

# Family Affair

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Secrets. Every family has them.

For filmmaker Jide Tom Akinleminu, it would seem that his not-quite-blended family is nursing more than their fair share.

As the mixed-race son of a Nigerian father and a Danish mother, Jide Tom Akinleminu spent his life straddling both often extreme worlds. His parents met and fell in love while his father was an agricultural student in Denmark. They moved to Nigeria, started a family and lived for about 16 years together. The realities of living in Nigeria soon took their toll. The family moved to Denmark as Nigeria's economic and political hardships worsened. The quiet shadow of Scandinavian prejudice exerted very real consequences as Akinleminu's father, Akin- subject of his 2013 debut documentary, *Portrait of a Lone Farmer*- could not manage to secure gainful employment equivalent to his qualifications. Depressed and hollowed out by his inability to provide for his family, Akin returned to his farm in Idanre, Ondo state, effectively separating the family for good. Jide and his two sisters remained with their mother, Grete in Denmark.

The significance of this premise will be familiar to audiences who saw *Portrait of a Lone Farmer*, the quiet, lyrical feature in which Akin comes across as a sympathetic if self-righteous fellow finding meaning and sustenance in his farm work. While in Nigeria filming *Portrait of a Lone Farmer*, Akinleminu was hit with a shocking awakening. His father had started a parallel family in Nigeria. Film for Akinleminu, represents the most sensible way of making sense of this revelation.

As such, *When a Farm Goes Aflame*, his follow up feature, independent of the first, despite sharing the same subjects, is a riveting and occasionally frustrating look at a family legacy of lies, betrayal and more secrets.

Akinleminu may be close to the story but that doesn't mean that he implicitly gets his family blessings to tell it to the world. At every turn of his investigation, there are barriers thrown up to prevent him from opening wounds that are still mostly fresh. At some point, his father, Akin even threatens to cut off communication permanently should he decide on pursuing a pivotal lead.

The film which premiered last year at the Berlinale is a very personal one and while Akinleminu tries to maintain a professional remove, limiting his appearances on screen, it is clear that he only gets the access that he does because he is in some way part of the story. How does a parent turn away a child in search of their identity?

Akinleminu's mother Grete seems the most cooperative as she is quite vocal about her life in Denmark, her health challenges and even grants access to meetings with her support group of Danish women who share her experience of being married to Nigerian men. In these meetings, it is instructive how differently both cultures perceive polygamy. But even for Grete, there seems an unwillingness or inability even to engage completely with the lingering traumas of her relationship with Akin. This often telegraphs as a compulsion to protect Akin and what is left of her family.

On Akin's part, he belongs to a generation of Nigerian men raised to be strong, silent, and hopelessly incapable of accepting complicity even in the face of clear damage. The patriarchy is alive in him indeed. His unwillingness to interrogate his role, accept responsibility for the breakdown of his first family or even acknowledge the damage his decisions continue to cause to his loved ones makes him come across quite differently –and less sympathetic – than he did in *Portrait of a Lone Farmer*.

But perhaps *When a Farm Goes Aflame* isn't meant to be an act of therapy for the filmmaker or for his audience. Perhaps the project was never supposed to lead to tidy answers or therapeutic closures. Akinleminu's quest for answers takes him from Idanre to Denmark and Canada and judicious editing manages to compress a several worlds of footage into a compelling narrative. Akinleminu's filmmaking is elegant and warm as he adopts relaxed, conversational style sessions and confessional testimonies with most of his subjects.

Fitting too as the depth and emotional import of the story may have made any other approach awkward. With archival footage, close up portraits, home video recordings and voice actor readings of letters from the personal archives of both parents, Akinleminu presents a coherent and compelling account of how the actions and indecisions of one person— whether noble or malicious – can set off ripples that leap across time, crossing cultures, borders and generations.

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