



# One Stop Doc Shop Transcript Episode 5 - Simisola Akande



Hello and welcome to One Stop Doc Shop, a podcast that celebrates and encourages diversity in non-fiction filmmaking. In each episode, a guest filmmaker will share their secrets on how to make award-winning documentaries.

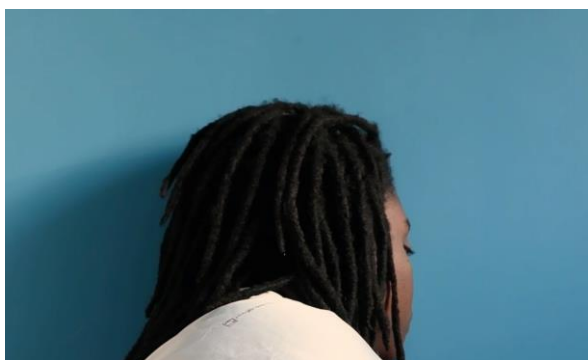
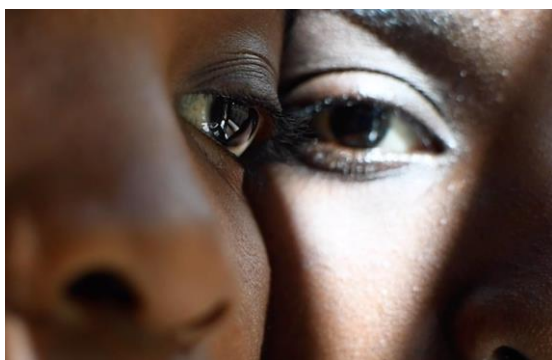
I'm your host Angela Clarke and this series was made possible with the support of Screen Alliance Wales, Ffilm Cymru Wales and BFI Network funding from the National Lottery.

My guest today is Simisola Akande, an award winning filmmaker that has to date created intimate and personal films that reflect her unique worldview.

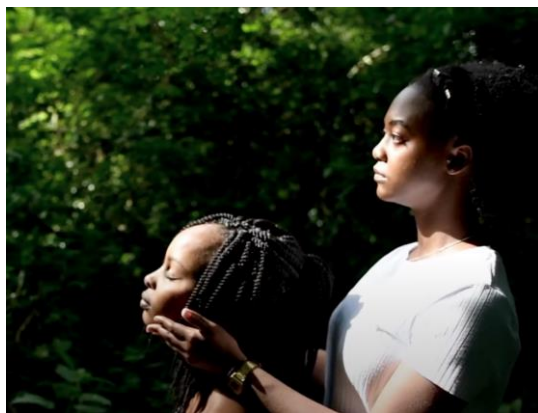
Her breakthrough short *Ojumo Ti Mo* won the BFI's Who We Are film competition in 2020. It also picked up Best Documentary and Film of the Year awards at the Watersprite Film Festival whilst her first short, *Du Du*, took home Best Experimental Film at the BFI Future Film Festival.

During the podcast we discuss the inspiration behind her films, managing the unexpected pressures that come with making personal documentaries, as well as the importance of creating spaces for people from all walks of life to share their stories.

I hope you enjoy listening.....



Ojumo Ti Mo



Du Du

**Angela Clarke** – Simisola, hello and welcome to the One Stop Doc Shop! It's lovely to meet you and I've been looking forward to chatting to you since I saw your films, so thank you so much for taking time out to have a talk today.

**Simisola Akande** – Thank you so much for having me, this is very cool.

**Angela Clarke** - While you may be the youngest guest that we've had on the podcast series so far, the documentaries that you have made to date have certainly packed a punch and resonated with audiences. So before we start to talk about the films themselves, I was going to talk a little bit about your journey as a filmmaker so far. So how and when did you decide to get into documentaries?

**Simisola Akande** – So how I got into film was a very confusing thing in general I think for my entire family because it kind of came out of the blue, it just randomly seemed like this is what I want to do! But I think for a long time when I was younger, I really wanted to be an actress and I remember I would send Disney Channel loads of emails saying Disney Channel make shows in England, I want to be in your show. *(laughs)* But as I grew up, I started to recognise that people who look like me weren't really on those shows and I subliminally got the message that maybe that space isn't for me. So I think that is why I turned my attention to behind the camera, so I can decide... *(pauses)*, well not decide, but I can collaborate with other people as to who gets to be seen and what stories get to be told because I felt I wasn't included in those spaces originally.

I think documentary was the first genre of film that really spoke to me. I can't even really say why, I think when I was younger I used to watch a lot of Channel 4 documentaries and some very experimental stuff online and I just found it so interesting. I think maybe there was a part of me that just felt archiving things was very important, especially as a person of colour, as a black woman I think archiving things is very political and I don't know that I was thinking like that you know 4 years ago, but I definitely am thinking about it like that now yeh....

**Angela Clarke** - Well that is really interesting and I think that's hopefully something that is starting to change now that people from all walks of life and all ethnic backgrounds are starting to be more represented.

**Simisola Akande** - Definitely.

**Angela Clarke** - What was your journey to get in to The Brit School then, when did you decide right I think I want to make a move towards this world?

**Simisola Akande** – Yeh so it's really funny because my mum is a kind of master planner, she always has all of our lives *(referring to her sisters)* planned out before we even realise it! *(laughs)* Although she was very shocked when I told her I wanted to do film, she did take that on board and she just ran with it. She started to do research about what universities do film and what courses I

would need and she found the Brit School and she was like Simi I found this place you know...

I live like in the East Midlands, I don't live in London so she was like you know if you want to do this, this is what you're going to have to do! So I was like, 'Wow bro this is too much' (*laughs*) so it was actually my mum that really encouraged me to think - if you are going to do this you better do it! And I remember I went to the open day and I was thinking I'm not sure because I'm a person who is very steadfast in terms of academics, you go to school, you follow the timeline etc. But going to the Brit School was a risk for me because it felt so unorthodox because of the way that they do things there.

