

Toolkit: Kenya Screen Worlds

Author:
Peter Pages Bwire

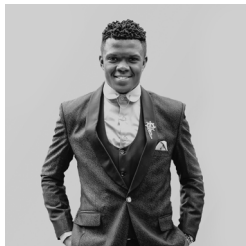


ScreenWorlds



E. M. Mwangi & Philemon Makini

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Bio

Peter Pages Bwire is an entrepreneur, filmmaker, singer and writer based in Kenya. He holds a masters' degree in International Film Business from the University of Exeter and the London Film School, a bachelor's degree in Theatre Arts and Film Technology from Kenyatta University, Nairobi and a certificate in Community Engagement and Civic leadership from Wagner College, New York, awarded by both Wagner and the US department of State through the Mandela Washington Fellowship for Young African Leaders. Peter is a business development partner of the Hip Hop Film Festival, the flagship project of New York's Harlem Film House which he has helped organize in Nairobi and Abidjan. He is also the founder of Dots Village Entertainment where he is working with other filmmakers to produce and distribute films and TV shows around Eastern African stories and heritage. Peter has spoken at conferences about the use of art in development, most recently presenting at the Chevening Conference 2019 in Manchester on the role of art in the development of sustainable global cities. He is a passionate researcher of Eastern African cinemas and African history and is happy to be part of conversations around these. His other endeavours include singing with Hillsong London and writing about cinema and Africa. He can be found through email at peterpages25@gmail.com or info@dotsvillage.com, on LinkedIn as [linkedin.com/in/peterpages25](https://www.linkedin.com/in/peterpages25) and on Twitter as [@peterpages25](https://twitter.com/peterpages25). Check out peterpagesbwire.com for Peter's latest work.

Introduction

This section is best studied alongside Lindiwe's overview on the story of African film, especially the section on women filmmakers in contemporary Kenya.

Film practice in Kenya has heavily flown with the currents of a constantly changing socio-political environment. As an independent nation, the production of feature films has evolved from Sao Gamba's lost picture **Kolormask** to internationally sold productions. The study of Kenya screen worlds introduces a diverse range of discussions concerning the role of cinema in distinct cultural contexts in Kenya which are both different from and in connection with screen worlds across the Eastern African region, Africa, and the rest of the world. From an industrial perspective, we can learn about the aspects of

cinema as an economic system within the wider international film business. Cinema's role in shaping national identity is also explored while as a formal system we can also consider questions of authorship, narrative and audience as they have been shaped in the context of Kenya screen worlds.

Key texts

These texts provide different perspectives that can help us to understand the contexts of film production, distribution and consumption in Kenya. Diang'a introduces themes and subjects which can be further discovered by looking at the entire history offered by Mugubi and Okioma. Overbergh dissects the Riverwood industrial structure, which can be studied alongside Mhando's commentary on the effectiveness of international models of distribution in the African context. McNamara and Steedman offer a look into Nairobi, the hub of Kenyan filmmaking, and help us understand the environment and ecology of film whereas Diawara gives us an outlook of the entire socio-political landscape across Africa as seen by him.

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- Mhando, M., 2015. Globalization and African Cinema: Distribution and Reception in the Anglophone Region in E. N. Sahle (ed.), *Globalization and Socio-Cultural Processes in Contemporary Africa*. pp. 149–168. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137519146_7
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- Overbergh, A., 2015. Kenya's Riverwood: Market structure, power relations, and future outlooks. *Journal of African Cinemas*. 7, 97–115. https://doi.org/10.1386/jac.7.2.97_1
- Steedman, R. (2017). Nairobi-based female filmmakers and the 'Creative Hustle': gender and film production between the local and the transnational. PhD Thesis, SOAS University of London.

Key Films

Kolormask (1985)

Kenya | Director: Sao Gamba

Synopsis:

In this film made early after Kenya's independence, a native man living in Nairobi with his British wife and teenage children regains his adherence to African tradition and places himself at loggerheads with his wife.

Study:

Widely regarded as independent Kenya's first feature film, the late Sao Gamba's only feature film *Kolormask* was as relevant to its time as it was ground-breaking for the practice of filmmaking. Presented at the 1987 FESPACO film festival, Manthia Diawara writes in *African Cinema: Politics and Culture* that *Kolormask* was criticised for being too exotic in its emphasis on documenting

African cultures. Gamba was among the first Kenyans (and East Africans) to be trained in a film school when he got a scholarship to study film in Poland, and his dedication to art was intense. This film will help us study the early contexts of filmmaking in Kenya.

