Contemporary East African Cinema: Emergent Themes and Aesthetics

A thesis submitted to the University of Sydney in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Art History and Film Studies

School of Literature, Art and Media

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

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Statement of Originality

This thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, my own original work. It contains no material previously published or written by another person except as otherwise duly acknowledged in the text and notes. Research for this thesis was based on primary texts—films and interviews of the filmmakers—and secondary sources. The University of Sydney Human Ethics Committee approved the protocol of interviewing East African filmmakers. All the participants consented to be identified.

Cindy Evelyn Magara

2020
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Abstract

At the turn of the 21st Century, a dynamic and eclectic cinema that had been slowly developing in the East African region gain traction. Yet, the nascent cinematic imaginaries of East Africa have received the least scholarly attention of all the regional cinemas of the African continent. The study explores emergent themes and aesthetics of East African Cinema by locating East African cinema in contemporary African cinema criticism, particularly its indigenous concepts, epistemes and approaches to film analysis. By conceptualising eclectic national cinemas into a complex homogenous entity, I argue that the various national cinemas of East Africa are best understood as a single regional, transnational cinema (at least within East Africa), given the shared socio-political, economic and cultural experiences, and this homogeneity manifests in the representation of parallel themes and aesthetics. I also posit that East African cinema is not a closed static cinema, however, because its aesthetics are influenced by other continental and international cinemas such as Nollywood, Bollywood, Hollywood and European cinema. Despite these influences, the narratives of East African cinema continue to be centrally organised in terms of African oral storytelling aesthetics. To explore the emergent themes and aesthetics in East African cinema, this study employs a range of disciplinary research methods. By combining close textual analysis with interviews with significant East African filmmakers, this thesis examines how the East African filmmakers partake of their presumed role of modern griots to reflect and shape popular discourses. Such discourses include the representation of history in the post-colonial era, power struggles concerning gender, class conflict, and migration to the Western world, all of which are recurrent themes in films across the region.
<table>
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<tr>
<td>AU</td>
<td>African Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BEKE</td>
<td>Bantu Educational Kinema Experience</td>
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<td>BFC</td>
<td>Burundi Film Centre</td>
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<td>CAR</td>
<td>Central African Republic</td>
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<td>CFU</td>
<td>Colonial Film Units</td>
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<td>CDEA</td>
<td>Culture and Development of East Africa</td>
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<td>CIA</td>
<td>Central Intelligence Agency</td>
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<td>DRC</td>
<td>Democratic Republic of Congo</td>
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<tr>
<td>DSTV</td>
<td>Digital Satellite Television</td>
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<tr>
<td>DW</td>
<td>Deutsche Wella</td>
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<td>EAC</td>
<td>East African Community</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fespaco</td>
<td>Festival panfricain du cinéma et du télévision d’Ouagadougou (Pan-African Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou)</td>
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<tr>
<td>ICC</td>
<td>International Criminal Court</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JAC</td>
<td>Journal of African Cinemas</td>
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<td>JAMAFEST</td>
<td>Jumuiya ya Afrika Mashariki Utamaduni (East African Arts and Culture Festival)</td>
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<tr>
<td>LRA</td>
<td>Lord’s Resistance Army</td>
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<td>NRA</td>
<td>National Resistance Army</td>
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<tr>
<td>NRM</td>
<td>National Resistance Movement</td>
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<tr>
<td>RFC</td>
<td>Rwanda Film Centre</td>
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<td>RPF</td>
<td>Rwanda Patriotic Front</td>
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<tr>
<td>SRB</td>
<td>State Research Bureau</td>
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<td>TFB</td>
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UN------United Nations
UAE------United Arabs Emirates
USA------United States of America
USAID------United States Agency for International Development
VCD------Video Compact Disc
VCR------Video Cassette Recorder
VHS------Video Home Systems
VJ------Video Jokers
ZIFF------Zanzibar International Film Festival
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Dedication

Rt Rev. Deogratius Muganwa Byabazaire Abwooli (PhD)
Mrs Beatrice Kagubaza Bigirwa Abwooli
Ms Susan Magara Ateenyi
Ms Olivia Mugabi Magara Amooti
Chapter One: East African Cinema—Background and Conceptual Framing

*The ability to picture oneself is a vital need... The development of Africa implies, among other things, the production of its own images.*

—Gaston Kabore, Burkinabe filmmaker

*Film is a medium we have borrowed to replace the fireplace storytelling sessions that the new modernity does not favour. Our stories were entertaining as well [as] educative. These characteristics find their way into our films.*

—Matt Bish, Ugandan Filmmaker, Interview, 2019

Introduction

When I started to consider studying for a PhD, I was certain it would be in the area of African cinema. I was drawn to African cinema when it was introduced as a course unit to undergraduate Literature students at Makerere University in 2004. For me, African cinema studies resonated with the arguments on the definition and intention of African Literature. Both African literature and film were understood to entail a social function that, as Kabore highlights in the epigraph, was to be a vehicle for self-articulation that would in tandem contribute significantly to the development of Africa. Because of film’s capacity to vividly mediate “between human consciousness and the entire ecological, economic, social and political landscape,” the core argument from the proponents of appropriating film for development was that it would be useful to Africa only if it was deployed for “collective empowerment” (Ngugi 239). This was and is still the case because Africans are still reeling from the European colonialists’ methods of divide and rule, and assimilation policies, that not only demand “superior military technology and political astuteness” but also “literature and film” as the most effective “cultural weaponry” to reconstruct and stabilise Africa (Dokotum 22). It is undisputed that African people need to feed on art that can “decolonise” their mind and prepare them to fight the looming neocolonialism (ibid). Film was seen as one of the media with the
potential to transcend literacy inhibitions and therefore reach a broad audience. Cognisant of film’s potency, Ousmane Sembéne, often claimed as the “grandfather” of African cinema, pragmatically adapts some of his literary works into film and resorts to a fully-fledged creative career in cinema (Adekosan 236). The adaptation of oral literature into film alongside the heavy deployments of social messages in film by Sembene and his compatriots, such as Pauline Vieyra, Moustapha Alassane and Med Hondo, as well as the second generation of African filmmakers, shaped African cinema’s agenda: to make films “primarily for national [or African] consumption” for the core purpose of contributing to decolonisation and development (Ngugi 240).

As an undergraduate, however, I observed that there were no films from East Africa on the African Cinema course. The course’s filmography was dominated by West African films and films from French African colonies with a few titles from Egypt and South Africa. Convinced that film could reach an even wider audience, my desire to become an ‘African’ writer and filmmaker intensified. I resolved to turn all my scribbled novel or poetry ideas into films. In August 2006, a couple of months after my graduation, I premiered my first film Fate, followed soon after in 2009/2010 with the premiere of my second feature film Fair Play, and in 2011 another feature film, Windows of Hope. In 2005 Ashraf Simwogerere, a dramatist had made the first feature film in Uganda called Feelings Struggle, and later in 2006, a collaboration between Nigerian and Ugandan filmmakers called Roses in the Rain was premiered. In 2007 more than three films were premiered in Uganda, and by now the film landscape was changing. Concomitantly the film landscape was changing in Kenya and Tanzania as more independent filmmakers\(^1\) started making films for reasons akin to those in Uganda, that is, using popular

\(^1\) In East African context without a studio system, independent filmmaking is mainly defined from the financing point of view where filmmakers independently fund the films and have control over their production while the non-independent filmmakers make government or NGO commissioned films that are tailor made to the producers’ need.
films as a tool to raise people’s consciousness. In the 2000s, it was evident the regions’ film scene was fast-changing with film festivals and mentoring organisations springing up as well. The emerging filmic imaginaries made an interesting batch for the academy because many creatives seemed to be, advertently or otherwise, applying the tenets of African cinema—avant-gardist and political, despite their milieu being saturated with Western and Asian films and television.

During my Master of Arts degree studies, I was determined to include Uganda’s budding film industry in the corpus of African cinema studies through a thesis titled “Symbolism in Ugandan Film.” This research was further eye-opening for me because I had to locate Uganda in regional and continental film studies. It was apparent that while there was a growing corpus of films in East Africa and scholarship on African cinema, the region is given footnote presence or simply absent in critical African cinema studies (Diawara 1992, 2010; Ukadike 1994, 2002; Barlet 2000, 2016; Gugler 2003; Shaka 2004; Dipio 2014; Orlando 2017, Harrow and Garritano 2019; William 2019). The handful of East African film that were made before the turn of the 21st Century are not mentioned in key African cinema monographs. East Africa attains a minimal visibility only when researchers historicise colonial film units or consider East Africa as a setting for popular Hollywood films (Smyth 1977, 1989; Diawara 1992; Ukadike 1994, 2002; Barlet 2000). Conspicuously still, the growing subjective East African filmic imaginaries (at least from the 2000s) receive minimal critical attention compared to the often-contested Hollywood films about East African experiences populate the academia (see, for instance, Vambe & Zegeye 2010; Rwafa 2011; Vambe and Khan 2014; Dokotum 2013; 2020). This paucity of scholarship in films by East Africans (as a whole or films from the constituent national cinemas in the region) is what created more zeal for me to study the region’s growing cultural representations.
Moreover, the few studies about the burgeoning cinema seem to have focused more on industry dynamics. However, the attention to East Africa’s film industries revealed the presence of significant synergies in terms of film funding and production, regulation, training that established (and still contribute) the necessary conditions to enable a vibrant cinema in the region (Dipio 2010; Englert 2010; Rasmussen 2010; Ndiho 2014; Magara, “Empowering Ugandans” 2014, 2015; Overbergh 2014; Shule 2011, 2014, 2016, 2017). Given the previous studies’ attention to matters of industry and policy, this study focuses on exploring East Africa’s emerging themes and aesthetics in the films of 2000 to 2018 when the region witnesses an unprecedented boast in film production. This scope was based on the hypothesis that since the development trajectories of the constituent cinemas of East Africa were similar: they are mostly influenced by Nollywood’s popular cinema and commenced from the 2000s, the emergent themes and aesthetics might be homogenous. Geopolitical and geolinguistic factors were considered as significant in fostering a homogenous but complex trajectory of discourses that in tandem shape the themes and mode or style of representation.

This project, therefore, uses the geopolitical confines of Burundi, Rwanda Kenya, Tanzania, South Sudan and Uganda—the member states of the multilateral political entity called East African Community (EAC)—as a geographical definition of East African cinema. When conceptualising the regionality of East African cinema, I considered contemporary debates in East African literature and film studies. Most of the discussions draw on authorship, subject and geographical factors. Simon Gikandi, a prominent scholar of African literature, for instance, defines East African literature as those texts about the region’s experiences written by East Africans in Africa, “the East African diaspora” and “expatriate writers” that have a link with the area (ix). The Journal of African Cinemas on the hand also considers East African films primarily from the geographical point of view to mean all films made by countries from the Horn of Africa through to the mid-East African coast, including Islands in the Indian Ocean.
Therefore, I combine the Bisschoff’s and Gikandi’s views with the geopolitics of the EAC to loosely define East African cinema as films made about East African or widely the Great Lakes region experiences. The films can be written or produced by East Africans by nationality, East African diaspora or the expatriate African diaspora.

While considering particular geopolitical and geocultural characteristics shared by otherwise eclectic, and distinct national cinemas to argue for the existence of a cohesive East African regional cinema, concomitantly, I am cognizant of East Africa’s diversity. In this sense, I identified and considered the similarities in history (pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial), the stages of socio-economic development, the use of Kiswahili lingua franca and the impact of the East African Community (EAC) in fostering cohesion among the member states (East African nations) hence an East African cinema.

I also used the common emerging thematic and aesthetic trends as significant parameters to determine the regionality of East African cinema. As Keyan Tomaselli argues, “relationship between African aesthetics and partnered representations of African cultures in different kinds of film” can be understood through continued interrogation and it is the means to decipher the films ideological underpinning (Tomaselli 301). Similarly, I did not veer from traditional oral codes and the aesthetics of political cinema that theorists have identified as a definitive characteristic of African cinema (Barlet 2016; Adesokan 2014; Diawara 2010, Irobi 2014). This perception essentially eliminated films by non-Africans such as Kevin MacDonald’s The Last King of Scotland, and other Hollywood films not produced or written by people with a connection to the region. Even if the films were about African people’s experiences, their lack of the above dominant aesthetic of African cinema was central to their being excluded. I am conscious of a myriad of the region’s film aesthetic influences since East Africa began making films at the time of technological revolution that allowed for transnationality of cinematic products from all over the world. However, the eclectic aesthetic
influences notwithstanding, African oral literature is given significance as the filmmakers deliberately appropriate the *griot aesthetics* in their films.

I derive the concept of *griot aesthetic* from studies of orality and the griot in African arts which look at the ingenious performance of the oral literature as mediated in other media forms, particularly film (Diawara 1988; Ebrahim 1998; De Turégano 2003; Papaioannou 2009; Fofana 2011; Tomaselli and Sakarombe 2015; Fisher 2016). The filmmakers’ (screen-griots) partaking of the traditional griots’ appropriation of art for “the double responsibility of instructing and entertaining” is what I have termed the griot aesthetics (Fofana 259). Therefore, by griot aesthetics, I simply mean the employment of oral literature’s formal styles of orality, a performative trait that aims at recreating the griot (oral storyteller), and the ideological paradigm that informs the functionality of their story or art—the didacticism. In film, didacticism manifests in the ethicopolitical messages the screen-griots chose to relay to the spectators. In exploring the emergent themes of East African cinema via attention to traditional African oral narrative aesthetics, this study attempts to contest Femi Okiremuete Shaka’s claim that “current African film scholarship is lopsided in favour of the history of the film industry at the expense of theory and textual analysis”(73). This study adds to the existing textual analyses of East African films such as my own (Magara 2014, 2019) on Ugandan films, Diang’a (2014) and Giruzzi (2015) on Kenyan films, Nkunzimana (2009) and Cieplak (2010) on Rwandan films. However, these studies focus on either a single motif of representation in each specific country, yet themes such as trauma, war and conflict are prominent across East African cinema.

To explore the specific configurations of griot aesthetics—orality and didacticism—in East African cinema, I used two primary methods: I combined textual analysis of the selected films with semi-structured interviews with the selected film’s filmmakers. Filmmakers were considered to be authentic critics of their movies just as it has been the case in key studies of
African cinema (Bakari & Cham 1996; Barlet 2000, 2016; Thackway 2004; Ukadike 2002; Diawara 2010). My starting point was to consider the filmmaker as a griot—a widely accepted position in African cinema studies. Like other scholars, I draw on the Sembenian observation that African filmmakers are the modern griots and film is the ‘evening school’ since film performs a role akin that of traditional storytellers who told stories by the fireplace in the evening. The education metaphor entails the contemporary significance of film in Africa. For the goal of African film since the 1960s to date was self-expression of “values and customs that have a long tradition in the region” and are of immediate relevance to spectators (Thackway 92). Against this backdrop, I conceptualise East African filmmakers as screen-griots, and as my interviews have demonstrated, East African filmmakers aspire to be relevant griots in their community. The filmmakers belabour to orient their creativity towards the shaping of popular discourse. The emerging themes from this burgeoning regional cinema encapsulate the critical discourses which include but are not limited to the desire for self-articulation of history, the contradictions and complexities of migration class and gender conflicts.

The History and Legacy of Colonial Film in East Africa

Unlike oral storytelling, painting, or sculpture and other material artefacts that have traditional roots in Africa, cinema is a direct product of the African encounter with the colonial experience. It is not well established when film first appeared in Africa. Scholars speculate that film arrived in Africa roughly at the end of the nineteenth Century and in the first two decades of the twentieth Century. In West Africa, film is claimed to have been first introduced by a French circus group and filmmakers in 1905. The French circus group and filmmakers exhibited two films L’arrivée d’un train en gare de la ciottat and L’arroseur arose produced by the Lumiére Brothers and screened initially in Dakar, the capital of Senegal (Diawara 52). Nwachukwu F. Ukadike, on the other hand, claims that film made its debut earlier in 1896
when a Vaudeville magician stole a “theatre graph” projector from the Alhambra Palace Theatre in London and “used it to introduce motion pictures in South Africa” (31). Roy Armes postulates that film was first introduced into Africa in the last decade of the nineteenth Century, initially in North Africa, in Algeria, and then South Africa in 1896, 1897 in Morocco and 1903 in Tunisia (1-2). In East Africa, cameras are said to be first brought by “explorers, tourists and game and trophy hunter” who were “enchanted by the wildlife” (Okioma and Mugubi 47). What we know for certain is that in East Africa film exhibition, and later production was introduced in the 1920s by the British imperial government that used film for propaganda and education, or acculturation purposes throughout its empire (Diawara 1992, Jaikumar 2006). It is not until the 1960s that the now well-known Ousmane Sembene made what are arguably the first films by a Black African from which Africans visibly participated in the production and articulation of their own experiences.

In the EAC, film was introduced by the colonialists. In Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania and South Sudan, the growth of filmmaking and film policies are traced back to the 1920s when “the British colonial office started to explore the possible influence of the use of the new mediums of radio and film in the colonies and their impact on the colonial process” (Ssali 4). While Rwanda and Burundi, who were part of Belgian Africa, film was introduced to them by the Belgians. These initial films in British East Africa were crystallised in the establishment of the Bantu Educational Kinema Experiment (BEKE) for East and Central Africa that was created in 1935 and administered by L.A Notcutt. The purpose of the films under BEKE is made explicit in the name “Educational Cinema”: films were to educate the local people in how to participate in the colonial economy. The films covered topics such as commercial farming, taxation, and modern banking methods, diseases, and their treatment, etc. In Uganda for example, some of the films made during the Bantu Educational Cinema Experiment (1935-1937) include Post Office Savings Bank, Tax, Progress, Coffee under Banana Shade, High
Colonial films were meant for the cultural adjustment, if not total acculturation of the people who were assumed to be culturally and racially ‘inferior’. As such, BEKE films were simple narratives that could be ‘easily’ understood by “the African mind [perceived as] too primitive to follow the sophisticated narrative techniques of mainstream cinema” (Diawara 4). The Colonialists’ films, like their literature and reports, propagated the notion depicting Africans as superstitious and uncivilised. They were sustaining the narrative of the glorification of Europe at the expense of Africa. The role of such films is analogous to that of cinema in other colonies of the British Empire. In India, for example, the British government produced the Hindi epic, *Mahabharata*, “to teach the Indian peasant the elements of hygiene and sanitation” (Jaikumar 17). The Indians, like Africans, were perceived as backward, “simple and illiterate,” whom the British Empire determined to ‘civilise’ using satirical films in addition to being taught proper‘ farming methods and obedience to the law (Diawara 1992; (Jaikumar 17). As Beatrice W. Mukora a Kenyan film scholar observes, films were used for indoctrination, cultural adjustment and to continuously “precipitate stereotypes of Africans while simultaneously attempting to justify colonial administration activities” (32). Similar methodologies and film policies were used throughout the British Empire. The report on the film in India, *The Film in National Life* says, “Great Britain owes a duty to the dominions; the dominions to Great Britain and to each other”; this in part reveals the mission of cultural adjustment and civilisation of the British (137 qtd. in Jaikumar 17). Framed in terms of a
benevolent and paternalistic duty, Great Britain’s mission was to civilise the purported uncivilised colonised peoples using film.

As a colonising and propaganda tool, film was also tailored to serve the needs of the empire, especially for maintaining existing power structures. After the observation that screening of similar or generic films from across the British East and Central African countries were expensive and not effective (Banfield 18), the colonialists disbanded BEKE. They established the Colonial Film Units (CFU) that operated in each colony and produced tailor-made films for relevant topical issues (Shaka 1999). The CFU for East Africa started in 1937, head quartered in Nairobi, and operated throughout the 1950s. While it ceased operation in some locations in the late 1950s—closing in 1955 in Uganda and 1957 in Sudan—in other countries the CFUs continued to operate even after independence in the 1960s (Diawara 3; Banfield 18). While the CFU continued the BEKE’ educational’ project, making films in Uganda and Tanzania, focused on, for example, economic matters such as cash crop growing, it also produced propaganda films designed to discourage rebellion against the colonial regime as evidenced by the 1950 Kenyan film that was designed to discourage people from participating in the Mau Mau uprising.

Similarly, film in Burundi and Rwanda was used as a propaganda and pedagogical tool in addition to the countries being used as sets for foreign films. Their dense tropical forests, just like plains and mountains of Kenya, were also used as sets for colonial films produced by Europeans for the European market (Shaka 28; Nkunzimana 80). Obed Nkunzimana summarises the Burundi and Rwanda experience as follows:

Under colonial occupation, their reality was captured on film and their image was disfigured by the occupying power for propaganda and mercantile reasons. During the post-independence period, some natives started to shoot their own images in tune with local preoccupations, but their endeavours were still under
surveillance by their former master whose intention was to maintain power over his former subjects by indirectly shaping the natives’ reality (79).

Post-colonial Burundi and Rwanda have been ravaged by civil wars that have curtailed the development of their respective film industries. Rwanda stabilised somewhat after the 1994 Rwanda genocide, and that semblance of peace and stability, albeit with an autocratic police state, has allowed for the development of independent filmmaking. In terms of formal, institutional support, both Rwanda and Burundi established film centres in 2003 and 2007 respectively that have greatly nurtured film culture in those countries. ²

The dynamics of film history in South Sudan are different yet similar to British East Africa. They were exposed to film as propaganda and acculturation tool as elsewhere in the British Empire. The history of colonial/post-independence film production in Sudan, is complicated by religious differences which were exacerbated by the colonial administration and independence movements. With the British’s typical divide and conquer approach of governing populations, the Northern Islamic region and the Southern Christian region of Sudan were administered separately. Upon the end of British rule, the north and south of Sudan were united as one nation-state. Since the time of Sudan’s independence in 1956, the North and South have existed in an antagonistic relationship. In 1962 a civil war broke out that culminated, after many years, in the secession of Southern Sudan in 2011. The impact of over half a century of war did not allow for any kind of film industry to thrive in South Sudan except for journalistic documentaries detailing the horrendous war and the human rights abuse in Darfur. At the same time, the Northern part of Sudan has enjoyed a stable film industry. Since

² The Rwanda Cinema Center and the Burundi Film Center are non-governmental organisations aimed at promoting the film industries in their countries. They have contributed to the training in film in the countries and the production of the short films that still dominate the cinematic expressions from Rwanda and Burundi. For more information on each see the websites, www.burundifilmcenter.org/ and www.rwandacinemacenter.wordpress.com/
secession, South Sudan has utilised nearly a decade of peace to make stories about their challenges as the newest country in Africa.

Despite their imperial purposes, Colonial Film Units were essential training grounds for the first African filmmakers and for the documentary and docudrama genres that were dominant in East Africa until the 2000s when a dynamic experimental film engrained in popular Hollywood film emerges. Gadalla Gubara, one of the first generation of Black African filmmakers, secured his film apprenticeship while working with the Sudan CFU and later Sudan Film Unit. He articulates his film production experience:

Most of my films were documentary films about Sudan. The British colonisers were in Sudan at that time, and they wanted to document their activities. They had an agricultural scheme for cultivating cotton, so I made a film about that (Ukadike, Questioning 43).

While some Africans participated, at the technical level, in the production of colonial educational films, such as Gubara of Sudan and Faustine Misanvu of Uganda, Africans tended to be underrepresented on screen and acted only in minor roles. As Rosaleen Smyth in the analysis of colonial film in East Africa affirms: “the Africans acted in these films only when it was absolutely necessary” (440). Post-production was done in London, which limited the ability of African personnel to participate. African personnel later received the final edit to be screened during a communal gathering. Africans were mainly active spectators to low-quality colonial films hence the inadequate apprenticeship.

Consistent with the colonial purpose, film censorship during both production and exhibition was introduced by colonialists and later adapted by the post-colonial East African countries. Alongside the production and screening of CFU, films were cinemas that exhibited Hollywood and other foreign movies for the natives, Europeans, and other non-native communities, especially Indians in East Africa. But the films exhibited to Africans were highly censored to eliminate any negative portrayal of European and North Americans. L.A Notcutt,
the founder of the Bantu Educational Cinema Experiment, explains the reason for the censorship in racist and patronising terms:

With backward peoples unable to distinguish between truth and falsehood, it is surely in our wisdom, if not our obvious duty, to prevent as far as possible the dissemination of wrong ideas. Should we stand by and see a distorted presentation of the white races’ life accepted by millions of Africans when we have it in our power to show them the truth (Notcutt, qtd. in Diawara 1).