But you know my mum was just very much like if this is what you want to do, I'm very much 100% behind you and I will let you go and live in London for the next two years if you want to. And I don't think I wanted too, I was very was very, very scared, but my mum was like, 'Just go do it please because you're annoying me, just go and do it' in her Nigerian accent (*laughs*) as she would. I did go there and I thank her very much for it. And even now we talk about it sometimes and like the other day my mum was like, 'Huh you don't even know bro I've planed your entire life out' and I literally look at her and I'm like I'm glad one of us has a handle on this because I don't know what I'm doing. (*laughs*) So it's very reassuring to have that support so yeh it was my mum's master plan and I'm just living through that now so....(*laughs*)

**Angela Clarke** - Your mum sound excellent I think maybe I might give her a call and get some careers advice from her myself and she if she can sort my diary out...(*both laughing*)

**Simisola Akande** - She's very good...

**Angela Clarke** - I like the sound of that! So what was that like then moving to London? This whole kind of whole new world where I suppose there is a big expectation to be creative and to deliver. How was that for you?

**Simisola Akande** - It's so interesting because when I was doing it, when I was living it, I was almost on auto pilot and I wasn't really processing anything because I think it was actually just a year or so after my father had passed away that I moved (*to London*). And it was really funny because we had gone back to Nigeria for the one-year remembrance ceremony that we did and then I went straight to Brit School from the airport and there was something unhealthy about that transition. I think none of us took the time to really think about the repercussions that would have on me.

And I think now, looking back at it, it was really, really difficult time because I was grieving, but I was alone. Obviously I was staying with a family friend but that is not the same thing as staying with your own family. But the school was so excellent at dealing with my anxieties, because I got very anxious. I mean understandably and I would cry a lot and I would be that student who kind of

needed that extra hand holding but the school dealt with it very well, and they for some reason really believed in my abilities even before I could really understand what I could do.

They really seemed to have a lot of faith in my creativity when I had yet to prove it to myself and when you said you know there is a lot at risk here, a lot of pressure, I most definitely put a lot of pressure on myself. It was never my mum or anybody else putting pressure on me, it was definitely always me being Simi, you are here by yourself and you are all the way here now, and your mum has supported you through this, and this is your turn to make like the next move, you have to be amazing at this or we are gonna go back home! And that was very much the energy I carried through my first film, it had to be amazing or I would literally pack up my stuff and go back home. And that was a really toxic mind set and it's often one that I am still having to unlearn and understand that I cannot be a creative individual if I am putting that much weight on myself, it is impossible you know so yeh all of that...*(laughs)*

**Angela Clarke** – It is an amazing opportunity, but it is also difficult to navigate not putting a huge pressure on yourself, because when you've had a lot of success with your first couple of films you can think maybe I've got to do this now and you know I think it creates lots of doubts doesn't it?

**Simisola Akande** - Very much.

**Angela Clarke** - And all of that is understandable. So I want to talk to you about your first film then, *DuDu* so that's going back to 2018 then is that correct?

**Simisola Akande** - Yeh.

**Angela Clarke** - So you were at the Brit School then, so what age were you when you made that?

**Simisola Akande** - So 2018 so I was probably like 17...

**Angela Clarke** - So for those that maybe haven't seen it - can you tell us a bit about the film?

**Simisola Akande** – So *Dudu* is a film, it translates to 'Black' in Yoruba the language that we speak and it's just a film that explores colourism and the effect of colourism on your sense of self and how we grow from loving our mothers skin to learning how to despise our own as we grow up. And it's that painful fracture in the self when you learn to hate yourself a little bit yeh.

**Angela Clarke** – And so it comprises of a – a spoken word poem. Did you write that?

**Simisola Akande** - Yeh I did, very embarrassingly I did yeh...*(laughing)*

**Angela Clarke** - No it's really, really moving, I figured you probably had. It's really eloquent and really poignant and really upsetting to think that people think that of themselves or that others would think that of them and I suppose if it's not a topic that impacts somebody directly, people are oblivious to the fact that those conversations and dialogues go on in people's heads.

**Simisola Akande** - Yeh.

**Angela Clarke** - So you use the form of spoken word to tell the narrative of loving the skin colour you are born in, and then that kind of painful process as you grow up recognising that your colour is not necessarily represented or reflected back to you within society. You don't see yourself in films, and you then start to move into that territory of dating and hearing what people have got to say about the colour of your skin...

**Simisola Akande** - Yeh yeh.

**Angela Clarke** - And I just wondered why do that as your first film?

**Simisola Akande** - Well I think at that time I was going through a lot in terms of coming to terms with my own skin tone. I've always been a very dark skinned girl and I've always been very aware about how people respond to that. But I think I was 17 or 18 and like I mean any young girl at that point is very insecure, and anything that adds to that normal sense of insecurity is very crushing and it's very destabilising you know. It really...*(pauses)* I think it tainted the way I saw myself relating to others, and how I saw others relating to me. And it was almost like before I would speak my skin would speak for me.

And it was something *(pauses)* colourism is not just a thing you know from you...*(pauses)* it is a thing from white supremacy but it's also something that very much festers within the black community. And I think sometimes that is where it hurts the most. I grew up with my sisters who are a lot more light skinned than I am and my mum is also more light skinned than I am, but my dad had very dark skin and so was myself and my other sister. But he is a male and that is always favoured you know in men, to be dark skinned because it's a sign of strength whereas for women it's too masculine, and it's too aggressive and un-delicate and un-subtle you know.

And I think at that point I was also starting to like boys - thinking, 'Oh I really like this guy' but I noticed my process regarding how I would experience that very normal teenage situation of liking other people would centre around me always have to first ask the question *(to myself)* does he like people who look like me? Not just like am I pretty, it's never am I pretty, it's like is my skin okay for this interaction?

And it became a very painful process for me having this feeling as though I didn't have permission to like other people. I would feel guilty about me liking other

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people was a weight on their shoulders, it was something I was inflicting on to other people and I think what was really sad, when I was making the film, I was talking to a lot of my friends about it because I wanted it to be about all that stuff. For all of us to see ourselves in it and I think what hurt me was that other people were feeling it too. And although that is very affirming that is also incredibly painful because when you are going through something bad, you don't want anybody else to go through that...

**Angela Clarke** - Mmm.

**Simisola Akande** - Because it feels terrible you know and so that was definitely in my mind at the time I was definitely living with that as I was doing the work yeh.

