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## CULTURE, MEDIA & FILM | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Themes in Kenyan cinema: Seasons and reasons

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**Abstract:** This is a study of thematic dimensions taken by feature films produced in Kenya from 1963 to 2013. The rather expansive 50-year period is characterised by varied historical, economic, social and technological changes in the country. These variations have had an impact on the nature and growth of the film industry in one way or another. One such way, is the kind of subject matter addressed by the films. The main objective of the paper therefore is to ascertain the impact of the environment of production on the nature of the narratives emanating from the Kenyan feature film in the first 50 years of independence. This study purposively selects feature film genre for two main reasons; it tends to define a film industry more accurately than the other genres and it is relatively shorter than TV drama series, which, given its longer and steadier presence in the country, could have been the ideal way of understanding the social concerns on Kenyan screens. Text analysis and interviews with film-makers form the larger sources of primary data for this study. Secondary data, based on literature and films of relevance were also consulted.

**Subjects:** Area Studies; Film & Politics; Arts; Philosophy of Film; Media & Film Studies; Film Production; Film History

**Keywords:** Kenyan film; African film; seasons; cinema; post-independence; themes

### 1. Introduction

This is a look back into the history of Kenya's film-making and consumption tendencies in the country's first 50 years of independence. Film does not exist in a vacuum, and is largely periodically influenced by the larger forces whose operations have continued to shape the country's film industry.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rachael Diang'a holds a PhD in Film Studies. She currently teaches Film Studies and Production in the School of Creative Arts, Film and Media Studies at Kenyatta University, Nairobi. Her practice and research interests lie within screenwriting, gender and cinema studies, African and post-colonial cinema and film directing. She is the author of the first book on Kenyan Film, entitled, *African Re-creation of Western Impressions: A Focus on the Kenyan Film* (2011) and several articles/book chapters on African and Post-colonial Cinema. Diang'a has produced and/or directed several films including: *Our Strength* (2012), *The Invisible Workers* (2013) and *Drugnets* (2015). She is a member of Nordic Association of Romantic Studies, Association of Media Women in Kenya, Kenya Film and Television Professionals Association and was the inaugural Secretary of the Association of Film Producing Educational Institutions in Kenya.

### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This is a study of thematic dimensions taken by feature films produced in Kenya from independence in 1963–2013, covering the first 50 years of the country's political independence. This rather expansive five-decade period of local cinematic experience is characterised by various historical, economic, ideological socio-political as well as technological changes in the country that have had an impact on the nature and growth of the country's film industry, one way or another. One such way is the kind of themes addressed by the films produced in the country over the period of study. The main objective of this article therefore, is to establish the impact of the environment of production on the nature of the social concerns of Kenyan feature films in the post-independence period, as the study deliberately focuses on the feature film.

This paper largely dwells on the impact of the environment of production on the social concerns that films tend to highlight. Thus, the major themes of concern in cinema, in Kenya since 1963–2013, become central for analysis. This is a fairly wide time span and the paper therefore, divides the period in clusters of years, thereby addressing them as blocks of a decade each and sometimes less. I characterise each of these blocks by certain tendencies, be they historical, political, ideological, sociological or generally cultural informants that highly influenced not only how the industry fared on, but also what the industry was producing and what it was concerned with. So the concern, here remains, what were these environments, and what was their influence on the themes of films produced? Without pre-empting the discussions ahead, I must state from the start that in seasons with less or no film productions, my interest goes into the lack of productions as a way of providing explanation for that absence. My use of the word film implies both celluloid and video production of creative feature films. I limit myself to feature films since this genre defines a film industry. The nature of feature films produced in an industry largely describes the state of that industry. The other main genres such as short films, documentaries and series add to an industry's definition to a relatively small extent.

## 2. Birth of a nation

At independence, Kenya had very minimal film production expertise, leave alone experience. Colonial film-making inheritance was very minimal as in East Africa. The locals mainly learnt through observation since the few East Africans who worked alongside the colonial film-makers remained novices (Diang'a, 2013). Even though film experience in East Africa began with the famous British Educational Cinema Experiment, BECE, in Tanganyika between 1935 and 1937, Kenyans were not technically empowered to produce films by the time the state was born in 1963. The colonial Film Units, despite one having been set up in Kenya, did not make things easier. It is worth noting that CFUs employed different approaches in different parts of Africa. For instance, in West Africa, the locals were actively involved in the production process as they learnt the craft through apprenticeship. This occurrence gave West African British colonies an early start in film-making even before British retraction at independence. In Ghana, for instance, Ave (2010, p. 122) confirms that CFU trained the locals, who were able to produce not just educative documentaries, but also feature films even before the country's independence.

