

BUILDING A SELF-SUSTAINING, INDIGENOUS FILM INDUSTRY IN KENYA

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A study on behalf of the World Story Organization

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The Background of this Study

In August of 2008, the World Story Organization (WSO) met with the Kenya Film Commission to discuss the current state of the Kenyan film industry, specifically regarding local productions indigenous to Kenya (as opposed to external production companies that use Kenya as a backdrop and setting). WSO, founded in April of 2008 as a non-profit organization, seeks to provide filmmaking and storytelling education for developing film industries around the world.

As part of its partnership with the Kenya Film Commission, WSO plans to deliver screenwriting and production workshops in Nairobi, Kenya in 2009. The hope is that these pilot courses will lay the foundation for a School of Excellence in Film Production in Kenya. This school would offer a one-year program in film production for Kenyans, by Kenyans. Currently no such film school program exists in all of East Africa.

The challenges that face building a self-sustaining, indigenous film industry in Kenya are varied and numerous. The purpose of this study is to address these challenges and define the role that the World Story Organization hopes to fill in accomplishing this goal.

A Brief History of Film in Kenya

Film in Kenya, until recently, has been marked by external film industries using Kenya as a location to tell their own stories. According to the Kenya Film Commission's website (2008), the first Hollywood productions in Kenya came in the 1930s, *African Holiday*, *Stanley and Livingstone*, and *Trader Horn* among them. Memorable adventure films like *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*, *King Solomon's Mines*, and *Mogambo* reached wider audiences in the 1950s and showcased Hollywood stars on wild adventures in the rugged Kenyan terrain. In 1981, the BBC produced a widely acclaimed 7-part television miniseries based on the life of Elspeth Huxley, and her white settler memoir, *The Flame Trees of Thika*.

But 1985's *Out of Africa*, the Meryl Streep and Robert Redford expatriate drama based on the life of Danish citizen, Karen Blixen, was a turning point for films made in Kenya. While not the first departure from the adventure-safari film so commonly made in Kenya, *Out of Africa* brought worldwide attention to Kenya by winning Best Picture at the Academy Awards. *Out of Africa* showed that Kenya could also be a beautiful setting for dramatic films. Recent films, such as *Nowhere In Africa*, the German film that won the 2003 Academy Award winner for Best Foreign Language Film, and *The Constant Gardener*, based on the John le Carré novel, have been successful Kenya-based films despite the fact that they belie the action-adventure genre.

The films discussed thus far have all been foreign productions using Kenya as the landscape to produce their own stories, with Kenya merely being a setting for a prohibitive Western or “settler” story. What of Kenyan films made by Kenyans, telling Kenyan stories? To date, there have been no major Kenyan films produced that have made a mark on global audiences. Other than wildlife films, such as those shot by National Geographic, Discovery Channel, or BBC, indigenous film in Kenya has been confined to selected Kenyan audiences without international release.

At best, a major Kenyan production has a premiere in cinemas around Nairobi before going direct-to-video for sale on the streets. Recently, *Mob Doc*, a Kenyan comedy from Vivid Features, secured a 3-week theatrical run in NuMetro Cinemas, the largest theater chain in Kenya with 18 screens. After playing in theaters it was sold on DVD for 100 Kenyan shillings, roughly \$1.50 (Micheni, 2008).

Kenyan filmmakers who are on the rise hope to break down the wall preventing Kenyan films from being shown and celebrated beyond Kenyan borders. In 2007 the short film *Kibera Kid* showcased local Kenyan talent in film festivals around the world, winning seven awards.

Kibera Kid is the story of a street boy growing up in Kibera, Kenya's largest slum populated by over one million people, who must choose between gang life and redemption. The success of *Kibera Kid* has inspired a feature film version, currently in production by the same filmmakers (Oladipo, 2007).