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**Angela Clarke** - And so how long did it take you to write the words for that film then?

**Simisola Akande** - It's really funny it did not take me long at all. *(laughs)* So as soon as I came back from school I was like okay this is what I'm doing for my final project and I literally went on to the computer and I typed, typed, typed and that was it. I only read it once, I barely edited it - maybe I edited it down, but that was about it. I was surprised about how easily it all came out and it kind of made me think, 'Okay so clearly this has been building up for a while' and it was kind of a cathartic moment of 'urgh' get it out on to paper and get it out on to film, and maybe we can move on from that you know.

**Angela Clarke** - Yeh. There is real brevity in it and you can feel the turn of phrase that you use and the poignancy and the pain within it...

**Simisola Akande** - Yeh.

**Angela Clarke** - Like you can feel the pain through the spoken word and you can feel you reflecting, and navigating those moments of realisation of - I used to love this and now I don't and I just thought it was really, really beautifully done...

**Simisola Akande** - Thank you so much.

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**Angela Clarke** - I've watched it a few time and every time there is something else that you notice and I think that it's such a complex issue and driving that narrative forward just through one persons eyes makes it so easy then to understand how that impacts that person. I just wondered after you had written the words how did you decide how to bring the film alive visually? Because you've got a lot of really beautiful, very visceral images at times, no music in it, occasionally a couple of bits of atmosphere sound and something that sounds a bit drone esq, but there is so much emotion in each of the shots. So how did you start to pull it together visually?

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**Simisola Akande** - It's always interesting in terms of how I work visually, because I feel like there is always less direction in how I create visuals. It always feels very instinctive and I think I definitely draw a lot from the things I see online that I think are beautiful. Maybe some images I will have of other people and I think I wonder what would this look like if there was black woman there you know instead of whoever was there at the time. And so I will try sometimes to recreate scenes that I wish I was a part of and then I would put the people I want in there.

And I think it's quite funny - I remember when me and my friends were shooting it, I was on holiday and I had to go back to school soon and I hadn't done anything yet and I was always complaining to my friend like, 'Dude I haven't done anything for this project' and he was like 'No Simi, I'm going to set this up - I'm calling all our friends and your going to do this, you are going to do what you need to do and get it done.' And he ended up producing it I guess you could say but I think there was something about being there with people, things just organically made sense to me. There were certain spaces that felt perfect and so look, I am very bad about talking about visuals because for me it's a very instinctive thing and I don't plan that much into it, although I do have some story boards and I will do shoot some specific images where I think, 'Wow this is really beautiful, let me put a black woman there and see what that says differently about that image.' So it is very organic for me which I don't know how helpful that is for other people when they hear me talk about it...*(laughs)*

**Angela Clarke** - Well a lot of the images are almost kind of quite photographic?

**Simisola Akande** - Yes.

**Angela Clarke** - You know in their framing... And there is quite a lot of stillness, and not always an awful lot of movement in your shots but there is a close up where you are you are really expressing pain, where you can't look away as it were, you look right down the lens..

**Simisola Akande** - Yeh.

**Angela Clarke** I loved the shot where you had the tear rolling down your face because it is so visceral - you can see and feel somebody's pain. I think all your shots are incredibly expressive and they emulate the words you're saying...

**Simisola Akande** - Thank you so much.

**Angela Clarke** - ..and they push beyond the words you've said as well and take you to another layer and it's really interesting to hear you say that you are looking at images that are in the mainstream and then changing things up. So do you keep, you know when you see an image do you keep it, do you screen shot it?



**Simisola Akande** – Definitely. I come from a generation of avid collectors. We like to collect everything we see and every moment we feel we have to take a picture and hold it forever and so I definitely take that on. Whenever I see something online I would take a screen shot. I have so many screen shots on my laptop. Just looking at my laptop, I'm definitely an accumulator of beautiful images and I will try to work that into the films I make or write stories around those images that I see...

**Angela Clarke** - The film is about 5 or 6 minutes or something in length and so how long did it take you to edit – because I take it you edited that yourself as well?

**Simisola Akande** - Yeh.

**Angela Clarke** - Is that a difficult process for you in terms of editing something that something that is really, really personal?

**Simisola Akande** - Yeh.

**Angela Clarke** – And I wondered, do you show it to other people? How do you help filter what makes the cut and what doesn't?

**Simisola Akande** – Yeh I think editing is something I always use to find fun until I started editing my *own* stuff and I was like, this is not fun. *(laughing)* Especially hearing your own voice it can also be alike a bit urghh and especially hearing your own voice talking about something really very personal can also be really exhausting emotionally. But I think the way that I often edit is that I will start with the sound first oddly enough - obviously it's a spoken word driven piece so it would make sense that I start with that, and I would start to order things in relation to what I said and what image best represents that etc.

And because of the way I filmed it, I didn't necessary film it in relation to the spoken word. A lot of the filming was just captured in the moment and like I said more organic and so it was about fitting things back to where they probably felt they should have been. I do remember I talked to lots of my friends about it and I was like, 'Do you think this is okay?' and it was very, very hard to do that because it was very exposing. Especially the parts where I would be saying things like, 'I like a boy but does he like me' and then getting my friend to listen to that would be like 'Whoops' *(laughs)* and I was 17 and I was a very insecure person, the same as everybody else is a lot of the time.

I have to get other people to look at the stuff I make because they are so personal and because a lot of the time when I'm making them, I haven't properly dealt with the themes in the films yet so it can be very scary to show other people. But I'm very lucky in the sense that people who are just so supportive, for no reason whatsoever, surround me, other than the very fact that they have love in their heart or something I don't know.

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But yeh, I do share with people and they help me with stuff but most of the time I know what has to happen and I know what I have to do but and sometimes things just have to happen a certain way. I don't know if anybody else feels that and sometimes of course there are creative decisions but sometimes the story is stronger than me myself and what I'm able to do and that I have to submit what the story needs from me and what to do for it you know so yeh.

**Angela Clarke** – That is the thing it is a massive subject that has been in the press a lot certainly of late and although this is your story, it could be the story of any young girl like you from a background that feels marginalised and just that horrible painful realisation that your happiness is impacted by how other people react towards you isn't it.