... the Gold Coast Film Unit established in 1946 under British producer/director Sean Graham. The unit was charged with the production of socially educative films to assist in the governance of the Gold Coast and other British colonies. The first feature film produced in this country, (was) *The Boy Kumasenu* (1952). (Ave, 2010)

For Kenya, the political independence was not accompanied by the independence of thought with regard to film production. Cinema remained a foreign product. Colonial hangover and hegemony catapulted ardent viewership, for those who could afford it, of the western productions, be they voyeuristic American productions or the earlier didactic and sometimes propagandistic CFU and BECE films. The introduction of television in the country in 1962, had expanded viewership from the social race-based viewership in cinema theatres to television sets, which some indigenous populations could now access.

## 3. Taking over the seat

Even as it is easily noticeable that there were very minimal film production activities in Kenya in the period immediately after independence all the way to the 1980s (Moggi & Tessier, 2000), the already steadily growing fame of the country as one of the preferred African locations for film-makers from the west was eminent. The earlier filming of parts of successful productions such as the second version of *King Solomon's Mines* (1950) and *Men Against the Sun* (1952) in Kenya, had continued to put the country on the global limelight in association with cinema. With the established prominence of the country in the region and the frequent witnessing of big budget productions being filmed in it, the urge to get involved in film-making was expected from the locals.

Given the excitement of self-rule and the widespread pan-African ideology at the time, there was a general call for change in perspective in order to give an African viewpoint to the economic growth, politics as well as the arts and culture. Literature and later on film were no exception. There was a realisation that the foreign films and the colonial historical recording of the colonised were not going to valorise an *Other* culture. Achebe, in his later work posits, “you do not walk in, seize the land, the person, the history of another, and then sit back and compose hymns of praise in his honour” (Achebe, 2011).

This realisation inspired a set of activities that later became recognised as cornerstones of the history of Kenya’s film industry to date. Although there are claims of the existence of two films produced by Kenyans of Asian origin in the 1960s (Barasa, 2010; Diang’a, 2011), it is not clear what happened. It is not easy to find a Kenyan who has watched the two films named *Mlevi* (1967) and *Mrembo* (1968) and those who make reference to them can hardly remember the films’ storylines. Barasa (2010) maintains that the two young independent film-makers, Ragbil Singh and Kuljit Pal, died in a plane crash as they were filming. Going by the titles of the films—*Mrembo*, the beautiful one and *Mlevi*, the drunkard—they seem to have tackled day to day phenomena in the society without a larger socio-historical factor influencing their choice of themes. However, it is the establishment of the Kenya Film Corporation in 1967, that had a direct national impact on the rise of the film industry. This move by the government echoed other revolutionary calls for indigenisation of cultural products, film included. For Kenya, the impact in the film sector was manifest in the establishment of this corporation rather than production of culturally conscious films as the case was in West African. Similarly, Tanzania also established Tanzania Film Company in 1968, a government initiative very similar to KFC. The corporation’s two main functions were to distribute mainly foreign films in the country and to produce local films.

Film critics see a lull in local film-making activities in Kenya between 1960s and 1980s, with the exception of a one-time successful story of a former Ugandan dictator, *The Rise and Fall of Idi Amin Patel* (1981) (Barasa, 2010; Diang’a, 2011; Moggi & Tessier, 2000). However, I currently characterise this period by discussions and attempts at definitions of what an indigenous Kenyan film should embody. It is the period when film training facilities were put in place to later churn out local film-makers. This is the time the first indigenous film-maker, Sao Gamba, was in school, learning film directing. Kenya’s oldest film school, Kenya Institute of Mass Communication—KIMC, which had already been set up in 1961, began its production training in 1975, adding to the fortunes of this apparently “silent” period ([www.kimc.ac.ke](http://www.kimc.ac.ke)). Just like it had funded the establishment of Ghana’s National Film and Television Institute in 1978 to train television and film production, the German Government (Ave, 2010, p. 123) funded KIMC’s establishment. It is also worth mentioning the unsuccessful production of the film adaptation of Meja Mwangi’s 1979 novel, *The Bush Trackers* by Gordon Parks Jr. in 1979 (Barasa, 2010). Therefore, 1960s–1980s was a critical period in preparation and laying of foundations for the later birth of indigenous film-making.