Thus, the Kenyan film industry is still finding its way. Njeri Kihang'ah (2008), entertainment writer for the *Daily Nation*, a leading national Kenyan newspaper, addressed the current state of film in Kenya:

Kenya has played home to documentaries and short films rather than feature films...It's hard to believe that despite having a 60-year exposure to location scouts, we still lag behind Egypt, South Africa, and of course Nigeria in film production. (para. 7)

Godfrey Ojiambo, one of the stars of *Kibera Kid*, discussed his frustration about this lack of progress in Kenyan cinema in an article by Arno Kopecky (2007):

The industry is not rising as fast as we hoped it would. For a long time it was just about money, about how fast producers could make a buck. Corruption was a problem...People are starting to realize it's not just about money, it's about quality. (para. 24)

In order for the indigenous film industry in Kenya to produce quality films worthy of a global audience, there are a number of educational, technological, and commercial concerns that need to be addressed. What follows in this study is an exploration of seven challenges facing the building of a self-sustaining, indigenous film industry in Kenya, based on discussions with the Kenya Film Commission and research into the current state of the industry. This list is by no means meant to be exhaustive:

1. Lack of film education.
2. Maintaining an indigenous, Kenyan voice.

3. Telling a story creatively and effectively.
4. Organization of above-the-line and below-the-line talent.
5. Finding funding, financial backers.
6. Technology.
7. Finding an audience.

Challenge 1: Lack of Film Education

Currently in Kenya there are no film schools to offer rigorous training in film production.

Tichi Sitati of the Kenya Film Commission surveyed the current offerings at universities:

We have schools like Daystar and the University of Nairobi. They teach what we call communication courses. They teach media, but concentrate heavily on journalism. They don't have film lecturers. We want people to know more about the art of film. Don't teach me journalism and camera work and expect me to translate that into a film. (Tichi Sitati, personal communication, August 20, 2008)

A few programs in Nairobi offer film production workshops; Wilnag and Magenta are two such programs. They offer one or two training sessions, but nothing thorough (Sitati, 2008). These programs are akin to the “Learn Filmmaking In Two Weeks!” crash courses that advertise in magazines in the United States.

What Kenya lacks is a school that concentrates on film. The only real option for a Kenyan who wants to truly study film is to leave the country for a film school on the African continent, such as in South Africa or Egypt, or overseas. The Kenya Film Commission recognizes this. “The commission is in the process of trying to set up a School of Excellence for film. We’ve talked to professors in the States about sharing curriculum with us” (Tichi Sitati, personal communication, August 20, 2008).

One film professor, Dr. Mary Beth Fielder, from the University of Southern California, recently came to Kenya and held training sessions with youth from the Kibera slum. “They were made to sit and critique films and write their own scripts. The organization, how the youth were trained, what they gained, was excellent” (Tichi Sitati, personal communication, August 20, 2008). The students who participated have since been involved in the scriptwriting process for the feature film adaptation of *Kibera Kid*.

Dr. Fielder was onto something by bringing such focused film education to Kenya. One of the ways to overcome the challenges facing the Kenyan film industry is to have willing and able educators share their film education with Kenyans. These Kenyans can then share their experience and achievements with others, which will, over time, build up the first generation of schooled filmmakers. It is only a matter of time.

Challenge 2: Maintaining an Indigenous, Kenyan voice

Films coming out of Kenya will inevitably reflect the life, culture, and values of Kenya. Louis Giannetti (2008) explained the essence of national cinema in his book, *Understanding Movies*. “Every nation has a characteristic way of looking at life, a set of values that is typical of a given culture. The same can be said of their movies” (p. 465). In contrast to American cinema, “Third World films tend to be preoccupied with issues such as neocolonialism, underdevelopment, the oppression of women, and especially poverty” (p. 467). The same can be said of films in Kenya, and *Kibera Kid* serves as a prime example.

