

A DOCUMENTARY FILM

AM I?

THE FILM

Nadia Sasso takes a look into the complexities and challenges of growing up bi-culturally in America as African and American. This guide will help facilitate discussions and thoughts amongst viewers.

GUIDE CREATED BY : NADIA M. SASSO

FILM SYNOPSIS

“Am I: Too African to be American or Too American to be African?” is a documentary film that explores the complex identity formations of young African women living in America and West Africa who identify bi-culturally. It is a multimedia intervention with a discussion on politics of identity with respect to immigrant populations and movements back and forth of the diaspora. The film explores 7 women’s histories with their bi-cultural identity, and looks into how these women wrestle with concepts of race, complexion, gender, and heritage among other issues.

CHARACTER BIO



SARRAN LAN JABBIE

BRANDKULTURED

Sarran Lan Jabbie is a first generation born Sierra Leonean who is currently the Media Manager for Hickok Cole Architects, an architectural design firm, located in Georgetown Washington, DC. Sarran also serves as the Co-Chair of the GWB Commission, a commission of Sierra Leoneans who produce the highly anticipated and revered event honoring Sierra Leone's independence day. Born and raised in New Jersey, Sarran attended William Paterson University of New Jersey and studied political science. After realizing her potential and passion in marketing she went on to enroll at The Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania and will be earning her specialized certification in Business Foundation.

She has played an integral part in Fashion Empowering Women as the Director of Social Media and also co-founded a non-profit, Edu-Share, an organization that focuses on the empowerment of young women in Sierra Leone.

Additionally, Sarran founded and is the CEO of BrandKultured. A boutique marketing firm focusing on helping Sierra Leoneans and international brands tell their stories through the power of storytelling and culture driven marketing. Her clients include FACE Africa, GWB Commission, Africa Responds, Excel Sierra Leone, RPG Show and more.

Sarran owes all her accomplishments, her upbringing, and outlook on life not only to her parents Lansana and Adama Jabbie, but to her family and community of Sierra Leoneans in her hometown of Somerset and New Brunswick NJ for never letting her go astray.

CHARACTER BIO



ISSA RAE

AWKWARD BLACK GIRL

Issa Rae, the multitalented CEO and Owner of Issa Rae Productions, is a pioneer in the fight against the narrow, mainstream portrayal of people of color in the media. With a dedicated and passionate team, and supportive fan base, Issa Rae Productions lends a voice to a demographic that largely goes unheard. The widespread success of Issa Rae's web series, "The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl," has unanimously placed Issa Rae at the forefront of the digital web revolution. With her own unique flare and infectious sense of humor, Issa Rae has garnered over 20 million views between her various web series, and just short of 125,000 faithful subscribers on YouTube - with no plans of slowing down.

Issa Rae Productions continues to be a growing, digital media phenomenon, catching the attention of major media outlets such as The New York Times, National Public Radio (NPR), The Washington Post, CNN, and naturally, widely across the digital blogosphere. Issa Rae is American born to Senegalese parents and talks about doing a webseries related to her African roots and how her traditional father is reacting to her success. She received her B.A. from Stanford University.

CHARACTER BIO



MARIAMA JALLOH-HEYWARD

GWB COMMISSION

Mariama Jalloh-Heyward's love of Sierra Leone was developed early by her parents who encouraged her to embrace her culture. This allowed her to identify herself not as an American, but as a Sierra Leonean born in the United States. Ms. Jalloh-Heyward is known in the Sierra Leone community as the founder of the annual independence gala The Green White & Blue Ball™. She is a Director in the Advisory Group at KPMG, where she works with Fortune 500 companies advising her clients on business integration and financial models. Graduating from Howard University with a Bachelor's of Business Administration in Finance she began to work at KPMG shortly thereafter and has been with the firm for 16 years. A mother of three little boys, Alieu-11, Amir-10 and Nasir-8, she deems her children as her greatest accomplishment yet.

