

# In Conversation with the Makers of BBC Four's African Renaissance

Helen Grant

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Russell Barnes is a Director and Producer for the documentary production company ClearStory. Clare Burns has worked in television production for 20 years and is now Production Manager at the documentary production company ClearStory. ClearStory's series African Renaissance, on art in Ethiopia, Senegal, and Kenya, aired in 2020.

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In 2015, director and producer Russell Barnes pitched a documentary to the BBC about the lucrative and sometimes 'dodgy' trade in indigenous art from Africa and Oceania, which is often pejoratively termed 'tribal art'. Barnes summarises his aims when we speak over video call:

We were interested in looking at extraordinary things that turn up in Britain and then tracing them back to where they came from, back to their ancestral roots, if you like. This idea of 'tribal art'. Even that phrase is just... it feels weird saying it. We were asking, 'Why is it called this?', and thinking about how it's been appropriated over the years.

The original premise proved something of a non-starter with commissioning editors, but it did lead to further conversations about shifting the focus away from Britain and towards the artists and cultures behind these works. The outcome was two separate series exploring the relationships between art, colonialism, and the postcolonial era. The first, *Oceans Apart*, was broadcast in 2018 and followed Cambridge academic Dr James Fox as he explored the clash of European and Pacific art in the colonial period. The second became *African Renaissance: When Art Meets Power*, presented by journalist and cultural commentator Afua Hirsch and broadcast in August 2020.

A joyful, unapologetic vision of what politically engaged art documentaries can be, African Renaissance follows Hirsch as she explores Ethiopia, Senegal, and Kenya through their vibrant creative cultures. While the films' geographical focus is markedly different from that pitched five years earlier, the focus is on confronting the same difficult questions about European colonialism. The perspective, however, is rather different. Barnes says:

Rather than approaching it as a kind of straightforward art history from a western perspective, we wanted to make it about a dialogue between cultures. Afua is the perfect guide because she's half Ghanaian and has a real affinity with and interest in pan-Africanism. So we had something that was very much about *now* with somebody who's got distinct and interesting views about these things, but was also willing to explore.

At one point in the Senegal film, Hirsch interviews Germaine Acogny, an internationally renowned choreographer who is often described as the mother of contemporary African dance.<sup>1</sup> 'What is the spirit here that makes our art so powerful?', she asks Acogny. Her use of 'our', not 'your', speaks volumes.

Days before I speak to Barnes and the series' production manager Clare Burns, *African Renaissance* receives a nomination for the RTS Programme Awards. Barnes reflects:

I think what people really responded to was the fact that this was a really positive vision of Africa, a continent which is so often approached with this kind of hand-wringing 'poor Africa' attitude. It was just brilliant to be able to tell the other side of the story. And you do feel, when you're there, this energy, extraordinary energy, a place that's really developing fast, and in fascinating ways.

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Working on a modest BBC Four budget, most of the initial research and planning had to take place in London. Only with the key artists, themes, and stories all worked out could Barnes and fellow producer

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<sup>1</sup> 'Germaine Acogny' (*École des sables*) <<https://ecoledelessables.org/about-us/our-team/germaine-acogny>> accessed 13 March 2021.



Fig 1. Afua Hirsch with four descendants of the Saint Louis signares. © ClearStory.

Alex Brisland approach local production managers with a list of requests. Barnes flew out to Ethiopia to direct the first episode, and Burns joined the team in Senegal. She jokes:

Because I'm managing the budget, it's not really a very good look to just send myself on shoots for the fun of it. But because I can speak some French, I went out as part of the crew and helped to liaise with local crew and contributors. I think I earned my keep!

The team did need to be multilingual. Hirsch had lived in Senegal and could build a rapport with her interviewees by speaking to them in French, the official language of Senegal. However, Wolof, Senegal's real lingua franca, was also used widely. Burns adds:

One interview was in another local, lesser-known dialect, which was a challenge when we later needed transcriptions for the edit. The elderly mother of one of the local crew helped with translating that one. I sent him clips over WhatsApp which he played to his mum, and he sent back voice messages in French, which I then translated. It was a slightly long-winded process, but it worked!

