. Lawrence Boadi (2005) views the name ɔkofo Kwasi Barima as an "alien combination [that] symbolically recalls the manner in which... this nonentity pursues his search", leaving behind what is essential. Similarly,

Aidoo's poem takes on the alien forces that have blown away Africans' hopes for big and beautiful things—most notably the slave trade. Yet in “Speaking of Hurricanes”, Aidoo is not sparing in her criticism of “my people”, especially the tyrants and despots who have left in their wake a brain drain and “women in various forms of civilised bondage”. Hence her reference in the poem to “decay and shame”. These are the kinds of issues that Aidoo thinks “might be controversial, might make people uncomfortable”.

Overall, the success of the documentary comes from its balanced blend of multiple genres: biographical vignettes by Aidoo herself and by literary stalwarts such as Anne Adams, Nana Wilson-Tagoe and Jane Bryce who have worked on Aidoo's writings; live performances and re-enactments of Aidoo's work; interviews; readings, and so on. Aidoo's self-portraits (though understated in large part), together with the commentary, testify to her stature as a pioneer writer who, through her celebration of the complexity of African femininity, has stood out from the crowd of mainly male African authors. Through the film, those unfamiliar with Aidoo and her works will gain an insight into the span of her experience and cultural reach, as well as the different genres that she has so deftly mastered, including the play, the novel, the poem and the short story. As Wilson-Tagoe tells us of Aidoo: “She can write a short story of three pages and give you an entire world”.

Its broad scope, depth and complexity attest that *The Art of Ama Ata Aidoo* is not one thing serving one purpose, but multiple things serving multiple purposes for multiple groups of people. It is, and is likely to remain, a timeless piece of work, an immemorial presence. With her modest smile, Aidoo herself quips so often in and of the film: “Isn't that something?”

## References

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