

Interview with John Akomfrah, March 2014

SF: You're always very careful in your choice of a title. What was the thinking behind *Testament*? Bearing witness or bequest or both?

JA: One of the things I'd learnt and took very seriously by the time we made *Testament* was that you needed the ability to draw from a *range* of sources, from multiple ways of seeing and doing that could form a kind of working paradigm or language or a working practice. This was something I took from the cinema of Latin America, watching the films of Tarkovsky, Jansco, Angelopoulos, and African cinema in general: basically from any cinema interested in exploring the historical by other means. So, the idea was to use the notion of a testament to draw from a *range* of sources: African colour theory and folklore, the value of Dirge singing as a kind of narrative device, and, of course, the mix of fiction and fact, documentary and drama, history and memory - the usual tropes that then came to define the Black Audio Film Collective. And the ambition was that if we drew on this range of stuff to formulate a language, it might give us access to an impossible history. The impossible history of *Testament* is this: there had been these experiments in African Socialism, they had come to an end, and the consensus was that they were a failure. However, the question for me was: what does this failure mean in *narrative* terms? How do you narrate *failure*? Since narrative is visually about *agency*, how does one construct a project which is about trying to understand the process of things failing?

The notion of a testament was absolutely critical to that, because of course it always presupposes bearing witness, that you have arrived at a point where the possibility of reflection is a given, almost in Biblical terms. The notion of a testament was therefore important not just because it was about bearing witness, but it was about trying to *alert* people to the range of approaches that we record in this *act* of bearing witness.

SF: So through bringing into service this range of things, you are able to perhaps make better sense of what *has* happened than if you just used one thing?

JA: Absolutely. By naming it *Testament*, you are alerting a viewer to the form that this takes: that it will be an act of bearing witness. But in naming it *Testament*, it was also then trying to say from the get go that this range of approaches, all these narrative tropes and strategies, were all going to be called upon to play some role of testament. In other words, the ensemble of approaches all make sense if you understand that they are all there to aid bearing witness, to aid the unfolding of this narrative.

SF: Just following through on the title again - of course, there's another sense of testament, as in the 'last will and testament'. Is there a sense in which this is looking at what was bequeathed by that revolution and by that experiment?

JA: Yes. And up to that point it had been a secret, even to myself - the secret of how much of one's formation owed something to that history. Now I kind of take it for granted. When somebody asks me, I say one of the reasons why we're here is because of what happened in '66, because without that that, my family wouldn't have had to emigrate, to go into exile. But then that was all a secret even to me - I

hadn't quite made the connection between the two. I'd made the connection between the place where we were *at* and the process by which we'd arrived at it, and it was in a way the making of *Handsworth*, going to Africa in 1987, being exposed to this vast array of narrative strategies by which people were trying to say something about Africa in the present, that I thought, hang on – I have some investment in this.

SF: So, are you saying that the idea for *Testament* began to form in your mind after *Handsworth*, after the African film festival in 1987? Because then, actually the gestation period isn't that long, is it?

JA: No, it wasn't long at all. In fact, what had happened was – it was a two-fold recognition. The first one was at the African film festival. I got there, met all these directors whose films and cinema I revered and one night they were all talking. Werner Herzog was in Ghana making *Cobra Verde* and I think they were just looking around for a Ghanaian filmmaker who they could lambast or beat up for allowing this travesty to happen!

SF: What was the nature of the travesty in their mind?

JA: Their whole *raison d'être*, their whole being was at stake: here's a festival and an organization, which exists to say that Africans should tell their own stories. And in the middle of this festival they find out that one of the prophets of the new German cinema is in Africa doing the exact opposite – doing their worst nightmare, which is denying Africans the right to tell their own story. So they said to me: what are you doing here? You should be in Ghana doing something about this, making a film about Ghana.

Even though I didn't take the question of assuming a Ghanaian identity seriously, what did strike me as worth taking on was the idea that one could offer a *counterpoint*, a narrative counterpoint to what Herzog was doing in Ghana. I mean I kind of got that straight away. I'd read the book that the Herzog film was based on – Bruce Chatwin was one of my favourite writers at the time, so I'd read *The Viceroy of Ouidah* - and I knew that the book was the fictionalizing of a certain African tragic. And it seemed to me that it would be interesting to offer a counterpoint at the same time as *Cobra Verde* was released, a counterpoint which was based on a 'proper' African tragic. So that was the initial rhetorical ambition.

