

Tanzanian Films

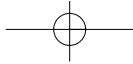
Between innovation & incompetence

VICENSIA SHULE

Introduction

Video film as a genre has made massive strides in Tanzania during the past decade as in other parts of the world. Technological advancement has played a major role in such transformation which has led to the film industry in Tanzania receiving substantial applause but also criticism from various stakeholders for its lack of professionalism compared to Euro-American and Asian films. The purpose of this article is to explore and analyse the current patterns of video-film production in Tanzania and the challenges it faces. With a focus on current practice, this article deals with some of the compliments and criticisms which film producers face. It briefly reviews the historical background to the film industry in Tanzania, current practice, as well as the level of audience participation in the produced films. The case study examples have been influenced by the author's personal involvement in the film production processes in Tanzania, but also refer to the produced films which can be found in the film shops and among street vendors. For this article, Tanzanian films are broadly conceptualized to include those produced by Tanzanians and/or in collaboration with Tanzanians describing Tanzanian lifestyles, issues and politics. When the phrase video film industry is used it represents what Mwakalinga (2010: 16) defined as 'local, popular, privately funded and commercially based industry that has been criticized for its orientation towards commercialisation and its apolitical stance as compared to African cinema'.

Historically, the film industry in Tanzania can be traced back to the 1930s when British colonial administration used films for literacy, entertainment and propaganda. Most of these films were imported from abroad including America, Britain and India. Later in the 1950s Tanganyika's governor Sir Edward Twining introduced a project to use Africans in making their own films in Kiswahili. This was done in collaboration with African Film Production of South Africa. Before the project was abandoned due to independence upheavals, more than ten films were already produced. These included *Chalo Amerudi* (Chalo Has Come Back), *Wageni Wema* (Kind Guests), *Ali Mjanja* (Cunning Ali), *Dawa ya Mapenzi* (Love Portion), *Meli Inakwenda* (The Boat is



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Sailing), *Mhogo Mchungu* (Bitter Cassava) and others (Smith 1989: 391). Most of these were based on morality tales and were created to 'civilize' Africans through the practice of good manners.

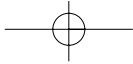
After independence in 1961, film production was not high on the national agenda until 1968 when the Tanzanian government created Tanzania Film Company (TFC). TFC aimed at producing and distributing films for locals (Smith 1989:392). This coincided with the adoption of *Ujamaa* (African Socialism) through the Arusha Declaration of 1967 that aimed at liberating people from neocolonialism. The produced films were supposed to propagate *Ujamaa* and nation building. Films produced with such an aim include *Fimbo ya Mnyonge* (A Poor Person's Salvation) 1976 and its sequel, *Yombayomba* (1985) and *Wimbo wa Mianzi* (The Song of Bamboo 1983) a Tanzanian/Dutch co-production focusing on irrigation using bamboo conduits.

Other productions and co-productions in the 1980s and 90s were *Arusi ya Mariamu* (Mariamu's Wedding 1984), *Mama Tumaini* (A Woman of Hope 1986) and *Maangamizi* (The Ancient One 1995-2001). These used either 35mm or 16 mm technology and focused on issues of social awareness, education or politics.

After the introduction of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) under World Bank (WB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF) conditions in 1980s, *Ujamaa* ideology began to be replaced by capitalism. Trade liberalisation gave room for more importation of foreign movies from Hollywood (USA), Bollywood (India) and Nollywood (Nigeria). Technological advancement enabled the young, amateurs and people with low budgets to produce films using video cameras. This socio-political transition gave rise to the massive production of commercially motivated video-films in Tanzania. Most of the stories and themes used to produce these video-films are market oriented, targeting audiences with commercially viable topics such as love, witchcraft, modern religions, fashion and to a lesser extent political issues. The choice of such themes can be argued to be in line with constructivist communication theory which describes how humans can develop knowledge and meaning from their experiences. This implies that the audience influences the themes and expectations of video productions.

Most of the films are geared towards creating an avenue for giving audiences a chance to reflect on social issues. To give a personal experience, in November 2010, I was travelling by Dar Express bus from Moshi to Dar es Salaam. In the bus they played a film known as *14 Days* written by Jacob Stephen and directed by Adam Kuambiana. The film describes a confrontation between a couple, Michael and Irene. Out of jealousy towards his wife, Michael insults and beats his wife Irene in what he claims to be a way of disciplining her. Irene, understanding her gender-based oppression resists Michael's violence by demanding a divorce. Michael decides to look for advice so that he can rescue his marriage, upon which a friend gives him fourteen days' activities to win back Irene's heart. In the end, Michael manages to stabilize the relationship.