Notcutt’s words in this instance explain the censorship of Charlie Chaplin’s films that were assumed to present the follies of the white person. Yet, the systematic indoctrination through films had endeavoured to shape the figure of a white person as infallible. Like the British colony of India, in East Africa, a censorship board based in Nairobi Kenya was established to regulate the films watched by the Africans and Indians in 1930. Because the British believed that different races had different film literacy levels, a racially based censorship system was established, “where the censorship board deemed films suitable for audiences of all races, for “non-native” audiences only, or banned entirely (Brennan 487). In the colonial hierarchy, Indians, who owned companies that operated the cinema halls in major cities in British East Africa and later in independent East Africa were regarded as second-class citizens over the third-class Africans. ³ At the same time, Europeans controlled film distribution (Banfield 20, Martin Mhando qtd. in Smyth, “The Feature” 392). Today, exhibition cineplexes in major East African cities are still predominantly owned by Indian Africans, and they mainly screen Hollywood and Bollywood films. The colonial film’s aesthetic and policy becomes ingrained in post-colonial African films that were state-funded and one of the factors for didacticism in East African film to date.

³ Indians are a minority population in East Africa. They came to region in the 19th Century as “traders” in the cost towns of Lamu, Zanzibar and Mombasa and then also came in with the colonialists as “labourers, employed workers, technical worker and small-scale traders” (Adam 1)
Using post-independence Tanzania as case for an East African country which had a clear film policy, there was a continuation of appropriating films in post-colonial East African states for education and propaganda purposes. Tanzanian employed film as propaganda and education tool to indoctrinate the Africans with its peculiar African socialist ideology known as *Ujamaa* (broadly meaning brotherhood, togetherness). Mona Mwakalinga in her study of Tanzania’s film industry encapsulates the *Ujamaa* films by the first president of Tanzania, Julius Nyerere:

The Nyerere administration had declared agriculture to be the backbone of the Tanzanian economy and thus targeted this audience. This was in line with the *Ujamaa* policy, which emphasised rural development. Films such as *Habari ya Tanzania* (*Tanzanian News*, 1964), *Road Ahead* (1962), *Land of Promise* (1963), *Kilimo Bora Cha Mahindi* (*Modern Method of Farming*, 1968), and *Panda Pamba: Mkoa Wa Mashariki* (*Grow Cotton: Eastern Region*, 1968) were shown to the rural population to show them what the government was doing “on their behalf,” in hopes of persuading them to adhere to the government’s agricultural policy calling for the production of more cash crops. The films *Kilimo Bora Cha Mahindi* and *Panda Pamba: Mkoa Wa Mashariki* both illustrate better ways of cultivating corn and cotton (39).

Mwakalinga further observes that the films were screened to the masses in the presence of government officials, who at the end of each screening emphasised the need for implementation of the government policies, particularly in agriculture as seen above. Tanzania’s state grip on the film industry has continued to date that contemporary filmmakers go through a rigorous censorship process. Like in Tanzania, other post-colonial states in the East African region, in particular Kenya, Uganda, and Sudan, continued to produce documentary films and television programs whose aesthetic is akin to those produced by the colonial film units—overtly educational and often banal.

Because of East Africa’s prolonged exposure to didactic documentary and television, the docudrama aesthetic remains relatively dominant, and it is often transposed into other
genres of films. Aesthetically, the few independent films produced in Uganda and Kenya from 1960 to 2000 are not distinct from so-called topic-oriented films, such as the non-governmental education films, whose characteristics can be traced to the colonial and state produced didactic and propaganda films (Prabhu 7; Diang’a “Message” 2). Titles include Faustin Misanvu’s *Adopted Twins* in Uganda (Dipio 189), and Sao Gamba’s *KolorMask* in 1986, Anne Muigai’s *Saikati* in 1992, and Wanjiru Kinyanjui’s *Battle of the Sacred Tree* in 1995 (Diang’a, “Cinematographic” 187). It is not until the turn of the 21st Century that East Africa’s more dynamic and experimental, independent filmmaking begins.

**Factors for the Growth of the Film Industries in the 2000s**

There is a myriad of reasons for the growth of film industry in the 2000s that can be traced from late 1990s and early 2000s when East Africa witnessed a myriad of film-related activities that ignited the growth of film industries in various countries. The activities ranged from an increased flow of films into the region, the establishment of film festivals, a revamp and establishment of film courses in major universities and the establishment of the first non-government film training organisation, Maisha Film Lab, that has mentored film practitioners (including the author) in and outside the region. The start of film festivals, university-level courses and production-oriented training coincided with the proliferation of affordable digital video production and distribution technologies and platforms. Together with the influx of transnational Nollywood and Bollywood films, these other activities—the establishment of film festivals, and training of different kinds—were some of the significant factors that jump-started film making in East Africa in the 2000s.

To unpack them one by one: digital technology allowed East Africans to make films by recording on analogue video cameras using the Video Home System (VHS). Later they progressed to Video Cassette Recorder (VCR) cameras and until recently, the higher definition digital format cameras. Today, East Africans can use a mobile phone to shoot popular films,
as seen from the feature film, *Jongo Love* from Kenya, a production practice now further incentivised by mobile phone film production competitions. As Ann Overbergh notes in her study of film in Kenya and Tanzania, “technology has indeed had a significant impact on many aspects of our societies, including on the production and diffusion of audio-visual stories” (47).

In addition to increased accessibility to the means of production, digital technology enabled the distribution of Nigerian, Ghanaian, and American films into the East African market from the late 1990s and early 2000s which in turn sparked the interest of many businesspersons to invest, initially, in the distribution (including sales of VHS tapes, DVD/VDC, and video rentals) and then commercial film production. It is still the case today that “several non-pay TVs channels” show Nollywood films and home video sales remain high (Dipio “Audience” 94). Digital technology also allowed for (and is still enabling) the establishment of more television stations, hence creating a market for local films (Young 180). M-net African Magic channels (based in South Africa), Zuku TV (based in Kenya), Azamu TV (based in Tanzania), and local television industries were able to broadcast East African films to a broader audience beyond East Africa and Africa via satellite. Ideally, if marketing structures were to be streamlined across the region, East Africa’s film industry would be a formidable force. For East Africa has a tremendous growing number of working and middle classes (those who can afford a movie ticket, data to live-stream a movie and or have a television set) to sustain a vibrant industry which can be supplemented with online platforms that target a market beyond East Africa.

The television industry (both local and international cable television stations) has been critical in the promotion of film production in the 2000s through the funding and exhibition of East African films. Before the 1990s there was a monopoly of state-owned television; this
ceased as more privately-run television broadcasters permeated the market. As privately-owned television was gaining more currency, pay cable television with the use of digital satellites also gained traction. Pay cable television provided a myriad of films and audio-visuals to viewers which, in part, influenced the filmmakers’ sense of subjective representation. For instance, the South African based MultiChoice’s DStv has many African Magic channels and have, to some extent, been funding film productions. Private television companies across the region are also increasingly investing in the production of content, but they are struggling to break even in an economy where television viewership is below 50% with a “household television penetration at 32%” because of low electricity penetration in rural East Africa (Advanced Television). In places where television has proliferated, the viewership of local content is excellent (Dipio 2014; Karoney 2008). In East Africa alone, Multichoice has over four African Magic channels (Maisha Magic, Magic Epic, Magic Family, Magic Bongo, and Pearl Magic) that majorly program the region’s films. However, one of the significant challenges to cinema, in terms of content production, broadcast and audience reach, is the tendency of television channels to screen series rather than single feature films because of the capacity of series to draw a continuous viewership (Overbergh 66). The filmmakers observe that from 2017 national and transnational film production around East Africa begin to decline while the production of television series surged (Ndagire; Owusu, Interview).

Another critical factor for the growth of film activities in East Africa was the commencement of teaching of film courses in universities and other colleges from the early 2000s onwards. For instance, at Makerere University (the oldest university in East and Central

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4 There are many television broadcasters in each East African country. Each of these broadcasters compete to show content of which more than 50% is foreign though particular national products dominate and screened at primetime.

5 According to the 2015 research by Dataxis, “The five countries of the East African Community (EAC) had a total population of 146.89 million end-2014, with 33.61 million households and a TV household penetration rate of 32 per cent” (Advanced Television). In 2019 EAC has 6 countries with South Sudan as the newest member. The combined population of the EAC is now estimated at over 200 million people. There are many households that cannot afford a television set, and even when they can afford the television, they do not have electricity.
Africa), the film criticism courses that were earlier accredited to be taught in the then Department of Literature commenced in 2004\(^6\), and in 2008 a full film and drama program was started at the school of Liberal and Performing Arts. Similarly, in Kenya, the Department of Literature at Kenyatta University graduated the first M.A thesis on film in 2007. This is said to be the first in the entire country, and after that a theatre arts and film program was started in 2008. By 2000, film course units were being taught in the Departments of Creative Arts and Performing Arts at the University of Dar-es-salaam that later developed into a full-fledged Bachelor of Film program in 2016. As the production of movies increased, other universities began teaching full film programs, and many film schools and training centres were established.\(^7\) These programmes were augmented by non-governmental institutions such as Maisha Film Lab which promotes film production in East Africa and was established in Uganda in 2004 \(^8\). In Dar-es-salaam, a cultural think tank called Culture and Development East Africa (CDEA) was established in 2012, and it has contributed significantly to the networking of filmmakers in Tanzania. These schools and organisations synergise with the other film-trainings at various film festivals augmenting a regional film culture — developing an East African community of creatives who were keen to produce filmic representation of their community and an audience that was interested in their images.

The establishment of film festivals whose primary target audience were East Africans also gave rise to a sense of East Africanness for East African filmmakers. Film stakeholders

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\(^6\) The general film criticism course unit was developed in the curriculum reviews, but it was never taught due to possibly lack of qualified staff. It is not until 2004 when Dr. Dominic Dipio started teaching film course units with a focus on African cinema criticism and screen writing.

\(^7\) In 2013 Kenyatta University launched a School of Creative Arts, Film and Media Studies, in which complete film programs are taught. The university of Nairobi started film courses in 2013 and United States International University Kenya launched a Bachelor of Arts degree in film production programme in 2018. Moi University teaches film courses in the department of Literature among other universities. These film programs and courses supplement the various institutes in Nairobi and Kampala such as but not limited to Mohamad Amin Institute (now closed) and Africa Digital Media Institute in Kenya and Kampala film school and Media Vision Academy in Uganda. They all target the East African community and beyond. Juba university, Burundi university and University of Kigali are yet to start film courses. It is probable the film expert there get training from other East African countries or outside of the region.

\(^8\)Maisha has trained many filmmakers in east Africa in its yearly film mentorship program. See maishafilmlab.org/
began to see the fact that they were lagging behind other African regions in filmmaking. The trailblazer was the 1998 Zanzibar International Film Festival in Tanzania. The Amakula International Film Festival in Uganda followed in 2004, and the Kenya International Film Festival in Kenya started in 2006. The table below highlights some of the key festivals in each country.

Table 1. Some of the Film Festivals per Country

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Start Year</th>
<th>Festival</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Burundi</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Burundi International festival of cinema and audio-visual (FESTICAB)</td>
<td>Annual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenya</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Lola Kenya Screen</td>
<td>Intermittent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Kenya International Film Festival</td>
<td>closed in 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Film Africa Documentary Festival</td>
<td>Closed after the 2nd edition in 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Udada International Women’s Film Festival</td>
<td>Annual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Kalasha International Film and Television Awards</td>
<td>Annual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rwanda</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Rwanda Film Festival</td>
<td>Annual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Mashariki African Film Festival</td>
<td>Annual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Sudan</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Juba International Film Festival</td>
<td>Annual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanzania</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Zanzibar International Film Festival</td>
<td>Annual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Arusha African Film Festival</td>
<td>Intermittent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uganda</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Amakula International Film Festival</td>
<td>Intermittent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Pearl International Film Festival</td>
<td>Annual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Uganda Film Festival</td>
<td>Annual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Nile Diaspora International Film Festival</td>
<td>Intermittent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Gulu International Film Festival</td>
<td>Annual</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Festivals are exhibition and networking spaces in which the crème-de-la crème of the region’s cinema is identified, and the filmmakers across the region offer mentorship to one other. All
the above festivals organised (and most still organise) symposia, short film courses and masterclasses aimed at improving the knowledge in filmmaking and criticism among the filmmakers and cineastes. Industry practitioners and stakeholders also get a chance to network and plan strategically for the nascent film industries. Festivals have essentially lobbied and started more systematic institutional support for the industry. For instance, it was at the Zanzibar International Film Festival (ZIFF) of 2013, that filmmakers from across the region initiated the East African Film Commission, a non-governmental organisation to advocate for the productivity of the regional industry. However, despite the film festival’s ability to accelerate the growth of the film industry, most of them have unsustainable or potentially unstable funding structures whereby donors provide most of the finance. It is only in Uganda that a government agency, the Ugandan Communications Commission, solely funds a film festival. As a result of a lack of significant government support, some festivals are intermittent or closed after a few years, as evidenced by the table above.

The geolinguistics and geopolitics of the primary market for East African film also enticed entrepreneurs into the film business. The use of common languages Kiswahili and English as the official languages in East Africa, in addition to the shared cultures were, for instance, seen as favourable conditions to distribute films transnationally and potentially ensure higher profitability. Even in instances where films were in local languages, such as Kirundi in Burundi, Kinyarwanda in Rwanda, Luganda in Uganda, the fact that these languages are mutually intelligible to Kiswahili speakers (who are a majority in East Africa) widens the

9 The committee of experts put up by ZIFF in 2013, reiterate the view this thesis holds strongly by saying that “East Africa remains the least productive region in Africa in terms of film production”. See details of experts from East, Australia and Barbedos that compose the initial framework for the East African film commission hosted by the Zanziibar International Film Festival in “ZIFF for Building an East African Film Commission” 26 June 2013 on www.ziff.or.tz/2013/06/26/ziff-for-building-an-east-african-film-commission/

10 “Kiswahili evolved out of Bantu languages… it is an African indigenous language” which developed by borrowing or mashing other Bantu dialects, especially those from the major trade routes, from the East African coastal towns of Mombasa and Zanzibar, through Uganda to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and “from Arabic and Portuguese” (Sigalla 107).
market access to at least a half of the estimated population. The predominance of Kiswahili and English languages in the region has facilitated the transnational movement and intelligibility of films both within and beyond regional borders, as well as to areas outside of Africa, hence the film industry’s economic potential. In East Africa, Kiswahili is the *lingua franca*, which fosters homogeneous identity and collapses the colonial and ethnic borders in the six EAC counties and their neighbouring DRC, Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Somalia, Comoros Mozambique, South Africa which in essence creates a “Swahiliphone Africa” (Sigalla 117). Kiswahili is recognised as Africa’s *lingua franca* because it has the most significant number of speakers inside and outside of Africa. Outside of Africa, Kiswahili is spoken in Oman, USA, Mayotte, UAE, India, etc. Because of Kiswahili’s extensive geographic coverage in Africa, it is one of the official languages of the African Union (AU) and the East African Community (EAC) (Kishe 127). As such, there is evidence of Kiswahili being used in some films from Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda, Kenya, as well as being the principal language for Tanzanian films.

After evaluating the potential of the film business, some entrepreneurs invested and continue to invest in the production and distribution of films, some of the significant facets of film industries in each country and the region. While what counts as popular film by this measure is determined by a ‘pure’ capitalist calculus of profitability, I also intend the term to

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11 The EAC’s population has been steadily growing. According to the 2015 research by Dataxis, “The five countries of the East African Community (EAC) had a total population of 146.89 million end-2014. In 2019 EAC has 6 countries with South Sudan as the newest member. According to the United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, the population of the EAC is approximately 195 Million. See [worldometers.info/world-population/eastern-africa-population/](http://worldometers.info/world-population/eastern-africa-population/)

12 In Tanzania, 98% of the films are in Kiswahili. In Kenya Kiswahili and English are used in about 50% of the films. In Burundi, 30% of the films are in Kiswahili while in Uganda, and Rwanda Kiswahili is used according to context, as seen in *The Mercy of the Jungle* and *Kony: Orders from Above* where the military men speak Kiswahili with each other or with strangers/civilians.

13 Kiswahili is Bantu language, a subgroup of the Benue-Congo branch of the Niger-Congo language family, that is spoken either as a mother tongue or a second language on in East and Central Africa.

14 African Union in African intergovernmental organisation that was formerly OAU (Organisation of African Unity that existed from 1963-2002.)
include that which “emerge[s] from everyday life on the ground” in terms of subject matter (Barber 2). Barber’s mention of “every day” and the “ground” invokes the representation of and by the ordinary folks in what Stuart Hall calls emerging cultural products in which the “margins begin to speak. The margins begin to contest, the locals begin to come to representation” (53). This study, in a further sense, delimits the ideological (class) nuances of East African film as popular art. It considers all films as popular because they are a tool of self-determination and representation of people who have until relatively recently been underrepresented in film imaginaries.

**Industry Dynamics: Film Production and Funding, Regulation and Distribution and its Impact on Aesthetics**

Presently, East Africa’s film industries can be summed up in terms of three dimensions: funding and production, regulation, and exhibition. Much as this study is not about the industry dynamics, a brief overview of the industry dynamics brings into perspective the aesthetic strands that manifest in the films. East African cinema grows out of forces of free economy whereby movies are produced according to the market demand and speculations. In each country, there are two visible strands of filmmakers—those that make artistic films for festivals and those that focus on popular films for targeting the local market.

Though industry dynamics (funding and distribution) unfold differently in each country, there are similarities in terms of the quality of the final film products and the challenges faced by art filmmakers. For instance, in Tanzania, currently said to be East Africa’s largest film industry, film production has had a long history of consistency in production, and at one time it had a clear government funding policy. In early post-colonial Tanzania, film continued to flourish compared to other East African countries because it was appropriated as a tool to reach popular masses in the promotion of African socialist ideology known as *Ujamaa* (broadly meaning brotherhood, togetherness) (Mwakalinga 39). One key personality in
Tanzania’s early film is Martin Mhando, the founder of East Africa’s first film festival—ZIFF, a filmmaker and critic. He made some of the known Tanzanian critical films before the turn of the 21st Century.\textsuperscript{15} Besides the first most talked-about film in Tanzania, Ng’oge Nangayoma and Ron Mulvihill’s 1985 \textit{Harusi ya Mariamu}, Mhando’s 1985 \textit{Yomba Yanga}, 1986 \textit{Mama Tumaini} and 2000 \textit{Mangamizi} are some of the notable films from Tanzania (Mhando, “Approaches” 2000; Mwakalinga 86). Mhando’s and other Ujamaa films were supported by the government for educational purposes.

Contemporary popular film in Tanzania is claimed to have begun informally with a theatrical group from Bagamoyo, who created television mini-series in the 2000s. Television popularised drama actors. Consequently, there arose a growing interest amongst film and music distributors to invest in the business with the sole aim of making money but not developing the art. Indians entrepreneurs, who saw the profitability of distributing video recording of stage plays and started giving small sums of money to dramatists to ‘produce’ video recording of their drama that the Indians would distribute. Daniel Manege, a Tanzanian filmmaker, explains Tanzania’s recent film history:

The 2000s was a starting point for big stars like Vicent Kigosi, Steven Kanumba, and JB. The Hindu businessmen who were distributing music saw an opportunity from the stardom of the television/drama actors. They would give them money to produce a film, and they would distribute it. They would star music artists in the film in order to maximise sales. There were no professional writers, directors or producers. It was totally business. Later on, we got a Kenyan filmmaker, George Tyson, who was working here [in Tanzania] in theatre. He was at least knowledgeable in film. I remember the first Bongo film \textit{Girl Friend} in 2003 (Interview).

\textsuperscript{15} His film, \textit{Mama Tumaini}, even though funded by the Norwegian ministry for Development cooperation, is critical of “foreign development experts whose attitudes are being questioned and evaluated” a kind of stance that cannot be easily taken by filmmakers today without government’s censorship (Mwakalinga 89). Mhando begins a conversation of examining the motive of NGO’s and other foreign agencies that as we learn in this chapter, are more neoliberal and neocolonial.
Entrepreneurs in Tanzania, East Africa’s biggest film industry, also tapped into technology and the interconnection of arts such as drama, music, television and film primarily through the use of recording stage plays and music videos so that they could distribute through a centralised system. The film industry still stands on the pedestal of Indian entrepreneurs.

Amil Shivji argues along similar lines to Manege and Shule that the start of film production in Tanzania foreshadows the kind of quality that later came to dominate the Tanzanian market, that is, largely low-quality movies (Interview; Shule 2011, “Video -Film” 2014). Shivji explains the possible cause of largely non-artistic films as follows:

Steps entertainment, one of the leading distributors, was run by an Indian businessman who had recently migrated to Tanzania…they were giving money to filmmakers to make films and therefore people associated films with Indians. They signed terrible contracts with the filmmakers (interview).

Indian distributors of Hindu movies employed famous performers from music and stage drama background to produce films in Tanzania. The Hindu businessmen valued the profit over any kind of professionalism in their filmmaking. As a result, the artistic dimension of film began to diminish (or instead were never prioritised). Majority of the first Tanzanian films starring celebrities are claimed to have been shot without screenplays. They tended to rely on improvisation by actors who were following the director’s proposed tagline (Manege and Shivji, Interview). As a consequent of low budgets and limited knowledge in film art, a huge number of popular films from Tanzania were not of good quality compared to even those that were produced in Ujamaa time and by independent filmmakers. For this reason, Bongo films, a name for Tanzanian films, became synonymous with low-quality video films, a reputation in relation to which independent filmmakers struggle to distinguish themselves. Shivji further elaborates:

Whenever I go to festivals, people ask me why I am the only Tanzanian at the festival, yet we have the biggest industry in terms of production. It is because
Tanzania is dominated by extremely low budget commercial, straight to DVD that hardly goes to festivals or cinemas (Interview).

In as much as Tanzania’s filmic landscape may not differ much from that of other countries that follow a straight-to-DVD film model, film production and distribution in Tanzania is relatively centralised which has contributed to the industry’s success and the most prolific in East Africa. Only a few filmmakers work on commission, making films for non-governmental organisations, government agencies, and sometimes independently (making films with no strings attached from the producers, often investing in their own resources). Notable among them are Beatrix Mugishagwe director of the 2005 release *Tumaini* (Childhood Robbed), Amil Shivji of the 2017 film, *T-Junction*, Notavus Mugurusi, who makes movies for YouTube, Seko Shamte known for the 2015 film *Homecoming* and Hamadi Mwapachu of the 2015 Tanzania’s thriller, *Dar Noir* fame. There are also filmmakers such as Daniel Manege who straddle both the independent and centralised commercial filmmakers’ categories in Tanzania.

The trajectory of Uganda’s contemporary film industry (the second largest film industry in the region considering the number of films produced per year) is not so much different from that of Tanzania. Uganda produced its first independent/commercial film in 2005 with Ashraf Simwogerere’s *Feelings Struggle*. Simwogerere, who began as a stage dramatist expressed interest in film due to the popularity of Nigerian films in Uganda. He thought Ugandans would appreciate a film representing their own culture and experiences. Immediately after Simwogerere’s *Feelings Struggle*, a trend of art cinema began to emerge, parallel to the commercial Nollywood inspired films that made straight-to-DVD films. This trend comprised of somewhat ‘professional’ filmmakers with skills in the art of filmmaking. As much as the Third Cinema’s facet drove them to raise awareness on crucial social issues, they were interested in operating a business structure similar to that of Hollywood, where a film would
premier in cinemas before its screening on television and home videos. Also, filmmakers were interested in showcasing their film at both local, regional and international film festivals. This group of filmmakers includes Cindy Magara’s *Fate* in 2006, Matt Bish’s *Battle of the Souls* in 2007, Donald Mugisha’s *Divisionz* in 2008, Dominica Dipio’s *A Meal to Forget* in 2009, Carol Kamya’s *Imani* in 2010 et cetera (Niwamanya “A Close Look”). The films coming out of Uganda today can be categorised as following Simwogerere’s commercial-oriented cinematic trend that is dominated by film enthusiasts who want to tell their stories in film, and those that espouse the artistic and ethical-political aesthetic of cinema. Distribution in Uganda is not centralised; many businesses deal in large to small scale film distribution.