Pramaggiore and Wallis (2006) would classify Kenyan cinema as Third Cinema, in “opposition to the First Cinema (commercial and industrial Hollywood) and Second Cinema (the international, author-driven art cinema)” (p. 312). Pramaggiore and Wallis also outlined characteristics of Third Cinema:

Characters	Narrative	Visual Style and Sound	Mode of Production
focus is on collective experience, whether represented through an individual or group	revolutionary stories that resonate at personal social levels	location shooting; non-professional actors; many adopt documentary techniques, others use indigenous art traditions	government-supported, independent, and artisanal productions; many varied national contexts

(p. 314)

In her review of *Symbolic Narratives/African Film: Audiences, Theory and the Moving Image*, Isabel Balseiro (2002) further characterized the unique qualities of emergent African cinema:

African cinema organically grows out of African reality; as such, its primary viewers need to be those who experience it. While this does not translate into the negation of an international market, it firmly grounds cinematic practice in Africa to an African viewing public. Since most African countries lack legislation and rules of practice for their film industry, filmmakers find themselves in a tight spot to finance their work, let alone distribute their films. (para. 3)

Riverwood is the center of indigenous filmmaking in Kenya, named so because it thrives on River Road in Nairobi, Kenya – a neighborhood that embodies the lively, often boisterous, even violent urban life in Africa. As Njeri Kihang'ah (2008) explained in citing Riverwood in his article, *Lights, Camera, Action!*:

Riverwood is famed for its racy movies that sell faster than they can be pirated in this one stop-shop of a street...In Nairobi's River Road, they can shoot a movie in a day, edit it in the next one, and release it into the market by sunset, making lots of money in spite of the sloppy product. (p. 2)

There is currently a project underway called “Riverwood 20” that aims to upgrade the skills of Riverwood actors and producers in order to enhance the business element of filmmaking, as well as capture the interest of Kenyans around the world (Kihang'ah, 2008). “Riverwood 20” was initiated by international movie producers Charles Liburd, Leon Coetzer, and Jessica Noon, with a goal of creating 20 diverse films from an array of genres (Kihang'ah, 2008). Liburd wanted to combat the typical practice of Riverwood films that “dispense with aesthetics and generally don't think much of the relation between form and content,” motivated by his search for what he deemed a “Kenyan voice” (Kihang'ah, 2008, p. 2).

That Kenyan voice is what will imbue Kenyan films with a unique vantage point when presented to the rest of the world. Therein lies the challenge: incorporating conventions of filmmaking language that First and Second Cinema employ and have infused into Kenyan culture for over 70 years, while at the same time discerning and maintaining this indigenous, Kenyan voice. Mburu Kimani, a director who works in Riverwood, believes westernized storylines “are demeaning [Kenyan] culture” (Kihang'ah, 2008, p. 3). The palimpsest of film production and storytelling theory will have to be taken into account to make room for a new voice, the Kenyan voice, as the film industry matures.

Challenge 3: Telling a Story Creatively and Effectively

One important factor in finding Kenya’s film voice comes in the very first stages of a film: telling the story. Sitati (2008) explained that attention to cinematic storytelling is the key:

That's been our biggest challenge here. We have excellent stories being told, but sitting and formulating a story and creatively bringing out the true aspect of what it is you want to bring out, that's what is lacking. We have excellent cameramen, but it's important to have a creative story. (Tichi Sitati, personal communication, August 20, 2008)

In its mission statement, the World Story Organization places storytelling at the center of its curriculum, emphasizing that the core story of a film must be primary. Scrutiny paid to the story, the key characters, and essential plot of a film is the one way to gauge the quality of film before one even touches a camera. The screenplay holds all the cards at the beginning.

What components comprise an effective screenplay? One could arguably answer this in many ways; memorable characters, new explorations of old themes, and strong moral dilemmas certainly make their mark. Dialogue. Pacing. Properly placed climax and plot resolutions. This list could be expanded indefinitely by reviewing classic screenplay successes across multiple genres and national traditions and charting their unique features. But the key question becomes, what makes a great *Kenyan* screenplay? That is also hard to gauge, but it is clear that aspiring filmmakers need to gain experience reading and practicing the art of the screenplay to be successful.