In one of the scenes in *14 Days*, Michael abuses Irene by saying that Irene's relatives think his responsibility is to take care of her extended family ... Michael uses the phrase 'Kwa Sadala' to mean cheap or easy life in reference to



Irene's relatives. Actually Kwa Sadala is a steep section of the Moshi-Arusha road and the local reference made the whole bus – which was quiet for some time – burst into laughter. This shows how the film appeals to its subaltern target audience through the use of local references.

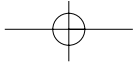
This reaction from the audience can be explained from different perspectives. First there were some audience members who related the scenario to their relatives who depend on them. Secondly, it can be described as a situation whereby those relatives (amongst the audience) reflect on their dependence. Lastly, those who know the place, Kwa Sadala, managed to relate the literal meaning of the phrase – slope – with their difficult experiences. Such an example from *14 Days* shows clearly that film reflects the norms and traditions of society and to some extent exposes complex situations and scenarios which gives the audience opportunity for self reflection. This audience participation is quite different from the peak of *Ujamaa* in the 1970s where top-down political statements and leaders' speeches were mostly used to create film themes for propaganda purposes.

The use of Kiswahili language has helped to reach a wide audience and to showcase Tanzanian films as unique in the region and abroad. One can argue that Kiswahili as a language used mainly by Tanzanian film makers has created dual functionality. On the one hand the national language has managed to reach more Kiswahili speakers. On the other hand, the films being distributed in neighbouring countries like Rwanda, Burundi, Kenya, Malawi, Uganda, Mozambique, and Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), have spread the language across borders. Kiswahili being a national identity, Kiswahili films have contributed immensely to the signification of such African identity, a goal which African film-makers have aimed at since the 1960s.

The pattern of film distribution has changed in recent years. Previously Tanzanian films were for domestic consumption or Kiswahili speakers. They were also regarded as poor films in terms of picture and sound, compared to Hollywood and even Bollywood films. With technological advancement and the shared experience from the audience, the perception has changed. Films are now accompanied with English subtitles which imply that the film makers have discovered a potential Anglophone audience which distributors are now targeting. Perhaps in the future they will put French or even Chinese subtitles. It should be noted that due to historical reasons, especially colonialism, English for the majority of Tanzanians is still considered an elite language. Hence, by having English subtitles, code mixing and code switching done by characters in the film, implies that Tanzanian films have now crossed the border to reach neighbouring countries and most importantly to try to fill the gap between the 'elites' and non-elites of Tanzania.

Challenges unfold: *Kasri la Wageni*

On 7 March 2010, I received a call from two colleagues with whom I have worked in various film productions since 2005. This time they wanted to produce the script that I wrote in 2005 known as *Kasri la Wageni*, which



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literally means visitors' mansion or palace. *Kasri la Wageni* dramatises the story of Tonga, a young girl from Ngagao village who escapes female genital mutilation and forced marriage. She is welcomed in the convent and later she becomes a nun. She experiences a lot of convent politics such as hate, jealousy and even sexual abuse. At last Tonga is chased away from the convent for failing to abide by its rules and principles, an experience that makes her realise that oppression in the village and the convent was almost the same.

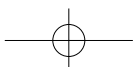
Even though it was a 'brilliant' idea to produce the film, I was not really comfortable about accepting the offer. There were many reasons, the major being that perhaps my ideology had shifted from where it was in 2005. I was also faced by the challenge that the industry in Tanzania was 'condemned' for lacking professionalism in film making, resulting in films with weak form and content. But I was comforted by the fact that I would be able to demonstrate my thoughts from the six years prior to writing the script.

After thinking for some time I accepted the 'offer' – as I would call it – under the condition that no changes would be made since I didn't have time for any rewrites, the backers proposed that I should be a producer in the real sense of providing financial support to the production. This was another challenge as I was not ready to invest in such a project. I was not sure how the film would do in terms of marketing and distribution. On the other hand, I believed that it could be a learning experience to see how the industry was performing. The decision was also complemented by the fact that academic studies should contribute to the current practice of film making in Tanzania. So I decided to take the risk. Two colleagues prepared for the production, one as a director and the other as a camera operator, and from there the production began. The process involved casting, script distribution, location identification, recording and finally editing. The recording was scheduled according to the location in the script, i.e. scenes which used similar locations were shot together. Finally, the film was completed in 2011 ready for distribution.