Kenya’s film history is older than Uganda and Tanzania’s. In Kenya, there were a couple of films produced before the turn of the twenty-first Century. Notable among them is the 1986 film *Kolor Mask* by Sao Gamba, that is also said to be “the first all native Kenyan cast and crew film to be produced in Kenya with government funding” (Okioma & Mugubi 53). In dealing with the issue of racial stereotypes between the black community and the white one, *Kolor Mask* inspired an aesthetic of didacticism, which is later adopted in the revolutionary film on gender, *Saikati*, by Anne Mungai in 1992.¹⁶ There are several films by Kenyans produced in the period Okioma and Mugubi call “the Re-Awakening” phase from 1983 to 1992, a name that indicates how Kenyans begin take charge of their narratives, and to make concerted efforts to address gender discrimination (52). The latter is a factor that influences the subject matter of later films, as discussed in chapter 5. From this period forward

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¹⁶ Anne Mungai is said to be the pioneer female filmmaker in Kenya. Her filmography includes: *Wekesa at Crossroads*, (a 60-minute docudrama released in 1986), *Tough Choices, Promise of Love, Usilie Mtotowa Africa* (which won the American Anti-Vivisection Society (AAVS) Award, Gabriella Mistral Award and the Plan International Award), *Pongezi*, a 25 minute documentary produced in 1993, and *Root 1*, a 52-minute docudrama produced in 1994 (both of which won the British Council-Kenya Award in their respective years), *Hope Beyond Tears, Sautiya Watoto wa Madiani, Sauti ya Watoto wa Nyangoma*, and *Counting The Cost* (Okioma and Mugubi 53). Mungai is phenomenal female filmmaker whose focus has been on producing overtly didactic films (docudramas) and documentaries.
Kenyans witness films made by Kenyans about and for Kenyans. These include Ingolo wa Keya’s *The Married Bachelor* in 1997, and Wanjiru Kinyanjui’s, *The Bird with the Broken Wing* in 1990, *Black in the Western World* in 1992 and *Clara has two Countries* in 1992. Despite the enormous output of films before the turn of the twenty-first Century, Kenya is the third-largest film producer in East Africa in terms of annual production. At the turn of the 21st Century, Kenya’s film industry grows exponentially. This renaissance could be explained by the wave of the avant garde cinema that was sweeping through the entire region. Like other East African countries, Kenya in the 2000s witnesses a kind of “post-modern era” characterised by experimental film that draw on multiple genres and themes, even attempting (albeit with little success) to divert from a dominant griot aesthetic (Okioma and Mugubi 55).

For instance, in 2002 Judy Kibinge’s *Dangerous Affairs* won the overall award at the fifth edition of the Zanzibar International Film Festival—then the only film festival in East Africa—while two films, *Price of a Daughter* by Jane Munene and *Naliaka is Going* by Albert Wandango are released in 2003. At the same time, popular films produced by entrepreneurs from River Road, downtown Nairobi also start an informal industry known as Riverwood that deploys the Nollywood structure straight-to-DVD marketing strategy (Overbergh, “Kenya’s Riverwood” 2015).

Rwanda and Burundi have a similar film trajectory because they both begin with film training centres that significantly shape the artistic sensibilities of filmmakers. The Rwanda Film Centre (RFC) and the Burundi Film Centre (BRC) were non-governmental entities initiated in 2003 and 2007 respectively by local cineastes and supported by Christopher Redmond, a Canadian filmmaker. These centres gathered people interested in filmmaking and produced a series of short films, which arguably gave rise to the first wave of filmmakers in both countries. Although the centre produced *Gito L’ingrat* (Gito the Ingrate) in 1992, which was written and produced by Leonce Ngabo—a Burundian filmmaker and founder of Burundi
International Film Festival—it may not have influenced contemporary filmmakers because it was not readily available on the market. Richard Niyongabo, a filmmaker, actor, and beneficiary of BFC training explains the brief history of film in Burundi:

Burundi film industry began in 2007. From 2007 to 2009 there were some films made. Then another wave of filmmaking takes place in 2011 and 2012; then there is a generation of 2014 to 2016. There are production houses that make popular films that are sold on the market but don’t go to festivals. On average, 20 film titles are produced per year.

While the BFC produced filmmakers with technical film knowledge and consequently artistic films, the dominance of market tactics and profiteering (similar to those in Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania) is nonetheless evident in Burundi. Most of the BFC trainees were unable to secure funding to produce feature films. There are many short films from Burundi selected for this study especially those produced under the BFC, which was premised on the griot-like mandate of making films to “inspire and educate and entertain” (Guadardo 83). Significantly, because of Burundi’s instabilities that led to an exodus of refugees from Burundi to other parts of the world, there are diaspora filmmakers dramatatising Burundian’s experiences in their adoptive countries. Jean Mary Ndayishimiye (also known as John K-ay) and Ferdinand Niyongere (also known as Fred Niyo) in Australia are the most notable.

Likewise, Rwanda has many short filmmakers with a handful of filmmakers who have produced a feature film. Rwanda’s first feature film appears much later, and it is claimed to be Grey Matter, by Kivu Ruhorahoza in 2011 (Dusabejambo, Interview). Comparatively, Rwanda, having started filmmaking much later, has had more of a chance to anticipate and mitigate the film industry’s challenges, especially those associated with distribution and funding. Most filmmakers look for co-productions with Europe, particularly France and Belgium, which has got ripple effects on the filmmakers’ aesthetic choices. Rwandan filmmakers also distribute most of their films through online platforms, which lessens the piracy issues.
South Sudan, East Africa’s smallest industry had its “first feature film called *Jamila* in 2008” (Labajo, Interview). *Jamila* was produced by a local film company, Woye Film Company. Since 2010, more companies have started to invest in film production in South Sudan. Because of South Sudan’s political instability, there are many films about Sudan that are being produced by Sudanese refugees in Kenya, for instance, the 2017 *Love has no Boundaries* by Justin Ruharuka Abel. The most productive filmmakers of the South Sudanese diaspora are the online producers of Nyuonville TV, that has, among other things, produced the award-winning short film *Deception*, directed by Bashir Jaythankz (see [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xCKEStUakK4&t=127s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xCKEStUakK4&t=127s)). There are other films by South Sudanese and non-South Sudanese filmmakers in Australia who are representing Sudanese experience in the diaspora (see for instance the 2014 film by Eddy Bell, *Grey Bull*, and the 2016 *Bad Influence* by Yaro Ladou and Maggie Athou). Despite social instabilities, there are a steady growing number of films produced in South Sudan as evidenced by the catalogue of the 2019 Juba International Film Festival that evidence at least 10 films (short and feature fiction) were screened and competed in various award categories. Significant challenges notwithstanding, the festival is an opportunity for filmmakers converge to discuss the critical role of representing an alternative discourse to the war and conflict narrative that dominates mainstream media.

**Funding and Regulation**

There is limited systematic government funding in East Africa. As a result, filmmakers source funds from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and government agencies that commission subject-driven films such as but not limited to AIDS, elections violence, gender, excision. The local finance void has led to foreign film production companies shaping the film industry, a situation which has contributed to the development of ‘festival’ filmmakers (those who make films to screen at festivals and cinemas in Europe or North America). Most of the
Euro-Africa co-productions, however, are scarce in Africa. Therefore, co-productions are seen to continue propagating the ideology of colonial films whose focus was to sell exotic African experiences for the consumption of non-African audiences. Critics view ‘festival’ filmmakers as continuing the trajectory of the Hollywood films of Africa whose main interest is “profit” from the misery of Africans (Dokotum, “Re-Membering” 147, Nkunzimana 82). Until recently, the responsibility to fund, produce and exhibit films has been left to creative personnel which complicates their efforts to pursue creative, and independent productions. A case in point concerns the struggle of filmmakers to include culturally specific codes in their films. Even at fundamental stages such as script writing, co-producers have a reputation for interfering (Shivji, Ruhorahoza and Gitonga, Interview). Yet East African filmmakers continue to seek co-production finance in order to offset funding gaps, or simply in order to break through to more extensive markets. Despite the compromises required, a considerable corpus of East African films is modelled on the existing popular films from other vibrant African film industries such as Nigerian and Ghanaian in terms of genre and industry.

There are processes to establish film regulatory agencies in each country which could synchronise the industry’s funding, training, production, marketing, and exhibition. Since 2014 there existed the East African Film Network (EAFN), a non-governmental organisation that oversaw coordination and tracking of film activities in the region.17 Although a clear policy regarding financing remains absent, respective governments in East Africa have started initial steps at establishing systems to regulate the industry, albeit haphazardly. Visibly, various East African governments have initiated agencies to govern the budding film industry. Only Kenya has developed something like the Kenya Film Commission (KFC). KFC was established in 2005, and it was operationalised as a government agency under the Ministry of Information in

17 The first meeting was convened by the EAC at the EAC headquarters in Arusha, Tanzania in March 2014. See https://bigeye.ug/east-african-film-network-launched/
2006. Its main task is to streamline the film industry at both production and exhibition levels. Uganda, for example, has a government agency, the Uganda Communication Commission (UCC). The UCC is tasked with supporting the film industry via its sponsorship of the Uganda Film Festival. Tanzania has established the Tanzania Film Board (TFB). The TFB is however, criticised for focus more on the censorship of film scripts and films that are screened in the country, rather than financing the industry (Shule “Piracy, politics, and control” 46-47).

Rwanda is in the process of establishing a film commission attached to their Rwanda Film Office. The latter is in turn under the administrative control of the Rwanda Development Board.

At supra-governmental level, the EAC has initiated programs to govern the budding film industry. However, it is not only tailored to film. The programme encompasses all arts. The EAC, with the goal of fostering regional integration, started a biennial East African Art and Culture Festival called JAMAFEST in 2012. JAMAFEST is a Kiswahili acronym, Jumuiya ya Afrika Mashariki Utamaduni (East African Arts and Culture Festival). JAMAFEST is held rotationally in the different EAC countries. Film is one of the arts that the EAC identifies as capable of creating jobs for the young East African population (Magara, “Emerging”). The commencement of the East African Film Network and the JAMAFEST have interested various governments in thinking strategically about the potential of film to contribute to the economic development of East Africa. Because the EAC’s critical role is to foster regional cooperation, from now onwards, there are prospects of bringing up to speed all the EAC countries regarding financing of creative arts. As a celebration of the 20 years of the existence of the EAC, in 2020, the Cultural Office announced the first regional call for the short film competition called “The EAC ideserve citizen’s engagement campaign” (see theeacideserve.com). This funding campaign, albeit temporary, is a milestone towards regional governments’ funding initiative
and it supplements the non-governmental documentary film fund, Docubox,\(^\text{18}\) that is based in Kenya and targeting filmmakers in East Africa and central Africa. The appearance of the EAC’s film funding campaign can be interpreted as a litmus test pointing toward the creation of an EAC film fund that could steer the film industry towards more self-reflexive and subjective imaginaries.

Due to the above industry dynamics, there are two categories of filmmakers in East Africa namely: the festival filmmakers and commercial filmmakers (straight-to-DVD). The two categories are partly due to the lack of clear film funding policies in East Africa, exposure to low budget Nigerian film, and the presence of a broad audience that is largely interested in the social function of film as opposed to its art. Notably, the imperfections in policy and funding and the presence of neo-liberal economies in East Africa have enabled the growth of various national film industries, which is evident in the respective industry’s nomenclature. Though not unanimously recognised as such, Bongowood is the name for Tanzania’s film industry, Hillywood, for Rwanda, Ugawood/Wakaliwood for Uganda, Riverwood for Kenya. All these names attest to eclectic influences from Hollywood, Nollywood, and Bollywood which were introduced to East Africans through the forces of market demand (Englert 143; Brennan 508; Shule 2017). The second category—the festival filmmakers—make commercial films that are exhibited at film festivals in and outside of East Africa. Most of the films in this category are either co-productions or commissioned films that are funded by film funding agencies non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and government agencies, and they are mainly subject-driven narratives or art films. Commissioned films that are funded by government agencies, NGOs and non-film making agencies are often a hindrance to creativity because they are mostly issue-based, and they focus on “content rather than form” (“Hjort and Jørholt 10).

\(^{18}\) Docubox was established by a Kenyan filmmaker, Judy Kibinge in 2012. It was majorly to fund documentary films, but it has since opened up to supporting fiction short films.
Moreover, the filmmakers are given “the opportunity to make films about issues that they do actually regard as important” (Ibid).

Despite the fact that commissioned and co-production films have allowed for the production of transnational African films, they are noted for having created something akin to a ‘genre’ of *message films* that “isolate a global problem and make it look local” (Shivji, Interview). By 2010 before the commercial film industries gained momentum, the film landscape was awash with films on the subject of health, girl child, gender-based violence, HIV/AIDS which “form the bulk of films made in Kenya” and by extension throughout East Africa (Kinyanjui 73). Often such films are propaganda or advocacy tools aimed at addressing a given goal or used for fundraising. Amil Shivji, who once turned down the offer to direct an NGO film, argues that commissioned films are very political, and they can make filmmakers lose their “way in terms of style and purpose” (Interview). For instance, a film on female excision or gang-rape would be made to look like a problem of only a given tribe X in Africa, yet many women all over the world experience it. Though they are sold and screened in North America and Europe, commissioned films have a minimal presence in local African cinema markets. Some co-production companies and agencies also have left an indelible mark on East Africa’s filmscape as they are responsible for the most transnational East African films such as *Grey Matter*, *The Mercy of the Jungle*, and *Sometimes in April*. The German companies, One Fine Day Films and Ginger Ink have produced over five outstanding films made in Kenya (see, for example, *Nairobi Half-life*, *Supa Modo*, *Kati Kati*, *Soul Boy*, and *Something Necessary*). Noteworthy too, is the fact that films such as Raoul Peck’s *Sometimes in April* and *Lumumba* have also become critical aesthetic influences on new filmmakers.

**Censorship**

Another industry dynamic that has had an exponential effect on film aesthetics is the formal and informal modes of censorship imposed on filmmakers. All countries have
regulatory bodies that are overseeing the film industry activities. Tanzania and Rwanda are exemplar of censorship in the region, because they have a comparatively more restricted production and exhibition space. In Rwanda and Tanzania, censorship begins at the script level and extends to production and distribution, thus stifling the aesthetic choices of the filmmakers. Even though Tanzania has a long history of state-funded films and a prolific popular film industry, it concomitantly has a long history of censorship. Censorship was instituted during the colonial period (which applies to all Imperial British East Africa) and continued in the post-independence Nyerere administration (Mwakalinga 2010). Nyerere used film as one of the tools to organize Tanzania into a stable economy and society. The government’s grip on film production has continued post-Nyerere’s Ujamaa (African socialism ideology) to the present governments (Brennen 508, Mhando, “Approaches to ”). Throughout East Africa, only Tanzania systematically continued to fund Ujamaa films and screenings that were purposively a cinema for national development Smyth (1989, Mwakalinga 2010). Still, this cinema ceased in the 1980s (Brennen 506; Shule 45; Böhme 2015). From the 1980s onward, the Tanzanian film industry, like in other East African countries, was abandoned to private investors and donors. But, post-Nyerere governments seem to be more concerned with collecting tax revenues from the industry rather than investing in it. Vicencia Shule, a Tanzanian filmmaker and scholar, articulates the cost of film making and exhibition in Tanzania:

Before the issuance of tax stamps, video films on DVD and VCDs have to pass through four major ‘checkpoints’. First, the individual or the company involved in the DVD/VCD business should be registered by BASATA and obtain a registration and a license; the work should pass through the Film Board for ‘censorship’ and classification. This stage involves acquiring recording and distribution permits (46-47).

In addition to the TFB’s services the filmmaker or film production company must pay a filming tax to the government. Then the film’s distributor must also pay an additional tax, which, in
essence, functions prohibitively. While the Tanzanian government collects taxes from the industry, there are no systemic policies to improve funding, exhibition and copyright management to prevent piracy all of which would improve the industry. More importantly, there are no policies to advocate or secure the filmmakers’ freedom of expression. Because of Tanzania’s strict policing of content, filmmakers undergo self-censorship. Otherwise, they risk the TFB banning their films, a risk articulated by filmmakers such as Mugurusi, Shivji and Manege who have made critical films about Tanzania’s political regime. Their political claims are evident in *Samaki Mchangani*, *T-Junction*, and *Shoeshine* by Shivji, *Safari Ya Gwala* by Manege, and Muguruzi’s YouTube movies. As a consequent of censorship, a more significant percentage of Tanzanian films (approved or not) are concerned with superficial themes of love, family and other social relationships. The filmmakers are pressured not to freely engage with more critical subjects.

In the post-genocidal Rwanda, like in Tanzania, the Kagame Administration has taken a restricted ideological stance to filmmaking by supporting or rather only allowing the production of films that promote the ‘unity’ of Rwandans by foregrounding the ‘We are all Rwandan’ trope. Presently, the government of Rwanda sanctions and finances films (majorly documentaries) that agree with their message. As Andrew P. Young in his study of media in Rwanda succinctly articulates, “[g]iven contemporary funding conditions, potential funding has relegated general narrative filmmaking as secondary to documentary and educative programming” (231). The government’s stance is manifested in both self and state censorship on any genocide discourse that it deems as countering the ideology of a united, conflict-free Rwanda. Clearly Rwandans are prevented from remembering through film, yet objective representation of any traumatic events could function “as some sort of therapy” (as discussed in chapter 3) (Kabera qtd. in Hron 361).
Like Tanzania, which has most films in romance genre, censorship, coupled with historical coincidences, accounts for the over ninety percent present films narrating the 1994 Rwanda genocide (Mutiganda, Interview). The genocide narratives are woven around varied subject matter such as love war, and genres such as drama and war or adventure films. Justifiably, the subject matter of genocide is dominant “in all other forms of art” because “people want to tell their side of this national tragedy for therapeutical purpose” (Ruhorahozza, Interview). However, in a heavily policed Rwanda’s film industry, there has emerged something approximating a genre: genocide films that foreground the forgive and forget mantra. Any creative not towing the government line of producing a film promoting co-existence between Rwandans is forced to make their films outside of the country. Joel Karekezi, Rwanda’s most prolific filmmaker, filmed both of his feature films *Imbabazi: The Pardon* in Uganda where censorship and regulation to filmmaking are slightly relaxed. *Imbabazi: The Pardon* gives an objective representation of the Rwanda genocide by portraying the anguish and disillusionment of both the victims and perpetrators of the Rwandan genocide in the post-genocide era. Possibly Karekezi could have been authorised to film in Rwanda if the film removed sequences that show anguish and despair by protagonist and antagonist because despite showing the complexity of forgiveness and healing after such traumatic incidents where best friend turn archenemy, he still ends the film on a note of mercy.¹⁹

As such, censorship has led to filmmakers selling or instead negotiating their aesthetic sensibilities, so to speak, when they lobby for funding outside their country and operate outside the mainstream film circuits. Of course, foreign funding, majorly from Europe comes with its restrictions: it is unsystematic and unreliable. Filmmakers who have done co-productions with

¹⁹ It is worth noting that the filmmakers I interviewed in Rwanda were hesitant to share their opinions concerning representations of the genocide. What this hesitation suggests is difficult to say with certainty. In these instances, it is difficult not to be attuned to the kind of environment that censorship creates—self censorship. It could be because of the trauma that some aspects of the genocide are rather not discussed.
Western filmmakers such as Mutiganda, Ruhorahoza, Shivji and Karekezi decry of the restrictions tagged on foreign funding which in tandem delimits the creative independence of filmmakers. However, co-productions are one way in which filmmakers circumvent state censorship since transnational films often evade state scrutiny. For instance, Karekezi’s *The Mercy of the Jungle*, that exposes the fact that African states (around DRC) are looting Congo’s minerals) would not easily get funding from Rwanda or Uganda, the countries explicitly implicated in the looting of Eastern DRC’s minerals. However, it manages to get filmed in Uganda which in a way impacted its representation of Uganda’s role. Uganda, which was very prominent in the invasion of Eastern DRC (as discussed in chapter 3) is conspicuously absent in this film, which I see as a compromise.

The filmmakers have to make pragmatic decisions regarding their choice of story and source of funding, collaborations across the region as a means to circumvent any state’s control. Kivu Ruhorahoza, for example, has worked as a producer on films in Burundi, Kenya and Tanzania. There are other ways to evade state censorship such as using the internet to publish films, as seen with Novatus Mugurusi’s films in Tanzania. Another key tactic is the use of symbolism and allegory, key examples of which include Amil Shivji’s *Fish of the Land*, a film that interrogates the misappropriation of Africa’s rich resources of Africa by a few people while the masses are wallowing in poverty, Hamadi Mwapachu’s *Dar Noir*, which explores the underbelly of crime such as illicit drug dealing, human trafficking and sacrifice in Tanzania, and Kivu Ruhorahoza’s experimental film, *Grey Matter*, that touches on the gross psychological impact of the genocide on Rwandan youth. Films that openly explore topics that are considered taboo have often been banned, as seen with the Kenyan government’s censorship of Wanuri Kahiu’s 2018 film *Rafiki* because it explores the same-sex relationship. Ultimately, East African filmmakers must devise means to perform their social responsibility
as griots in a political environment that is suspicious of filmmakers and deliberately interferes in their creativity.

**Distribution**

Like funding, film *distribution* is not institutionalised at either government or inter-governmental level. The absence of a systematised or consolidated distribution network, however, does not mean there is no film industry. The neoliberal economy generally follows a pattern of a theatrical release, then television broadcast, home video sales, and online distribution, with the latter, in particular, gaining currency. Online platforms such as YouTube have accelerated the circulation of films across and beyond the region. In each country, there are private distributors and exhibition halls (cinema and video halls). In Kenya, for example, “the democratisation of distribution” and “the dense network of video libraries and screening places near majority audiences has indeed led to dramatic increases in access to local stories. Sales prices have decreased, and the option of renting movies is widespread” (Overbergh 119). This scenario is familiar in all East African countries except for Rwanda, where DVD stores have closed business since most films are now substantially distributed on online platforms such as Zacu TV. Video halls (informal screening places often with a small projection screen or a small television) and cinemas are, for the most part, in urban centres and big cities which excludes a large percentage of rural spectators, who only watch films during film festivals when outside cinemas are set up. Throughout the region, more online video platforms are being developed while more filmmakers are utilizing existing modes of distribution and screening.

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20 Zacu TV is the first online platform that showcases films from Rwanda. Rwanda being a small cohesive country with one common language, Kinyarwanda, most of the film from Rwanda are on the platform. See Moses Opobo’s “Zacu TV, Rwanda’s first subscription-based video platform is here,” *The New Times*, 4th Dec. 2018. [newtimes.co.rw/entertainment/zacu-tv-rwandas-first-subscription-based-video-platform-here](newtimes.co.rw/entertainment/zacu-tv-rwandas-first-subscription-based-video-platform-here). See Zacu’s website: [zacutv.com/](zacutv.com/)
spaces to maximize the market potential. The online distribution platforms help filmmakers to elude state censorship and promotes creativity in terms of genre and subject matter.

**Framing a Regional Cinema**

The conceptualisation of six eclectic cinemas into a homogenous cinema, East African cinema is, in part, premised on the ongoing debates of conceptualizing African cinema as a single unit despite its heterogenous cinemas. This latter mode of categorisation was enabled by the consideration of similarities in history and culture that manifest in analogous thematic concerns and aesthetics, particularly the orality and didacticism of the films (Diawara 1988, Dipio 2014, Adesokan 233, Barlet 2016). As African scholar Elija Doro points out, East Africa “is inhabited by people the same cultural and primordial ties” in addition to a shared history (both precolonial and postcolonial) (“The Geo-Politics”). To some extent, this striking similarity engenders coherence among the peoples, which in tandem influences some tropes in artistic representations from music, fashion, literature, and film. Before the imposition of the present problematic and complex geographical borders by the European imperialists that was orchestrated in the 1884-85 Berlin Conference, (in which Africa was partitioned for resource exploitation purposes), East Africa was governed under political entities (kingdoms and chiefdoms) that stretched to East and Central Africa. The kings and chiefs arranged and negotiated trade routes from Bunyoro, which is said to have at one time “included entire modern Uganda, parts of Kenya, Rwanda and Tanzania” to the entire Great Lakes Region (Kiwanuka 28). Even when Bunyoro Kitara empire, that is said to have covered the more substantial part of the interlacustrine region began to have large chunks of its territory breakaway, the trade route from the east coast of African (Mombasa and Zanzibar) and North Africa (Egypt) along River Nile were maintained (Dunbar 36; Nyakatura 1973; Kwesiga 2014; Doyle 12). Consequently, cultural and social cohesion among the East African peoples was further augmented by developing a lingua franca: Kiswahili language, which emerged by
borrowing from the Bantu languages, and the language of the foreign traders (Arabic and Portuguese). Kiswahili was spoken as a business language among the coastal peoples and those in the interior of the interlacustrine region.

Despite the erroneous geographical borders, East Africans have maintained their original social ties that are enforced by a long history of shared experiences and culture. The imperial cartographic impositions that “fragmented ethnic identities” are, therefore, of less consequence to the social lives of folks who find themselves in different modern East African geopolitical spaces (Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Mhlanga 12). As Doro argues, there are “ethnic fault lines that transcend national boundaries” that can augment social cohesion across various countries (“The Geo-Politics”). For example, the Masai ethnic group stretches from Kenya to Tanzania. The Luo ethnic group is found in Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda and North-Eastern DRC and South Sudan. A close examination of Uganda, an epicentre of the interlacustrine region, illustrates the social-cultural web that in part constitutes East African identity. For instance, the peoples of Northern Uganda have a linguistic, cultural and genealogical affinity with some ethnicities in Southern Sudan. Uganda and Kenya’s border divides the Samia people in two different countries with both countries having an administrative district with the same name—Busia. The Samia people, whether they belong to Uganda or Kenya, would and do disregard the borders separating them. Uganda’s western and southern borders also divide other peoples. The most notable ethnic group is the Banyoro-Batooro that has linguistic and cultural affinities with the Hemas in DRC across Lake Albert. In South Western Uganda, the Bafumbira and Bakiga ethnicities have kins in DRC and Rwanda. Rwandans are also closely linked to Burundians, and the Hayas of present-day North Tanzania speak a language identical to Runyoro-Rutoro (Runyakitara) of Uganda. Though these peoples are in different nation-states, there are various forms of cohesion among the East African peoples, which is brought about by cultural affinities, particularly shared languages and history. The people continue to
cooperate based on their ethnic and linguistic identities. The cooperation is augmented by the presence of porous borders which allows people to blend and continue to augment their shared experiences.