**Simisola Akande** – Yeh exactly.

**Angela Clarke** - It's a really powerful film and so that's just been recently shortlisted hasn't it for Best Experimental Film at the BFI Future Film Festival hasn't it?

**Simisola Akande** - I won it thankfully woo hoo, yeh. *(cheers and laughs)*

**Angela Clarke** – Excellent, excellent. *(laughing)* And so what is the plan for that film now, will you take it to other round to other film festivals?

**Simisola Akande** – I was genuinely shocked when it did make it on to the BFI Festival, let alone getting nominated, let alone actually winning it! The whole process has been a shock to me. I think I'm okay with the film right now, I'm okay with just leaving it alone now and moving on to something else because a part of me also recognises that was my first film and every time I watch it I can see so many mistakes and I think 'oh I shouldn't have done that' and that is a bit embarrassing. So I think hopefully I'm growing now in the right direction and I can leave that film behind and whoever needs that film can hopefully go and find it but for now like I'm looking forward to making new stuff I think...

**Angela Clarke** - Well I think everyone always feels like that when they look back at any of their films. *(Simisola – laughing)* So then returning back, whilst you're at Brit School - the next independent shorts you made while there was now let me get the pronunciation correct... *(picks up notes)*

**Simisola Akande** - *(laughing)* It's funny because I do this on purpose. I always make my films Yoruba names just to frustrate other people *(laughing)*– so I did this on purpose and I'm sorry about that...*(both laughing)*

**Angela Clarke** – Listen that's okay, it's good for me to practice my Yoruba – I'm out of practice! So the next film you make then whilst at the Brit School which has also done really well is ***Ojumo Ti Mo.***

**Simisola Akande** - Yah well done! *(both laughing)*

**Angela Clarke** - I got the pronunciation right! And basically that has also gone on to snag you an award. I'm seeing a pattern her Simisola - releases a film, gets an award, you're on a roll...*(Simisola laughing)* It's a beautifully stunning film that explores the mixed emotions experienced by a family, brought on by grief after a difficult loss and I was really blown away by it...

**Simisola Akande** - Thank you so much.

**Angela Clarke** - And yeh I think again it speaks to anybody who has lost a parent or lost somebody significant in their life. And so if people haven't seen it, can you give us a brief description of the project and again what attracted you to tackling this particular subject?

**Simisola Akande** - So *Ojumo Ti Mo* is like an experimental documentary film where I recorded some phone conversations with my family over a period of three months and I kind of weaved that into a story about how each person was dealing with the loss of our father. I think it was probably maybe two or three years after his passing at that point and we were all living in different places, none of us were living in the same place at the same time. My middle sister was in the Czech Republic, my elder sister was in Birmingham, I was in London and my mum was at home *(in the Midlands)*.

But this is a very normal thing you know for children in the diaspora to not necessarily always be in the same place as family. But we are obviously tied because of the very fact we are family and we're also tied by the fact we are all experiencing the same thing in the sense that we have all lost a central figure in the family.

I think the film was a kind of an ode to telephone conversations and how they save people's lives on a daily basis and keep us connected. Which is also very good now especially with Covid, we are all now really thankful for that connection - so maybe I saw it coming who knows! *(laughs)*

**Angela Clarke** - Maybe you're actually a prophet! *(laughing)*

**Simisola Akande** - Add that to my CV *(gestures a tick box and laughs)*

**Angela Clarke** - Part time prophet!

**Simisola Akande** - So yeh I think what made me pursue this kind of film was an accident, *(pauses)* actually a lot of things that happen are an accident for me! I don't know what that means but I'm very grateful. Initially I wanted to do the project just based on recording mundane conversations with my mum to show her doting over me and being overly protective and concerned that she has a child living in London by herself and then, we had this one conversation which is her talking about the guilt which she felt towards my father passing and after

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**Angela Clarke** - So the film is made up of mainly phone conversations with your mum and your two siblings, and text messages that you have transcribed onto screen and a composite of images that you have used to bring that audio dialogue to life. There are lots of lovely archive images of your mum and dad and I mean I can see it has sort of grown organically then and it become about death which wasn't its starting point, which is often the way when people start out making a film and things move organically and then you get that gut feeling where you think this is the right thing to do. Death is always a really difficult topic to tackle and its something that people kind of pretend to some degree that doesn't happen....

**Simisola Akande** - Very much so... *(laughs)*

**Angela Clarke** - They kind of look away...

**Simisola Akande** - Yeh.

**Angela Clarke** - We try and hide the fact that we age, we're not culturally a country that speaks a lot about death or people passing, so why was that so important to you, had you not spoken so much to your family about your dad's passing?

**Simisola Akande** - Definitely.

**Angela Clarke** - And so how did you get the family on board? Why did you decide there would be a value in doing that?

**Simisola Akande** - I think before the documentary, a few years had passed and obviously we had of course spoken about it to some degree but it was never like anybody was really telling the truth about the matter. In terms of Yoruba culture, death is also a very difficult topic for people to talk about. The idea is you don't really talk about it and that you are not really allowed to grieve for a prolonged amount of time because it means that you are stopping that person moving into the afterlife. And so you know us still grieving after 3 years could be seen as a problem - you need to get this sorted out or he *(her father)* is going to be trapped in some sort of space.

16 So getting my family on board wasn't hard and I think that was because my family are very supportive of my work and they took it as a purely, obviously I will support you, you are my sister, you are my daughter and I will do what I can to help you make this thing.

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And I think once the conversations started to happen, and they started to feel the weight of that, and feel the strain that it brought then it became something else and it became an act of resilience and although they thought this is for your film, it's also for me to have a space for myself. Although we are far away, like having space within a family dynamic as well is often quite difficult, especially in my family. I don't know why, I think we are all very cautious around each other, nobody wants to hurt each other feelings especially when you have all suffered through something very big, the last thing you want to do is make anybody else upset.