It was only really when I arrived in Ghana in December 1987 when the authorities said to me, well you can't make a film on Kwame Nkrumah, and you can't make a film on the coup, because the CPP was a proscribed organization that things started to turn for me. It was only then that I started to think that there might be a role for autobiography in this project. Up until then it had been fairly straightforward: I wanted to do something on the fall of Nkrumah's experiment in African Socialism. But because the Ghanaian Ministry of Culture denied that possibility, I had to resort to other means and it was in the process of trying to devise those other means that I thought: shit, I'm vastly implicated in this!

The level of disavowal, the level of denial was, not just for me and my family, but for a whole number of us, something that I hadn't quite got my head around. Of course, if you have a parent who dies in this maelstrom of counter-revolution and if that passing has a bearing or says something you associate with your condition

of exile, then it's not a space you'd want to get back to that many times. And until that point, what I hadn't realized was how *little* I had gone back to that space. It was very difficult to edit it, because all the way through, I realized that the specter, the ghost that haunted the whole thing was the passing of my dad. I hadn't thought about it in the course of shooting it, but in the process of putting it together it became clear that that was partly what *it* was about.

SF: This perhaps takes us to the subtitle, *a warzone of memories*, and to the idea of a warzone as a violent, contested, bloody place.

JA: It's a space of disfigurement. Because of the violence, because of the blood, because of the conflict— people get physically and mentally fucked up. What I hadn't realized was just how much I was wrapped up in that fuckedupness. It was a real shock to me, but I should have guessed, because of course the minute we started to imagine what the *mise-en-scène* might be if you couldn't concentrate on the political one, and the minute we started to turn, or I started to imagine, the *mise-en-scène* as a folkloric one, one that would pull in those colours of death. I was already in that psychic space of mourning – I just didn't realize it in the course of shooting it.

The shooting was difficult anyway. It was the first thing that we did as a collective outside of this country and we were kind of unmoored by this new location; we were in a space that none of us were really familiar with. Ok, I was born there, but I hadn't been there for decades – it was just a really troubled space to find one's feet.

It wasn't so much that we were fighting or struggling with ourselves, it was just the realization that we collectively were up against it. Everything was so unfamiliar. We had actors who we'd brought over who disliked eating the local food, and it went from that banal level to really profound ones to do with how we got across this notion of working collectively to a group of Ghanaian technicians. It was really tough to graft a Ghanaian film industry shoot, in which the traditional hierarchies were in place, onto our collective approach, where everything was the subject of collective decision-making, reflection and discussion. Over and above these problems that were directly what we were getting anything on the camera, you had all that other stuff – the politics and the background, and between the two it was tough.

SF: And you were trying to reclaim from Herzog and fulfill a certain responsibility towards African cinema. That puts a heavy burden on your shoulders!

JA: Yes, but in saying, the whole thing starts with that burden of representation. It's recognizing something that I've tried to apply ever since: if you say that you admire African cinema, for instance, and one of the reasons why you say that you admire African directors is their ability to wrestle with this problem of representation, to wrestle with the way in which all manner of influences – political, cultural, psychological and professional – impact upon a stage called representation, then of, course, the thing to do is to take it on! There's nowhere else to go. So that was a recognition I made personally, that helped the way I approached most of the things that would have been otherwise impossible to navigate.

Just to go back to your *warzones of memory* question. The fact that you accept you're combatant in this field – conceptual, geographic and psychic; the minute you accept that this is the space you are in- a space in which the question of memory is a product of contestation - what you see yourself offering is a counter movement, to that officially sanctioned amnesia, the one that says that this fucker (Nkrumah) and his party (the CPP) doesn't exist, in fact, never existed: this was the official narrative, okay? The minute you realize this – you also realize that this then means there are certain ethical and political responsibilities to be taken on – you have to fight for the *space* of that counter - narrative to come into being. And that also necessarily means having to accept certain burdens as necessary prerequisites for this to work.

SF: There's an interesting duality emerging related to the idea of *Testament*. On the one hand there's the sense of bearing witness, and on the other of a bequest; the social, of Nkrumah and African Socialism and the personal, the death of your father.