An early 1980s proposal by employees of KFC, led by one Nyamweya had a lot of Afro centric tones that highly resonated with the widely cited Algiers Charter on African Cinema (1975, Fédération panafricaine des cinéastes, 2014a) and the Niamey Manifesto on African Films (1983, Fédération panafricaine des cinéastes, 2014b).<sup>1</sup> The two highlighted the need for film by Africans for Africans and those that could appropriately represent Africans, their history and culture to the world. The proposal convinced the government to fund production of *Kolormask* (Sao Gamba) in 1985 to a wide local reception. The film was timely to have, in quenching its viewers’ thirst for something local, hence different from the mainly western films that they had been accustomed to.

*Kolormask* largely upholds indigenous cultures within Kenyan communities, overturning the imperially inscribed power positions as described in colonial library. To Diang’a (2011, p. 32), “it is common to find negative images of the third world in colonial literature and film. Most colonial films were based on Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution, which justified the popular ‘supremacy’ of the coloniser” (Diang’a, 2011). *Kolormask* pits the protagonist—John Litodo—against his English wife—Eliza—with whom he has two children, Toby and Susan. While, studying in England, John adjusted to

fit in the lifestyle of the majority. Once the family relocates back to Kenya, on completion of his studies, he expects and indeed advises Eliza to also adjust to fit in the demands of indigenous African way of life, which John applauds, despite being a medical doctor. We see him respond positively to traditional ways of mourning the dead; he is proud of traditional initiation rites since he is glad that Toby gets circumcised in a traditional ceremony, thanks to John's sister, Maria. After this rite of passage, John recognises Toby as a man, even though he is only seventeen. John says that Toby should now be in charge of Susan, an elder sister. Other than initiation and burial rites, the film also flaunts indigenous ethnic attire, dances and food. These are shown to the viewer through Toby's long walk in the wilderness as he goes to his aunt's place to participate in the seasonal initiation ritual. The circumcision procedure is elaborately shown just like the funeral and burial rites of John's late mother who passes on in the course of the film. The story was a great success in its contribution to post-independence cultural emancipation drive. It was however, doing this, while trailing behind other earlier African films, such as Sembene Ousmane's *La Noir de* (1966), *Mandabi* (1968), *Emitai* (1971), Ron Mulvihill and Ng'onge Nangayoma's *Arusi ya Mariamu* (1983), Gaston Kabore's *Wend Kuuni* (1982) among other earlier films that tended to uplift African cultural practices in the face of Western imperialism.

Sometimes, films such as *Kolormask*, in trying to defend indigenous African ways of life are viewed to be rather antagonistic to the former colonial ideology. This subversive approach has been criticised to be, in itself, subjective and only aimed at downplaying the imperialists, hence only managing to let the colonised and the coloniser simply exchange positions. "Such inversions run the risk of reproducing the very racism that they were designed to combat" (Diang'a, 2011, p. 78). Thus, a less combatant approach seemed to be preferred by Kenyan film-makers who made films on the indigenous/western culture axis. Two cases in point are Brutus Sirucha's *Greencard* (2004) and Wanjiru Kinyanjui's *The Battle of The Sacred Tree* (1994). The two films avoid the frontal antagonism to the West, but rather explore the Kenyan misinterpretation of the west and its cultures. In *Greencard*, two young Kenyans get conned of cash as they try to pay anything they can in order to win American Greencard Lottery so that they can relocate to the United States of America and evade the ever-increasing suffering in Kenya. They see USA as the timely panacea to all their woes in the underdeveloped Kenya. When they face the truth as the film ends, the viewer is overwhelmed with laughter as he ponders slowly whether the west is that wondrous. For *The battle of the Sacred Tree*, Born again Christian women fault everybody in the village since they believe that all the traditional activities taking place around them are sinful. The viewer is compelled to introspection and to evaluate his own view of Christianity and other western institutions.