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But the film presented a perfect place to be upset because it was only just me and that other person and they could just say whatever they wanted to say and I would just respond as myself and so I think, I think they were able to get on board with it as well because it gave them space to speak and to remember properly. Because often times when we are in trauma, we don't like to remember and we just sit there and I think that is something we really love about cinema is they are very political spaces as well and remembering is an *act* that for a lot of people they don't have the permission to engage with or have the space for that because they are too busy in their everyday hustle of life. And I think film is really a beautiful space for people to create spaces for themselves and tell their truth and leave it there and then walk away and do whatever they want with whatever they have created.

**Angela Clarke** – I think also as well it's a beautiful, snapshot of how a family can all experience a particular passing at the same time, but people don't process that information, or they are not all necessarily on the same page.

**Simisola Akande** - Yeh.

**Angela Clarke** - As they process that passing of somebody...

**Simisola Akande** – Absolutely.

**Angela Clarke** - And I think that until you experience grief yourself I think that's sometimes a difficult thing to understand.

**Simisola Akande** - Very much so...

**Angela Clarke** – And I think what was really beautiful about your film was almost those conversations that were something and nothing. It was that kind of dancing around the fact that we want to talk, but are you ready to talk and am I ready to talk and if we say it, does that upset you and I think that...

**Simisola Akande** - Yeh.

**Angela Clarke** - That in itself is as much a part of acknowledging that people are on the journey at different stages and different pages...

**Simisola Akande** - Exactly.

**Angela Clarke** – And that it's okay to be in different places. But it is also about you trying to work out how do I navigate that? Who do I speak to in my family that is on the same page as me at that particular moment in time? So how did you start to go back and retrieve what was then going to be used to create the narrative, talk us through how you did that?

**Simisola Akande** - Yeh I think so. Apart from actually having these conversations, sifting through the conversations and finding the narrative at the core of them, that was probably the hardest part of making the film because first of all the process of having to listen back to three months worth of phone calls, (*pauses*) like my mum calls me twice a day, every day. And my sister calls me at least once every day, my eldest sister that is, and so listening back to a lot of these conversations was very, very upsetting.

And I remembered when I would be in class, and I was editing it in school, I would just start crying. I would be like 'Why me, why did I do this and why did I think this was an okay thing to do' and often I would have to leave and come back another day. It was a very emotional process in terms of sifting through that but I think there was also a lot of guilt involved in making the film. Because as the conversation would go on, I would listen back to it and when somebody would say something I thought was interesting I would think, 'Okay we need to move in this direction' and I need to start asking them these questions and there was something unsettling about that.

Because I think at one point I thought I was exploiting their trauma, you know I was forcing them into these really vulnerable positions and for what like a grade? Because at that point I was thinking this is not going anywhere - this is just for school and then I started getting very worried about that because I didn't want to exploit my families grief and create a spectacle out of it so other people can enjoy that, that is really messed up. But I did eventually voice that to them and I was like, 'Guys if you don't want to do this, that is okay, this is really hard' and they were just like no we will do it whatever and they didn't think it was a big deal. But it was obviously a big deal and so yeh the editing process was very hard and even now when I hear like the ringing of phones calls like my mind goes, 'Nooo' you know (*laughs*) because I heard that so often you know listening back to the recordings it's low-key scarred me a little bit (*laughs*) but that's what we get... (*laughs*)

**Angela Clarke** – Well that's the things because once again much like *Du Du* there is no music in it you've got the ringtone that punctuates and starts you know the film off doesn't it...

**Simisola Akande** - Yeh.

**Angela Clarke** – And again the images that you've got are, are really beautiful and really compliment the conversations. I guess the audio was the thing that led

13

the narrative and the drama because within those audio snippets you've got so much emotion that drives the conversation forward. You know – yourself or your mum or your sisters are upset at various points and you can hear the weight of the thought in their voice, so I wanted to ask you a few things because most of the film takes place inside...

**Simisola Akande** –Yes.

**Angela Clarke** – And a lot of it looks like its been shot quite naturalistically. It's all quite natural light, and there is lots of kind of playful sibling closeness erm...(laughing)

**Simisola Akande** - Yeh.

**Angela Clarke** - And not quite tussling...

**Simisola Akande** –(laughing)

**Angela Clarke** - I mean I saw a bit of wrestling and I definitely did that with my sister (laughs) but really beautiful, kind of slow shots. Again not huge amounts of movement in them but they were hugely emotive. So tell me a bit about how you approached doing the shots that you got?

**Simisola Akande** – Yeh so it was obviously quite funny because we weren't all together (*in the same geographical location*) and so in my head I was like 'Bro how are you going to film this film when you guys are so literally so far apart?' but luckily before my birthday celebrations, we went to go visit my sister in the Czech Republic for a couple of days and so this was maybe about halfway through recording the phone conversations. So the real conversations hadn't really happened yet because I was slowly just understanding this was the direction that it had to go in.

So we went to the Czech Republic, and I was thinking this place is stunning, I can't film here because it would take attention away from what I was trying to do. Ideally I would have filmed the film in our house (*family home*) or keep that personal intimacy vibe and so when we got there and I was thinking this place is too beautiful I cant add it into the film. So that is why a lot of times the spaces (*in the film*) are kind of neutral they could really be anywhere. I had to work hard to make sure that I identified a neutral corner of the hotel room...

**Angela Clarke** – Mmm.

**Simisola Akande** – ..or a neutral corner of the street, you know a wall on the street because it was me dealing with technical difficulties on set I guess. And in terms of the slowness of everything and the lack of movement I think sometimes I'm like that is probably just because I have little experience and I'm sure if I was more cinematic I could do something crazy whip pans and it would go off the hinge (laughing) but because my experience with the camera is incredibly

13 limited and I was very, very self conscious with the camera, I'm not very good with it, so everything I do has to rely on a compositions and colour.

14 A lot of colour choices are just purely accidental, but I think my family we just dress in very similar colours, its either likes blues or mustards, those are the colours we tend to wear as a family and so it made things easier. So I had to rely on things like composition and colour and gentle movements. And with some of the shots, I shot them when people were sleeping so the one where the feet were kind of scurrying through the sheets.... my sisters were just sleeping and I was like, 'Bro I've got things to film, I can't be sleeping here' and so I just took that as an opportunity to grab a few shots of those moments!