The Kenya Film Commission hopes to discover – as opposed to prescribing – what a great Kenyan screenplay will encompass as they bring professionals and students together. “Emerging talent, upcoming talent, budding talent – that’s what needs to be tapped and nurtured. After the workshops with Professor Fielder we thought, wait a minute, we should do more of this” (Tichi Sitati, personal communication, August 20, 2008). The success of the screenwriting workshops with Dr. Fielder have certainly made an impression and desire for further storytelling education in film.

As great screenplays begin to come out of Kenya, the need for quality actors, directors, cinematographers, sound technicians, and so on will be paramount in bringing the story to the screen. A great tragedy would be to see excellent screenplays not given the vision and

performances they require to be fully realized. All facets of the production stage deserve a discerning attention to the details of the story.

Assuming the screenplay has been shot under the watchful eye of the director and production crew, fledgling filmmakers face the other end of the production spectrum – where the story really gets put together: the editing. Bordwell and Thompson (2008) in *Film Art* quoted director V. I. Pudovkin, who said that “editing is the basic creative force, by power of which the soulless photographs are engineered into living, cinematographic form” (p. 219). According to Barsam (2007) in *Looking At Movies*, editing is “the basic creative force of cinema” (p. 238). And, as the great Orson Welles concluded, “Editing is not simply one aspect (of cinema). It is *the* aspect” (Barsam, 2007, p. 238).

In short, editing determines how a story is told after it’s been filmed – and this is accomplished by creating meaning between shots. The screenplay may be considered perfectly suited for storytelling in audio-visual terms, but its effectiveness for an audience lies in how that story is told when it is put together in the editing room. As the film industry in Kenya continues to grow, so will the need for editors with a keen idea of storytelling techniques that begin with the screenplay.

Challenge 4: Organization of Above-the-Line and Below-the-Line Talent

In order for a film industry to run as a well-oiled machine, each aspect of the industry needs to be cared for. This includes writers, actors, and directors, commonly referred to as *above-the-line*, all the way down to miscellaneous crew members, extras, costume designers, lighting technicians, caterers, and so on, which are referred to as *below-the-line*.

In American cinema, many facets of the film industry have formed unions and guilds. “Workers in the industry formed labor unions for the standard reasons: they sought worker

representation, equity in pay and working conditions, safety standards, and job security” (Barsam, 2007, p. 355). Today the Screen Actors Guild, Director’s Guild of America, Writer’s Guild of America, American Society of Cinematographers, American Cinema Editors, and others ensure that professionals working in the film industry in the United States work hard on behalf of their members to insure that they are treated fairly.

The Kenyan film industry would be well advised to form for themselves at the very least a guild for writers, actors, and directors. According to the Kenya Film Commission, Kenyan talent above-the-line have what they call associations. “There are three major film associations. Two key organizations are the Kenya National Film Association and the Kenya Film and TV Producers Association. Riverwood has their own association called Third Force” (Tichi Sitati, personal communication, August 20, 2008).

These associations don’t seem to be doing a satisfactory job, however. “Their interests are supposed to be represented from that association, but that doesn't happen. They feel that they are not being cared for. They want to break away and start their own guilds” (Tichi Sitati, personal communication, August 20, 2008). Recently there has been a movement to form an official Screen Actor’s Guild in Kenya beginning in October of 2008 (Sitati, 2008). That would certainly be a crucial step in the right direction for future workers in Kenya’s film industry, and would give these artists a foothold in the industry from the beginning, rather than retrofitting them and their rights to fair wages and working conditions after the fact.

Challenge 5: Finding Funding, Financial Backers

Films around the world feel the sting of a basic fact of filmmaking: it costs money. More often than not, it costs a lot of money, whatever the level of production value. Kenya’s film industry is no different. Producers in Kenya have to raise their own funding through any means

necessary, since there is no studio system in place. Kenyan film producers face the same financial challenges as independent filmmakers around the world.

The Kenya Film Commission has recently set up a film fund, effective 2008. Their goal is to raise 10 million Kenyan shillings (roughly \$150,000) each year to use as funds to produce one film project per year. They hope to identify potential films to produce by having nationwide calls for scripts (Sitati, 2008).