#### 4. Cultural negotiations in the post-liberal Kenya

After the production of *Kolormask* and its release in 1986, there was hardly any film produced in Kenya until the 1990s. Many scholars easily explain this gap as an aftermath of the expensive cost of producing *Kolormask*, though as I said earlier, this gap is filled with many behind-the-scene activities that later benefitted the national cinema (Diang'a, 2005, 2009; Moggi & Tessier, 2000). The film was so costly that KFC was rendered defunct shortly afterwards. The cost of production kept film-making at its minimum as the sector was viewed to be unaffordable, especially to the independent film-makers who were to emerge in the years that followed.

Political leadership did less to aid the situation, especially, after the state's failure to sustain KFC after *Kolormask*. Kenya's political regime in the 1980s, just like the earlier Jomo Kenyatta's reign, did not support film-making as much as other governments, especially in West Africa did. Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso as well as Anglophone West Africa had well orchestrated government involvement in the growth of their film industries thereby giving the region an early lead compared to other parts of Sub-Saharan Africa. The four-year drought in the Kenya's film industry coincided with a period of deliberations on economic liberalisation, which came to fruition by early 1990s, opening a new era in Kenya's cinema. This came alongside multi-party system and the advent of the much more affordable video film production technology in the country. The expansion of television broadcasting network in the country as a result of the liberal economy also added to this list of fortunes. For

film-makers, this meant an increased ability to produce straight to video films that did not have to be censored by the state-run national TV station, Kenya Broadcasting Corporation before being aired. It meant that there were options at every level of production and exhibition. There was an alternative to high cost of production; digital technology did not require post-production film processing and there was an alternative to distribution and exhibition procedures given the new independent television stations that emerged in the decade, such as KTN (1990) and Citizen TV (1998).

This environment favoured film-makers and consequently, independent film-making burgeoned. The film-makers were mainly graduates of the government film school, KIMC's film production department. The department mainly trained film professionals who always got absorbed either in the Department of Film Services within the ministry of Information and Communication, KBC, among other government agencies. Some of these film-makers could later set up film-making firms that produced some of the films that populated the industry from the 1990s to the mid-2000s. It is in this period that the first female directed Kenyan film was produced. *Saikati's* (1992) director, Ann Mungai, says she was compelled to celebrate African women through film. When she made the film, she believed that it was her duty to tell the world the untold stories of strong African women, exemplified by her mother.<sup>2</sup> *Saikati* tells the story Saikati, a teenage schoolgirl who lives with her economically challenged family in a village near Maasai Mara national park in Kenya. She strives to overcome every hurdle on her way in order to get formal education. First, she has to run away from a son of a local civil administrator who wants to marry her with the approval, albeit sometimes reluctant, of her family members. Her cousin offers to get her a job in the city, but the job turns out to be prostitution. Saikati rebels and goes back home only to find that the chief's son has married someone else. So she continues with her education and in the sequel, gets a medical job and helps her family.

Wanjiru Kinyanjui's *The Battle of the sacred Tree* (1994) followed a few years later. This film exposes the pretentious women who have misinterpreted Christianity to mean an outward war on any indigenous beliefs. The Mothers Union members discard indigenous herbal medicine as well as the belief that the Sacred Tree (a large baobab) is indeed sacred and should be revered as the community's source of religious succour and healing. The women feel that the presence of these heathen symbols in the community is what is disrupting the spread of Christianity and holy life. They plan to bring the tree down to their disappointment. The tree 'fights' back. The women are sent packing by enraged red ants, which bite the women mercilessly. Although the story is an adaptation of Barbara Kimenye's short story by the same title, it aptly applies in the Kikuyu traditional religion, where the wild fig tree (*mugumo*) is equally considered sacred and should not be tampered with. Kinyanjui says that the story is not an attack on Christianity, but rather a farce depicting our misinterpretation of Christianity and other social institutions like the school, hospital-symbolised by modern medicine and civic administration represented by the local chief.