Each episode was filmed in just ten days, partly because of staff availability: one of the field producers for the Ethiopia episode, Zablou Beyene, had to film an episode of Amazon's *The Grand Tour* immediately afterwards. Barnes tells me:

For our BBC Four arts travelogues, our rule of thumb was always that you do a sequence every half day. If you've got ten days, that's potentially 20 sequences, and then with a bit of archive, that will be enough to make

you a 59-minute BBC Four film. What's incredible, and what we felt every single time our local producers came back with lots of amazing options, was that there weren't any bad options. It was always, 'What are we gonna *not* do?', and that was so much to do with logistics and really working out travel times.

It may all sound rather mathematical, but events soon intervened. Burns' crew was not able to get an overhead shot of the African Renaissance Monument in Dakar, because of difficulties sending up a drone. Burns tells me of her disappointment:

It's the tallest statue in Africa, so of course we were very keen to do justice to the size and scale of the monument. We wanted to start the sequence with some beautiful sweeping drone shots. We had all the necessary permits, but it was too windy on the day we were there to fly the drone safely. I did carry on talking to one of the local producers afterwards, but it was not to be. He went back there later with his own drone but actually had it confiscated by the police.

In Ethiopia, a planned visit to the remote fourth-century Church of St John in Tigray was delayed when Hirsch went down with food poisoning. The rest of the team spent a day taking aerial shots of the local landscape while their presenter was ill in her hotel, and it was touch and go whether they would be able to make the climb up to the church the next day. Barnes remarks that this did add a certain poignancy:

We did want to capture the inaccessibility, so strangely, that sense of how hard it was—with Afua being ill,

schlepping up the hill with lots of equipment—suited the editorial theme. It really captured what an extraordinary place it was and how hard it is to get there—an hour of walking uphill.

One of the church elders, Melake Genet Adhana, had been making that same journey for 85 years. 'I've been coming here all my life', he says simply when Hirsch asks him about it in the film. 'I will never stop coming here and will finish my life in this place.'

The three episodes present various different ways of approaching and coexisting with African history. In the Senegal episode we are introduced to Diabel Cissokho, a musician who played at the Jazz Cafe in London just before the pandemic. Cissokho is internationally renowned for playing the kora, a traditional West African stringed instrument. He was born into a long line of *griots*, a caste of people tasked with keeping the community's stories and traditions alive through poetry and music. 'Because of the nature of the oral history, he straddles the past, the present and arguably the future in Senegal', Barnes says. Elsewhere in the country, in the city of Saint Louis, we meet four descendants of the nineteenth-century *signares*, affluent biracial women who held influential roles in society. These modern-day *signares* use their spare time to dress up in the bright silks and filigree jewellery emblematic of their ancestors (fig 1). One, Marie-Madeleine Diallo, is a famous actress in Senegal and attracts lots of tourists wanting to take photographs. Another, Ariane Re'aux, runs a hotel in Saint Louis where the team stayed.

Then there are also dark moments, when more painful histories are confronted head on. We visit Gorée Island, a former base for the transatlantic slave trade just two miles off the coast of Dakar, Senegal's capital. Hirsch comments in the film:

I think it's so important that this island and the House of Slaves that still stands here [have] been preserved as a World Heritage Site, and it's good to see people coming here and engaging with that. At the same time, I can't help but feel a bit uneasy at the ways tourists have this experience, seeing Gorée Island as a nice day out.

In the Kenya episode, Hirsch visits Mweru Girls' School, which shares its grounds with the former Mweru Works Camp set up by the British colonial government in the mid-twentieth century to hold suspected Mau Mau supporters. The British did not actually construct the buildings themselves, historian Chao Tayiana tells Hirsch: the detainees had to make the bricks for their own prison.