Addressing incompetence to hallmark complements

The production of *Kasri la Wageni* took a route similar to many video films in Tanzania. Such films are often received by an audience with two different opinions: with compliments or with criticisms of incompetence. Taking *Kasri ya Wageni* as a case study, I can argue that there are many multifaceted and underlying factors for what is seen today in the Tanzanian film industry. In order to analyse the production scenario which bring these challenges one has to focus on three major areas: artistic (acting, directing, language, mise en scène), technical (sound, light and editing) and managerial (copyright, marketing and distribution), factors which in totality must complement each other.

The current acting in films shows the maturity of amateurs compared to the video-films produced in the early 2000s. Storylines have begun to acknowledge the existence of artists who 'think outside the box'. Apart from such improvement in the production of *Kasri la Wageni*, acting was not that



easy for all actors. Most actors are amateurs or semi professionals, and the director has to find ways of dealing with such actors. For example it was difficult for some actors who were used to improvisation to use scripts and, as a result, they failed to perform to the director's expectations. Since they also possess inadequate acting skills, it became a challenge even to apply such techniques as Stanislavski's 'emotional recall'.

During the production of *Kasri la Wageni* one of the main characters almost decided give up acting as she believed it was too difficult. This happened when she was supposed to deliver several takes in the middle of the night and she complained of being tired. If this was a trained actor, perhaps she would have had a different way of understanding acting as a job in its fullest right. This challenge clearly shows that there is a need to mainstream arts subjects in the Tanzanian education system from primary to secondary schools especially performing arts. This would enable young people who are fond of the industry to understand the dimension not only for film production but also as a creative industry which provides both income and employment opportunities.

The other challenge is the influence of theatre and radio drama acting on film. Most actors are not in a position to differentiate between such 'media'. As a result they overact by enlarging gestures and raising their voices in front of the camera, a style described by some audience members as oracle-speech acting. Regardless of the script directives, actors try to speak as if they are addressing a public rally, whereas they are conversing with other characters in the scene. This clearly shows the influence of community theatre or Theatre for Development (TfD) in film as in most cases actors on the stage have to address the audience through a process of audience participation or involvement. In order to improve acting in Tanzanian films, it is important to provide in-service training for practising actors. Such training, which can be done during the production or in separate sessions, should focus on the differentiation between radio drama, theatre and film acting, and can be used to raise awareness of acting as a viable job, which should be done professionally. Providing such basic knowledge, gives room for improvement, especially for practising actors who cannot fit in the formal Tanzanian education system.

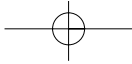
Directing for film is not an easy task as one has to be conversant with both artistic and technical elements of the production. Since directors in Tanzania usually have a theatre background, they are more conversant with community theatre or Theatre for Development techniques and they fail to remember that in addition to having actors on the scene, light and sound need to be directed too. Most of the time, light is used purely for illuminating the scene rather than creatively. This makes many of the films look too bright, with tasteless top-lighting and no atmosphere. Sound is another problematic area. Directors concentrate purely on the audibility of the actors' dialogues, without considering the camera work or editing; as a result, the sound tone and the shot often do not match. For example an actor can be seen in a two-shot but the tone comes out as if s/he is in an open space giving a speech. Thus directors too have to go through training to update themselves with the basics of film production and modern digital techniques.

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Another problem is the emergence of some sort of 'djing'. By djing I refer to the situation where in post-production the film is augmented with heavy music which sometimes overrides the characters' dialogue. The music which accompanies film tends not to complement the theme mood or *mise en scène* but merely to prolong the scene. This can be clearly noticed in some films such as *Chanzo ni Mama 1&2* (Mother is the Cause) where there are scenes in which a character is captured walking in a single, long, non-functional take accompanied by music.

The issue of prolonged films points to the phenomenon current in the Tanzanian market: as with Nigerian videos, most films are in parts one, two and even three. These are not sequels but films produced together then separated during editing. This issue of having film in more than one part has been advocated to be a counter solution to piracy. Producers of such films argue that having a film in more than one part makes it easy to solve piracy problems as one work can be sold for the price of two; distributors have a similar argument, though they are also interested in the financial gains. So the use of music 'djing' is one of the easiest ways to prolong the film during editing to get two or three out of one slim script. Even though the language is controlled by the script, in most cases when the director allows actors to add their creativity they prefer to code switch between Kiswahili and English. The motive behind code mixing is unclear, whether it is to show the class of the participants, as English is presumed to be an upper class language, or whether it is a realistic reflection of the way Tanzanians speak nowadays. Another reason could be the influence of English on Tanzanian actors. If the script was in English perhaps they had to understand it first in Kiswahili then act in English, so, due to insufficient English vocabulary, they opt to use code switching. On one occasion I heard one person complaining after seeing actors code mixing. He questioned, "What is the logic of using English in Kiswahili dialogue? Is it to add emphasis?" However, code switching can be also argued to be a strategy to capture both English and Kiswahili speakers within Tanzania and across the borders. On the same language issue, most of the produced films, like *The Cold Wind*, *14 Days*, *Family Disaster*, *Girlfriend*, *Dilemma*, and *Uncle JJ*, use English titles while the dialogue is mostly in Kiswahili, probably because an English title upgrades a film's status in the market. The scenery in many Tanzanian films depicts exaggerated wealth, often contradicting the storyline which necessitates a background of poverty. It is clear that these video films are trying to appeal to a realism which does not necessarily reflect the characters' profiles. Characters' clothes used in the film often seem to advertise new fashions in the market rather than plausibly reflecting the class to which characters belong. I recommend that the director, costume and props designer thoroughly analyse the script. Such collaboration would not only complement the *mise en scène* but also add value to the film's themes.