In the 1990s, there rose a persistent feminist trope in Kenyan films. Ann Mungai's *Tough choices* (1997), Albert Wandago's *Metamo* (1997) and *Sabina's Encounters* (1998), Ingolo wa Keya's *The Married Bachelor* (1997) and *Saikati's* sequel, *Saikati, the Enkabaani* (1997) are some of the films that were produced in this period. Other than *The married Bachelor*, which tends to address the issue of cultural crisis between the indigenous African culture and the western lifestyle, the rest of these films address the plight of the female in the society. They largely portray female protagonists who are disadvantaged by the society's gender prescriptions and inequitable resource distribution. The films seem to draw the society's attention to the unfairness with which women have to contend in their endeavour to excel or achieve their goals in life. Feminist films continued to be popular with the Kenyan film-makers way into the early years of the twenty-first century. Jane Munene's *Price of a Daughter* (2003) and *Behind Closed Doors* (2004), Wandago's *Naliaka is Going* (2003) being among them.

The trend in feminist films got to an extent where themes were occasionally repeated. The motif of a helpless girl running away from early marriage can be located in *Price of a Daughter*, *Naliaka is Going*, *Saikati*, *Saikati, the Enkabaani*, among others. To an extreme extent, the combined plot of



*Saikati* and *Saikati the Enkabaani* is summed up in *Price of a Daughter*, raising interest in the factors that pulled the film-makers to this already overexploited subject. One issue that obviously comes to mind is the widely debated concept of whether African film-makers should seek production funding from western inclined multi-national organisations that Diawara (2010) refers to as 'Tarzanist NGOs'. My concern is the amount of artistic freedom available to film-makers who are the recipients of these organisations' generosity, in the face of the organisations' wider objectives. Diawara says he "would put value in Africans owning their own aesthetics and vision of the world in cinema, and would argue for a dialogue and equal partnership between North and South" (Diawara, 2010). The ensuing caging of a filmmaker's creativity is eminently foreseeable in a situation where the partnership is skewed. Kinyanjui (2000) in an interview with Beti Ellerson is worried about this trend whereby film-makers are perpetually showing suffering Africans at the expense of more creative stories. Most of the films that tended to replicate the "desperate female" trope were largely funded by Western organisations or foundations. The neo-colonial tendency in these films draws attention to the fact that suddenly, film-makers were paying less attention to other social, historical or political realities of the time.

### 5. The birth of *Riverwood*

With more professional film-makers embracing the highly didactic and neo-colonised stance in film-making, potential film-makers were seeking room to address the day-to-day realities in the society. There was need to reawaken the artist from the long slumber and challenge the continued reproduction of similar stories that only helped further imperial supremacy in an independent country. The rise of *Riverwood* in the early 2000s, was partly necessitated by the fissure that had been created between the professional film-makers and the audience, who were now left with no option but to consume the pirated foreign productions mainly from Hollywood, India Nigeria and sometimes Ghana. This gap was worsened by very poor distribution and exhibition used by the local film-makers. In local vendors' shops, it was rare to find a Kenyan film. When they were stocked, it was too expensive to purchase the films since the foreign films were way too affordable because nearly all of them were pirated copies. At the same time, the didactic films were being produced for non-commercial purposes. Other film-makers whose contracts with the funding organisations allowed for commercial release feared that if they placed their films on the vendors' shelves, the films would be pirated.<sup>3</sup> This habit made local films so inaccessible.

The realisation that with digital film production and exhibition technology, learning the art and technique of film-making became easier given the much simplified equipment and process of production made *Riverwood* flourish fast. Former music producers in Nairobi's downtown River Road and its environs ventured into film production without much knowledge of the craft. Film production professionalism was highly lacking in the early *Riverwood* productions; a feature quite similar to the origins of similar revolutionary alternative film sub-cultures in Tanzania, Uganda, Ghana and the now very successful *Nollywood* in Nigeria (Diang'a, 2015; Dipio, 2014; Haynes, 2000, 2010; Haynes & Okome, 2000; Shule, 2011). Despite their disadvantaged technical know-how, *Riverwood* film-makers reported a lot of success since their films were initially produced in the local vernaculars, ensuring a preservation of idiomatic authenticity, while the films entertained at the same time. The largely short films were mainly comedy and addressed very common day-to-day challenges in families.