In the Ethiopia episode, the artist Eshetu Tiruneh gives us another haunting moment. Tiruneh painted Ethiopia's experience of famine. In the West, as the film points out, what we generally remember most about the famines is Live Aid, a charity concert at which not a single African band was invited to play. We have seen the Church of St John and been reminded that it, along with Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity as a whole, predates the Vatican by centuries. It is therefore particularly jarring to hear a clip from 'Do They Know It's Christmas?'. In Tiruneh's 1974 piece *Victims of the Famine*, there are no white saviours to be seen: Ethiopians support and physically carry each other through the suffering. Barnes recalls:

I was very moved by it, and I think Afua reacted to it very strongly as well. And he'd had such a difficult story. The Derg [the military junta that ruled Ethiopia between 1974 and 1991] sent him off to Moscow to be trained after Haile Selassie was toppled, so he had

this life that had been twisted and turned by events, and by history, and it was fascinating talking to him, a very quiet man, very softly spoken, very sensitive, a man who'd had to kind of turn with the wind, in the very harsh politics of Ethiopia. I just thought, 'Actually, this is exactly where the series needs to be', this very different conception of it, from the African perspective, of who Ethiopians are, rather than how people like Bob Geldof saw Ethiopia in the 80s...

When *African Renaissance* aired in late summer 2020, it did so in the wake of months of Black Lives Matter demonstrations after the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis. In June, protesters had toppled the statue of Bristolian slave trader Edward Colston into the Avon. It is difficult not to see the films as part of that broader conversation about race, colonialism, and art, especially since their release on the BBC coincided with a rerelease of historian David Olusoga's series *Black and British: A Forgotten History*. Barnes is keen to emphasise that the African Renaissance was pitched long before 2020, but, he says, the change in attitude fits with the 'zeitgeist'.

Colonialism, and the colonial attitude, dismisses this art as 'tribal art' and as art that can be collected from all round the world and brought into Western museums and bought by collectors and just sold as a commodity, without thinking through what that art means in the context of where it's made, and why it was made, and who it was made by. This series was meant to be the antidote to that, predicated on the idea that there's this amazing, lively, dynamic, powerful art scene in Africa that's not properly known and covered.

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On 5 March 2021, the day Barnes, Burns, and I meet, the NGO Human Rights Watch calls on the United Nations to establish an independent inquiry into war crimes and possible crimes against humanity in Tigray.<sup>2</sup> It alleges that in November 2020, Eritrean and Ethiopian armed forces massacred hundreds of civilians in the town of Axum, and that the incumbent Ethiopian government has kept this covered up. This appalling event, along with the many other episodes of violence in the region that have occurred since the start of the war between the Ethiopian government and Tigray secessionists, casts a certain shadow on the central thesis of *African Renaissance*. It is bitterly ironic that in autumn 2019, while the production team was editing the film, Ethiopia's prime minister Abiy Ahmed had just been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

The crew had filmed in Axum, outside the The Church of Our Lady Mary of Zion where the Ark of the Covenant is supposedly located. The church was a particular target of the armed forces. I ask if this changes how the team thought about that episode. Barnes replies:

Had we been aware of what was to come, I think we would have covered things differently, but obviously it's impossible to see that future. It was completely weird that we'd finished the series and it was about to go out. And obviously that would have changed the nuance and coloured our end conclusions, no doubt about it. We

<sup>2</sup> 'Ethiopia: Eritrean Forces Massacre Tigray Civilians' (*Human Rights Watch*, 5 March 2021) <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/05/ethiopia-eritrean-forces-massacre-tigray-civilians>> accessed 13 March 2021.

would have been much more circumspect, I think, but at the time we had no sense of any imminent conflict. It didn't feel like that at all.

Ethiopia once again faces an uncertain future, proof enough that it is impossible to squeeze Africa's complexities into three 60-minute episodes. In spite of the programme's ambitious title, its makers stress that they were only offering a snapshot. They hope to make a second series, looking at Nigeria and South Africa. Barnes explains: 'It's such a huge continent, so diverse, and we obviously tried to suggest that at the beginning of each film: we can only do a selection.' If there is one thing to take from that initial selection, it is the extraordinary boldness, creativity, and resilience of Africa and its people: rebirth not just once, but continually.

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