My definition of East African cinema, therefore, has been premised on previous studies that conceptually look at art in East Africa (Bisschoff 2017; Gikandi and Mwangi 2005; Slavkovic 2014). Their findings were supported by the cultural and social conditions in the region, particularly its geolinguistics factors—the use of Kiswahili and English in these countries and their geopolitics. As such, this study uses the 2020 EAC geographical borders as the scope of this complex cinema. I am cognisant of the fact that East Africa is broad, and its boundaries are fluid—it can either expand or contract—as other countries aspire to be (a)part of the multilateral organisation of the EAC. For example, Sudan and Somalia formally requested to be part of the EAC, but their requests were rejected. In June 2019 DRC formally lodged in its application to join the EAC (Mutambo). It is highly probable that DRC could be admitted into the EAC given its history and the fact that it neighbours five EAC countries (Burundi, Rwanda, South Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda) with whom it also shares cultural affinities. In addition, Somalia’s bid to join the EAC is currently being considered. Despite the existence of the longest collaboration between Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, there is more social cohesion amongst the EAC countries and those in their neighbours. The cohesion broadly manifests in the filmic imaginaries at both thematic and aesthetic levels.

21Somalia asked to be part of the EAC in 2012, its application was rejected. Sudan had earlier required to be admitted into the EAC, her application was rejected in 2011. Since then Somalia has been pressing to join the EAC. According the press release of the EAC in 2018, the Somali Ambassador paid a courtesy call to the East African Community headquarter in Arusha and he was assured that the formal process for his country to join the EAC was to commence with the sending of a “preliminary team to Somalia”. See “Somali Ambassador pays Courtesy call on EAC Secretary General”. 12th Nov. 2018. eac.int/press-releases/151-international-relations/1285-somali-ambassador-pays-courtesy-call-on-eac-secretary-general. Also see “East Africa’s EAC Rejects Somalis’ bid, Approves S.Susan,” Hiraan Online, 3rd March 2016. See hirraan.com/news4/2016/Mar/104402/east_africa_s_eac_rejects_somalia_s_membership_bid_approves_s_sudan.aspx
22 Considerably, there has been a long history of collaboration among nations on the East African coast for either political or economic purposes, which is enhanced by the geocultures and geolinguistics that could subvert the
Locating East African Cinema in African Cinema Studies

Of all the African regional cinemas, East African cinema is the least studied. While East Africa’s novelty on the film making stage could, in part, be one of the reasons for its relative paucity in African cinema studies, the postcolonial histories of African cinema, as well as the conceptual frameworks adopted for their study, have also contributed to this lack of critical attention. From the time Africans began to make films, its ensuing scholarship was mostly based on perspectives framed by broad geographical divisions—of North and South of the Sahara and former colonial linguistics classifications of Lusophone, Anglophone and Francophone (Ukadike 1994, 2014; Thackway 2003). Some studies have used geolinguistics and geopolitics as a framework such as Jonathan Haynes’s “Anglophone West Africa: Commercial Video.” Ukadike, Frank Nwachuku. Black African Cinema (1994); Roy Armes’s Postcolonial Images: Studies in North African Film (2005) and African Filmmaking: North and South of the Sahara (2006); Martin Botha’s South African Cinema 1896-2010 (2012), Boukary Sawadogo’s West African Screen Media: Comedy, TV series, and Transnationalisation (2019). Despite using such broad parameters, East Africa is conspicuously absent or only footnoted as seen in Diawara 1992, 2002, 2014, Barlet 2000, 2016, Gugler 2003, Okiremuete 2004, Armes 2008. The linguistic classification of the study of African cinemas does not capture the heterogeneity of Africa’s ethnic and linguistic diversity, in addition to the varying post-colonial socio-political dynamics that characterise these geopolitical spaces. Moreover, as Orlando has observed, African film criticism based on “linguistic denominators are also fraught with misconceptions” that “contribute to enduring neo-colonial markers” (Orlando 13). It is counterproductive to continue studying Africa based on the relatively short period of colonial history that would somewhat be forgotten or relegated

d_(geopolitics of the colonial borders) For instance, in the colonial British East Africa, present-day Kenya and Uganda were the first to cooperate by having a single customs union in 1917 (that we can call the first formal EAC), which Tanzania (the then Tanganyika) later joined in 1927. Cooperation amongst post-colonial states has had significant challenges, and often tripartite relations break and mend but the social connections remain intact.
as irrelevant at this time when Africans are undertaking a massive decolonising phase at the social, political and economic levels.

Similar to studies based on geographical and linguistic paradigms, studies of African cinema approached in terms of cultural affinity and shared experiences, such as national or ethnic identity, tend not to address to any significant degree East Africa cinema. These latter paradigms are evident in critical monographs that on their face seem focused on specific regions and countries such as Jacqueline Maingard’s *South African Cinema* and Cara Moyer-Duncan’s *Projecting Nation: South African Cinemas After 1994* on South Africa; Mathias Krings, and Onokoome Okome’s *Global Nollywood: The Transnational Dimensions of an African Video Film Industry* on Nigeria/West Africa, and Roy Armes’ *African Filmmaking: North and South of the Sahara* and *Postcolonial Images: Studies in North African Film*, Suzanne Gauch’s *Maghrebs in Motion: North African Cinema in Nine Movements* on North Africa. Even with such a paradigm shift, contemporary East African cinema appears in a single book chapter Milika Slavkovic’s “Filmmaking in East Africa: Focus on Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda.” in the 2014 Desser et al.’s *Small Cinemas in Global Markets: Genres, Identities, Narratives*. The chapter elaborates the historical film trajectory of the three countries Kenya and Tanzania and Uganda. Slavkovic reproduces an old observation that East African cinema has inherited the legacy of overtly educational, and propagandistic colonial films. However, Slavkovic claims to desist from making any comparative and thematic study of the three countries. She instead gives a chronology of the few films that have been produced in the most recent digital boom. Despite an approach that leverages the study of African films at either regional or national level, East African cinema is still underrepresented.

The lack of scholarly material on East Africa could be because most of East Africa was not exposed to any feature-film culture, yet it is the feature film that was of great interest to early scholarship on African cinema (Ukadike 1994). When East Africans begin to make films,
their efforts were overshadowed by foreign-produced and marketed films especially those of Hollywood cinema. It is not until the 21st century that East Africa begins to make feature fiction films and breaks the monotony of documentary/docudrama filmmaking that was common in British Africa colonies while the French colonies were thriving in feature film making (Orlando 13, Ukadike 109). As much as it is disputable as to whether France intended to support African filmmaking in her former colonies or rather expand the outreach of her film industry and create jobs for her people, it is argued that France gave Africa the feature film. In contrast, Britain bequeathed East African an educational anthropological documentary films (Bisschoff 72). To a great extent, the so-called ‘French given’ feature films from Francophone Africa dominated the African film scene and criticism for over four decades. Ureke and Tomaselli aver that films from English-speaking Africa get visibility and critical engagements when the post-apartheid South Africa government began to support the film industry and after the massive video film industry in Ghana and Nigeria gained traction (81-82). Still, the budding interest in Anglophone film has not favoured East Africa’s growing cinema. It is also clear that foreign-produced films and co-productions attract the attention of critics, as is seen in Rwanda’s films about the genocide and the few films produced in Kenya.

Until recently, previous studies of East African cinema as a homogenous entity have been mainly from a historical perspective, as seen in the critical analyses of the CFUs. Slavkovic’s article (cited above) is not fundamentally different from the studies of Rosaleen Smyth’s detailed history of colonial film in East Africa because it focuses on the history of the

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23 Rosaleen Smyth’s “The Development of British Colonial Film Policy, 1927-1939 with Special Reference to East and Central Africa,” and “The Feature Film in Tanzania”; and Mike Hillary Ssali’s “The Development and Role of an African Film Industry in East African with Special Reference to Tanzania, 1922-1984” give a trajectory of colonial films in East and Central Africa. Ssali and Smyth contend that Colonial Film Unit establishments were not producing African stories but films about African people to serve the broad imperialistic agenda. Also see Rosaleen Smyth’s “The Development of British Colonial Film Policy, 1927-1939 with Special Reference to East and Central Africa”. It is one of the first scholarly pieces on film in East Africa. The colonial films are outside this study’s scope as East African cinema refers to films written by Africans (in Africa and Diaspora) about East African experiences.
colonial films rather than contemporary ones. Criticism that goes beyond colonial history and that does more than compile an East African filmography, however crucial that initial documentation might be, is seen in the debut special issue on East African cinema published in 2015 by the leading African cinema studies journal—*The Journal of African cinemas* (JAC). One of the innovations of this issue is to provide a working definition of contemporary East African cinema. First, Lizelle Bisschoff perceives East African cinema according to multilateral relations under the East African Community (EAC) in which six countries are signatory: Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda. Second, East Africa cinema is understood more expansively to include film industries from countries geographically located in the Eastern coast of Africa such as “the horn of Africa (Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia), as well as the islands of the Indian Ocean (including Madagascar, Comoros, Mauritius, and Réunion)” (Bisschoff 72). There have been studies in literature that have similarly conceptualised East African literature as including countries below the horn of Africa to the mid-Eastern countries of Africa (Gikandi and Mwangi 2007).

Despite the few studies on East African cinema in general terms, as I mentioned in the introduction, there have been some inroads into the studies of the different national cinemas that have taken various approaches ranging from history and industry, thematic and aesthetics the films (Dipio 2010; Englert 2010; Mwikalinga 2010; Rasmussen 2010; Magara 2014; Slavkovic 2014; Overbergh 2014; Dianga 2014, 2015, 2016; Shule 2014, 2014, 2016). However, most of the studies focus on industry and little is done on aesthetics and thematic analysis with the exception of few studies in Uganda and Kenya.

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24 Collaboration between E. African countries dates back to precolonial history and is carried forward to colonial and post-colonial E. Africa. For instance, the EAC was founded in 1967, collapsed in 1977, and revived in 2000. Prior to the independence of African countries in the 1960s, the countries in British East Africa were already collaborating.
Tanzanian film has generated a large corpus of critical material, but it mainly focuses on the history of film in Tanzania, and the industry’s economic dynamics, such as taxation and marketing, but minimally on thematic analysis. Key texts include Mona Mwakalinga’s thesis *The Political Economy of the Film Industry in Tanzania-From Socialism to an Open Market Economy, 1961–2010*, Mhando, Martin and Lauren Kipeja “Creative/Cultural industries financing in Africa: A Tanzanian film value chain study,” and Vicencia Shule’s “Piracy, politics, and control: The paradox of Tanzania’s Kiswahili video film tax stamps” and “Reading beyond statistics: The contribution of video film industry in the Tanzania Economy,” all of which examine the different dimensions of the economics of the Tanzanian film industry. It is only in Claudia Böhme’s “Showing the Unshowable: The Negotiation of Homosexuality through Video Films in Tanzania” that there is a shift in critical attention to the social aspects of Tanzanian films. Böhme contends that “Popular Tanzanian culture, with nuanced and ambiguous messages, has always been a valuable means to speak about love and sex” (65). Böhme’s study is vital in informing my exploration of the thematic concerns of Tanzanian films, a field that is has received little critical attention.

Because Tanzania and Kenya have the biggest economies in the region, they tend to be the subject of comparative studies on industry dynamics, focused respectively on production technology, distribution and censorship. For instance, Ann Overbergh’s thesis *Extended cinema in Kenya and Tanzania: Technological Innovation and Related Trends in Local Audio-visual Storytelling* highlights that technological innovation crucially accounts for the increase in film production in the two countries. She argues that filmmaking can be and is being afforded by everyone in the region as evidenced in the “video film” industries in both countries. Claudia Böhme’s “Film production as a ‘mirror of society’: The history of a video film art group in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania,” also takes a more in-depth look at the video film enterprises and “their relation to the state” (119). Böhme re-articulates the issue of censorship, that as already
discussed above has been articulated by by various scholars as having a tremendous impact on
the creativity and freedom of expression of Tanzanian filmmakers (Brennan 2005; Mwakalinga
2010; Shule 2014). Studies on censorship and industry dynamics have overshadowed the
thematic studies of the vibrant Tanzanian film industry.

Uganda’s film industry, on the other hand, has been studied in terms of its history and
aesthetics. For instance, Dominic Dipio’s “A Historical Overview of Ugandan ‘Film Industry’”
and Kristin Alexandra Rasmussen’s *Kinna-Uganda: A Review of Uganda’s National Cinema*
give a comprehensive study of the historical trajectory of the film industry in Uganda. Sam
Kasule’s “Conversations with Kin[n]a-Uganda Home Movie Directors Mariam Ndagire and
Ashraf Simwogerere” problematises a symbiotic and fluid relationship of African film and
drama. Most importantly, Kasule illuminates one significant influence on the aesthetics of
African cinema: drama. Like in Tanzania where filmmaking was started by formerly stage
actors, in Uganda Mariam Ndagire and Ashraf Simwogerere, some of the country’s most
formidable filmmakers, juggle both stage and video/film productions. For Kasule, Uganda’s
‘films’ are more like video recordings of stage drama. Dokotum’s “Trauma aesthetics in war
documentaries about the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda” touches on the memory of the
Lord’s Resistance Army’s horrific war in Northern Uganda. However, its focus is limited to
the representation of trauma in documentary films which is outside this study’s scope. My
Master of Arts (MA) thesis “Symbolism in Ugandan Films” analyses how symbolism in
selected Ugandan films contributes to content (themes). All these studies inform my
preliminary understanding of a Ugandan film and its aesthetics that lays ground for the broader
understanding of East African cinema.

Some studies that have almost attempted to touch on aesthetics but have been derailed
by the sheer focus on industry. For example, Tanzania and Uganda’s films have been studied
from the perspective of the VJ (Video Jokeys) phenomenon. Matthias Krings “*Karishika* with
Kiswahili Flavour: A Nollywood Film Retold by a Tanzanian Video Narrator,” explores the popularity of Nigerian films in Tanzania that are re-performed through a translator/VJ. Often Nigerian, Hollywood, and Chinese movies are V-jayed or retold by a single translator who doubles as a performer. S/he retells a story by incorporating their idiosyncratic interpretation of the narrative. The VJ phenomenon is also prevalent in Uganda. Dominica Dipio has also made a documentary film about the V-jay phenomenon titled Extreme Artists: Ugandan VJs in Uganda. Krings explains:

Contemporary East African live interpretation of film may be traced back to the video parlours of Kampala, Uganda, where the art grew strong during the late 1980s. And to date, Uganda, with its three hundred plus video narrators, is certainly the East African country leading the way in this art form (309).

Birgit Englert also explores the V-jay in Tanzania in “In Need of Connection: Reflections on Youth and the Translation of Film in Tanzania.” A V-jay brings the film closer to the masses by using their local language. V-jaying demonstrates the desire to domesticate the art that they otherwise have no economic capacity to produce. Most V-jayed movies are pirate copies that get redubbed, packaged and sold on the market. Through the phenomenon of V-jays, it is evident that the industry is not comprised of only original East African films, but it is also thriving on informally ‘adapting’ foreign films for the East African audience. The VJ phenomenon underscores the renegotiation of film meaning through observation and performance (using hyperbole and often recreating the story to suit the audience), a mode that is connected to the griot’s performance (orality). The practice of V-jaying for film screenings can be understood as a performative dimension, enacted at the moment of exhibition, hence an adaptation of the griot (story-telling) concept where a known story is recreated and embellished with imagery and hyperbole considered appropriate for any given audience.

While the economics of Tanzanian film industry has been the subject of extensive study, Kenyan cinema has been surveyed in a more multidimensional manner. Kenya has
studies that draw on textual and industry analyses, with quite more explorations on form and style. Overbergh’s studies (already cited above) have contextualized the development of the film industry, which in my case, help to understand the dynamics that inform the artistic choices of the filmmakers. Nicodemus Okioma & John Mugubi’s “Filmmaking in Kenya: The Voyage” and Edwin Ngure Nyutho’s *Evaluation of Kenyan Film Industry: Historical Perspective* not only gives a history of filmmaking in Kenya but also offers an analysis of film movements that, to some extent, also indicate the thematic leanings of the films. Noteworthy are the categories “The Renaissance 1993-2002” and “The Post-Modern Era 2003-2013” (54-55). These categories succinctly define the film trends from the 2000s (more independent and creative), which lays ground to the thematic and aesthetic claims that this study makes.

Related to themes and aesthetics, Rachael Diang’a’s “Message films in Africa: A look into the past” uses Kenya as a springboard to give a conceptual analysis of the prominence of didactic (message-oriented) films in Africa. She elaborates on the origin of didacticism in film as something that goes beyond the colonial propaganda film; it is deeply rooted in the African oral tradition. Diang’a explains:

> In Africa, orature or artistic productions were both entertaining and educative. In this duality, and as a result of this background, one wonders whether there is a time in Africa when entertainment was never useful because, since the pre-colonial time, Africa has never afforded ‘art for art's sake’ (6).

Diang’a’s study informs the major claim of this study, that is, the griot aesthetics that I contend is ubiquitous in East African cinema and African cinema at large because of the films’ close link to the oral story telling tradition. The griot aesthetic usually manifests as “edutainment” or entertainment with a message. For instance, John Mugubi’s “Delineation of National Healing and Conflict Resolution in Film: A Case Study of Kenya” (2014) highlights the role of films in situations of conflict resolution, as seen in the 2007/2008 Kenya post-election violence docudramas *Wale Watu* and *Pieces for Peace* that he juxtaposes with physical violence from
the decadence in urban centres, as represented in *Benta* and *Nairobi Half-Life* (16). Via the analyses of Mugubi and Diang’a, I draw some insights on themes and the didacticism in East African cinema.

Related to these thematic analyses are studies that draw on different theoretical perspectives. Clara Giruzzi’s “A feminist approach to contemporary female Kenyan cinema: Women and nation in *From a Whisper* (Kahiu, 2008) and *Something Necessary* (Kibinge, 2013),” for instance, is significant because it interrogates women’s subjective representation in film, a topic that this study engages at a broad level in terms of the representation of gender power relations in East African cinema. There are also dissertations such as Beatrice W. Mukora’s “Disrupting Binary Divisions: Representation of Identity in *Saïkati* and *Battle of the Sacred Tree,*” which looks at the earliest fiction features in Kenya; and Robert Wesonga’s “The Portrait of a Secondary School Student in a Contemporary Kenyan Television Drama: A Study of *Tahidi High*” (2011). Mugubi and Wesonga also examine the linguistic nuances in the high school children’s drama in the article “Localized Nuances of Linguistic Choices in Film: A Case Study of *Tahidi High*, a Kenyan Television Drama.” For Mugubi and Wesonga, the language used in the film enhances its “verisimilitude with regard to characterisation,” which also contributes to the legibility of the message of the film (846). Simon Mutunga M’erimba’s “Kenyan Drama Films: An Investigation of the Aesthetics of Selected Films” also gives a definition of Kenyan films as those made about the Kenyan people’s experiences and relatable to a Kenyan audience. M’erimba’s attempt to define and analyse Kenyan films is key to my understanding of what East African cinematic aesthetics entails considering my interest in griot aesthetics’ centrality in popular discourse. Altogether, this corpus of critical analysis of the content of Kenyan films highlights some of the emergent discourses such as the gender and class conflicts and by extension provide an angle in which to explore the films of other East African countries.
Compared to Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, Burundi, Rwanda and South Sudan’s cinemas have received little scholarly attention. The paucity of critical attention could be a result of Burundi, Rwanda and South Sudan’s later entry into film production. An attempt to explore the content of Burundi’s film is evident in Alejandro Guardado’s “Framing Africa: Exploring the Role of Filmmaking Practices in Post-war Burundi” in which the recurrent themes of war, family and education are identified as significant to the filmmakers (83). For Rwanda, Madelaine Hron’s “Interview with Film Producer Eric Kabera,” a Rwandan film producer and founder of the Rwanda Film centre, articulates the fact that most young Rwandan filmmakers “create films relating to the genocide,” which in part, is an indication to the thematic sensibility of the country (361). As stated earlier, the genocide films come close to constituting a film genre in Rwanda. Andrew Phillip Young, in “We are all Rwandans”: Imagining the Post-Genocidal Nation Across Media, also touches on “reconciliatory discourse” in Rwandan films, which, as he succinctly articulates is gravely influenced by Rwanda’s post-genocide ideological stance. Most films serve as state propaganda, and nationalist campaigns apparatus “that serves the obvious purpose of promoting the values deemed necessary to maintain political and social stability” by curtailing any objective discourse of the 1994 Rwanda genocide (201). Young’s work draws attention to the nationalist dimensions of East African cinema’s didacticism, which complicates the role of screen-griots at individual, spectators, national and regional level.

In terms of theme, the critical exploration of the tragedies of the Rwandan genocide and South Sudan wars have gained traction because of what we can understand as the Afro-pessimism narrative promoted by the Western filmmakers and media. Okaka Dokotum’s “Re-Membering the Tutsi Genocide in Hotel Rwanda (2004): Implication for Peace and Reconciliation” argues that Hollywood “reproduces the ‘dark continent’ narrative trope of Africa, where violence is portrayed as a way of life” (130). Similarly, the foreign gaze on the
Rwandan genocide has elicited many scholarly articles with some being critical of the excessive dramatisation of the tragedy. This is demonstrated in Urthur Rwafa’s “Film representations of the Rwandan genocide” and Piotr A. Cieplak’s “The Rwandan genocide and the bestiality of representation in 100 Days (2001); Shooting Dogs (2005),” and Maurice T. Vambe and Khatija B. Khan’s “The violence in the spectacle of excessive signification: Shooting Dogs (2005).” Obed Nkunzimana’s “Beyond colonial stereotypes: reflections on postcolonial cinema in the African Great Lakes Region” investigates the foreign gaze by looking at the history of film in Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Rwanda. To Nkunzimana, images of these countries are typical of the exoticisation of Africa, particularly East Africa, by Hollywood. On the other hand, South Sudanese subjective films have not had critical attention, save for the documentary films about the exodus of refugees from Sudan to the globe, especially their experience in America as seen in Diana J. Shandy’s “Updating Image of South Sudan” (2005). Therefore, a critical study of films from Burundi, Rwanda and South Sudan is a step towards recognising the subjective imaginaries from those countries and how they contribute to shaping the regionality of East Africa.

The limitations and strength of the above few critical studies are a canvas upon which I explore the emergent themes and aesthetics of the growing body of subjective representations in East African cinema from the 2000s to date. This study foregrounds East African cinema’s perspectives in the broad context of African cinema studies.

**Methodology and Theory: Centring the Voice of Filmmakers**

This thesis employs a multidisciplinary theoretical and methodological approach aimed at foregrounding the role of filmmakers as critics and as griots. By invoking the word *griot*, I theorise the East Africa filmmakers as conscious agents in reproduction of the oral storytelling traditions (discussed in detail in chapter 2). Throughout the subsequent chapters, I explore how East African filmmakers are appropriating the griot aesthetic (oral traditions) into the film
medium to create visual representations that have an East African or African signature despite an otherwise universal set of codes and conventions operative in film. This thesis intersperses the filmmakers’ critical views on the ongoing discourses about African cinema criticism, mainly the appropriation of oral narrative traditions into the film narration and the agency of the filmmakers as a screen-griot.

Selection of Films/Scope

Due to the exponential growth of fiction films produced in East Africa since the turn of the twenty-first century, my thesis considers films from 2000 to 2018.25 The criteria for selecting the critical filmography was based on the time when the film was produced, the film producer/director or writer’s nationality or race, the film’s setting, genre and, in part, the recognition (awards) the film has garnered in and outside of East Africa. Initially, I had set a maximum of five fiction films—either feature or short—as the quantitative target for each country, though in some instances (due to inaccessibility or the film’s failure to meet the selection criterion) less than five films were selected. With pragmatic flexibility, selected film had to have won an award or be directed by an award-winning filmmaker at any recognizable film festival in and outside East Africa. The filmmaker also had to have been credited with at least two fiction films that are of either short or feature-length. Therefore, countries with a fairly developed film industry such as Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda have five key texts selected per the above criteria, while Burundi and South Sudan that have a slow developing industry or rather an industry that commences much later, their filmography was chosen from the available films. In instances where the available film did not suit the selection criteria such as having won an award or been nominated at a recognised festival, the emerging thematic representation from the filmography from the more prolific countries—Kenya, 25 Although most fiction films are features, it can be argued, that short fiction films are a growing genre in East Africa. There is an increasing number of filmmakers who have focused on only short films, such as Willie Owusu, Godwin Otwoma, Clementine Dusabejambo and Christina Pande.
Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda—determined the selection of the handful of films from Burundi and South Sudan. This is because all selected films had to be significantly dramatising the social realities of East Africans.

