

## The AWDF Interview with Yaba Badoe

*Nana Darkoa Sekyiamah, Communications Officer at the African Women's Development Fund, interviews Yaba Badoe, Director of 'The Gambaga Witches'*

### **NS: What was your motivation for making the documentary, 'The Witches of Gambaga'?**

YB: I stumbled on the Witches camp at Gambaga in 1995 when I was working as a stringer for the BBC World Service in Ghana. I was shocked that, not far from where I was born in Tamale, there were refuges for women believed to be witches. What was even more horrifying was the fact that women were condemned for witchcraft through a ritual by which a chicken is slaughtered - and depending on whether the chicken dies with its wings facing the sky or the ground - a woman is forced to live in exile from her family. After spending a sleepless night at Gambaga I wanted to make a film about the women there, because I realised that if I'd been born nearby, it was more than likely that I would be targeted as a 'witch' as well.

### **NS: How did the community in Gambaga react to your desire to create this documentary?**

YB: Research for the film and the filming itself wouldn't have been possible without the incredible help and support of Gladys Lariba - the care-worker at the witches' camp who works very closely with the women living there - and her supervisor - Simon Ngota. Moreover, no filming or research could have taken place without permission from the chief of Gambaga, the Gambarrana, Yahaya Muni. He gave me access to research and then film the women in his custody. Gladys helped with translations, provided me with background information on women whose testimonies I recorded, and enabled me to develop close relations with them. What struck me was that many inmates at the 'witches' camp were prepared to share their stories with me; were prepared to answer my endless questions and then take part in the film. Everyone who participated was extremely patient, cooperative and accommodating.

### **NS: Did you experience any challenges whilst shooting the documentary?**

YB: In retrospect, shooting the film was the easiest part of the process. I had a great cameraman, Darren Hercher, the chief of Gambaga, Yahaya Muni, was cooperative and gave me permission to film rituals that had never been filmed before, and the women at the camp were endlessly patient in telling me their stories. They soon got the hang of filming as well.

What proved to be extremely challenging was finding the funding to complete the documentary, a task which wouldn't have been possible without the help of my co-producer, Amina Mama, and well-wishers such as Yao Graham of Third World Network in Ghana, Dr Takyiwaa Manuh of the Institute of African Studies

at the University of Ghana, Dr Rose Mensah Kutin of Abantu for Development, Kwasi Gyan-Appenteng of the EU's Cultural Initiative Support Programme in Ghana and Naana Otoo-Oyortey, the Executive Director of Forward in London.

**NS: To date, what have been the highlights of making this film?**

YB: The autumn of 2009 was a break-through time for me. The MD of Big Heart Media – a TV production company in London - Colin Izod, suggested that I use one of his editing rooms to edit the documentary. I'd just received a grant from Forward – a UK charity dedicated to safeguarding the reproductive and sexual health and rights of African girls and women - to hire an editor to edit the film. A couple of weeks later, when I received a grant from AWDF with the help of NETRIGHT, I was able to pay for the editing room and equipment, to pay myself some money, and also cover the cost of music copyright as well as a proper sound dub. I can't tell you what a difference the AWDF grant made to the quality of the film.

Another high point was in May/June 2010 when Dobet Gnahore, an Ivorian singer and songwriter, gave me permission to use her music in the documentary for nothing. I ended up paying her a token fee for using a lot of her fantastic music. I found Dobet's generosity amazing. Indeed, her music adds emotional punch to the women's testimonies in the 'The Witches of Gambaga'.

**NS: What do you hope to achieve with this documentary?**

YB: People who've seen the film have been moved by it and are keen to use it as a campaigning tool to change attitudes towards women believed to be witches throughout Africa. These attitudes, which scapegoat and demonise vulnerable women and children and ostracise them as 'witches', need to be questioned and debated. If 'The Witches of Gambaga' can play a part in promoting change by helping to stop violence towards women alleged to be witches, it will be a great step forward.

**NS: What are your thoughts on the African film industry and in particular its portrayal of women?**

YB: I love the medium of film and am an avid consumer of movies from all over the world, even though often, women play second fiddle to men on the screen, and are rarely portrayed as fully-rounded characters. I believe that it's up to us women to change this state of affairs. The more women we have working behind the camera, directing, filming, writing and producing films, then the more likely it is the characterization of women on the screen will improve.

**NS: What advice will you give to young women who wish to become filmmakers?**

YB: Persevere. Learn your craft. Then watch, listen and learn some more.