Topics:

Race; culture; authorship; national cinema; post-colonial cinema, filmmaking

Availability:

Contact the Kenya Department of Film services (DFS)

Saikati (1992)

Kenya | Director: Anne Mungai

The Battle Of The Sacred Tree (1994)

Kenya, Germany, France | Director: Wanjiru Kinyanjui

Synopsis:

(Saikati): After escaping a forced marriage at her village, a young Maasai girl with dreams of going to University has to deal with unforeseen problems in her new residence in Nairobi City where her cousin has planned a career for her as a commercial sex worker.

Synopsis:

(Battle of the Sacred Tree): Based on a short story by Ugandan writer Barbara Kimenye, The Battle of the Sacred Tree is the comedic story of Mumbi, the divorced daughter of an old-fashioned medicine man who leads a protest against the cutting down of a tree. This tree, a sacred traditional shrine, is the last pagan symbol that needs to be destroyed, according to the local Christians, but they won't have it easy.

Study:

Released in relatively quick succession, considering how long it took before a feature film was produced after Kolormask, these two films represent a season in Kenya when women filmmakers come to the fore, and the stories they tell might give a glimpse into the landscape they found and what they created. Mungai tackles the early challenges of urbanization in Kenya, talking about the rural-urban migration and the challenges it brought in education, faith, and sexuality. Battle of the Sacred Tree tackles marriage matters too, but brings faith and religion into view, making every human need subordinate to the spiritual matters at hand.

Topics:

Culture; women in film; religion; transnational cinema; co-production; post-colonial cinema, festival circuit, gender and sexuality; decolonization

Saikati Availability:

<https://youtu.be/Lyatic1hrL1g> (Legal status unverified) / Contact filmmaker, Anne Mungai

Battle of the Sacred Tree Availability:

On request to Wanjiru Kinyanjui, Multimedia University of Kenya

House Of Lungula (2013)

Kenya | Director: Alexandros Konstantaras

Fundi-Mentals (2015)

Kenya | Director: Alexandros Konstantaras

Synopsis:

(House of Lungula): Rated 18+ by the Kenya film regulation body, House of Lungula is the story of Harrison (Gerald Langiri), an overworked and underpaid man on the search for money to pay dowry. When he finds himself with an opportunity to access his boss' house (The House of Lungula – Lungula was the Sheng word for sex in 2015) while he's away on holiday, he decides to rent out the house to his friend who is looking for a place to spend the day with a girl he has met. But a few more people are planning to use the house on that same day, and mostly for the same purpose, leading to an uncomfortable day for all.

Synopsis:

(Fundi-Mentals): Joseph (Gerald Langiri) and his equally inept assistant Moses (Charlie Karumi) consider themselves to be the finest electrical and plumbing fundis (fundi: expert/craftsman/general fixer) in the little town of Kinoo until a new and bigger company comes into town and throws them out of business and they have to re-invent themselves as new types of fundis offering the best 'sexpress' services to the women of Kinoo.

Study:

These two 18+ rated films were the most iconic of Historia Films productions, which was a renaming of G2 films, a film company which experimented with film distribution through deals with Nakumatt, the biggest retail chain in East Africa at their time. Alexandros Konstantaras and Lizz Njagah were the main architects of these productions before they moved to and settled in Greece. Their commercial approach was helped by close friendships with Kenyan celebrities. Alex was able to cast famous actors such as Ian Mbugua, Sarah Hassan and Gerald Langiri in his films, and his connections spread word about his productions across the nation. But his films were shown to adults only, banned and have quickly been forgotten, while the lack of film distribution and exhibition infrastructure has limited the films' audiences to the few who watched them when they were screened on release. Studying these films helps us to discover the attempt by Kenyans and international filmmakers to commercialise local cinema through the use of famous actors. Former video on demand platform BuniTV released House of Lungula for a brief period in 2014.

Topics:

Authorship; audiences; form and narrative; genre; star studies; representation of gender and sexuality; environmental contexts of cinema; mainstream film; exhibition; film distribution.

Availability:

Showmax/Contact filmmakers Lizz Njagah and Alex Konstantaras

Nairobi Half-Life (2012)

Kenya, Germany | Director: David Gitonga

Kati Kati (2016)

Kenya, Germany | Director: Mbithi Masya

Supa Modo (2018)

Kenya, Germany | Director: Likarion Wainaina

Synopsis:

(Nairobi Half-Life): A young dreamer from upcountry Kenya travels to Nairobi to start a career as an actor. When he is robbed of all his money and belongings and left alone in a city where he doesn't know anyone, he meets and forms a friendship with a city crook who introduces him to the world of crime puts his dream of becoming an actor in great jeopardy.