Since these films often have a pedagogic function, the audience usually debate and compare their lives with those of the actors. Actors as well as producers have been criticised for failing to reflect social reality. At this point the audience has crossed the border of seeing these films as fiction rather con-

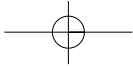


sidering them as real representation of their lives. The editing of these films is done using available software. The common ones include *Adobe Premiere Pro*, *Final Cut Pro* and *Avid* which are considered to be professional editing software, while *Pinnacle* and *Imovie* are used by amateur editors as they are for home use. By the use of such software, editing has become a relatively easy job. This software provides various options, and enables editors to do image manipulation, such as through the use of colour filters. In *Mahabuba (Lover/Darling)*, for example, the editor has used a yellow colour filter from the beginning to the end of the film. In day scenes it tends to match and bring the sense of coolness. The challenge has been how to balance between day and night scenes versus interior and exterior scenes. It could be possible to select some scenes which would fit within a yellow filter, rather than making the whole film look yellowish. Regardless of such minor challenges of improper use of filters, *Mahabuba*, directed by John Kallage, is considered one of the best films produced in 2008.

Despite the general popularity of Tanzanian films, cover designs and titles have received criticism. From the audience perspective, it is important to see in the film what has been reflected on the cover, since the latter, along with the title is what makes most of the audience buy or watch a film. But what has been observed is the extreme beautification of characters on the cover. The way characters are seen in the films do not match the artwork. For example in *The Cold Wind*, Daniel is seen differently from the way he appears in the film, especially in his skin complexion. On the cover he is seen as a lighter person compared to the reality. Regardless of its position as a selling point and device, a cover should at least be able to reflect the story and characters of the film.

The production process has developed what I can refer to as multiple responsibilities. This is the situation where participants of the film carry out both technical and artistic duties, even managerial in some cases. Although the levels of such multiplicity differ, the highest has been between the directors as the main characters. For example in the film *Kwa Heshima ya Penzi (In the Respect of Love)*, the director, Single Mtambalike, also plays Dominic, the main character of the film. Likewise in the *The Cold Wind*, the director, Vincent Kigosi, plays Daniel, also the main character, while in *Chanzo ni Mama 1&2*, the director, Suzan Lewis, doubles up as Mama (mother of the main character). Such multiple responsibilities make films lack directorial focus and the story remains undeveloped. Film actors sometimes seem to be 'jack of all trades', i.e. preaching instead of talking as they assume both the role of the director and the star of the films.

'Starism' is another problem in Tanzanian films as it reduces the motivation which a character can have when cast to play a certain role. The so-called stars/directors/main characters opt in the film for lifestyles to which they aspire. This means if they adore rich people, they would prefer to act as rich in most of the films they produce. Since it is nearly impossible to convince actors/directors/producers to decentralise their powers, it is important to bring to the fore the technical and artistic challenges of multiple roles in the film. This can not only be addressed by film critics but also through workshop training.



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There have been complaints from various viewers that Tanzanian films are half cooked. This is supported by the fact that artists produce too many films within a short period of time and fail to provide quality. In responding to such challenge, one of the famous actors in Tanzania, Vincent Kigosi, argued that the film industry does not encourage production of high quality films. Film producers have no capital so they are forced to produce numerous films within a short period of time in order to survive. He emphasised that the film industry in Tanzania is different from Hollywood where famous actors are involved in big budget films, creating profit margins so high they can survive by producing one film in a year (Kigosi, 2010). Kigosi might have a point but still there are issues to query. Most of the produced films are too short and are in one, two or even three parts. This is also cheating customers as they buy one film for the price of two or three. This might also start to motivate buyers to buy pirated cheap films. Perhaps the best solution could be to mobilise film stakeholders to pressurise the Tanzania Revenue Authority (TRA) to provide tax stamps so that they can effectively collect taxes and therefore help to minimise piracy. Collecting taxes from film would allow producers/distributors to know their contribution to the national economy and hence request for the formalisation of the industry.