Otherwise, the Kenya Film Commission has recommended producers go to corporations, such as Kenya's cellular giant, Safaricom, the national grocer, Nakumatt, or Coca-Cola. They encourage pitching films and seeing if they go for the idea. "The sad thing is that a lot of corporations in Kenya don't realize the potential of film. Nigerian banks, we've heard, fall all over themselves to sponsor films. Kenya hasn't gotten it the way Nigeria has." (Tichi Sitati, personal communication, August 20, 2008). It seems corporations have found supporting the Kenyan film industry in its infancy to be not yet worth the risk. "We are trying to get Kenyans into that psyche. 'Listen, this thing can get good money for you and give you all the branding you want.'" (Tichi Sitati, personal communication, August 20, 2008).

One local television show has been able to tap into corporate sponsorship, however. *Cobra Squad* is Kenya's attempt at the high-action police show, full of guns, drugs, and explosions. *Cobra Squad* had a secret path to corporate backing, though. Sitati (2008) explained:

Cobra Squad was done by the Government Spokesman, a civil servant. He was very clever. Number one, he is using government resources, such as guns. Because he's in the government, he just picks up the phone. Number two, he uses product placement. He talked to Coca-Cola and Nakumatt and their products are placed in the show since they

sponsor it. It's worked. It's action-packed, and Kenyans are taken in by that. (Tichi Sitati, personal communication, August 20, 2008).

Cobra Squad recently started its second season, so it truly has been a success thus far for sponsors, and with viewers.

Perhaps the success of *Cobra Squad* will show businesses in Kenya that there is indeed a reward for taking a risk in supporting the local film industry. Here's hoping those in Kenya with money to invest will recognize film as an important industry to develop, and that the product will continue to get better through opportunity and practice.

Challenge 6: Technology

One of the greatest beneficiaries of the advancement of technology has been the film industry. Even within the last ten years, the boom of digital technologies has made shooting a film, editing using affordable consumer software, and distributing the movie online through YouTube (or any of the myriad video sharing sites) a relatively cheap and easy method of making a movie and sharing it with the world. Today, digital technologies and fast internet speeds work hand-in-hand to further the reach of a film to greater audiences. While Kenya has access to these latest technologies, it is either very limited or very expensive.

“People are shooting in HD in Kenya. They are moving with the times” (Tichi Sitati, personal communication, August 20, 2008). *Some* people are shooting in HD (high-definition). A consumer HD camera, while available at stores in Kenya, can cost up to twice as much as it sells for in the United States. For high-end productions, the Kenya Film Commission suggests using Kenya Grips, a rental company for film equipment. Another company, Film Studios, houses cranes, dollies, and even a recently added steadicam. The technology is there, but it can be pricey (Sitati, 2008).

Kenya may have access to the latest high-end production equipment, but where it falls behind is in high bandwidth internet access. There are currently initiatives underway to catch Kenya up to the rest of the world's high speeds, but none will be available until late 2009 or 2010 at best (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/TEAMS> and <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/EASSy>). Until then, Kenyans take their time online using dial-up modems or a bogged-down 3G cellular network. It often takes an hour or more to load a 3-minute video on YouTube or a movie trailer at Kenya's current internet speeds.

As digital video technology continues to proliferate throughout Kenya, and with high-speed internet on the horizon, Kenya's future on the technology side of filmmaking looks brighter than it does today. The tools will be available. The real question will lie in if there are Kenyans willing to go through the necessary training to master these tools to the benefit of the industry to produce more quality films. This ties in with the challenge to create more educational opportunities.

Challenge 7: Finding an audience

The final challenge explored in this study focuses on what to do with a film once it has been completed. How does a Kenyan film find an audience, not just in Kenya, but beyond its borders? What distribution methods are available for a Kenyan film? How does a Kenyan film make any money back?