Synopsis:

(Kati Kati): Kaleche, a young woman with no memory of anything, wakes up in a strange place and has to try to figure out how she got there. When she inadvertently finds a mysterious resort nearby and gets in, she meets the inhabitants who claim that they are all dead and are waiting to pass on to the next stage of their journey.

Synopsis:

(Supa Modo): A clever girl with a terminal illness is shunted out to her rural village to spend the rest of her doomed life there, but her dreams of being a superhero stay with her, and the entire village devises a plot that will make this dream come to pass.

Study:

These films will help discuss the exportability of Kenyan films and Kenyan characters. While Kenyan actors such as Lupita Nyong'o and Benjamin Onyango have crossed borders to international markets, there's still much to see in regards to the export of films, characters and storylines made in Kenya. German Tom Tykwer is the common denominator in all these films, and his involvement through his organization, One Fine Day, has transformed the business of filmmaking in East Africa considerably. Tykwer, alongside another entrepreneur, Ginger Wilson, have mastered the art of co-production finance and brought together talented Kenyan filmmakers to work on daring projects. Nairobi Half-Life is highly regarded as the film that proved to local filmmakers that they did not have to make their films in English or to mimic Hollywood or anyone else. Its relative success with the audiences and in reach outside Kenya was crucial to the reversal of attitude toward local language films. Many films after that have taken to sheng and other local ways of speaking as primary means of dialogue. But the presence of Tykwer has always been a factor that prevents Kenyans from claiming ownership and pride in the film. These films will help us study co-productions, finance, language in cinema, among other key discussion points.

Topics:

Co-production; film finance; authorship; language and culture; themes in Kenyan cinema; social class; crime; festival circuit.

Availability:

One Fine Day Online Store <https://www.ofdf.shop/>

Mo And Me (2006)

Kenya | Director: Roger Mills, Murad Rayani

Silas (2017)

Kenya, South Africa, Canada | Director: Hawa Essuman, Anjali Nayar

Synopsis:

(Mo and Me): Salim Amin, the son of famous photojournalist Mohamed "Mo" Amin, takes a trip to tell the story of his father across continents. This documentary shows contrasting perspectives of the respected photojournalist, depicting him as an unbending father and professional whose hunger for "the story" propels him to professional heights, sometimes at the expense of those he loves.

Synopsis:

(Silas): The story of activist Silas Siakor and a network of citizen reporters, who swiftly respond to a serious land-grabbing in Liberia by traveling from village to village armed with mobile phones and cameras and working with local communities to document the government-approved pillaging of the country's natural resources.

Study:

Documentary filmmaking has gained a new lease of life through Judy Kibinge's Eastern African documentary fund, DocuBox, addressing an apparent previous avoidance by Kenyan filmmakers to produce films that speak about major issues, especially when they touch on the government and politics (Kinyanjui 2014). What we have here, and the 2019 documentary Softie about activist Boniface Mwangi, is a new commitment to celebrate activists and people who stand up to and speak against injustice and oppression.

Topics:

Activism; co-production; transnational cinema; documentary filmmaking; politics

Availability:

Contact author

Further Possible Studies

In discussing Kenya screen worlds, it is impossible to ignore short films, which comprise a huge portion of what is produced in Kenya annually. Although shorts worldwide are mostly used for portfolio reasons and as calling cards, they have been made by local filmmakers for commercial purposes, being monetized on YouTube and on platforms such as Viusasa. Some key short films which have stood out over the years include Wanuri Kahiu's *Pumzi* (2009), Katja Benrath's *Watu Wote* (2017), Manu Maina's *Angles of My Face* (2015), Njue Kevin's *Intellectual Scum* (2015) and Nathan Collet's *Kibera Kid* (2006).

Machawood festival winner 'Wakamba Forever', a parody of the popular blockbuster 'Black Panther' popularized the Machawood preference of having films on YouTube for free before narrative features such as 'Plan B' and 'You Again' took it up as a business model.

There are also unconventional and protest films which attempt to speak truth to power. Even though they are fictional tales, they take a documentary approach and tell their stories in very accessible ways to the local audience. Nick Reding's *Ni Sisi* (2013) and Jim Chuchu's *Stories of Our Lives* (2014) (available on Vimeo) are examples of these.

Nyasha Kadandara's short virtual reality documentary *Le Lac* (2019) won at Sheffield international documentary film festival in 2019, revealing the changing landscape of film production in Kenya and East Africa.