With the steady emergence of *Riverwood*, there existed two rather parallel factions of the Kenyan film industry: *Riverwood* and mainstream film-makers. The former being market oriented, while the later paid more attention to formal professionalism yet had very minimal market presence. The initial image of the *Riverwood* was very unprofessional. This was later redeemed when some of the professional film-makers developed interest in working with *Riverwood* film-makers in order to get to the audiences. *Riverwood* has been seen to be making steps towards a stable and self-sustaining film industry in Kenya. Although much wider earlier on, the rift between the two factions of the industry is narrowing faster given that the newer, younger and more free-spirited film-makers tend to favour *Riverwood's* approach of producing films affordably and making them available and affordable to the public. The rift was initially so noticeable that the *Kalasha* (Kenya's film talent) Awards had

a special category for *Riverwood* in its first edition in 2009.<sup>4</sup> *Riverwood* played a significant role in reigniting filmmakers' creativity and opening new avenues to rebrand the industry as a possible source of livelihood.

The early 2000s saw an eruption of new and more liberal film-makers, whose films have expanded the thematic horizons to cover an even wider range of day-to-day subjects. The shift from heavily didactic foreign-funded films paved way for, not just for *Riverwood* but also a new crop of contemporary film-makers in the country whose interest was to produce films that addressed easily ignored yet not so ignorable day-to-day issues in the society. Films such as Judy Kibinge's *Dangerous Affair* (2002) and *Project Daddy* (2004), were well received and well recognised in East Africa's biggest and currently the oldest active film fair, Zanzibar International Film Festival (ZIFF). Kibinge, in the two films, takes a very popular approach to addressing some of the untold stories of issues that affect lives of young elitist urbanite Kenyans. The two films reconstruct the female characters from the helpless and passive receptors of men's sweat to active producers of both material and ideological wealth. *Dangerous Affair* narrows down to the story of Kui, a New York trained banker who relocates to Kenya and meets Murags, a care-free young man who is known for never being so serious with women. For once, he decides to get serious with Kui and marries her. However, the untimely resurfacing of his ex-girlfriend, Rose, whom he truly loved, changes everything. His marriage is hurt and divorce is inevitable. As she spearheads the divorce process, she discloses to Murags, to the viewer's utter dismay, that she has been hiding her true identity to him. This reveals her wittiness, rendering Murags the less intelligent of the two. Throughout the film, Murags acts smart believing that Kui is just another of the many women whose hearts he has been breaking. *Project Daddy* has an equally empowered woman's story. The protagonist, a 29 year-old professionally successful lady, Mumbi, is on a journey to select the right man to father her child whom she must bear before turning 30. Kibinge's *Killer Necklace* (2008) is a story of love that dismantles social borders. Kibinge's women protagonists, unlike the women in the 1990s films are definitely in charge of life around them. They are informed and have a self-awareness that neither the male antagonists nor the society's gender norms can shake.

There was such an outburst of film-making in the country that so far, no comprehensive account of their prowess has been documented. In the later part of the decade, Wanuri Kahiu's first film, *From a Whisper* (2008) received accolades globally. It is a rendition of a personal struggle with the aftermath of the catastrophic 1998 Al Qaeda bombing of the US embassy in Nairobi. Kahiu's superlative film-making skills saw her next film *Pumzi* (2009) an Afro-futurist sci-fi won even more awards and recognitions. Other films that left a mark in this period through their films include Robby Bresson's *Help* (2007) reminds Africa that its help lies within and not necessarily in the west. Njoki Mbutia and Mona Ombogo-Scott's *Unseen, Unsung, Unforgotten* (2009) meticulously address various aspects of living positively with HIV. Another factor in this decade that motivated several film productions is the 2007/8 post-election violence, which inspired several films, most of which were produced after 2010, strategically positioned to forewarn the citizenry against allowing a repeat of the violence in the elections that followed in 2013.