CHARACTER BIO



YENIVA SISAY-SOGBEH

EXCEL

Yeniva Sisay- Sogbeh is a Value Creator. With over 19 year of experience as a teacher, leader, mentor, coach; Yeniva has developed a portfolio of diverse skills and experience across private and public sector in the United States and Africa. In 2007 Yeniva relocated to her ancestral home Sierra Leone, West Africa. Since then she has pursued her passion to develop, build and transform the continent through her work, creating value by way of youth empowerment, training, project management, business development, branding, communications and events.

Yeniva possesses the ability to transform proposals, aspirations, ideas and objectives into tangible projects, programs, businesses and events that make a difference. Bringing vision into action in many areas of development in Sierra Leone,

Yeniva has been a midwife in the birth of a range of projects such as The EXCEL Education Program, PLAY ON WORD's Poetry Showcase, The Ma dengn Beach Festival and Sierra Leone's first luxury resort The Place. As a thought leader in the New Africa discourse you can find her contributions in AfroElle Magazine, Evoque Magazine, African Luxury Magazine (ALUX) ,Substance and Style, and The African.

CHARACTER BIO



ODUNAYO ADEOYE

OYATO DESIGNS

Odunaya is the third child of six children, is a proud Nigerian born and raised in New York City. She grew up with a love for art and pursued that love faithfully throughout her academic life. From middle school to high school she perfected her craft through fine art and soon enough found her niche through an Apparel Design degree and recently capped it off with a degree in Marketing from the Fashion Institute of Technology. Upon graduation, in 2008 she debuted her first collection; Enigmatic and began producing custom made clothing for friends and family. Odunayo took up jobs as an intern at Tracy Reese, an assistant designer at another small design firm, a stylist at an indie boutique and a freelance makeup artist further immersing herself in the world of fashion and beauty. With the knowledge acquired from her formal education, internships and work she started OYATO Designs. A full service clothier where she designs and manufactures ready to wear and custom made clothing for women. About a year later, she partnered up with her cousin, Abi Yussuf to find a way to utilize their love for makeup and OYATO Artistry, the sister company to OYATO Designs was born. A beauty oriented business that conducts makeovers for women and men through makeup, hair and wardrobe styling.

CHARACTER BIO



AJARA BOMAH

RHOYLATY CONCEPTS

Ms. Ajara Bomah. Originally from the US, Ajara obtained her Master degree in Psychosocial Therapy at Smith College School of Social Work and her Bachelors of Science in Sociology & African Studies at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. Ms. Bomah has worked with International, Public & Private Sector, Non-Governmental and Governmental Organizations. She worked under the Office of the President Of Sierra Leone as the Logistics Manager for the Office of Diaspora Affairs, where the main focus was capacity building and Diaspora relations with the Government and people of Sierra Leone. Currently Ms. Bomah is working as an Events & Project Management Consultant in Sierra Leone. She recently set up the Royal Ladies Club which is scheduled to be launching September 2013. The purpose of the Royal Ladies Club is to provide a positive experience for young women ages 13 to 16 in leadership development, academic counselling, personal counselling, mentoring, community service, and serve as a rites of passage.

CHARACTER BIO



AMINATA DUMBUYA

PINNACLE

Ms. Aminata B. Dumbuya is a Business Woman thriving in the emergence of Sierra Leone's budding private sector. As an accredited Chartered Marketer from the CIM in London, and a BA in International Business from San Diego State University, Ms. Dumbuya has acquired both professional experience needed to spearhead Corporate entities and marketing activities for her corporate clients, and also provides business consultancy and serviced office services to international and local investors coming into the Sierra Leone market. Ms Dumbuya spent all of her youth and young adult life in the United States of America. After the war ended in her native Sierra Leone, she felt a strong urge to return back to Sierra Leone and contribute in the transformative process by giving back and sharing her skills and passion. She heeded to this call in December of 2004 and has been living here since then. Her passion for her country's development in both the private and public (social) sector has seen her actively involved in various professional and social organizations geared towards nation building and development throughout this period resulting in the emergence of a new Sierra Leone!