15 And so that was also at that time that I grabbed the shot of my sister looking out of the window in the natural light. I did have to rely on the natural light because I didn't know how to light things properly but I think natural light works really beautifully with dark skin anyway and so I think it was definitely a plus that I was filming in summer which was a good thing. So there was a lot of happy coincidences and me kind of understanding - Simi you don't really know things very well and so just work with what you do know...

16 **Angela Clarke** - Well I think you are underselling yourself slightly when you are saying *(both laughing)* that you are not very good at filming! I think the shots are really beautiful and I think that stillness in the shots again emulates the stillness in the story because the audio itself drives the narrative forward and there is so much emotion in that and that you almost don't want too much going on in your shots, and that it feels like, it feels really reflective. And yeh just the way the light catches your family it's just really beautiful, there is a real stillness and a slight melancholy in them. There is a lot of reflection, but I was going to ask you about the ones you shot in the bed because they all looked really natural and now you've just made me slightly chuckle at the thought of you just lurching over your sister! *(both laughing)*

**Simisola Akande** - Literally like I wouldn't make too much noise and I would be there zooming the lenses in the corner, I mean it's a very creepy image but you know its all consensual... *(laughs)*

**Angela Clarke** - I was gonna say, that is what's quite funny when you watch the film and you see it's so beautifully done and now I've got this image of you lurching over your sisters foot like *(whispering)* she wont know I'm here!

16 **Simisola Akande** - *(laughing)* Or it was like when my sisters saw the film for the first time they said - when did you do this bit - I was sleeping, when did you do this? So that was funny as well..*(laughing)*

**Angela Clarke** - Ah yeh that bit, I just did that whilst you were completely out for the count *(laughing)* As you said, the film is a personal film and I get the sense that probably up until the moment the film was edited and finished, I wasn't sure had your two sisters and your mum, did everyone realise what conversations



had gone on with each other? Or was it just a case of like once you put the film out there everyone was like hang on a minute now?

**Simisola Akande** - Yeh it was very much that. Like I messaged (*pauses*) - it's a very interesting story because there was lot of politics involved in terms of which parts of the story I could show and couldn't show. And so the parts where my sister talks about 'coming out' to my mum, that was a really difficult one ethically to know what to do. I had to ask my sisters because the plan that I had was I would make two version of the edit, one that would be suitable for my mum to watch and it wouldn't create any chaos and could to be sent to her friends in Nigeria and not cause any issues.

And I would have the other one where maybe me and my sisters and my close friends would see it, with the bit where she does talk about her 'coming out'. But I asked my sister and my sister was just like no just do one version - like I think she believed in the film enough to be like it's important that this part is there and I thought that was really, really brave of her. And I think it is one of the really interesting things about making film, you know as a person of colour, creativity is not always something you have sometimes. The very fact that you pick up the camera is a massive deal...

**Angela Clarke** - Mmm.

**Simisola Akande** - And there are a lot of repercussions in the stories you tell, not just globally but just even being like black and queer. Understanding that is a very difficult space to navigate in your own family, there is a lot of risk, there is a lot *at risk* when we make these films together as a family, because as you said nobody was hearing what each other were saying. So when I did put it out there and I messaged everybody and said, 'Okay I'm sending you guys the film now like tell me what you think' and I called my mum after and she was just quiet. She was just talking really kind of quietly, and I was like, 'Oh my god no, did that scene trouble her?' Is this is going to be a whole thing again but I think she was quiet because she really liked it basically, and I think she was quiet because she didn't know what my sisters were thinking and I think it really hurt her to know we were all struggling so much with it (*my dad's death*).

And for my sisters - because Anjolo my middle sister - almost the narrative surrounds her for a bit. The end piece, (*pauses*) nobody really gets to talk to her because she is a very closed person, I think her hearing how we were always talking about her and how everyone was always worried like have you spoken to Anjolo? How is Anjolo doing? I think that definitely upset her as she was thinking thinking am I the problematic child? Am I the one that everybody is always worried about?

And as much as it was painful to hear, I think it was incredibly needed. Like everybody felt okay finally you have said what you didn't tell me and although I'm mad that you didn't tell me, I'm glad that I get to hear it now. And I think I definitely after the film it completely changed how my family related with each other, and how open we would be about each other's sadness. Because sadness

isn't something that is celebrated because nobody wants their children to be sad, and that was something my mum really struggles with is understanding why we can't be happy all of the time, and that you are just gonna have to be okay with that and there is nothing else to do about it and so yeh...

**Angela Clarke** - And you can see that the film is obviously quite cathartic for all of you, and that you come to that conclusion. And in a way that has given you the platform to sit down and have those conversations you probably wouldn't necessarily have done. There are always decision to be made as a filmmaker as you say, about ethics and how you work things in. And given that was only your second film you know - not only were you dealing with a big subject that's difficult to deal with anyway but...

**Simisola Akande** - Yeh...

**Angela Clarke** - You really went for the jugular then...

**Simisola Akande** - Go big or go home! *(both laughing)*

**Angela Clarke** - You definitely did go big or go home! *(laughs)* But now that you've come through the other side of that, what did you learn most about that process of filmmaking in terms of navigating those relationships with your siblings?

**Simisola Akande** - I think a lot of what we all learnt was to understand the family dynamic is not something that was natural. I think a lot of times; the reason why there is always so much tension in families is because everyone expects this is the one relationship that should come naturally. Like you should know how to treat me, especially between parents and children - like you should know how to love me and know how I want to be loved.

And I think the documentary was the first time we were all like okay maybe I need to teach you how I need to be loved and maybe I need to teach you about when I want to talk and when I don't want to talk and how you have to be okay with that. And I think it's something I really hope that people can do more in terms of their own relationship. Especially with their parents and like with young people there is always a massive issue with parents and I think a lot of that comes from the fact that we just always expect them to know what we want from them.

But so much of our conversations and relationships with my mum after the fact you know - every day she is having to relearn and unlearn what she thought she was doing right and realise maybe it just wasn't the right this to do at the time.

**Angela Clarke** - Mmm.

**Simisola Akande** - And to see her doing that work, that mental work you know to discard her biases, to really have to challenge herself in order to raise us

was probably something that she didn't think was part of the job of being a mother - that you genuinely have to question your sense of self at times...