The divergent thematic trend that started in the 2000s, seamlessly moved into the 2010s, a period where by 2013, where the perimeter of this study ends, there were much more local film-making activities than ever before. The film industry is indeed thriving with much newer innovations in place (Diang'a, 2015). Some of the films that have condemned the 2007/8 strife, or called for a more unified citizenry include *Pieces for Peace* (2008), *Togetherness Supreme* (2010), *Ni Sisi* (2013), *Something Necessary* (2013) and *Our Strength* (2012). However, not all these films are feature films, which is the focus of this article. At the onset of the decade, *Soul Boy* (2010) was released to a wide reception. The film is a magical journey of a teenage boy in search of his father's lost soul. Equally well received were Bob Nyanja's *The Rugged Priest* (2011), based on a true story on an activist priest who loses his life after taking on corrupt government leadership (Bisschoff, 2015) and Tosh Gitonga's *Nairobi Half Life* (2012), a film on the *Other* side of an otherwise attractive Nairobi city as discovered by Mwas, the protagonist.

The admirable change in thematic trends can be attributed to various developments that have characterised the industry in recent times. The increasing rate of unemployment in the country plays a role in the increased number of young people turning to film-making as a means of procuring livelihood. The post-Moi era has also seen an increase in the number of public and private universities. Not all graduates who come from these institutions can be accommodated by the decreasing job vacancies available. Therefore, more unemployed youth are left with no option but to try anything that can earn them an income, including film-making. Since the introduction of *parallel* degree programmes or admission of self sponsored students in public tertiary institutions such as KIMC and universities, there has been a boom in the number of fresh film and media graduates every year so that there are more skilled personnel in the industry, challenging the earlier professional film-makers who have not embraced newer modus operandi in the industry.

Today, fewer film-makers in the country trained to be film professionals. This is unlike the early film-makers who were largely film school graduates. For example, Sao Gamba trained in film directing for seven years in Poland.<sup>5</sup> Ann Mungai, Jane Munene, Albert Wandago, Wanjiru Kinyanjui, among other early film-makers, were all trained film-makers either locally or overseas. The trend has changed and now potential film-makers just need to have an interest in production before finding a position on set and learn on the job. The *Riverwood* examples described earlier are a case in point. Although I take note of the negative impact of this approach on the formal quality of an industry, I will not dwell on that topic since I have discussed this in my earlier work (Diang'a, 2013). With the expansion of the curricula of many local tertiary institutions, there has emerged a common trend to include film schools in universities. This is a recent phenomenon that has made cinema a promising destination for new graduates from these film schools.

Another crucial factor that has aided in increasing the number of film-makers, hence diversifying the thematic concerns is the government's renewal of involvement in growth of the film industry. In the early 2000s, filmmakers' associations, Kenya National Film Association and Kenya Film and Television Professional Association, pushed for the establishment of a film commission. The move culminated into the setting up of Kenya Film commission in 2005. The commission has been supporting local film-makers through financing films. Some of the films produced through such a support are *Pieces for Peace* (Robby Bresson & Mburu Kimani, 2008), *History of Film in Kenya 1909–2009* (2010) and *Wale Watu* (Boy, 2008). This move comes as a relief to film-makers who feel less controlled by the funding bodies since KFC does not doctor the productions to make them take a particular aesthetic angle.

To train film-makers, the commission conducts fully paid for workshops on various aspects of film production. This way, it provides basic skills to potential film-makers who may not have had a chance to acquire the skills through training in a film school. Going by the requirements of the new Kenyan constitution, the commission has highly devolved its services as including the trainings to several major towns in the country. The commission also exhibits, archives and through the annual *Kalasha* awards, recognises talent in local films. KFC's activities in conjunction with other foreign film commissions have helped further unveil Kenya's potential in the region as a possibly powerful film capital. Briefly put, the Commission has played a big role in reestablishing the image of the industry as a possible full time employer. By supporting film-makers, it has—to some extent—helped ease their financial, marketing and exhibition constraints, thus encouraging independence of thought and creativity. More film-makers have continued to invest in the industry, leading to a healthier competition, hence diverse themes. This has provided a fertile ground for film-makers to address varied social concerns unlike the film-makers of the 1990s. In fact, one of the films produced recently dwells on the issue of Africa's ideological dependence on aid as one of the major drawbacks for the continent's development. Robby Bresson's *Help* (2007), mentioned earlier revolves around George Simba, a man who decides to ferry passengers in an un-roadworthy bus and, to evade the police, takes an alternative rough road. Suddenly, they experience a tire puncture in the middle of a deserted rough road. The passengers initially wait for passers-by to offer them help, only to realise that help must



come from within, so long as they have a positive resolve and can co-operate among themselves. This film's moral lesson aptly applies in Kenya's film history.