CHARACTER BIO



PROFESSOR CECIL BLAKE

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR FOR
UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH

Professor Cecil Blake is currently at the Department of Africana Studies and the Department of Communication at the University of Pittsburgh in Pennsylvania, serving as Chair of The Africana Studies Department for five years. Dr. Blake also served as Chair of the Communication Department at Indiana University North West in Indiana. He once served as Minister of Information and Broadcasting and Chief Government Spokesman in Sierra Leone. He also held senior research and administrative positions in the international system, with responsibilities for development projects in several sectors mainly in Africa and Asia.

Widely travelled, he has authored several journal articles and books focusing on communication, as well as African development. Dr. Blake was a founding member of the Africa Leadership Forum, together with General (Rtd.) Olusegun Obasanjo former president of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. He served on the TOEFL Advisory Board of the Educational and Testing Service at Princeton, New Jersey, and the Board of Directors of Panos Institute, West Africa.

Dr. Blake has been working ardently to resuscitate the African Council on Communication Education (ACCE), in his capacity as Chairman of the Committee of Elders. Most recently, Dr. Blake established the Institute for the Study of Alternative African Futures (ISAAF) located in Freetown, Sierra Leone, against the background of challenges faced by fractured communities in emerging post-conflict states; increasingly sprawling ghetto communities in African states; the need for consolidating peace, and pre-empting internecine wars in the continent. Dr. Blake accepts invitations and presents motivational speeches as well as invited keynote addresses in several parts of the world.

FILMMAKER

*NADIA SASSO*

DIRECTOR

Nadia Sasso has a dual B.A. degree in English and Sociology from Bucknell University and an M.A. in American Studies with a certification in Documentary Film from Lehigh University. Her master's project was a documentary film, "Am I: Too African to be American or Too American to be African?" which explores the complex identity formations of young African women living in America and West Africa who identify bi-culturally. It specifically looks at how they wrestle with concepts of race, complexion, gender, and heritage among other issues. She is currently pursuing a Ph.D in Africana Studies at Cornell University where she will continue to use film and new media to generate qualitative insights into the fusion of U.S. and African experiences, as well as identify the contours of new identity formations among immigrants beyond the first generation.

Born in America to parents who emigrated from Sierra Leone, Sasso believes in the potential for collaboration to inspire innovation. She spearheaded the corporate social responsibility initiative at Royal Dynamite so that the company donates an educational care package to children around the world when a t-shirt is purchased from the company. The initiative has led to collaboration with more than 300 organizations in countries across the globe. In 2010 she co-founded Yehri Wi Cry (YWC), an organization that distributes birthing kits in Sierra Leone to increase the successful birth and delivery rates for women. Named among Katie Couric's "Next Generation of Female Leaders," Sasso received the "Young African Committed to Excellence Award" by Face2Face Africa magazine. She is also the 2013 recipient of the Posse Foundation's Ainslie Alumni Achievement Award where she was honored for her commitment to social responsibility.

FILM THEMES

MIGRATION

Am I: The Film explores the history of African migration to the U.S. via the oral histories of the participants. Although the majority of the participants were born in the U.S., thus, telling the story of their parent's migration, there was one person born in West Africa who migrated at an early age. Furthermore, many of the participants' parents migrated in search of new educational and economic opportunities. In coming to the U.S., most established and lived in close-knit communities, as the first step in creating a transnational experience. This also aided in their parents raising them with an African centered identity. The uniqueness of this migration process and transnational upbringing has left the participants in a space where they had no choice but to learn how to negotiate various identities.

Most interestingly, the women that reside in West Africa found that as much as they had a hard time negotiating their dual identity in America, they also had a hard time negotiating their identity on the continent in their respective country. However, they found the process more rewarding at "home" in Africa because they were apart of something bigger than themselves and that was changing the image of home for one that is positive. In the end, the women revealed that it was necessary to visit or move home to be a part of something that would "rebrand" home as something to be proud of and to celebrate.

FILM THEMES

LANGUAGE

Many of the participants encountered linguistic bias in multiple arenas such as: having an American accent when speaking the native language, “talking White”, speaking African American Vernacular English.