Some of the managerial challenges include marketing and distribution, whereby there are no defined distribution channels. This means that one cannot trace easily how many films are sold and where. There is no such tracking as most of the distributors buy films, pay a lump sum to the producers and remain with total distribution rights. The other challenge is political neglect, which has left the industry unrecognised for the whole decade. There is no tracking or economic support for the industry. A claim that the industry is in its infancy and has to be nurtured is political propaganda which needs thorough investigation. I would argue that the industry is not at the infant stage because it has survived the political and economic shifts from socialism to capitalism and from nationalism to neoliberalism. It has also survived donor funding and foreign aid interference to some extent as compared to theatre which has arguably been overwhelmed by donors (Shule 2010). Therefore the model which the film industry in Tanzania has pursued needs thorough study to capitalise on the most sustainable and creative practices.

The victory ahead

Regardless of the challenges which face the Tanzanian film industry, there are remarkable improvements. Take for example the film *14 Days* (Stephen 2010). One can realise the improvement in terms of story development, mise en scène, sound, acting even editing and distribution of the final piece. The director has managed to centre the whole story between two people, Michael and his wife Irene. This shows clearly that it is possible to have few characters and still produce a gripping film. In terms of acting Jacob Stephen has strikingly presented the character Michael to perfection. The combination of his voice,

movements and actions stimulates the story from the beginning to the end. Perhaps this is because he is the one who provided the story and hence is emotionally attached to it and to the character Michael.

With such history and current improvement in the production of films in Tanzania, criticism of film makers should be muted. Most of them are working purely from their own creativity and observation. They have not received professional training and what they produce seems to be above average for amateurs.

The issue of training and education of artists is deeply rooted in the history of Tanzania. The education policies have excluded art training in primary and secondary schools for more than four decades. It was not until 2008 that theatre and other performing arts were included in secondary schools' syllabus as examinable subjects. Therefore acting and film training were regarded as a privilege for the selected few who managed to join a university and college or were trained abroad. On the other hand, these film makers receive no support from the state or foreign donors. Hence what they produce at artistic, technical and managerial levels is individually developed and market supported. Lack of foreign aid and state support could even be seen as a 'blessing' as the producers have artistic freedom as long as their audience is satisfied.

Apart from the challenges, the major success of Tanzanian film industry is to minimise the number of imported films from abroad. Nollywood films were among the first African films to flood the film market in Tanzania in the 1990s, which is not the case today. Since most Tanzanian films are not shown in movie theatres, the major income for film makers has been through social support from the citizens who buy films. Regardless of such achievement, piracy has remained one of the biggest challenges that needs to be addressed from a regulatory perspective. Lack of support from the Tanzania Revenue Authority (TRA), which could discourage counterfeit goods, has contributed much to the under-development of the film industry.

While there are unsolved outcries about piracy and copyright infringement, in August 2010 the National Art Council of Tanzania (BASATA) launched four major umbrella federations to coordinate artistic works and activities in Tanzania. One of them is the Film Federation of Tanzania. The major objective of this federation is to unite and coordinate film productions in Tanzania. The federation is expected to negotiate for artists' rights and also provide useful information on the role and challenges of the industry in Tanzania. To fulfil those objectives, the federation needs more support from various sectors such as business organisations, legal agencies and revenue authorities as most of the film industry challenges require a multifaceted approach to bolster expertise and professionalism.

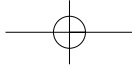
However, it is very early to comment on the input which the federation will add to the film industry, considering that it is dominated by amateurs. Perhaps the film industries should start by facing challenges from the audiences' perspective rather than the film makers'. These include production improvement, quality assurance, piracy control and adherence to professionalism. As this analysis reflects, film industry in Tanzania beyond the 2000s suggests tremen-

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dous progress as compared to the 1980s. This shows that commercialisation, one of the neoliberal policies, has managed to shape the industry to sustain itself based on the market rather than depending on the state or foreign donors. Being free from the state allows Tanzanian film makers to focus on the market and the audience. This situation is quite different from the African cinema movement of the 1960s which was based on the ideology of Pan Africanism (Mwakalinga, 2010: 16). Even though there is no reliable inventory of the number of films produced between 2000 and the present, the number of films seen in the streets suggest much progress in quantity and, in a few cases, quality.

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