The selection of interviewees was also contingent on the above factors plus to some extent gender and residence of the filmmaker. Though gender was not a critical factor in the selection of the films, at least a film by a female filmmaker per country was included except for countries where it was impossible to find one. Nonetheless, where applicable, I had a female filmmaker interviewed even if their film was not part of the key filmography from that country as was the case with Marie Dusabejambo and Damaris Irungu from Rwanda and Kenya, respectively. In cognizance of the complex definition of East African cinema, due to the region’s fluid geopolitics and geolinguistics, and the dynamic that an East African experience may be produced by a non-African, the selection criteria was flexible (as argued on page 47). The determinant factors for a film to be regarded as East African were as follows: first, the ethnicity and citizen status of the film director/writer/producer, whereby they had to be East Africans or Diaspora Africans. Second, the content of the story ought to have detailed East Africans’ experiences in Africa or outside of Africa. Even with that flexibility, when a film was directed by someone outside the pan-African identity, it had to be written by an East African citizen or an African Diaspora. For instance, films by a diasporan African Raoul Peck (*Sometimes in April* and *Lumumba*) are selected for this study because of their centrality in the authentic representation of historic events in the Great Lakes Region. Notably, Raoul Peck has also had a significant influence on the aesthetics of African filmmakers.26 For manageability,
and consistency, only the directors or writers resident in East Africa were interviewed. They were contacted through emails or telephone to schedule interviews in order to get their critical views about their films, films in their respective countries and East Africa at large.

In Kenya, for instance, Bob Nyanja, who is among the first generation of independent filmmakers was selected. His first feature film, the 2007 Malooned comes out at the time when the feature film phenomenon was gaining traction across East Africa. Nyanja is also renowned for initiating the satirical political comedy television show called Redkyulass that “became a major hit” in Kenya and East Africa at large since its inception in 1999 (Nyanja). As a critical filmmaker, his satirical political comedy, The Captain of Nakara is selected for this study. Nyanja is part of a group of elites, university-educated East African filmmakers who are conscious of their griotic responsibility.

Alongside Nyanja, I interviewed Wanuri Kahiu, yet another accomplished filmmaker (both academically and artistically). Her first feature, From a Whisper, won Best Original Screenplay, Picture and Director prize at the 2009 Africa Movie Academy Awards including the Best Feature Narrative at the Pan African film festival, Los Angeles in 2010, among others. She is credited for the feminist futuristic scientific fiction short film, the 2009 Pumzi, which anticipates a world where women shall be the leaders to bring order to the dystopian world. The 2018 film Rafiki, a “controversial” film about same sex relationships in East African was among the first films from the region to have competed at the prestigious Fespaco and Cannes film festivals (Jackman and Kelleher 2019). It has won several awards. Because of From a Whisper’s representation of historic incidents—the twin bombing of the American embassies in Nairobi and Dar-es-Salaam—it was selected for this study.

Tosh Gitonga unlike Kahiu and Nyanja did not study film, but he was apprenticed on several German-Kenyan co-productions in Kenya. Having studied marketing in college did not
deter his passion for films. He explains his trajectory into film, “I always liked films. Having experienced the behind the scenes at the production house, I was working. It aroused a certain passion in me. I went into the industry full force without any film school training” (Interview). Because of his enthusiasm and excellent performance, he was selected out of a master class of twenty directors conducted by One Fine Day films (a European company) to direct his debut feature film, the 2012 Nairobi Half-life, a lyrical representation of urban life in Nairobi Kenya (by extension representative of East Africa’s urban centers). Nairobi Half-life won several awards in and outside Africa. The second film Disconnect that he co-directed with his mentee Mwangi Jones is selected for this study. Compared to his first film, where he may have had little artistic independence, Disconnect was selected as key text for the study on a presumption that it entail his authentic style. Disconnect has also been acquired by the global online streaming network, Netflix, which as result makes it potentially one of the most transnational films from East Africa.

Willie Owusu is an award-winning short filmmaker who is working on his first feature film. He has a substantial body of short films, and he started making films in 2005, the start of the exponential growth of filmmaking in Kenya and Uganda. He was a key mentor at the early film festivals in East Africa particularly Amakula Film festivals in Kampala from 2005. He is notable for bold representations of issues concerning sexuality, a subject that is considered complex and a taboo for public discourse in East Africa. As Sylvia Tamale posits, sexuality is supposed to be talked about in “metaphors and symbols” that are only comprehensible to “adults” (317-317).

Damaris Irungu is interviewed because she is the writer of Jonglo Love (one of the key texts). She is one of the most prolific writers with a formidable reputation. She is an International Emmy award-winning writer on a three platform digital media category for Jonglo Love radio and TV drama, and Shujaaz Comic the film version of which was selected for this
study. She has been writing for the screen since 2007. She is a prolific writer, script editor as well as story developer for over 71 TV movies of different genres for MNET’s Africa Magic original films project. She has written for a few popular films, such as *Kiberan Shakespeare*, *Run honeymooners*, *Sopi*, among others. She has also worked on several TV shows such as KONA, Kalasha awards winning shows, *Makutano Junction*, *Jastorina*, *Pray & Prey*, *Mali*, *Sue and Johnnie*, the Africa Magic viewer’s choice awards nominated show (2016).

**Rwanda** may not be as productive as Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, but it has the second most transnational films in East Africa. Rwanda’s filmography has one of the films directed by a non-Rwandan, and two films by the same director (Joel Karekezi), which reduced the number of interviewees. I interviewed Kivu Ruhorahoza, who is said to be Rwanda’s first feature filmmaker. He is known for experimental filmmaking in East Africa because of the 2011 *Grey Matter*, the 2015 *Things of the Aimless wonderer* and the 2019 *Europa*, among many other short films he has produced which are seen as breaking the boundaries of creativity by breaking most formal rules. His first feature, *Grey Matter* which has been selected for this study, won Jury special mention for Best Emerging Filmmaker at the Tribeca Film Festival and the ecumenical special mention at the Warsaw Film Festival in 2011. Other interviewed filmmakers from Rwanda are Marie C. Dusabejambo, Mutiganda wa Nkunda, Jean Kwezi and Joel Karekezi. Mutiganda and Dusabejambo’s films are not included in the main filmography, however, they were interviewed because they are among the critical voices from Rwanda and they represented the new breed of Rwandan filmmakers. Dusabejambo was selected as a representative of the female gaze (that is underrepresented in all countries except Kenya). She is an award-winning short filmmaker for the film *A place for Myself*. Mutiganda wa Nkunda was interviewed as one of the realist filmmakers who, unlike many Rwandan filmmakers, decided not to make a movie about the Rwanda genocide memory. He is a journalist and film critic, now turned filmmaker with three short films and a feature that is
currently in post-production. He offers a unique perspective on cinema in Rwanda and the region considering his attention to contemporary social reality. Jean Kwezi is famous for the poetic film *Umutoma*, that tackles the issue of materialism. He is also the chairperson of the Rwandan Filmmakers Association.

Also notable from Rwanda is Joel Karekezi. His second feature film, *The Mercy of the Jungle* was the first East African film to win the Best Film Award at Fespaco, Africa’s most prestigious festival after winning the grand prize (the golden stallion of Yennenga) in 2019. Fespaco is Africa's prime, and oldest festival reputed as a Pan-African platform for the exhibition of authentic African films and, consequently, its films tend to be privileged objects of scholarly attention. Karekezi is also a bold and critical filmmaker who touches on subjects that are deemed taboo in Rwanda (as noted earlier he has had to film in Uganda). As an accomplished filmmaker (with nationally and globally recognition), both his feature films *Imbabazi: The Pardon* and *The Mercy of the Jungle* have been selected for this study. His Fespaco award is a turning point for the cultural visibility of the East African region and his films are the most transnational of Rwandan films both inside and outside of East Africa.

In Tanzania, there are few films that can be categorised as award-winning despite Tanzania being the home of East Africa’s debut film festival in Zanzibar (ZIFF). Consequently, most films were selected because they are produced or written by the most accomplished filmmakers in Tanzania. I interviewed Amil Shivji, an award-winning filmmaker, who also presents an interesting case study because of his background: he is a Tanzania of Indian origin. Shivji is also one of the critical filmmakers and academic from Tanzania. He has the most transnational films from Tanzania with his first feature film *T-Junction* achieving a wide distribution, including Emirates Airways in-flight entertainment. Another filmmaker of interest is Daniel Manege. Having studied engineering at Dar-es-Saalam university, his motivation into film is the passion for storytelling. His debut feature film *Safari ya Gwalu*, is a significant
popular film in Tanzania and helped amplify his career as a writer. As such, he has written several scripts for popular film producers as well as produced and directed his own films. As already mentioned, he juggles the two film trends that are common in Tanzania—the romantic drama genre-driven popular film vis-a-vis the more contemplative topic-oriented didactic films. His comedy drama, *Kiumeni* was selected for this study.

Other selected filmmakers from Tanzania include, Novatus Mugurusi, Seko Tingitana Shamte and Hamadi Mwapachu. **Novatus Mugurusi** is viewed as a ‘rebel’ filmmaker because all his films were banned in Tanzania and as a result, he defiantly publishes them on YouTube. Mugurusi has subverted Tanzania’s censorship by refusing to submit his film scripts for censorship or classification. Instead, Mugurusi makes movies that he distributes on YouTube and at film festivals. He is one of the most popular experimental filmmakers in Tanzania and the only one who has ventured into new genres such as crime thrillers in a country where most of the films are family dramas about love. While **Seko T. Shamte** is the only prolific female filmmaker, she is renowned for the two films *Mkwawa* and *Homecoming*. I was not able to interview **Hamadi Mwapachu**, director of the 2015 film *Dar Noir* which was well received in East Africa and throughout Africa (Opar 2016) because he was unreachable and in the United Kingdom at the time of the interview. He is a trained actor who has starred in plays and films in London including the 2005 film *Dominion: Prequel to the Exorcist*. Mwapachu was a protagonist in *Dar Noir* which gives it excellent execution of the story about a junky cop in the underbelly criminal life of Dar-es-Salaam. It screened at festivals in, Accra, Harare, Helsinki, Kampala, New York, Rotterdam and was well received in Uganda and Tanzania.

In Uganda, I interviewed Hussein Omar, Matt Bish, Mariam Ndagire, Stephen Wasswa and Steve T. Ayeny. **Omar** is a prolific award-winning filmmaker most well-known for the 2016 feature film, *Dream America* that he wrote and co-directed with a Ugandan of Indian origin. Matt Bish is among the first group of independent filmmakers with a degree in
filmmaking and is an award-winning filmmaker. **Mariam Ndagire** was selected as one of the most productive female filmmakers. She crossed from music and drama to focus on making popular films as a business. In 2015 she was selected to be among the judges of the African Magic channels viewers’ choice award. **Stephen Wasswa** is known for collaging different aesthetics to adapt oral stories into Hollywood-style genre films. He has also won an award for his educational film *Girl Child in Dilemma*. While **Steve T. Ayeny** is known for *Kony: Orders from Above*, a biopic of the notorious Ugandan rebel, Joseph Kony of the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) has won many accolades across the region and the globe.

Access to the films and filmmakers from **Burundi** and **South Sudan** for this project proved the most difficult. Even if a film was popular, and despite my own networks within the local industry, it was difficult to access and view all films from these small but nevertheless regionally significant national cinemas. Burundi and South Sudan have fewer films because of the limitations in the industry due to political instabilities. Burundi has had economic and political challenges with civil wars, while South Sudan has hardly experienced two years of peace since its independence in 2012. This environment has not allowed cinematic art to thrive in both countries. As such, only two directors were interviewed online from Burundi: **Jean Richard Niyongabo** and **Joseph Ndayisenga**. Niyongabo is a celebrated actor in popular Burundi feature film, *Amaguru n’Amaboko* (selected for this study), and is an award-winning short filmmaker. His film *Les Gros Cailloux* was nominated at Fespaco 2017. Richard has four short films and a feature documentary to his credit. **Ndayisenga** is another notable person in Burundi’s film industry. He has worked in creative roles on all the films I selected from Burundi. Ndayisenga has lived in Europe and is currently in North America which, in part, makes his film *Welcome Home* of keen interest to me because of its treatment of the subject of African migrants’ experiences. I could not get Roland Rugero the director of *Amaguru*
n’Amaboko, and Pacifique Niyonzima of the Kivumvu: The Basket Boy, but their films were selected because they fitted the criteria.

Similarly, I could not go to South Sudan due to social unrest. I managed to secure an interview with Alex Bop Labajo. He manages a film and drama group called United Friends Film and Drama South Sudan. He is one of the prolific filmmakers who has showcased his films at international and national film festivals despite the social-political challenges in South Sudan. His film, Decide, was screened at the Berlin film festival of 2013. Kafeya was nominated at the Ankara film festival in 2018 and was awarded for the best short film at the European Union Human Rights Award in 2017. Charity was nominated at the Oscar of African Creativity Egypt in 2019.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Film</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Duration/Type</th>
<th>Director/Screen Writer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Burundi</td>
<td><em>Kivumvu: The Basket Boy</em></td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Short, 11 Minutes</td>
<td>Pacifique Niyonzima</td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>Welcome Home</em></td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Short 25 Minutes</td>
<td>Joseph Ndayisenga</td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>Amaguru n’Amaboko</em></td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Feature, 83 Minutes</td>
<td>Roland Rugero &amp; Amani Papy Jamaica</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Les Gros Cailloux</em></td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Short 14, Minutes</td>
<td>Jean Richard Niyongabo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenya</td>
<td><em>From a Whisper</em></td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Feature, 79 Minutes</td>
<td>Wanuri Kahiu</td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>Flight Path</em></td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Short, 29 Minutes</td>
<td>Willie Owusu</td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>The Captain of Nakara</em></td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Feature 88 Minutes</td>
<td>Bob Nyanja</td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>Jongo Love</em></td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Feature, 99 Minutes</td>
<td>Damaris Iruungu (writer)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Emma Bodger (director)</td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>Disconnect</em></td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Feature, 107 Minutes</td>
<td>Tosh Gitonga &amp; Michael Mwangi Jones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rwanda</td>
<td><em>Sometimes in April</em></td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Feature, 140 Minutes</td>
<td>Raoul Peck</td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>Grey Matter</em></td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Feature, 110 Minutes</td>
<td>Kivu Ruhorahozo</td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>Imbabazi: The Pardon</em></td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Feature, 77 Minutes</td>
<td>Joel Karekezi</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Umutoma</em></td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Feature 72 Minutes</td>
<td>Jean Kwezi</td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>The Mercy of the Jungle</em></td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Feature, 91 Minutes</td>
<td>Joel Karekezi</td>
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<tr>
<td>South Sudan</td>
<td><em>Our Big Fear</em></td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Short, 35 Min</td>
<td>Martin M.C</td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>Be Patient</em></td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Feature, 115 Minutes</td>
<td>Alex Bop Labajo</td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>Forced Marriage</em></td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Short, 52 Minutes</td>
<td>Bebe Joel Hillary</td>
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<td>Tanzania</td>
<td><em>Bongo na Flavour</em></td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Feature, 136 Minutes</td>
<td>Novatus Mugurusi</td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>Dar Noir</em></td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Feature, 114 Minutes</td>
<td>Hamadi Mwapachu</td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>Home Coming</em></td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Feature 90 Minutes</td>
<td>Seko Shamte</td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>T-Junction</em></td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Feature 106 Minutes</td>
<td>Amil Shivji</td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>Kiumeni</em></td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Feature 88 Minutes</td>
<td>Daniel Manege (writer)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Nicholas Marwa (Director)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Uganda</td>
<td><em>Dear Mum</em></td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Feature 180 Minutes</td>
<td>Mariam Ndagire</td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>State Research Bureau</em></td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Feature, 95 Minutes</td>
<td>Matt Bish</td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>Dream America</em></td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Feature, 116 Minutes</td>
<td>Hussein Omar and Paresh Gondalinya</td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>Girl Child in Dilemma</em></td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Feature 120 Minutes</td>
<td>Stephen Wasswa (aka T. West Ttabu)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Kony: Orders from Above</em></td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Feature 90 Minutes</td>
<td>Steven T. Ayeny</td>
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Understanding the Ideological and Artistic Place of the Screen-griot

This section aims to contextualise and understand the role of the griot as it was traditionally used in Africa in order to develop the concept of the screen-griot and to foreground its ethico-political significance. In most African communities, a griot or bard is a hereditary praise singer, poet, and historian, who uses music, poetry, and storytelling to perform the trials and tribulations, conquests, and genealogies of the people. Though the word griot used to refer to specifically West African storytellers, because it was first used by early French travellers to describe the story-tellers of the Mandinka Empire, its semantics in this context encompasses all African traditional oral performers in pre-colonial and post-colonial eras (Smith 28; Fisher 6; Mekuria1). As Kate Bolgar Smith explains, “the griot is variously seen as a traditional African storyteller, oral historian, praise singer or genealogist, narrating past events and myths to contemporary audiences” (28). The griot is, thus, understood to have a dual and potentially conflicting social and aesthetic function as a mouthpiece of the rulers and the ordinary people alike. In pre-colonial times, all monarchs had griots to sing their praises, inform the people about the Kingdom’s genealogy or trajectory and all its escapades and, above all, to give a warning about any impending catastrophes (Smith 28; Kahiu). Griots, in their traditional sense, still exist in communities that have maintained their monarchies, particularly in Uganda where kingdoms are still given some relevance in an otherwise constitutional democracy.

Nevertheless, the griot is not a static ancient tradition. The aspect of ‘praise singing’ that griots did has come under criticism because some contemporary griots are being corrupted by money in the post-colonial era where “the traditional social structures that created and supported [griots]” have collapsed (Fofana 258). However, if all factors remain constant, the role of the griot is changing to suit the contemporary demands of entertainment, information distribution and the academy. Until recently, the griot has been synonymous with oral storytelling that is studied in the African academy as oral literature (orature). Jane Nandwa and
Austen Bukenya describe oral literature (the mastery of griots) as “those utterances, whether spoken, recited or sung, whose composition and performance exhibit to an appreciable degree the artistic character of accurate observation, vivid imagination and ingenious expression” (1). What was once only orally shared is now written or recorded, that is to say, mediated in some form, even if minimally. For instance, oral literature performances (in their varied genres) are increasingly recorded in audio and video formats for posterity. A griot might, therefore, be understood simply as a storyteller who uses various artist mediums to entertain as well pass on social messages. This is in keeping with critical efforts to democratize or expand the concept of the griot to refer to any artist who uses art for social change (Tomaselli and Sakarombe 317). For this thesis, therefore, the term griot is used synonymously with the storyteller/filmmaker that I call the screen-griot because of the medium used to deliver the story.

As it was in precolonial times, in contemporary time the griot is still very significant. The ‘griot’ denotes an artist who uses art to convey the aspirations and ideologies of the people, while in some cases narrating stories that “record, embody and explain history” (Mhando, “Approaches to”) and uses words to create images that excite listeners and “force them to think” (Fofana 260). Amadou T, Fofana, in his analysis of Sembène’s Borom Sarret, encapsulates traditional griots were “the link among past, present and future and …molders of social conscience and discourse” (258). It is that noble role of being a conscience of the people that the griot has been embraced by various artforms with filmmakers particularly embracing its political stance. Keyan Tomaselli and Phebbie Sakarombe also conceptualise a modern griot as any artist who looks at “the shared sentiment and offers an analysis of its effect on the constituents of a particular time and society” (317). Griots are philosophers of society.
My perception of East African filmmakers as screen-griots is based then of the functionality of griot’s art and on the fact that African filmmakers view themselves as modern griots. The pioneer of African cinema, Ousmane Sembene, explains:

The artists must in many ways be the mouth and ears of his people. In the modern sense, this corresponds to the role of the griot in traditional African culture. The artist is like a mirror. His work reflects and synthesizes the problems, the struggles, and hopes of his people (80, qtd. in Gugler V).

Like Sembene, Gaston Kabore, a trendsetter in the second wave of African filmmakers, reiterates this strong link of the filmmaker/artist with the griot when he argues that his griot inspiration comes from the communal artistic knowledge (Martin and Kaboré 2002). This is because, generally, an African artist is viewed predominantly “as a community member situated within that value system and more concerned about communicating with the community than expressing an esoteric, individual style” (Dipio, “Audience” 97). While a griot aesthetic embeds performance that employs formal stylistics of oral literature, Dipio’s view underlines the fact that the functionality (the didacticisms of the narrative) which is derived from the urgency and agency of the themes is given priority over the artistic mode of delivery. In other words, the message of the film supersedes any formal elements of film much as the formal aspects should not necessarily be ignored.

As I analyse East African films, I, therefore, apply the functionality and artistry of the screen-griots. In other words, I explore how the griot aesthetic is appropriated in East African films at both function and performance (art) level since a griot is associated with ingenuity in creation. This is because, as already argued above, the griot is a historical and contemporary figure whose critical role manifests in any art form as instructive and entertainment (Mekuria 1-2, Fofana 259). The screen-griot is thus, expected to be conscious of their need to balance entertainment as well as ethico-political responsibility. The griot aesthetic can be a framework for making and reading East Africa’s and by extension all African films.
**Griot Aesthetics and Significance of Third Cinema Theory**

The growth of African cinema in the 1960s exemplified by the work of acclaimed African screen-griots such as Ousmane Sembene, Med Hondo, and Moustapha Alassane, coincides with the growth of nationalist movements in South America, Asia, and Africa. As Mbye Cham puts it, “African film-making is in a way a child of African political independence” (1). The African filmmakers’ sensibility and approach to filmmaking is intricately linked to Solanas and Getino’s argument in their manifesto “Toward a Third Cinema,” which positioned film as a “revolutionary” tool that could “intervene in the [political] situation as an element providing thrust or rectification” (Solanas and Getino 124). Owing to the perception of film as a tool able to cause social change, Third Cinema’s first role was to resist the aesthetics of the hegemonic cinemas from Europe and Hollywood (second and first cinemas). They were viewed as unproductive for spectators since they lacked the “political” role of raising the spectator’s “consciousness” to the fact of their oppression (Teshome 37). Solanas and Getino use the metaphor of a “gun” to describe the global concept of ‘third cinema’ as a tool (127) to enhance the “struggle against imperialism and neocolonialism” (Bachsbaum 155). As such film was expected to prioritise the socio-political issues that were relevant to colonised peoples. This focus on critical messages aligns with Dipio’s views of the priority of African filmmakers whereby the artistic aspect comes secondary to social message of the film. As Robert Stam also argues, Third Cinema comprises “forms of popular culture, where the process of communication was more important than the product, where political values were more important than ‘production values’” (31, my emphasis).

Reiterating Solanas and Getino’s views, Teshome Gabriel in *Third Cinema in the Third World: The Aesthetics of Liberation* posits that third cinema’s role was to “decolonize minds, contribute to the development of a radical consciousness, lead to a revolutionary transformation of society, [and] develop new film language with which to accomplish these tasks” (3).
Teshome’s ideas are further echoed by contemporary African film critics who opine that African cinema should be further investigated to uncover culturally specific aesthetics beginning with orality, symbolism and magic realism that might contribute to third cinema ambitions (Mhando 4, Ukadike 234, Irobi 26). Third Cinema’s purpose was not only the transmission of revolutionary messages, but also the creation of a space in which filmmakers could improvise and create meaningful films whose aims were the elimination of all forms of oppression including artistic dominance. Thus, third cinema as a theory provides a lens to explore representations from the periphery of the global mainstream, such as the films from East Africa. As I will demonstrate, East African films tend to foreground a griot aesthetic in terms of performance, thereby both consciously and unconsciously appropriating Third Cinema aesthetics. In some sense, the fusion of African oral tradition’s paradigm of art in film, all together, creates a new aesthetic, which resonates with Third Cinema’s propositions of domesticating film through democratic representations of the people’s “reality” and “daily struggle” (Solanas and Getino 127).