CODE SWITCHING OF THE IDENTITY

The various language obstacles translated into performing certain identities including being American, White, African American, Black, African, and the ethnicity of their respective countries. To maintain all of these multiple identities resulted in being teased. Almost everyone interviewed remembers being called an African booty scratcher as a child or adolescent. In addition to being teased for being African because of negative portrayals in media, most of the women in the film were also scared of being associated with non immigrant Blacks. For some, it was something their family had warned against given the negative media portrayals of Blacks. For others being Black was something they couldn't relate to culturally or they assumed had no culture. Participants find themselves relating to the discriminatory racial and ethnic experiences of their counterparts but they like to shy away from the negative attributes associated with “blackness.” In America, Blacks are criminalized and face stereotypes of being lazy and violent (Awokoya, 2009).

The stage upon which such identity politics is set in America is less about categories and classifications and more about performing race and/ or ethnicity. “Identity” is not so much the issue. Instead, it is the politics by which identity must be adhered to in the context of the rigid and plastic strategy known as identity politics. These discourses continue to restrict and flatten the complexity of identity. As such it not only affects the President Barak Obama but everyday citizens such as the women interviewed for this thesis *Am I: The Film*.

FILM THEMES

BEAUTY IDEALS

The film discusses beauty ideals that include both hair and fashion. In this scene, various perspectives were shared from natural hair, weaves, colorism, and upholding western beauty in order to blend and succeed. .

COMMUNITY

The women of the film were comfortable to talk about dating, marriage, and raising kids both in America and West Africa, and how their dual identities affects or will affect that aspect of their lives. Many feel that the close-knit community they once knew to help with the identity process will no longer be around when they are ready to have kids. Those that live in West Africa with kids, depended on the family oriented community of their home country to help with all around family life.

GENDER

The majority of the cast are women. As the director strived to tell a story inspired by her grandmother and mother, it was intentional to interview women. She also found it important for a woman to tell a story of women given the cultural, social, and political significance of this project. Lastly, she wanted to inspire not only the general diaspora but the women in the diaspora to highlight that women too have a voice and it can be heard.

FILM THEMES

TRANSNATIONAL ANXIETY

For many of the subjects growing up, the home was so African centered in America that many of the subjects felt as though they had to choose the more dominant culture, in this case American culture, in order to acclimate themselves socially outside the home because they felt as though it clashed with what was taught at home and would not be acceptable to parents and family. This experience is known as the Transnational Circuit, “in which the distance between seemingly separable worlds is brought into close juxtaposition, creating complex heterogeneities” (Rouse, 1991). Thus, making many of my subjects transnationals; individuals that establish links between multiple sites, situating themselves exclusively in neither one nor the other, community and who can no longer be understood in terms of a single central orientation (D’Alisera 2004).

The concept of “transnationalism” has had parents viewing their own children as strangers, as parents struggle to make those children familiar with national and cultural identities. They lament that their children, neither fully Sierra Leonean nor any other West African nationality, nor fully American, do not know who they are—or who their parents are (D’Alisera, 2004).

FURTHER DISCUSSIONS

QUESTIONS

1. What were your initial reactions to the film? What impressed upon you the most?
2. What do you think about the filmmakers' approach to AM I The Film?
3. In what ways were you able to identify with the women in the film?
4. What surprised you about their identity struggles?
Did you find any of the topics raised in the film to be controversial? If so, do you think it is useful for viewers to experience this reality or should it be edited? Explain why.
5. American society oftentimes collapses different complex ethnic identities into a single racial category of blackness. Upon migrating to the U.S., non-native black immigrants find this racial categorization restricting. To what extent, do you relate with the racial categorization within American society. Furthermore, how does using this reality as a framework help you to understand these women's experiences?
6. Within ethnic communities, traditional culture can be viewed as fixed and unchanging. This simply means that sometimes members of the community believe that culture is supposed to look a certain way at all times. In light of the increasing transnational flows of the 21st century, a fixed notion of culture can be limiting for individuals who identify bi-culturally. In what ways, do you agree with this statement? And how do you think we can encourage fluidity and diversity within our cultures?
7. When the film ended, did you have answers to all of your questions? If not, what questions still linger for you?
8. Share your thoughts on social media using the hashtags #AmI #2AF2AM and #Amithefilm and see how your friends and followers respond.



#AMITHEFILM #AmI? #2AF2AM



AM I THE FILM