**Angela Clarke** - Mmm.

**Simisola Akande** - You have to question your beliefs at times and the fact like you know my sister coming out to her, that was a moment when she had to completely scrap everything I know and I think is good and true and holy and I have to start again. And that is incredibly scary for anybody to have to do and the fact that she is taking those steps every day was something we've all had to learn from the film. That you don't know me as much as you think you do and that is fine, it's not a bad thing - it just means we can learn how to get to know each other better...

**Angela Clarke** - And as you say you have created a beautiful time capsule of that moment and again it's a personal story but it's a bigger subject that culturally will resonate with other people from that ethnic background who maybe find themselves in a similar position. And I think also as well, as you say, the world, especially in recent years, the world has changed so significantly as a result of social media and technology and how we live our lives, and increased levels of anxiety, how people process and share information and things like that and what is expected of you publically. And I think you get a sense of that through the film as well. That there is not just a generational difference between you and your siblings and your mum, culturally there is a whole meld of things coming together in that world AND one of the things I wanted to ask you - you don't always show their faces full frame...

**Simisola Akande** -Yeh.

**Angela Clarke** - And was that a conscious decision because I guess they kind of exposed quite a lot through their audio?

**Simisola Akande** - Yeh.

**Angela Clarke** - Did you want to give a bit them a bit of privacy or was that just a stylistic thing...?

**Simisola Akande** - Yeh I did want to give them a bit of a sense of privacy because I was very aware you're all out here fully naked in front of the world like the least I can do is take your face out of it. Yeh it was definitely a choice I consciously made to make sure that, and I think sometimes having to see your face when your saying things makes it harder, you get distracted and you get self conscious. And sometimes if you just hear your voice, it's easier to process that was you speaking without having to see yourself in that way.

**Angela Clarke** - Well a lot of the shots you did I think that's why the shots and the audio work really beautifully together because a lot of the time, because you haven't gone the traditional route of featuring their face full front on as it were -

you've got a lot of non verbal – you can see their body language in a lot of the shots.

**Simisola Akande** - Yeh.

**Angela Clarke** - You can see a lot of tension in the shoulders or that kind of slight fidgety actions and I think all of those things I think from a creative point of view, it's a film that is really beautiful to watch from that point of view as well because there is a lot of pain, the shots say a lot again and it's interesting to see just the subtly of how you can show the emotion – without having to do the obvious.

**Simisola Akande** - Exactly.

**Angela Clarke** – How long did the edit process take you? Because you edited that one as well - what kind of duration are you looking at to edit that film down, because that film is about what 15/16 mins so how long did you take?

**Simisola Akande** – Yeh I want to say that it took me a month because it was for a school project so I also had to do all the other course stuff but I think yeh I want to say I think it took me about a month to edit. And that month was a hard month for various reasons. I wouldn't be able to get connected to Wi-Fi or I wouldn't be able to access the software. And this is another reason why film is such a privileged art form. Like if you don't have access to a computer, or to a camera, to Wi-Fi, you are excluded from this art form and it's virtually impossible for you to get in. And I think having those troubles at that time I was like okay I see the power of this place. I see the power of my presence in this space as well you know. The years of my mother planning to get me here, in these times it was difficult as I see how specific this is. I see how intricate my presence here is and I appreciated that a bit more I think yeh.

**Angela Clarke** – And so after you finish that film then, tell me a bit about the competition then *Who We Are* that was run by the lovely people at We Are Parable in association with the BFI - how did that come about?

**Simisola Akande** – So I had like followed the BFI Academy you know on a whim on Instagram and I saw that they had posted something about it. And it was around the time that you know everything was going on with like Black Lives Matter and George Floyd and there was this kind of agency and because I wasn't really putting my film forward for festivals, it didn't really occur to me that it was something good enough to be put on to this platform.

But during lockdown I was a bit bored and I was thinking you know what would be good, just to get some awards. *(laughs)* But I was really surprised when I got the phone call from them going like 'You've won', I was like I was literally like 'Oh my child you what, sorry do we have the wrong number here?' *(laughing)* like I remember I told my mum and my mum was like ahhh!!! *(as if screaming with joy)*

**Angela Clarke** – I think she probably knew, she had predicted that...*(laughs)*

**Simisola Akande** - She definitely did it was all part of her plan.... *(Laughing)*

**Angela Clarke** - How did you feel about the fact that it gives the film a bigger platform? That wasn't necessarily the intention when you started off but I mean it's exciting to know more people can watch your story and share in that isn't it?

**Simisola Akande** - Yeh I didn't really process it. One thing I've noticed about living life is you are not processing anything that is going on around you, it's only in retrospect you can go, 'Oh wow I was having a hard time there, that was me having a hard time.' So during that time I wasn't really processing it. Like I have a tendency when good things happen around me, I have to minimise it, because I'm scared it will blow up in my face for some reason. So when that happened, I was like 'Whatever it's cool, it's not a big deal!' so I was like that for a couple of months until it was *(publically)* announced and then it was quite interesting because around the time it was lockdown. And I think everybody was going through it in lockdown, I was going through a really hard time with mental health and anxiety at the time and so it was very hard to balance celebration with the fact I was just not happy. So there were some times where I felt very selfish thinking I should be like dancing and jubilating right now, and like I'm in bed like crying.

I even remember the day it got announced, I posted it up on my social media and it was so sad *(laughing)* and I posted it to my social media as soon as I got up, and then I just went back to bed and cried the whole day, just sat in bed and there was no sense of celebration about it. And it wasn't until people started to message me and being like 'Oh I found your film' and I was like 'You found my film?' and telling me about their stories that I was like 'Oh my god I didn't realise that other people were living such similar experiences.'

**Angela Clarke** – Mmm.

**Simisola Akande** - That was when I started feeling the success of that, and of other people opening up to me and being like 'Yeh me too, I also went through this thing, it was hard and I wish I had been able to talk to my family like this' or something like that. That was when I felt 'Yeh maybe I did do something good here' you know...