Third cinema proposes a freedom of expression for every filmmaker in choosing liberation messages to the spectators—a view that is significantly relevant today. Solanas and Getino suggest that going against the currents in art is the beginning of creativity and innovation. Because Third Cinema is advocates for “the great possibility of constructing a liberated personality with each people as a starting point” it can be argued that, presently, third cinema as a theoretical paradigm refers to a cinema of independent filmmakers not only in the third world but the entire globe (Solanas and Getino 116). In some sense, minorities can “organize their screenings as part of a strategy to advance the interests of the group” (Buchsbaum 162). All over the world, there can be a “Third Worldist” cinema, and digital technology has made filmmaking accessible to whoever has a message to communicate (Zubel 191). Such an expanded and universalised definition of Third Cinema underlines an
independent cinema that is free of dominant cinema’s rules, rules that are by nature oppressive. For African filmmakers, who are still developing their unique aesthetic identity—hinged on the tradition oral story-telling formal and ideological grounds—third cinema theory is a stepping stone to appreciate their films that are often pitted against cinemas with a long established history of filmmaking.

**Griot Aesthetic as a Democratisation and Indigenisation of Theory**

As filmmakers continue being conscious and more revolutionary in their quest for alternative styles that are derived from culturally specific tropes, the more the critical field is expected to expand and accommodate the new development in art. For instance, since the proponents of Third Cinema aesthetics propose alternatives style to filmmaking, it implies an alternative paradigm to critical analysis of Third Cinema, in this context, African filmic texts (Papaioannou 142, Guneratne 10). The idea is that culturally specific paradigms of film representations and analysis are suggested. By implication, this claim attempts to either counter Western epistemology film theory or create indigenous film theories. In this sense, the appropriation of African cultural codes in the making and reading of film is a necessary move to democratise and indigenise theory.

Therefore, third cinema and griot aesthetics significantly inform the corpus of emerging contemporary debates of African cinema studies, which is broaching a theoretical paradigm shift in the making and studying of African film texts. Third cinema and the griot aesthetics provide the twin foundations for an ‘African’ epistemological paradigm of studying film. Of relevance to this study is the trend among African critics that gravitates towards the use of theoretical approaches that can be located in “its [Africa’s] own specific cultural lenses”

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27 Third cinema theory focused on the liberalisation of aesthetics of filmmaking. It encouraged an aesthetic devoid of the dictates of quality standards set by Hollywood’s (First Cinema) commercialization and Europe’s (second cinema) state-controlled auteur cinema that often leaned on propaganda (Guneratne 10).
(Mhando 4). Mhando further elaborates on the examples of cultural “specific lenses” as “orality or Magic realism” and “African iconography, symbolism” (ibid). In this perspective, Mhando (as already hinted at above) is rearticulating and extending Teshome’s idea that a new “cultural [specific] codes” should be infused in the making and interpreting films (Teshome 1). Similar enunciations are made by Esiaba Irobi’s “Theorising African Cinema: Contemporary African Cinematic Discourse and Its Discontents,” in which he proposes creating a Metzian “cinematographic language” based on African iconography that can be applied in the interpretation of African films (26). For when a film is rich in the iconography and cultural codes of the originating culture, then a new aesthetic is birthed that is antagonistic to hegemonic film establishments of commercial cinema.

Indigenous epistemes of making and reading films, indeed, should be sought and used in the study of African film since it will allow for the authenticity and/or subjectivity of African cinema to emerge. Frank Ukadike explains the paradigm shift from mainly content analysis only to studying both themes and codes of representation of those content. He states:

Since the inception of African celluloid filmmaking, indigenous themes have sustained the narrative style of African films; they have highlighted not only the contradictions between western values and African cultures but have also utilized narrative styles based on hybrid paradigms that mix the dominant cinematic codes with the conventions of other types of indigenous cultural expressions (“Video Boom” 234).

Ukadike is seen to support Irobi and Mhando’s views that advocate for an African iconography, orality, and didacticism as aspects that can revolutionalise African cinema studies. In other words, contemporary critiques suggest critical paradigm that foregrounds the Africanness of film and has potent to advance African cinema studies. Mhando furthers suggests that the use of a paradigm hinged on indigenous knowledge to analyse African films lucidly portrays “films as products of environmental and social conditions, historical pressures, and technological
innovations, as well as of the beliefs, attitudes, and cultural perceptions of the African people” (Mhando 5). Therefore, this thesis argues that the griot aesthetics is one way of indigenising film and theory and it could redeem the negative depiction of Africa, with regard to the preconceived lack of epistemes, which has been orchestrated by the domination of Western theories to Afro-centric theories in academia.

As I explore the emerging themes in East African cinema, I locate the griot aesthetics within the realms of third cinema theory because I consider these to be conceptual mutations of one another. That is to say, the griot/oral storytelling tradition in the African context engenders any mode of committed art that is meant to entertain as well as educate/inform. When I apply this to cinema, the griot aesthetic entails two components: the artistic presentation that I call the performativity (orality) and the functionalty film (the social messages therein) particularly the foregrounding of ethico-political issues that affect the masses and lead to liberation. I employ third cinema and the griot aesthetics as paradigms to make sense of the emerging themes and how those themes are organised.

The Filmmakers as Critics: Interviews

In addition to theory, another aspect of analysis in this thesis was the reading of films as primary texts. The term text is here used in various ways. First, in a linguistic sense, texts are a complex set of signs and codes that are readable (Blandford et al. 239). Second, texts are used in a poststructuralist sense in the shadow of Roland Barthes, that is, texts as objects that “engage readers in an ongoing relationship of interpretation and reinterpretation” (Murfin and Ray 477-8). Third, as already indicated by Irobi and Mhando, films are an embodiment of the cultural codes of their set communities and are semiotic objects open to interpretations in a Metzian point of view of film as a language where each film text constructs its meaning (1974). It is from the films, therefore, that this study generated the emergent themes and the fact that the
oral traditions is evident in the films in terms of the socio-political function of the films message and the orality therein.

Being a filmmaker from East Africa, I used interviews as a research method to foreground the place of filmmakers as primary critics of their films and the milieu in which they make the films. The decision to use interviews can help challenge and open up traditional methods of thinking. In the humanities and social sciences, “there has been an enormous increase in the multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary and now transdisciplinary approaches to knowledge building” (Leavy 725). Additionally, this thesis is a new project in as far as conceptualising the aesthetics and analysing the emergent themes of East African films are concerned. However, some critics perceive the use of interviews in film studies as unconventional. This perception is because “interviews with practitioners as well as theoreticians, critical essays, and storytelling (anecdotes and experiences) serves to create a heterodox practice” (Mistry and Schuhmann xiv). But for this study and other studies in African Cinema, whether interviews are a deviation from known practices, they have been part of a corpus of knowledge creation for both practitioners and critics. Christine Cornea in her theorisation of the significance of interviews, argues that interviews present an unambiguous discussion of the art in terms of the context of practice and production which also appreciates practitioners as critics of vast experience in “thinking and talking about their work” with journalists and academicians (120). The interviews elaborated on why specific themes and aesthetics were more prominent.

In the African film studies context, since film is a novel art form, most of its scholarship has used the critical voices of filmmakers to shape the subject. Debut monographs of African cinema such as Teshome Gabriel’s 1982 Third Cinema in the Third World: The Aesthetics of Liberation; Manthia Diawara’s 1992 African Cinema, Politics and Culture; Oliver Barlet’s 2000 African Cinema: Decolonising the Gaze; and Imruh Bakari and Mbye Cham’s 1996
anthology, *African Experiences of Cinema* among others, use filmmakers as a critical voice that give the first-hand perspective of their work. Interviews were sought after because of the novelty of African cinema scholarship, and African filmmakers were persistent in calling for their involvement in the development of a critical body on African film. Bassek Ba Kobhio, a Cameroonian filmmaker postulates:

> We do need criticism as we further develop our cinema, but there is a concrete reality that critics should get to know about, and there should be a little humility when they do not know that reality. Let us [filmmakers] be part of the common struggle (Givanni and Bakari 150).

Kobhio is particularly antagonistic to non-African critics who are often accused of failing to read the film’s artistic images, hence misinterpreting the films.

Several studies in African cinema argue for complementary relationship between African filmmakers and African film scholars. Scholars are, to some extent, blamed for having inadequate knowledge about African cinema, yet they fail to engage the filmmakers as critics too. Melissa Thackway, a Western film scholar, claims that “African cinema merits the attention of a multiplicity of critical viewpoints—it is thus worth accepting that our own reading of these films will be more complete if informed by the interpretations of local critics working within the cultural sphere in which these films are set” (28). Thackway, like Kobhio, cautions Western critics to control their paternalistic attitude and become enlightened about local film critics (academicians and practitioners) who possess first-hand or broad information about the films’ setting and symbolism. She adds,

> Western readings of African films will ultimately be more useful if taken to be part of an on-going critical dialogue, rather than a definitive statement, which thus requires that we accept that our critical paradigms be constantly challenged (ibid).

Much as Western critics are perceived as central to this criticism, these views apply simultaneously to the local critics because of the complex composition of Africa. Therefore, as
an East African studying East African film, I should otherwise have a better vantage point to comment on East African cinema as my knowledge of the region is further enhanced by the filmmakers’ critical views, especially on supposed common issues, such as themes and orality in African literature and film. However, I locate myself as an insider-outsider because of the eclectic composition of ethnicities and cultures in East Africa.²⁸

As noted above, a myriad of African film studies is saturated with interviews from the first and second generation of African filmmakers (mostly from Francophone Africa). And, as suggested by contemporary African film theorists, critics need to immerse themselves in the understanding of African iconology and other cultural codes because artistic traditions and forms are said to increasingly influence African cinema (Irobi 26; Mhando 3; Mahoso 222). Clearly, from the various interviews and critical material, the contentious definition of whether African cinema is homogenous, whether it has a familiar definitive aesthetics, and whether African cinema is substantially different from other world cinemas, is yet to be conclusively answered. This study brings to the discussion the views from East Africa’s screen-griots, who see their emerging themes as derived from popular discourses. The filmmakers appropriate the role of a traditional storyteller (the griot) to offer critical comments on pertinent topics such as gender, migration, social class (as seen from the films and the interviews). A discussion of the trajectory of cinema is East Africa with the prolific filmmakers in each country, in addition to a critical analysis of the key texts, enhanced and broadened my critical perception of the themes and stylistics in East African cinema.

²⁸ As an East African and a filmmaker, I may see myself as an insider to the project. However, this is also complicated by the fact that I come from one East African state, Uganda which has got many ethnic groups: it has at least 10 major ethnic groups. So, I cannot claim to be an expert on all films coming from Uganda since I can only belong to one ethnic group or be a product of two groups that may have affinities with a few more groups. Therefore, I immerse myself in the discourses of the films aware that the film is influenced by the social reality and the culture of the filmmakers who are diverse yet can be homogenous if we use different paradigms such as socio-politics—language, culture and political experiences.
As articulated in the subsequent sections, this thesis focuses on how East African screen-griots appropriate the griot aesthetic and how the griot can be an analytical framework in African cinema (and creative arts in general), a cinema that aims at foregrounding significant contemporary popular discourses that articulate the agency of ordinary people. Key among the popular discourses are self-representation and determination (as seen in their capability to tell their own stories of historical and memory significance); gender power relations among others (as is discussed in chapter five of this thesis); migration of Africans to the West and social class dynamics in Africa (as discussed in chapter four and six). As seen in the filmography, the screen-griots seem to be responding to Frantz Fanon’s call—“so, comrades, let us not pay tribute to Europe by creating states, institutions, and societies which draw their inspiration from her…Humanity is waiting for something from us other than such an imitation, which would be an almost obscene caricature” (315). East Africans, like the rest of contemporary Africans in and outside Africa, are reverberating the words of Fanon by experimenting with aesthetics to create themes and styles that are authentically African and contribute to the body of world cinema. In this thesis, my interpretation is, in part, only one of the numerous that can be made out of the selected texts. Each chapter draws on several films from the study’s filmography and beyond to augment the study’s claims regarding emergent themes.

Chapter Layout and Summaries

This thesis is comprised of seven chapters that can be divided into three categories—background and conceptual framework, aesthetic and thematic analyses and a conclusion.

In chapter two, I explore the concept of the griot and articulate how it informs the griot aesthetics, that this study appropriates as one of the conceptual frameworks for the analysis of the emergent themes that I discuss in the chapters that follow. Chapter two argues that the griot aesthetics is an integral part of African art particularly its underpinning value for artistry (at
performance/orality) and ideological functionality (diacticism/message) that is prominent, even as an aspiration, among East African screen-griot).

Chapters three, four, five, and six discuss the significant messages in the films, which, as argued in chapter one and two, is one arm of the griot aesthetics—the function or purpose of the narrative. Like griots who shaped popular discourse, contemporary filmmakers derive material from and contribute to popular discourse. Chapter three explores the representation of history and memory in films. East African filmmakers appropriate the film medium, like griots who used a story to record history, to tell stories about popular memory. This is in itself an act of self-determination as some of East Africa’s historical incidents have been produced from a foreign gaze, namely Hollywood. Chapter four explores the representation of the subject of migration from South to North. Here I analyse films that are intentionally foregrounding the anti-migration discourse. The films highlight the primary causes of economic migration and the impending solutions to mitigate the continuous exodus of people from Africa to Europe and North America. Chapter five looks at gender power relations in the broader global discourse of gender and African feminism. The films implicitly foregrounding the contemporary contradictions on gender socialisation in the hegemonic patriarchy that seems to be undergoing a slow and steady renegotiation of its facets. Chapter six looks at the issue of class in Africa and highlights how class politics has become the new frontline in Africa. The relevant films highlight the fluidity of the gaps between being rich and poor. The application of social class boundaries is represented as a vice that is counterproductive to the values of humanity. The vices of corruption, nepotism based on ethnicity, and religious identities are demonstrated as subtly creating class divisions that are carcinogenic to social equilibrium.

In chapter seven, I give a summary of my key arguments and recommendations for further research. Overall, this thesis argues for a collage of third cinema and the griot aesthetics as a culturally specific paradigm for studying of African cinema. The films demonstrate a
representation of key discourses that are encapsulated in subjective depictions of themes such as repairing the image of East Africa’s history, migration, gender power relations and relational conflicts. These dominant themes throughout the region’s cinema are key in shaping the regionality of East Africa.
Chapter Two: Griot Aesthetics: A Negotiation of Oral Traditions Amidst a Multivocality of Influences

The oral tradition influences what you write, because it usually comes with you unconsciously, as you write.

—Joel Karekezi, Rwandan filmmaker

We are the modern griots, modern storytellers because we come from a history of storytelling. We are just using film medium and format, to tell the stories.

—Wanuri Kahiu, Kenyan filmmaker

Introduction

East African cinema draws upon and embodies a range of stylistic and genre influences from other African cinemas as well as television and non-African audiovisual media. East African filmmakers themselves testify to the diverse range of influences and inspirations for their work, whether arising from either their training, individual sensibilities and interests or their social networks and milieus. In the introduction, I outlined the history of independent filmmaking in the region and how funding and regulation of the industry also affect the artistic choices of filmmakers. Here I consider the influence of media culture and arts heritage on the aesthetics of the budding film industries in East Africa. For example, the proliferation of Nigerian and African American films on local televisions, cinemas and home videos gave impetus to the desire for self-representation in film. Self-representation was apparent in the immense production of low budget films modelled on Nollywood’s straight-to-DVD market design. But television and film are not the only factors that have influenced East African cinema aesthetics.

This chapter argues that within the eclectic aesthetic influences of East African cinema, there is, nevertheless, an identifiable strand of an aesthetic oriented to more traditional African oral forms—the griot aesthetic. The griot aesthetic that most filmmakers foreground is a long-
held critical identity marker of African cinema and an essential way of expressing African cultural and artistic perspectives (Diawara 1988; Ukadike 1994; Smith 2010; De Turégano 18; Fisher 5-6; Sawadogo 176; Barlet 286). It manifests in East African cinema at two levels: the first level is performativity (orality), and the second level is socio-cultural functionality (didacticism). In as much as most of the filmmakers interviewed self-identified as screen-griots and stressed the importance of a griot aesthetic in communicating their messages to their audiences, some of them have articulated a sense of struggle to sustain this screen-griot identity in the face of pressure from producers, the desires of spectators who are accustomed to Hollywood’s production values and constraints on freedom of expression in some countries (Dusabejambo; Kahiu; Manege; Niyongabo; Omar; Shivji; Wasswa). However, the filmmakers understand themselves as negotiating various obstacles—whether access to funding, distribution or censorship regimes—in order to maintain their role as screen-griots. They understand themselves as having a cultural responsibility to offer a critical view of society that they package in film just like the traditional griots did in oral literature. The screen-griots deliberately create narratives that are oriented towards communicating ‘messages’ that they assume will offer philosophical guidance to contemporary challenges.

The Dialectics of the Griot Aesthetic Identity in African Cinema

The significance of the screen-griot identity reflects a notion of a griot aesthetic that has been important for many African filmmakers (ever since the now canonical and influential Sembene), and scholars of African cinema. Notably (as argued in chapter one), the griot aesthetics is partly inflected by the political imperative to understand African cinema from a Third Cinema perspective which advocates for a cultural relevant mode of filmic expression. Eddie Ugbomah, a celebrated Nigerian filmmaker, elaborates this view as it is supported by most African filmmakers and critics:
American movies have their own identity. British and European countries have their own identities. I think oral tradition is the only true African identity for African movies because the oral tradition is a critical element in our pattern of communication. It seems that the only identity we have now, to which we should hold tight, is the interpretation of our folklore. African film must have its own identity, and its identity is located in the oral narrative technique… (Ukadike and Ugbomah 162).

Ugbomah succinctly articulates the griot aesthetic as an artistic heritage that Africa can bring to the world stage. This is significant because traditional African oral aesthetics, as an authentic identity insignia, is not only predominant in Africa, but it extends to the entire pan-African world.

The griot aesthetic of orality, understood as adaptation and performance of oral practices and roles, genres and forms (the griot storyteller, folklore, poetry, music) to cinematic narrative, is actualised in various ways in the pan-African arts. Like East African creatives, African diaspora also assert their identity through the African oral tradition, an aspect they have held onto strongly as an authentic and “all-encompassing” aesthetic contribution to film art (Smith 28; Papaioannou 142). Haseenah Ebrahim in “Africanity, Orality in the Films/ Videos of Women Filmmakers of the African Diaspora,” highlights the traces of African oral influences in the filmmakers from America to the Caribbean to locate and affirm their identity. She argues that African diaspora filmmakers “recognise that elements of the oral tradition, including tales, proverbs, and other sayings, riddles, music and drumming, popular remedies and beliefs about the world, constitute an alternative form of knowledge” (108, my emphasis). As such, they incorporate the above features of cultural expression into narratives posed as “subversive” (ibid). Yet this diaspora art is not subversive because it is oppositional. Instead, as Sheila Petty argues, their “poetics… [move] beyond the oppositional to probe relational, rather than static, binary interactions between flows of race, religion, histories, and events” (Petty 424). Therefore, a diasporic aesthetic that draws on oral traditions does more than undermine
narratives of dislocation and racism and seeks to affirm the identity and philosophy of the peoples who feel the immense desire for self-representation and carve out their place in world cinema and art in general.

The claim that the griot aesthetic of orality and functionality is the most significant and authentic marker of identity for African cinema is not uncontested. While most African filmmakers see the griot aesthetic as an authentic identity insignia for African cinema, others perceive the nomenclature African cinema as an attempt to compartmentalise filmmakers from Africa. The opponents of identifying orality with African cinema, if I may call them so, argue that the name fixes their “films in a language and a genre that they laboriously have to fight out of to belong to the world” (Barlet, Contemporary 286). It is because of such perspectives that filmmakers, who contest what they see as a ghettoised perception of the characteristics of African film, also challenge the blanket label African Cinema as a misnomer for diverse cinemas in an ethnically heterogeneous Africa. “African cinema” is a complex and dialectical configuration and yet it remains a viable cultural and aesthetic category as a result of the prevalence of a griot aesthetics and its inflection towards both orality and didacticism.

As much as the griot aesthetics feels like a “paradox of identity,” whereby some filmmakers want to hold onto it while others want to disassociate from it, it is arguably the most vivid, authentic marker of “specificity” for film from Africa (Barlet Contemporary African 286). There is consensus among scholars that the use of the griot aesthetics in African cinema cannot be underestimated (De Turégano 18; Sawadogo 176, Diawara 1988; Ukadike 1994; Papaioannou, 2009; Smith 2010; Fofana 2011; Fisher 2016; Barlet 2016). Julie Papaioannou in “From Orality to Visuality: the question of aesthetics in African Cinema” explains the drive for the metamorphosis of oral literature to film:

Over the last fifty years, film-makers, theorists and critics alike have clearly formulated their preoccupation to Africanize film form, create an aesthetics that
would preserve the character of *cinéma engagé*, yet ultimately break with didacticism, and define new socio-political and aesthetic interactions of African film-making with African cultures and audiences (141).

Papaioannou encapsulates the fact that the griot aesthetic does not only manifest at the level of adapting oral performances into film but extends to the socio-political aspect of the narratives. The first films in Sub-Saharan Africa by Africans such as Ousmane Sembene’s *Borom Sarret, Black Girl, Xala*, Idrissa Ouedraogo’s *Tilai (The Law)*, and Gaston Kabore’s *Wend Kuuni*, Med Hondo’s *Sarraounia* are notable for adapting Africa’s oral tradition to the screen and particularly for using the second aspect of griot aesthetic—the socio-political function of film—a characteristic that is also identified as the “griot function” (Fisher 7). Similarly, the anthropological films that explored life in pre-colonial Africa that Diawara has categorised as the “return to source” films have vivid features of the griot in their narratives (Diawara 140-166). They are a quintessential representation of an interaction between orature and film.

Today, modern technology has allowed for pragmatic and fluid adaptations of folktales, poetry, proverbs and riddles into literature, hip-hop songs, comics, audio, and audio-visual formats such as film. James Odhiambo Ogone in the analysis of how oral literature is increasingly adapted into Kenyan video films, postulates that there is a tendency for “Kenyan vernacular films to remediate the oral traditions of local communities within the new technological medium of video” (480). Teresa Hoefert De Turégano calls the relationship between African cinema and oral traditions dialogic because aesthetically there is a “dialogue between cinema and oral traditions,” which informs the “strategies of the griot; and various means of storytelling, improvisation, linguistic codes, et-cetera” that get “transformed and appropriated by the cinematic language” as the filmmakers employ the griot aesthetics so as to respond to contemporary conditions (16). Before modern technological advancement in the modes of data archiving and recording of performances, African oral traditions faced
limitations in terms of breadth and mobility. Artists archived the folklore in sculptures, paintings on houses and stones. Also, for continuity, the griot became a hereditary cast job. The relationship between film and oral literature is symbiotic—African film cannot exist without the African oral traditions, and oral traditions need film to ensure their continuity.

While not all East African critics and filmmakers view the griot aesthetic as the only significant factor in the definition of African cinema, there is tangible evidence that it will continue to shape African cinema’s identity in the otherwise universal medium—film. For the griot aesthetics as was appropriated by the early African filmmakers still influence contemporary filmmakers who are “trying to pull off a delicate balancing act between asserting their Africanness and wanting to escape it to thwart other people’s projections” (Barlet, Contemporary African 286). The immense presence of griot aesthetics in independent commercial films attests to a conscious or advertent appropriation of a storytelling sensibility that comes naturally, as it were, to Africans amidst multivocal aesthetic influences. The griot aesthetics forms a substantial part of the filmmakers’ milieu that they cannot escape from it.

The Significance of the Griot Aesthetic in East African Cinema: The Filmmakers’ Perspectives

This section foregrounds the filmmakers’ views regarding their perceptions of the griot’s responsibility and how they feel it should be deployed. Because of the significance of didacticism in African film, the griot aesthetic has become both an inspiration and aspiration of filmmakers, a form of authenticity and identity. Even when the filmmakers have had no experience of a traditional oral storytelling session, their milieu is often saturated with oral tales, proverbs and sayings that have gone through profound transformations and adaptations. As such, the filmmakers strongly claim to be influenced by the oral culture and its ideological role. Karekezi argues, as already quoted in the epigraph, that the oral tradition influences what the filmmakers write because it is part of their subconscious as an artistic form. He adds: “our
grandmother’s stories had the classical beginning, middle and end. Surprisingly, this fits in the universal structure of storytelling” (Interview). Karekezi encapsulates the African storytelling forms often translated into many film narratives because that tradition intrinsically comes with their creativity. However, he brings a perspective of the universality of story structure which, in some sense, complicates the idea of whether African films are any different from any narrative film from around the world.

Similarly, speaking in plural form, Wanuri Kahiu affirms the function that she perceives African filmmakers play:

> We are the modern griots, modern storytellers because we come from a history of storytelling. We are just using film medium and format, to tell the stories. We are very firmly linked to the past filmmakers and storytellers not only in how we record our histories but also in how we pay attention to the future because the griot is a person who told the community “watch out something is happening!” (Interview).