The most recent entrant into the Kenyan film industry is the Kenya National Schools and Colleges Drama festival (KNDF). In its 53rd edition in the year 2012, KNDF officially set off the film wing of the festival with a lot of entries. Now in its sixth year, the students' film festival introduces school children and tertiary students to film as an inevitable medium of expression of thought in the digitally powered global village where audio-visual messages are predominant. The festival theme and the interests of the annual sponsors may get awarded though films produced are not attached to particular general subject matter, though the centrality of the child remains key. The festival only has slots for documentaries, short films—referred to as “screen play” at the festival—“screen verse”, advertisement “screen narrative” and “Screen dance”.<sup>6</sup> The feature film category was created in 2016 for tertiary institutions, though this research is demarcated up to 2013. The festival may therefore seem to be beyond the limits of this study hence irrelevant. Nevertheless, I make reference to the festival since it stands out as a precursor of a vibrant film industry in the coming years. In addressing history, we cannot underestimate what the past and contemporary activities portend for the future. The students who get exposed to film production now have a high potential of growing into a generation that is audio-visually conscious, hence a more thriving industry. This is one of the major components of an industry that was lacking in the earlier years of film-making in Kenya; a connected audience.

## 6. Conclusion

From the ongoing, it is clear that Kenyan film industry is far from homogenous, therefore a study of its history needs to take this into account and accept that it cannot cover every aspect of the industry. However, the main strands identified that run through this article include: connection between film and its audience, thematic variation and its impact on reception, active participation from all stakeholders—be it the government, film-makers, business community, training institutions or even the audience, who can turn into film-makers in the absence of compelling stories from the professional film-makers. In a Focus Group Discussion with Kenyan film critics, it emerged that Kenyan audiences do not like watching local productions and instead, prefer foreign films, mainly Nigerian, American and sometimes Indian films.<sup>7</sup> This is a problem that affects all the seasons discussed above. The industry has been stagnating in growth from its birth in the 1960s. Even though the same question came up during a discussion at a one-day film conference organised by the Kenya Film Commission in June 2013, the solution to the question remains slippery for film-makers. Kenyan film-makers have grappled with the question of audience-film relationship over time as they struggle to compete with the foreign films.

The first step in solving this stand-off is by addressing issues that the audience can identify with and that they may find close to social realities of their lives. Ondego (2008, p. 114) argues that themes play a major role in connecting the audience to films. Citing the escalating Kenyan market for Nigerian films, he says “it is the relevance of the themes—poverty, illness, unemployment, injustice, religion, rituals, culture—that readily connects them with Kenyans who readily identify with these issues” (Ondego, 2008). Barrot (2008, p. 28) concurs, stressing the importance of netting the audience. He observes that “not only have Nigerian directors recreated the successful formulas of Indian and American models, they have also succeeded in supplanting them with the audiences ... The majority of consumers clearly prefer locally produced films” (Barrot, 2008). However, it is important to note that adopting right thematic angles may not be the sole antidote for a successful film-audience relationship since other formal elements in a film play an equally major role in the way it is received.

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### Notes

1. Only one name is given on the proposal and my attempt to find out the other name from other film stakeholders has not yielded much.
2. Interview with the author between 10 and 11th March 2012, Nairobi, Kenya.
3. To date, I have not acquired a copy of a 2004 film that I had really wanted to study in 2005. A colleague just confirmed to me in February 2017 that she too could not procure a copy for the producer fears piracy.
4. I was in attendance and a film by Mburu Kimani, *The Race*, won the best *Riverwood* film award. Currently, Mburu Kimani's productions cannot be easily classified as *Riverwood* per se.
5. Information gathered from an interview with Ingolo wa Keya in August 2011. Wa Keya is the film's Assistant Director.
6. I have been a member of the festival's jury between 2012 and 2015 and the information I have shared here are from my personal observation and interactions with the festival organisers and participants.
7. Focus Group Discussion with thirteen film critics on 12th February, 2011 in Nairobi.

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