**Angela Clarke** - You definitely did. And I think also as well I mean it's interesting in terms of you know when you revisit a film, and that film also carries pain...

**Simisola Akande** - Yeh.

**Angela Clarke** - Because it's part of the process and it's always erm, it's always a slightly challenging scenario to be in then because when you take it to film festivals and see it again then there is that reminder isn't there?

**Simisola Akande** - Yeh.

**Angela Clarke** - And while it's great because good comes out of that pain you know not just on a personal level that your family just spoke about something that they hadn't necessarily dealt with, but it gives bigger levels of relatability to other people in other situations but it also comes with a...

**Simisola Akande** - Yeh...

**Angela Clarke** - A tinge of pain as well, so I think that is something that as a filmmaker you know, maybe none of us realise how you are going to feel when you revisit that.

**Simisola Akande** - Yeh.

**Angela Clarke** - And I think that is part of that process as you make more films that you are aware that one is more maybe more difficult to go back and approach and watch of course it does have a lot of personal memories in...

**Simisola Akande** - Exactly.

**Angela Clarke** - And so what is next for that film? Are you going to take that on the film festival circuit?

**Simisola Akande** - I've already tried. I put it into a few festivals and got denied by a few film festivals but there were some very amazing festivals that took me on like Film Africa and that was a really big deal for me, and you know just a few other small festivals as well like. I think for now I am good. I feel like we can leave it to rest. It's already on the BFI so what else can I really want from life other than?

But it's also very scary because as you said before in the beginning, these are my first two films and there is a kind of sense is this a fluke? What is going on, is this a fluke? I feel a sense of pressure because anything I make next has to be amazing and basically had to be in the Cannes Film Festival or I have failed. And I think getting away from these toxic thoughts of putting too much pressure on yourself is something I'm still learning now and even as I work on my next project now and every time I look at the script I'm like no this is not good enough. It has to be *(laughs)*....there has to be an explosion somewhere like somebody has to land on Mars or something because this is not big enough! So that is definitely there but I'm trying to contain that and be realistic with myself a bit.

**Angela Clarke** – Yeh but I certainly don't think it's a fluke. I think you've crafted a style and there is an intimacy and a power with the style of your filmmaking and I think whatever you go on to do next will simply build upon that.

**Simisola Akande** - I hope so.

**Angela Clarke** – What lessons have you learnt along the way from what you've done so far?

**Simisola Akande** – I'm so glad you asked that because recently I've been having a whole sort of change of mind I guess you could call it. Because of all of the success I have been having and that I have been privileged to have, it kind of created an imposter syndrome reaction in me and I very aggressively...*(pauses)* every time I would get good news I would be very upset with myself because I was like you know Simi that is not you, and you don't deserve any of this. And it became a very toxic cycle and my mum was finding it very hard to deal with me because she was saying 'How can you not see this is a good thing?'

And you know we are quite religious and she was saying 'This is god giving you this, how can you reject gods work?' and I was like 'I'm not trying to reject gods work, I just don't think I can do this' and so I've been taking on the whole idea of you know 'creating through community', and 'creating as a village of people' and I think what that does is take the pressure off my shoulders. And when I relinquish power and say that I don't have to command an army of people to make a film, like this isn't about *me*, this is about the community coming together to tell stories and that is the case for both of the films already.

And the fact like those films wouldn't exist if the community didn't come together to make that and I think once I learnt that, and once I understood that my gift isn't that I'm a good filmmaker or anything but it's maybe that I'm good at creating spaces for people to come and tell their own stories - I will just be there to be a person to open up those places to people, that made me feel more comfortable, and I could understand my place in film better. I'm not some dictatorial director and I'm more about I will create a space for you and you can fill it with whatever you want to fill it with. And I think that is the way I prefer to work in that way yeh...

**Angela Clarke** – And so what is on the horizon then what are you working on next?

**Simisola Akande** - *(laughing)* Eh right now I'm quite excited because I'm trying to work on my first narrative piece because obviously I'm still very young, I don't know where I want to be and I just want to enjoy the form. So I'm working on a short film right now about this Nigerian girl who has her first kiss on the way back from getting some milk from the shop! And the milk is important yeh *(laughs)* so she has her first kiss with this other girl and what happens is it causes her sense of self to be destabilised and she struggles with that event that

happens. And what we have is that the film's journey is guided through this Yoruba spirit or Yoruba deity that guides her towards the acceptance of her sexuality, and this really came from me doing more research into Yoruba culture pre-colonialism and learning about how queer Yoruba culture was and how in the Yoruba language we don't have gendered pronouns and our deities are very queer as well.

So there was something very liberating about finding that out - that my ancestral culture gave me more space than the space I'm actually living in now and I think it's something very powerful, especially now in Nigeria with the difficulties people have being a queer existing person there. I think I'm very excited that we can find a lot of refuge in our ancestral deities and our cultural identity because it means we can never be othered in the way that they are trying to other us you know. We can claim a lineage from these people and I think there is something incredibly powerful about that and I'm very excited to make something about dealing with that.

**Angela Clarke** - Well I'm sure it will be amazing.

**Simisola Akande** - I hope so. *(laughs)*

**Angela Clarke** - And I can't wait to see what else you do in the future. Look Simisola it's been great to speak to you, so thank you so much for sharing your experience so far. And if you want to know more and people haven't seen your films and you want to know more about Simisola and her work then I think the links to all your films are on your Linktree profile aren't they?

**Simisola Akande** - Yeh.

**Angela Clarke** - And both films are currently on the BFI player so you can go and watch them both for free. Honesty best of luck with all your future projects...

**Simisola Akande** - Thank you so much...

**Angela Clarke** - And I look forward to seeing your output soon and maybe I will get your mums number and see if I can get some careers advice from her as well! *(laughs)*

**Simisola Akande** - *(laughing)* Thank you so much for creating this space and for having me on here, this is such a massive deal for me and I hope this helps whoever is listening. I'm so excited more people are doing things like this and including tiny people like me into big spaces like the one you are trying to create and I really appreciate that.

**Angela Clarke** - Oh thank you so much, your films have been amazing take care and I will speak to you again soon hopefully.



**Simisola Akande** – Thank you so much.... Bye.

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