Kahiu articulates the philosophical significance of the griot, which underscores and elevates the status of the films’ message. Another filmmaker, Tosh Gitonga, echoes Sembene’s words: “we are the ones who help society to mirror itself, to review itself” (Interview), while Matt Bish also posits that “film is a medium we have borrowed to replace the fireplace storytelling sessions that the contemporary modernity does not favour. Our stories were entertaining as well as educative, and these characteristics find their way into our films” (Interview). These filmmakers’ articulations clearly assert their art’s significance: it must embody entertainment and messages as a hallmark of the griots’ function to society. Their creativity is evident from how the message is packaged. The challenge to filmmakers, however, is how they negotiate to communicate social messages in their films without seeming banal. As evidenced in the films, they resort to employing both obvious and more subtle forms of didacticism, which requires a high level of creativity in terms of narrative structure, symbolism, satire, and juxtaposition.
While the griot aesthetic may be understood to accentuate performativity in terms of narrative character or voice that recreates the presence of an oral storyteller and alludes to oral literature, these aspects are employed to accentuate the important messages of films. In other words, there is already a hierarchical and functional relation between these dimensions of the griot aesthetic. Therefore, building on the assertions of the filmmakers discussed above, one might say that the sole aim of a screen-griot is didacticism (Diang’a 2016; Teno qtd. in Thackway 206). In African film, even when the narrative leans toward an overly entertainment-driven Hollywood model, it does not break away from didacticism. This is an effect of the purposefulness of art (inclusive of popular arts) in Africa. Wanuri Kahiu further elaborates on this position:

African art is the fabric of our clothes, but we wear them, our art is on pots, but we tend to use them to plant, to store water, to cook! There is a function of art; our films are functional in that sense. Our tradition is to be artistic and functional at the same time. I use film as an art form to communicate hope and joy (Interview).

While Kahiu situates film as art in the context of diverse and everyday material forms, drawing attention to the necessary entanglement and interdependencies of form and function, Ugandan filmmaker, Hussein Omar explains the reason for didacticism in his films in terms of both unconscious and conscious cultural and political motivations:

As a filmmaker, I can’t disassociate myself from my oral tradition. I am aware that the medium I am using has the potential to reach a wide audience, I meditate on what I want to say and look for the best way to say it (interview).

Both Omar and Kahiu underscore the African filmmakers’ intentional and overt appropriation of the griot aesthetic by participating in the adaptation of the ethico-political role of the griot into film because of the films’ ability to address a wide audience of spectators in comparison to oral performance. Moreover, because of this potential audience reach, film is a tool in the circulation of certain discourses in society that the griots deem as significant in contributing to attitudinal changes or giving hope to the disillusioned.
Therefore, because of the perceived efficacy of film as a communication tool, and more particularly in articulating Africa’s decolonisation mission and its self-assertion, East African filmmakers are aggressively stressing the didacticism and message-orientedness in their films. As Jane Murago-Munene one of the first generation of Kenyan filmmakers of the 1990s and the executive director of FEPACI (Federation of Pan African Filmmakers) elaborates, the role of film in Africa to date:

[to change how we perceive ourselves and how others see us, we have to start by telling our own story. And there is plenty to tell. We are at the dawn of the new African renaissance. An Africa that is youthful, having freed herself from the debilitating yoke of colonialism and apartheid...We are an Africa telling her story through her own eyes -African images and stories told by African peoples. That story is an Africa of hope and promise. An Africa of opportunity and prosperity (2013).

Evidently, film as propositioned by third cinema, is a tool Africans wish to use to correct the contradictions in their contemporary life, such as their history (as discussed in chapter three). Africans are determined to challenge the negative representations about Africa using the same medium that continues to grossly propagate them—film and popular media in general.

Damaris Irungu, a renowned Kenyan scriptwriter and lecturer of screenwriting, rearticulates Munene’s assertion by emphasizing the use of film as edutainment—to educate and as well as entertain. Irungu argues that Kenya, being a former settler country, has people whose cultures were depleted, whose history is miswritten, and that, like other colonised societies, is in need of reconstruction. Trusting the absolute potential of film to reach a wider audience, she says:

I am currently not doing anything that will not be thought-provoking, inform and educate. I will do it in the way I know best, entertainment. I use the three-act structure: beginning, middle and end, and twists and turns, things I learned from my grandmother. Edutainment has become a boring term but that is what
I do. From *The Mau Mau Detainees, The Doll, and The Masai Lawyer* story. I have written a film about the traditional Rainmaker (Interview).

Irungu’s assertions can be extended to the entire postcolonial Africa and the forcefully displaced Africans in America and the Caribbean, who (as argued earlier) appropriate the griot aesthetic and African folklore to subvert dominance and re-assert their identity. Irungu, therefore, re-articulates the intention of most filmmakers to carefully craft socio-political messages in their narratives. Even the few filmmakers (Manege; Omar; Wasswa), who claim that they prioritise entertainment over the message, attest to the fact that their films aim at engaging the audience in a thought-provoking manner as it was with oral storytellers.

East African filmmakers, like any other popular African artists, partake of their inherently bestowed (or rather assumed role) griotic responsibility by creating what Karin Barber calls “forms that are constantly emergent, ephemeral, embedded in daily life” that speak for the marginalised, challenge hegemonies through subtle subversions, and above all raise the spectators’ consciousness about ongoing injustices (Barber 13). Thus, the filmmakers, like griots, should ingeniously perform an “ethicopolitical task as cultural curators and agents of historical and cultural deconstruction and reconstruction in the realm of modern societies” (Papaioannou 155). Barber also elaborates on the fact that popular art (film) must have social messages because African spectators also expect particular discourses to come out of the narratives. She explains:

Audiences for African popular creative works are noted for the active role they assign themselves in the constitution of a work’s meaning. They often take responsibility for finding the significance of a work for themselves, including by bringing extraneous knowledge to bear on it or attaching a meaning that resonates with their own experience. As circumstances and experiences change, so do the ways in which audience members ‘complete’ the work (14).
Barber implies that the relevance of the story often transcends generations as different spectators’ interpretations are inevitably shaped by their milieu. As evident in the films, the filmmakers are conscious of their role, and they aim to create narratives that are in resonance with the spectators’ expectations. For instance, self-representation in matters of history and cultural identity as seen in the subsequent chapters are significant because the filmmakers are expected by their spectators to contest the hegemonic representations of East African history in Hollywood films and Western literature, including accounts of the history of Africa that have been ideologically askew to promote the image of Africa as a “dark continent,” “justify colonialism” and make a subtle case of “neocolonialism” (Dokotum 12). As African philosopher Valentin-Vyes Mudimbe argued, “[t]heories of colonial expansion and discourses on African primitiveness emphasise a historicity and the promotion of a particular model of history” (20). Filmmakers, therefore, have the baggage of such colonialist historiographies that they seek to counter. Their counter-narratives are demonstrated in the subsequent chapters, where we see reconstructions of Africa’s historical accounts, and a plethora of subjective representations of popular debates on gender, class, and immigration.

**Negotiating an Eclectic Film Aesthetics**

As discussed in chapter one, East Africa’s film industry is not systematically determined by coherent regional or national film policies, funding or institutional arrangements, but rather more ad hoc developments including neo-liberal economic policies of individual nation-states and filmmakers’ networks. Moreover, the film industry dynamics account for the limitations of aesthetic choices imposed on the filmmakers, particularly the funding constraints of a regional and transnational film industry. However, the filmmakers’ testimonies on their artistic influences reveal the existence of diverse aesthetic sensibilities. These aesthetic trends are partly predicated on the industry model to which they have been exposed and most significantly East Africa’s rich multi and inter-media milieu. For East
African filmmakers, like the other African filmmakers, their informal education in narrative film consists of the traditional oral culture (oral literature), and the audio-visual milieu. Manthia Diawara, a renowned African film critic, acknowledges that contemporary African filmmakers have a “multiplicity of influences,” ranging from Hollywood, European cinema, Indian, early African cinema and Nollywood in addition to the oral storytelling traditions (New Aesthetics 97). Similarly, Harrow and Garritano in their discussion of Nigerian and Ghanaian filmmakers succinctly explain the influence of African oral cultures on East African films:

Their notions about narrative and cinema, for the most part, derived from the films and media they had been exposed to as viewers – colonial documentaries, martial arts films, Bollywood, and Hollywood B movies – as well as from deep stores of oral culture and, more immediately, the rumors and stories that shaped African urban, popular imaginaries (4).

The development of East African cinema and its specific contexts of transnational African and international film exhibition and culture arises in a similar manner as that described by Harrow and Garritano. Cineplexes in major East African cities show mainly Hollywood and Bollywood films, and video street vendors are known to sell an eclectic collection of mainly pirated films copies from Hollywood, Bollywood, Nigeria, Ghana and more recently from China and the Philippines. As it was with the experience of Nigerian and Ghanaian filmmakers, the immediate film culture contexts of East African filmmakers inform, both directly and indirectly, their aesthetics.

Many filmmakers acknowledge that Hollywood’s production values, especially its cinematography and formulae genre films, are some of the artistic values that they have to negotiate alongside the omnipresent traditional oral literature aesthetic. Steven Wasswa’s views confirms the presence of Hollywood’s influence: “Hollywood heavily influences my style. You know Hollywood has influenced many people. They [Hollywood] seem to set the rules. I was
aware that Nollywood was also picking from Hollywood” (Interview). Hussein Omar, a Ugandan filmmaker, adds:

Often, when I make a film whose style is not Hollywoodish, I am criticised for not being ‘professional.’ I have an issue with the rules, and we need to create our own rules. The ‘rules’ are limiting the creativity of filmmakers. We need to portray who we are. Our strength our energy, our determination and everything we are. We know our society is also undergoing a lot of negative influences, but there should be a balance (Interviews).

As much as Omar identifies the fact that the viewers and critics’ sensibilities are dominated by Hollywood cinema, he expresses the need to break away from its domination. He further notes that a complete breakaway from Hollywood is not a simple task. Omar further observes that East African films “generally use close-up shots like it is in Hollywood films… not like those wide shots, long shots that are in the old West African films. Maybe we are getting influences from Nollywood and Hollywood” (Interview). His film Dream America, for example, defies categorisation as either Ugandan or African because it uses largely close-ups and a Hollywood postclassical style that can locate it anywhere where there are people of colour. Despite its deployment of dominant, mainstream film codes, Dream America focuses and foregrounds the social messages of anti-migration, which links it to the griot aesthetic.

Omar, like other interviewed filmmakers, identifies an important aspect of the cinematographic style and genre of the films sampled for this study as lacking or not majorly using the long takes and wide shots that dominate canonical West African Francophone films, and are regarded as some of the formal definitive aspects of African cinema. This is because, unlike the early filmmakers whose narratives revolved around rural settings or a combination of both country and metropolitan lifestyles, East African screen-griots are operating in metropolitan centres and responding to the tastes of spectators whose viewing sensibilities are both popular and eclectic. That is to say, the cinematography of narratives set in the village
may appropriate steady and wide shots that Teshome categorises as “slow long takes, wide shots and a repetition of scenes” (20). Most narratives in this study’s filmography, however, are about intimate urban life that is portrayed as largely individualistic hence, the appropriation of a more dynamic cinematography, as seen in Nollywood and films from Ghana. Early African cinema criticism generally argued that films about urbanity employ more close-up and medium shots to signify close individualistic life of the urbanites as opposed to the more familiar idea of the communal country Africa, which is often represented in long shots of large landscapes (Teshome 1982; Diawara 1988, 1992; Ukadike 1994). Whether or not the filmmakers are alive to the specificities of some of the scholarly debates on the early style of West African cinema and its relation to the development of an identifiable a griot aesthetic, most tend to draw on multiple visual styles in order to ensure the most effective communication of their intended messages to their audiences.

In addition to dominant film aesthetics—Hollywood and Nollywood, and the strong orature influences—East African filmmakers articulate other personal artistic interests and sensibilities as other forms of social and cultural capital that they manoeuvre and incorporate in their films. Rwanda’s experimental filmmaker, Kivu Ruhorahoza says he is often influenced by “literature, painting, a scene in a film, theatre, photography” (Interview). He adds:

I am a film junkie. I watch anything. Precise bits of many things influence me. Stylistically, I like playing with structure. The culture products I consumed as a child were never linear, be it religious books, or stories that I listened to as a child. I like playing with the past and the present… I don't pay attention to structure (Interview).

Like Ruhorahoza, Kenyan filmmaker Wanuri Kahiu elaborates on the multiplicity of influences and illuminates the fact that East Africans’ limited exposure to film history makes them look for other artistic expressions for inspirations. She says:
My influences are not only from films but also from artists and things. I have influence from the old school like Sembene Ousmane, *Black Orpheus* from Brazil really moved me. There are a couple of French filmmakers who I have really followed. Artists and photographers really influence my work. In an area when we don’t have access to many filmmakers, other storytellers come in handy to help you communicate a language, a feeling in this medium. African visual artists such as Wangechi Mutu, Zanele Muholi and other contemporary visual artists whose work you usually see on social media have greatly influenced how I see life (interview).

Burundian filmmaker, Joseph Ndayisenga, also believes that East African screen-griots are working in a complex, rich multi and intermedia environments in which they should prioritise the importance of art. Ndayisenga, who says he is influenced by the media forms he was exposed to, I believe, to some extent is disregarding aesthetic differences by underscoring the idea of the universality of film. He argues:

I’m one of those people who believe that the art of storytelling should be universal. I grew up watching Bollywood and Chinese movies. I’ve always been amazed by the fact that I could still relate to those stories, although I didn’t speak/understand either Mandarin or Hindi. That’s how I always wanted my stories to be: tell local stories in a way that they can resonate with anyone no matter their cultural backgrounds (Interview).

Ndayisenga emphasizes the point that film is universal. The setting and characters are what may differentiate one film from the other.

The filmmakers’ exposure to many kinds of visual media and the formal or informal training they undergo significantly informs their general film aesthetics, which is also contingent on an individual filmmaker’s stylistic signature. However, individual stylistic character is also hard to determine because of the complex industry dynamics in which the filmmaker operate. Many filmmakers have training from non-African mentors, have studied from film schools outside of Africa, and have been exposed to multiple film cultures, which,
in itself, is a ground for multivocality in artistic sensibilities. Amil Shivji contends that it is always a challenge to work with European and American mentors who, for instance, push for screenplays to have a single character lead. In contrast to European and American sentiments, Shivji prefers to represent groups of character because of his perception of Tanzanian life as a communal adventure (Interview). Ruhorahoza and other filmmakers who engage in co-productions identify with Shivji’s situation, in which African filmmakers are always negotiating their African narrative aesthetics vis-a-vis the Western-oriented film tropes. Unfortunately, East African screen-griots have to contend the complexity of co-producing with non-Africans who in most cases are also the major source of funds. The ability of East African filmmakers to strike a balance between multiple styles and their own sense of artistic identity suggests that a distinct East African cinema must be understood as a negotiated aesthetic.

What is pertinent in this chapter is the screen-griots’ awareness of the multiplicity of influences they must negotiate in a bid to maintain their identities, while also mapping out the contribution of African cinema on world cinema. East African filmmakers’ appropriation of audio-visual styles from Nigerian, Ghana, Hollywood, Bollywood, China and, more recently, television series from the Philippines and Latin America, underscores the adaptability of orature, particularly in its sense of performativity and ideological functionality. It is evident in the selected filmography that most East African films are focused on “the issues of political and cultural identity” that have been major concerns in African cinema (Adesokan 233). The filmmakers’ desire to use orality in film can also be understood as a continuation of self-representation and the ongoing manifestation of Third Cinema today. For orality is seen as the commencement of “a new aesthetic to break with the dominance of the spectacular and consumerism” in Hollywood and a possible African contribution to world cinema (Barlet Contemporary 287). Though cognisant of the complexity of adapting oral literature formal elements into the film, the filmmakers have endeavoured to present the African traditional oral
storytelling aesthetics in film at both ideological and formal levels. Through their presumed role of screen-griots, they have also sustained their sense of style as upcoming auteurs by allowing for idiosyncratic deployments of orality and of the griot aesthetic either advertently or inadvertently.

**Manifestations and Complexities of Griot Aesthetics in E. African Film**

Despite the varied external and industrial aesthetic influences, most of the East African filmmakers interviewed for this study claim that oral tradition in its varied forms of literature, such as proverbs, chants, poetry, and folktales stylistically and ideologically is fundamental to their films. A key part of their creative process involves the effective employment of the various elements of oral literature into their films. For orality in film or literature is about the ingenuity of the performer’s formulation of the story (Finnegan 4; Nandwa and Bukenya 1).

As I have already explained in chapter one, the griot aesthetics can be analysed in two facets. First, the performative aspect that employs orality which involves the simulation of an oral storyteller and the appropriation of oral literature genres into film. Second, the narrative’s key message or subject, what I will call the griot function or purpose, which focuses on how formal elements are mobilised as an aesthetic means to communicate the subject matter vividly—the didactic message (Diawara 1988; Haseenah 1998; Papaioannou 2009; Roy 2015; Fisher 2016). In this way, form and message are symbiotic.

Manthia Diawara’s “Popular Culture and Oral Traditions in African Film,” a seminal article that theorises oral tradition in film, underscores the reliance of the griot’s performance “on spoken language as well as music to actualise the story” (7). Later critical studies of orality also argue that it is a “fissure between oral and literate cultures” that, in part, manifests in terms of adapting orality into multiple creative media such as music, literature, and film that can be categorised as the literate and potentially more permanent media (Fisher 8). As argued in this chapter, the functionality of the griot encompasses the ideological role of an artist as envisaged
in African epistemes. That is to say, the griot is an entertainer as well as a philosopher and historian.

A film griot’s role is challenging because adapting oral literature to film is a complex process, particularly the actualisation of orality in film because of the crucial difference between the two media. Some filmmakers manage to successfully adapt orality in film, while others still struggle with it despite their great interest in orality. Dusabejambo, a Rwandan filmmaker, explains this difficulty of ‘translation’ from spoken word narratives to visually-oriented media: “I am struggling to put words in visual images to incorporate orality in my film fully. We know our people remember the spoken word. It is a responsibility of the filmmakers to tap into that heritage” (Interview). More than a difficulty in ‘translation’, Mutiganda suggests that there has been a more persistent failure to make that adaptation. He argues, “a majority of East Africans are not taking their own culture into their narratives. The oral tradition of storytelling is not visibly translating into film as is the case in West African film” (Interview). These observations foreground the complexities of adapting oral codes and conventions of the spoken word, and embodied performance, beyond a transparent, realist style of representation.

Albeit the complexity of adapting oral traditions into film, Jean Kwezi, a Rwandan filmmaker, successfully adapts orality into his first feature film, *Umutoma*, using the narrative device of poetry to propel the story of a girl who is torn between choosing from two men. One suitor expresses his love in beautiful lyrical poetry, while the other, a busy businessman, only buys her gifts. The girl chooses money over love. The protagonist’s selection of a businessman over the childhood poetic lover, in effect satirises the vice of materialism. In his interview, Kwezi asserts the relationality of the griotic aesthetic to the identity of African art and cinema before giving another salient example of his flexible and adaptive griotic practice:

The adaptation of oral literature into film could be the only way for Africans to create our unique and original art. Yes, I like to bring out my Rwandan culture
in art. My next film, *Omugane* is based on the folktale about a rat that separates a marriage. I use the proverb of a rat to explore the increasing divorce rate (Interview 2019).

Kwezi draws attention to the use of traditional oral stories to contribute to a contemporary conversation on the high rate of divorce. In *Bella*, Matt Bish cleverly adapts the song from a famous Ugandan folktale “*Mwana wa Nyabo*” (my dear one) to craft a narrative of street children phenomena in Uganda today. Bish exposes sex trade, child neglect, domestic violence and the widening gap between the rich and poor. Bella begins living as a street child after a grave domestic fight between her parents. Bish uses the folk song “*Mwana wa Nyabo*” as the film’s theme song that Bella sings as a pacifier whenever she is faced with challenges. Implicitly, Bish highlights the therapeutic role of art, and specifically of music.

Shivji, a creative Tanzanian of Indian descent, identifies the use of communal or group characters as a typical extension of the oral tradition because to him there is a communal disposition of East Africans especially when they gather to tell and, in return, be told *stories* (Interview). It is because of this disposition that his film company is called *Kijiweni* (at the stone), which means the meeting point where people tell and discuss stories. He contextualises his filmmaking practice in relation to his personal social experience:

> In Zanzibar, people still meet at the Barazas (Verandas) to talk about issues, share conversations. Growing up in the 90s, we dropped school bags and immediately went to the *Kijiweni*. This is a habit that had been there from the 70s, 80s. *Kijiwe* were urban places in Dar where people met take Kahawa [coffee], hung out. We even had political *Kijiwes*. There were no chief storytellers; everybody participated. Translating that to my films, I rarely use one protagonist… Even when you use the main character, that character can only be understood in contrast with the community (Interview).

Even though Shivji may not articulate African orality similar to native Africans, he still portrays it via the continued use of griotic characters, who are symbolic of the community and/or
communal characters where there is no single protagonist as seen in *T-Junction, Samaki Mchangani*, and *Shoeshine*. The above assertions underscore the filmmakers’ sense of how orality is mobilised in film and some of the difficulties of adapting or transposing orality into film. The difficulty can be at transposing a folk song, a proverb, a saying, character and characterisation, cinematography, to adapting an entire folktale and/or the oral narrative structure. In terms of film form, narrative, and performance, the griot aesthetic is, therefore, a necessarily flexible rubric.

As I argue in the next section, most of the films in this thesis employ the griot aesthetic of orality at the levels of narrative voice-over, characterisation, music, and theme. However, it is not only through the narrator, music and characterisation that the griot aesthetics are inscribed in film. Diawara argues that even at the cinematographic level, the filmmaker articulates and transmutes an oral literature aesthetics of storytelling. He cites the use of long shots and takes it as a way of “describing the emotions of the character instead of showing it.” He adds that the filmmaker can subvert the ‘subjective shots’ to “not always have the same significance in African cinema as in Western cinema” (“Popular Culture” 13). For example, a close-up shot can be used as a “description by the filmmaker/narrator for the spectator” instead of being a point of view shot by the character (ibid). De Turégano makes a slightly different point, drawing attention to how critics might contextualise analyses organized by a close attention to film form:

It is interesting to follow some of the current formal film analysis, which brings to the fore cinematic structures that draw on local oral narratives and transform and innovate oral practices into cinematic form and see this work in combination with ongoing historical, social, cultural, and political analyses (De Turégano 18).

De Turegano’s claim, which implies a dialectical relation between these different forms of analysis, might be understood to apply to the entire East African filmscape given the
filmmakers’ overt intentions to draw on oral narratives both in form and ideology, as evidenced in Ayeny, Bish, Kwezi, Ndagire, Nzitonda, Nyanja, Peck and Shivji’s films.

**Narrative Voice-over and the Griotic Character**

As much as Diawara and De Turégano have argued that orality can be analysed at several levels, in the remainder of this chapter, I identify and discuss only narrative voice-over and the representation of the griot character as the overtly visible formal aspects of orality that connect effectively to the social-political statements (didacticism) the films embody. From the study’s filmography, films such as *The Captain of Nakara* from Kenya, *T-Junction* from Tanzania, *Kivumvu: The Basket Boy* from Burundi, *Sometimes in April* from Rwanda, there is a vivid portrayal of the narrator/voice-over from whom the story evolves. Other films from the region, such as and Bish’s *Friends for Life* and *Bella*, Ayeny’s *Plan B*, Raoul Peck’s *Lumumba* employ the voice-over from the point of a griotic storyteller. As much as the griotic character can be understood as a voice-over in a narrative film, in this case, the narrator, who is also part of the characters, can be perceived as a simulation of the traditional griot’s storytelling session.

By focalising the protagonist and allowing the plot to evolve from his or her point of view as the first narrator/performer, the films recreate the traditional oral tales where the performer is an integral part of the story. For instance, *The Captain of Nakara* begins with the real griotic character as traditionally known. From the costumes to the props, the performative role of the griot is visible. The griot/storyteller is dressed in trousers and a shirt (African Print), over the paraphenalia of animal skin on his shoulders and on his head. He is carrying a tube fiddle that is also decorated with animal skin. Animal skin is employed for its symbolic significance, and either shows ethnic identity and allegiance or personal totems and status (Olupona 9). Indeed, kings, chiefs and respected performers use animal skins as a symbol of status. Similar paraphernalia is seen on the narrator in *The Captain of Nakara* to distinguish him as a respectable griot. He begins the narrative:
Esteemed audience, lend me your ear: You are about to hear an incredible story that took place right here in Nakara in the heart of the legendary Kwetu. The story of the Captain of Nakara! He taught the corrupt a lesson they wouldn’t forget. Understand though, it’s not set today, but some years ago…

The Captain of Nakara…he beat the system at its game.

Now, while I am relating his story, sometimes gay, sometimes sad,

You the audience, make yourselves comfortable for the story is a long one…

(The Captain 00:56-02:45).