JA: There is something I'd forgotten until I started editing *Testament*, which was my anger at the death of my father, and what seemed to me a desertion. I remember the last time I saw him. I must have been three and a half or four. It was at the airport, he was off on one of his usual trips to Germany or somewhere. He was carrying me and I'm looking down on him, and as I'm looking down on him, I notice this pool of red forming on his shirt. It took me a while to realize that this pool of red was coming from my nose! I was upset with myself for ruining the shirt, but I was also upset with him for leaving. I hadn't realized how much of that, if you like, momentary upset, had translated into anger with him until we started *Testament*. It was only in course of making the film that I made the recognition: this is what I'd been bequeathed, this was my true inheritance, my legacy: I had been given death.

It took a lot of time, years after the film in fact, for that anger to go away. Now I know that it was a necessary rite of passage, now I understand that you have to go through that in order to arrive, and it's also to do with the business of ageing. I stopped being angry with him when I became older than he was when he died.

In a way, what happened was I didn't fully realize what we were grappling with. I was particularly grappling with this question of mourning – trying to come up with a kind of language of trauma that made narrative sense – grappling with this question of return – what happens when you *return* to that scene of trauma? But those questions were separate from me, from my personal, individual traumas, at the time we were doing it. I'm really saying that I didn't realize that what *appeared* to be a cultural and political imperative also had psychic dimensions, and that the reason it had those dimensions was because I was angry with the return to that scene and with the reasons *why* that return was necessary in the first place. But of course the past and the gateways to the past were opened once I'd been there a couple of weeks, and once I had literally played a role in shepherding, confining its real space in my life, a space of primal scenes, a place of the dead, a place for memorial services, death, anniversaries, cleaning up the gravestone, you know, all of that.

SF: That leads us to the final image in the film: a graveyard and a grave in ruins with the skull visible. Where does that image come from? It's a startling image.

JA: So much of the rhetoric of the coup was about the idea that the African Socialist experiment had taken us to some dark, barbaric place, and what they were about to inaugurate was something that would take Ghana into the space of light. In fact, the opposite happened, because if there had been a descent, we continued down that road of descent to the point that when I arrived in Ghana, the full outline of the tragedy was in front of me.

The African Socialist war happened to be a Post Colonial first. Nkrumah wanted to inaugurate this space, this state that would be a state of agency. It was all about practicing the activity of statehood. What dawned on me, which in a way is the idea behind *Transfigured Night*, was the extent to which many of these coups were about arresting that agency to the point of narcolepsy. They were about trying to stop these states being active units and the most graphic extension of that moment was evident in the local cemetery, where there were hundreds or tens, certainly, of graves that had been broken into. People were breaking into graves and taking from them - people were buried with items of value and thieves were after that. So we had arrived at this situation where the state was so narcoleptic, was so indifferent to the living that it was prepared to turn a blind eye to the living literally disfiguring the dead. That was a very stark situation to be in. My father's grave was in precisely that state. These looted graves seemed to me a graphic illustration of the state and made me feel that we should do something about it.

SF: Before we explore the links with *Transfigured Night*, towards the end of the film Abena is seen visiting a fort built by European colonialists and a set from *Cobra Verde*, she talks of being 'trapped in a fake testament' and of how 'at least the Europeans know how to leave testaments'.

JA: It just seemed to me: here is this country (Ghana) that came into being because of this party and this figure (Nkrumah) – it wouldn't have existed without them - and yet when we arrived there, the space of statement had been so crippled by amnesia that people actually believed that to not talk about it (the coup that overthrew Nkrumah) was a good thing, and I couldn't see how not talking about it did any good to anyone, especially since we were actively encouraging this guy, Werner Herzog, to come to Ghana to make the film based on real events. But as, literally, fiction.

I don't have a problem with that, but Herzog's film seemed symptomatic of a broader drift in Ghana at the time, which was that in the absence of narratives of remembrance that somehow did a due diligence of what happened, you know, what had been put in place was a convenient, self serving narrative for the present that said 'oh wow, we were in the dark old days and now we're in a bright new one'. So the film, *Testament* was partly in reference to that. But it was also, you know, you can't help but be struck by the profusion of monuments on the west coast of Africa left by the European project from the 15th century. All of these monuments spoke a truth about that space and the ambitions for that space, and as we rode around Ghana, looking for vestiges of the CPP and not finding any, and being told that you couldn't even talk about it then, it seemed to me that you couldn't look at those European monuments without thinking, 'well, at least those exist, what about the CPP ones?' Of the CPP there was nothing, absolutely nothing, and there was something really disturbing about that.