As discussed earlier, a Kenyan film can find theatrical distribution in Kenya. A film may play on six screens around the country at most, though, since most screens are reserved for the latest Hollywood and Indian hits. Six screens in Kenya compared to films that open in the United States on over 2,000 screens underscores the futility of expecting too much from a theatrical run

in Kenya. More often, a Kenyan film will find its audience at home, in the direct-to-video market.

The home video market competition is a fierce one, however. Currently, there is “a flooding of the market with cheap, 20-in-one DVDs mostly from China and Nigeria for as little as 200 Kenyan shillings (about \$3) - the price of *one* local film” (Kihang'ah, 2008, p. 3). A 20-in-one DVD is what it sounds like: 20 hit movies pirated, then compressed enough to squeeze onto one DVD. One DVD may have a collection of 20 science fiction hits from Star Wars to Star Trek. Another DVD may have 20 of the greatest hits of Tom Hanks and Russell Crowe, while another DVD showcases the last 20 Oscar-winning films. When faced with the choice of a single Kenyan film or 20 Hollywood hits, can you blame a consumer for going for the 20 films every time? Obviously, the solution for Kenyan films to be successful in the home video market is to put an end to the piracy of these black market, 20-in-one DVDs. Without this, it will be very difficult for Kenyan films to find any financial success in Kenya.

Another way a Kenyan film can find an audience, both within Kenya and without, is to be that irresistibly good. This is an inevitable consequence of the development of the Kenyan film industry. Beginning with a solid foundation in film education, the films to come from Kenya's educated filmmakers can't help but eventually be deserving of international attention. A great film will get noticed.

The short film, *Kibera Kid* is a prime example of this promise. *Kibera Kid* did not just happen by accident. It was the result of hard work and training on the part of writer-director Nathan Collett, who received his M.F.A. from the USC Graduate School of Cinema-Television (<http://www.imdb.com/name/nm1862428/bio>). The only difference between *Kibera Kid* and future productions from Kenya will be that Kenyan filmmakers in the future will have been

educated in their home country, which is the first step in building a self-sustaining, indigenous film industry in Kenya.

The World Story Organization

There are more challenges to overcome in building up Kenya's film industry, but addressing the seven listed in this study will certainly give Kenya a great start. As the World Story Organization sees it, it starts with education in the principles of storytelling with the language of film, embedded in the indigenous life and culture of the people: better stories being told better. As Kenya's film industry organizes itself, it will lead to greater opportunities and happy filmmakers, drawing the attention of local businesses, rewarding them for taking a risk in investing in Kenyan film. These stories will lead to memorable, distinctly Kenyan films that will be irresistibly good, garnering attention even beyond Kenya's borders. As the industry grows more secure, so will the audience following the product. A film made in Kenya will be able to be relied upon to provide quality, unique, challenging, noteworthy, and important films as time goes on. This should be the vision for a self-sustaining, indigenous film industry in Kenya.

To be a part of realizing this vision, the World Story Organization is currently planning screenwriting and production workshops for 2009, in partnership with the Kenya Film Commission. WSO has been developing curriculum for a year-long film program that might lay the groundwork for the School of Excellence in film that the Kenya Film Commission hopes to establish soon. These initial workshops will be pilot courses to test the curriculum in order to continue to fine tune the course offerings to recognize and incorporate the culturally unique aspects of storytelling locally and nationally.

It would be a shame to see Kenya produce films that are mere imitations of Western stories and styles. The Kenyan voice that producer Charles Liburd is searching for with the

“Riverwood 20” project is also the goal of the WSO curriculum: indigenouness. Kenya is a beautiful land, full of beautiful, colorful people and stories. Kenyan films should celebrate this.

Sitati (2008) had the correct idea in mind when she stated, “We are concentrating on the youth. This is the only way this industry will be developed. If we don't get training or support...Unfortunately for us we will be left behind” (Tichi Sitati, personal communication, August 20, 2008). The World Story Organization is in agreement. It will certainly be this current younger generation that will carry Kenya’s film industry to the next level. WSO is glad to do all they can to be a part of it.

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