The griot’s costumes bridge modernity and African traditions as he narrates to the spectators, the legend of the Captain of Nakara. The griot stands out as someone important, knowledgeable in the histories of the Kwetu, an imaginary state, (meaning “our home” in Kiswahili) because of his animal skin embellishments. He is often presented in a low angle shot which accentuates his authority. To extend the performativity of the griot as the one telling the spectators the story, he addresses the spectators looking directly into the camera.

Direct address is effectively employed by Nyanja and Owusu in The Captain of Nakara and Flight Path, respectively. Nyanja appropriates the griotic character’s direct address in the film which oscillates from the first person to the third person narrator as the story evolves. The griot character in the film is represented as being aware of the dual performance to multiple audiences—one on-screen and one off-screen. For example, in his direct address, the griot directly calls the spectators his audience and invites them to be the primary audience. The griot character whom we see at the beginning of narrative about the legend of the Captain of Nakara appears again to direct the story at the turning point when Muntu has run out of options to raise funds for his wedding. The griot also returns at the end of the movie (at Muna and Muntu’s wedding party) to end the narrative for us. The end is parallel to the opening scene as both show a celebration, and both scenes signify the presence of an audience to the performance of the griot like it is in a storytelling session. Similarly, in Owusu’s Flight Path, the narrator
anticipates an audience that he is addressing on matters concerning migration (discussed in chapter four). The narrator shares his intimate experience in Europe with the intention of discouraging more migration. In both films, the griot character uses direct address (either by the protagonist or the narrator) which recreates the traditional mode of orality and suggests the spectators’ presence.

In the short film *Kivumvu: The Basket Boy*, too, the grandmother performs a griotic character’s function by narrating the origin of the curious young man's nickname, “basket boy.” The film’s narrative evolves from the perspective of the grandmother, a familiar figure whose familial identity signifies her role as a traditional storyteller in most African cultures. Therefore, the story suggests authenticity to the spectators who associate age with wisdom. In a simple tale of a grandmother pacifying an upset child, because his peers laugh at his name, the culture of naming is represented. *Kivumvu: The Basket Boy* also highlights the challenges of the healthcare system in Burundi and the connectivity of people from the Great Lakes Region who have been migrating across countries in the region, primarily because of war. This is because Kivumvu is a child of a Congolese refugee in Burundi. Kivumvu’s father (Abdul K Bakundikize) is arrested while ‘stealing’ his son (Wellars Nsimukuri) from the hospital because he could not afford to pay the hospital bills, which consequently leads to the presidential decree that all maternity services be free in Burundi. The short film continues the discourse on contemporary social issues, such as the civil wars in the Great Lakes Region that have enmeshed the region into spirals of migrations. Of utmost importance, is the film’s indication that anyone can settle anywhere in Africa and live a meaningful life. Whether the griotic character is embodied by a grandmother, mother, or father, their social and familial status functions to authenticate the message being relayed to the spectators.

Another significant characteristic of orality in East African film is the foregrounding of multiple narrators by way of accentuating the griot’s performance. Diawara draws out the
implications of the griotic aesthetic in comparison with other transnational cinemas: “while Western directors often achieve recognition by letting the story tell itself, African directors, like the griots, master their craft by impressing the spectator with their narrative performance” (“Popular Culture” 13). More specifically, it is possible to notice that the filmmakers have employed the first and third-person narrative point of view to simulate the griot instead of the narrative seeming to evolve on its own, driven by an omniscient narrator. For a similar effect, the filmmakers may also employ the first-person narrator and multiple subplots or stories within stories. In most cases, therefore, there are multiple storytellers or point of views in one narrative with the most obvious being the first-person narrator. This is evident in, but not limited to, T-Junction, The Captain of Nakara, Sometimes in April, Lumumba, and Kinyarwanda where the filmmakers use the first-person narrative voice-over to recreate the aura of an oral storytelling performance. The main narrative sets off various characters’ subplots that run parallel to the protagonist’s story. This multiplicity of narrative voices and perspectives is deeply rooted in African oral tales. As Teno explains:

Yes, there are so many tales in which someone tells a story, and in that story, there is another character who tells another story. You can end up with two or three superimposed layers without causing a problem. It’s funny because it’s often the Europeans who can’t keep up with this, Africans follow easily (Jean-marie Teno qtd. in Thackway 208).

Teno explains the narrative structure that can be identified as based on oral tradition and complicates the argument by hinting at a possibility that audiences accustomed to Hollywood modes of narrative with single goal-oriented protagonists might struggle to make sense of such narrative forms.

Disconnect, a Kenyan film by Gitonga and Jones, provides a more complex instance of the multiplicity of griotic narration and orality. In some sequences, the film presents an imaginary audience listening to what is being narrated, and the narrators shift from the first to
second and then the third-person point of view. In this tale of Nairobi working-class young men and women, the filmmakers use all three narrative voices (first, second, and third person), enhancing its orality. In the first sequence, Josh (Nicholas Mutuma), as a concerned friend, goes to check on his friend, Celine (Brenda Wairimu) at her apartment because she has not been to her office for a week. Celine narrates to Josh that she was heartbroken after going to her boyfriend unannounced and finding him with another woman. As Celine tells the story, Josh is seen present in the scenes that Celine is describing. The narrator of Celine’s predicament shifts from the first person as told by Celine to the second person when Josh tells the story to TK Celine’s female friend when she joins the duo. The mode of storytelling can seem confusing. But it is essential to take note of its recreation of the oral griotic tradition of the real narrator but not a voice-over that is interspersed in some narratives. After the exposition of the story, the film evolves with the spectators as the assumed audience to the tales of the private lives of Celine and her friends as they manoeuvre through life.

The multiple narrative point of views are sometimes employed and distributed across the sub-plots that draw out the communal aspect of East African cultural/social experience. This is most vivid in Sometimes in April, Kinyarwanda and T-Junction, films which are a collection of episodes from many peoples’ experiences. In Sometimes in April a period film about the Rwanda genocide, Peck employs a voice-over that is directed to the main protagonist, Augustine (Idris Elba), at the beginning and the end to bracket the film’s central narrative voice. Augustine is a griotic character who shares his personal experiences and contemplations of the pre-genocide, genocide and post-genocide Rwanda. As Augustine reminisces about the genocide days, the film relays two other sub-plots that elaborate the experiences of his close family members: his brother a genocidaire now being tried in a criminal court and his wife, a teacher who witnessed the cruel murder of students who refused to separate themselves according to ethnicity. Augustine’s brother and wife also engage in a journey of memory as
they struggle to heal from the genocide trauma. Augustine’s contemplative, nostalgic voice-over begins the narrative: “[w]hen did it all begin? It is said when Imana [God] created this land; he grew so fond of it he returned every evening to rest. When did paradise become hell?” (Sometimes 2:17-3:00). Augustine, from whose point of view the narrative evolves, is a teacher who was a military officer in the Hutu majority pregenocide government. He is a victim of the government he supported and the Interahamwe militia he trained with, simply because of his marriage to a Tutsi woman. Augustine’s voice is accompanied by the historical pictures of the beautiful hills of Rwanda, the landing of pompous Germans in Rwanda, and the measuring of people’s noses an act that is claimed to have given rise to constructed tribes in Rwanda and Burundi. Interestingly, Augustine knows that the horror of hatred has been imposed on them, and the intricate position their history placed them into. The perpetrators and the targeted group both become victims of the genocide.

A later film about the genocide Kinyarwanda, directed by an African American Arlick Brown, also uses the narrative voice-over at the beginning of the movie and the end, parallel to that in Sometimes in April. Peck and Brown craft their narratives in a recognisable African storytelling aesthetics, which in part makes their films popular in Rwanda and Africa at large. Augustine’s voice-over in Sometimes in April and Jeanne’s in Kinyarwanda reinforces the presence of the narrator just like in folktales, which in turn seek to sustain a culturally specific African mode of narrative verisimilitude. The use of the first-person and third-person narrators in T-Junction brings various angles of the class undertones in Dar-es-salaam (discussed in detail in chapter six) and heightens the story’s verisimilitude. As Maria narrates her own and her compatriots’ experiences to her friend, the spectators witness montages of what Maria is describing. Therefore, a collage of character and narrative voice-over presented in both first-person and limited third-person points of views not only develop the plot but also enhance the film’s orality by positioning Maria as a griotte.
Many East African films, therefore, deploy multiple narrative points of view, seizing the role of the griot in African life as a springboard to disseminate knowledge about multitudes of subjects. In Plan B, for instance, Ayeny begins with a narrative voice-over of Juku, a man who is telling the story of his life to his children. It ends with the character-narrator on screen, concluding his story in a scene that recreates a “traditional” fireplace where stories are told under the moonlight. In Plan B, Ayeny represents sequences of a formal storytelling session through the narrator telling personal experiences to his children as they are roasting and eating corn. In Bella, a Ugandan film, Bish uses the first-person narrator, Bella, to narrate her story of child neglect and abuse to the spectators. In another film Friends for Life, Bish tells a story of corruption, drug abuse, peer-pressure, and unwanted pregnancies through one of the protagonists, Lucy. Lucy, one of three friends, relays to spectators the story of their friendship from childhood, their education, sex-life betrayals, and solidarity to defend their friendship amidst threats from a conniving childhood male acquaintance. In all these films, the character-narrator introduces the story, interjects in the middle, and comes at the end to conclude in the same fashion as the oral storyteller.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the griot aesthetics, particularly the mobilization of orality in East African films. Narrative voice-over and character are two aspects of griot performativity that have been discussed in detail with a light connection to didacticism. This chapter has observed, however, that orality can also be analysed in other formal aspects, such as symbolism, cinematography, mise-en-scene, music, dialogue, and narrative voice-over/the narrator. Based on the examples provided from the films above, the voice-over narrator as it was used by African cinema’s ‘grandfather’ Sembene in Borom Sarret and East Africa’s pacesetter, Peck’s historical films Lumumba and Sometimes in April, are typical examples of effectively adapting the oral tradition of storytelling into film. East African films seem to...
mediate between the oral tradition and cinema as the filmmakers continue to look for effective ways to adapt a griot aesthetic into film. As much as East African films exhibit a hybridised and complex aesthetics because of the history of the audio-visual milieu and diverse personal artistic sensibilities, the griot aesthetic is an indomitable aspiration for most screen-griots as their ultimate cultural, artistic identity on both formal and ideological levels.

As much as orality is complex to visualise in film, it is probable that as more films are made in the region (and more studies on the region’s cinema are done), the practices of the oral performative aesthetic will be concretised. What is substantially evident in the films is the appropriation of the griot aesthetics aspect of functionality. The screen-griots aver that they employ film to underscore what they consider to be significant and popular discourses, particularly concerning self-representation. As we shall see in later chapters, there is a specific focus on the vital messages that the filmmakers intentionally represent to raise the consciousness of the spectators. Because African filmmakers see themselves as modern griots with an ethical responsibility to maintain their cultural identity (oral storytelling performativity in film), there is a deliberate endeavour to keep the griot aesthetic as a uniquely African cinema aesthetic. As Sembene encapsulates, the filmmaker ought to be a “mirror” of society, whose “work reflects and synthesises the problems, hopes and struggles of his people” (Sembene qtd. in Tcheuyap 16). The traditional griot was and still is a popular artist who “must, in many ways be the mouth and ears of his people” using popular storytelling traditions (Ibid). As a matter of fact, as the screen-griots employ multiple aesthetic lenses, they uphold the intense quest to comment on critical issues as examined in the chapters exploring the emerging themes such as the representation of history (in chapter three), gender power relations (in chapter four), migration narratives (chapter five), and class conflicts (in chapter six).
Chapter Three: Damage Repair: Restoring an East African Historical Imaginary

I first read about [King] Mkwawa in history books. But when I started working on this film[Mkwawa], I went to Iringa [on the ground]. It was disheartening to learn that everything we know about Mkwawa is wrong. The history was not written by us. It is upon us to correct these misrepresentations.

—Seko Tingitana Shamte, Tanzanian Filmmaker

Africa has got only one problem: how it’s presented all over the world...If the problem is the image, then the solution is also the image.

—Jean-Pierre Bekolo, Cameroonian Filmmaker29

The very medium used to propagate profoundly damaging and demeaning images of Africa in both the colonial era and today has thus become the means for challenging the visual hegemony of the West.

—Melissa Thackway, African Cinema scholar

Introduction

Raoul Peck opens his 2005 fiction feature film Sometimes in April not with a dramatic scene but with a historical chronology. A series of statements scroll up the screen, detailing in summary form the events leading to the Rwandan genocide:

In 1916, Belgium took control of Rwanda from Germany and installed a rigid colonial system of racial classification and exploitation.

By elevating the Tutsi over the Hutu, they created deep resentment among the Hutu majority.

In 1959, the Belgians handed control of Rwanda to the Hutu majority. With independence came decades of institutionalised anti-Tutsi segregation and massacre.

(Sometimes 0:17-1:05)

29Jean-Pierre Bekolo is a Cameroonian Filmmaker. He is also a significant director of experimental films in Africa. Cited from De Groof, Matthias. “Black Film Label Negritude and Cinema,” Third Text, p. 252
This chronology is mirrored by the background image of the map of Africa, which slowly zooms in until the present nation-state of Rwanda is visible. On a single steady zoom shot of the continent of Africa, Peck also manipulates the various changes of the geographical spaces through a visual palimpsest of African colonial history. Accentuated by a low moving onto a high-pitched melancholy soundtrack, the map together with the titles forecasts the grimness of the genocide. The narration in the opening titles indicates the intention of the film to give an account of recent Rwandan memory that can be traced in and aligns with that in political histories.\textsuperscript{30} As African culture theorist Karin Barber posits, popular arts present “another history” either parallel to scholarly accounts or with more nuanced details than those ‘official’ histories (175). The titles summarise the timeline of the Rwandan history up to the genocide to set the scene for what Barber calls “a history of popular memory and memorialisation” (175).

In the titles that follow, viewers read about the waves of political unrests that led to the exiling of Rwandan Tutsi and moderate Hutus;\textsuperscript{31} the 1998 plan by the Rwandan refugees in Uganda to go back and reclaim their homeland; the offensive by the Tutsi rebel group of Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) in 1990 to 1993; and the signing of the power-sharing agreement whose implementation was rejected by “hard-liner Hutu extremists” and they “planned one of the most terrifying genocides in history” to protect their exclusive power (\textit{Sometimes 01:50-02:00}).\textsuperscript{32} Peck’s opening scene establishes a foundational chronology of prior causal events and conditions, preparing the historical ground for the film’s subsequent employment of


\textsuperscript{31} I am using the ethnic referents Hutu and Tutsi for the sake of argument. As an African, I believe, as is popularly known, Hutu and Tutsi were social class markers. Hutu were generally agriculturalist farmers while Tutsis were cattle keepers. If one had a certain number of cows, he or she became a Tutsi (Upper class) since the cows gave status to an individual. The Belgian colonialists turned a social class identity into an ethnic identity that has destabilised the otherwise homogeneous Rwandans into a polarised ethnic community. It is worth noting that today on the streets of Kigali, hardly do Rwandan identify as Tutsi or Hutus—they are called Rwandans as it should be.

historical allusions and dramatic recreations. As Peck argues, “I tend to make historic films, films for posterity. . . To me, making a movie is . . . preserving who we are” (Interview with Haiti Reporters, qtd. in Sepinwall 16). Sometimes in April demonstrates the physical and psychological effects of the genocide on Rwandans.

Sometimes in April demonstrates the physical and psychological effects of the genocide on Rwandans.

Across East Africa, there are many films like Sometimes in April that draw on popular memory and historic events “to reverse the Western gaze” and as Peck emphasises, to “reappropriate their histories,” and redefine their identity (Sepinwall 17). In Burundi, for example, we see Kivumvu: The Basket Boy and Reveal Yourself hinting at the existence of Congo refugees in Burundi, which alludes to a discourse of instability in the Great Lakes region. In Kenya, there is From a Whisper, which poignantly recreates the memory of the twin bombing of the American Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, which killed over 224 people (CNN library). Also, in Kenya, Something Necessary represents the impact of the 2008 post-election violence, especially on women, young people and children. In Rwanda, most historical films detail aspects of the Rwanda genocide. In Uganda, films of recent historic events fall into two categories and significant periods. There are films such as Kony: Orders From Above, Imani, Devils Chest, A Dog Story and a series, Yat Madit made about the LRA rebel group/Kony war in Northern Uganda and South Sudan and State Research Bureau and 27 Guns that are about the tumultuous period in Uganda’s history in the early 1980s, where various insurgency groups fight for power that in the end is captured by Yoweri Museveni’s National Resistance Army (NRA) rebel group.

33 Idi Amin took power in Uganda in a coup of 1971 by ousting President Milton Obote and ruled Uganda in what has been described as a reign of terror for nine years. He was ousted out of office by a joint Tanzanian and Ugandan army that reinstated Obote in office. The period between 1980 and 1986 is Uganda’s lowest time as rebel activities were in every corner of the country and presidents were being ousted by military juntas. Yoweri Museveni who was one of the rebels then leading National Resistance Army rebel group takes power in 1986 and to date he is still the president of Uganda.
The above films highlight the fact that the filmmakers are deliberately appropriating their cardinal role as griots—embodiments of history—by representing popular memory and history in their narratives. Inez Hedges describes the potential function of “popular memory – [as] the excavation of a buried past that looks to the future” (106). By implication (from a griot’s point of view) popular memory embodies the depiction of individual, political, and cultural memories and how they resultantly represent history. As already argued in chapter two, one of the griot’s significant roles is to perform history to provoke spectators to contemplate upon such past events in the present.

The temporal dimension of this pragmatic use of history is demonstrated by a griot character in the 1980 film *L’Exile* directed by Oumarou Ganda when he encapsulates the griot’s role as that which stands outside of time. Better yet, Ganda identifies a moral injunction: the griot ought to have a timeless relevance. The griot character in *L’Exile* says, “time has no hold over me. I pass through and outlive the different periods…I am the passing of time. I am the memory of the people and history…I am continuity” (qtd. in Thackway, 61). Similarly, the filmmakers become “timelessness” as they reclaim Africa’s gaze, which is informed by history and popular discourse. The experience of film in terms of its present-tense temporality gives the narrative an equivalent griotic agency (live performance). Aleida Assmann concurs: “History turns into memory when it is transformed into forms of shared knowledge and collective identification and participation” (216). The screen-griot galvanises individual and collective memories in their narratives which becomes part of the cultural memories.

As I argue in this chapter, screen-griots represent historical imaginaries for purposes of commenting on contemporary incongruities in the post-colonial era. The films are understood as a subjective and introspective way to comment on post-colonial experiences—African democracy, justice, conflicts and conflict resolution, neo-colonialism, corruption, disease—for self-assessment and, in some cases, as a subversion of the gross misrepresentation of the
African people. As stated in the epigraphs, filmmakers and scholars aver that film is employed as a subversion instrument to reject the foreign gaze, especially Hollywood and other non-African filmmakers whose “camera” is said to have “perfected the distortion of the image of Africa that the colonial novel had begun,” and the inherited colonial education has continued through foreign authored history texts (Dokotum 72). Cognizant of the logistical challenges of producing period pieces, the filmmakers are convinced of the need for self-assertion through recording history before it is misrepresented. Hussein Omar, a Ugandan filmmaker, recommends that “after correcting the recent history, we can work on the colonial and then pre-colonial histories” (interview). As such, East Africa has also started representing its political history in different genres (documentary, fiction and docudrama) to open up debates concerning neo-colonialism, self-determination and to reclaim the dignity of the African person.

Countering Misrepresentation of Africa in Colonial and Western Films

We can connect the responsibility of the filmmaker as a griot to an ethical claim initially made by Chinua Achebe, the notable African writer of the classic Things Fall Apart, a novel that was written in defence of advanced civilisation of precolonial African society. He stipulates the responsibility of an African writer as that of “damage repair.” He explains: “owing to the peculiar nature of our situation; it would be futile to try and take off before we have repaired our foundations…” (10). For Achebe and other pan-Africanists, the foundations are repaired by putting African history correctly. Since the late 1950s, the negative representation of Africans as savages, degenerates, primitive and notoriously superstitious other than “notoriously religious,” as African Philosopher John Mbiti posits (1), has motivated politically committed African filmmakers and writers. Their primary aim was to challenge “the negative stereotype of Africa” in the Western racial and patronising iconography of Africa (Adesokan 233). By assuming the griot’s role of narrating history, the filmmakers foreground
the past in a manner that is relevant to contemporary challenges particularly the neo-colonial mentality of dependency on the West. As Stuart Hall argues, for post-colonial societies’ “identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves, within the narratives of the past” and these names are augmented by the representations emanating from both Africans and non-African (colonised and the colonising) peoples (“Cultural Identity” 236-7). This neo-colonial tendency as we shall see in Sometimes in April, Lumumba, and other films, is represented as counterproductive because the original aspirations of the West since pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods were to plunder Africa of its wealth, exploiting labour or extracting minerals, and above all use the land as a market for Western goods and services. Since the commencement of African film, several filmmakers aspire to represent Africa’s histories aimed at “decolonising the minds” of Africans and as act of self-determination, a task that requires systemic and systematic images (Ngugi wa Thiongo 1986).

In Africa, therefore, there is a strong aspiration of appropriating film to represent historical memory to overtly or covertly counter the dominant-negative representations of Africa (Watson 195; Thackway 39). This self-representation can be traced in the liberationist literature and films of the first set of African writers and filmmakers who engaged the subject of decolonisation (Ukadike 304). Sembene, for instance, has a rich filmography that attests to the immense interest in self-representation. Sembene’s self-reflexive filmography is concerned with correcting the historical records to raise the awareness of the precarious social and political conditions for Africans. Having written literature in French, Sembene realised he could not reach a vast number of Africans because of language and low literacy levels. He employed the film medium as a modern griot with which he was able to transcend literacy limitations. In the 1988 Senegalese drama war film Camp de Thiaroye, for instance, Sembene dramatises the historic incident of the burning to death of African soldiers who defended France
during World War II simply because France did not want to pay them. There are other films that give a historical perspective of pre-colonial Africa, a history not well documented in the colonialist history books such as the 1993 *Sankofa* by Haile Gerima (which represents the trans-Atlantic slave trade), and the 1986 *Sarraounia* by Med Hondo (which recreates the substantial resistance of French colonial forces by the legendary warrior Queen Sarraounia of the Aznas people of West Africa). These films are significant examples of how African cinema has emerged as a powerful weapon of popular culture to deconstruct colonialism and construct strong and authentic counter-discourse aimed at asserting the existentiality and selfhood of Africans.

As we shall see in the discussion of the films, besides correcting the historical facts and representing authentic recollections of history, African cinema counteracts the existing negative representation of Africa as a ‘dark continent’ that were systematically constructed in the early films and literature about Africa that were written by colonialists. Focusing on films, Melissa Thackway best encapsulates the political and subjective effects of these early films on non-African and African viewers:

Films produced in the colonial era … reinforced Western perceptions of both colonial ruler and subject. They helped to determine not only how Western audiences, who has little or no real contact with Africans, imagined Africa and its people, but also, more damagingly, how African audiences exposed to these films saw themselves (31).

The first films about Africa were for commercial purposes, interested in maintaining the exoticness of Africa, which would see to high box office sales. Besides the economic aspect, the political ideology propagated in the films was damaging to the image of Africa. Films such as the 1950 *Solomon’s Mines*, the 1930 *Trader Horn*, the 1951 *Tarzan*, and *The African Queen* “are striking in the way in which they positioned African characters as background ‘props,’ who are little more than geographic markers to remind the spectator that the film is set in
Africa” (Thackway 32). Haile Gerima, a film scholar and one of the first generation of African filmmakers, sums up the portrayal of Africans in the first foreign films set in Africa: “We are underdeveloped characters. Our sex life, our feelings of love and hatred are not explored because they don’t see us as part of society” (qtd. in Pfaff 1997, 28). These kinds of degrading representations originated in the Victorian novel, whose agenda was to justify the occupation of Africa, and their damaging concepts persisted as those literary narratives were adapted to Hollywood film.34

The stereotypical representation of Africans is central to the visual milieu of African filmmakers which then influences the revolutionary and didacticism stance in African cinema. Peck’s biographical reflection illustrates the sociological background that informs the psyche of contemporary screen-griots more generally:

I grew up in Haiti for the first eight years of my life, and my family and me would go to drive-ins and see movies, and the American movies were giving me a sense of the world… and I believed in that world. When I went to Congo, I discovered that the Africa that I would see in Safari, in Tarzan and all those jungle type of films, was not the reality. When I came to Congo, I thought I would see savages from the aeroplane, and that was not the case (qtd. in Matthew Allen)

Other African filmmakers, like Peck, have been shaped by negative images of Africa that propagated the myth of the ‘Dark Continent’. As Dokotum explains:

The myth of the Dark Continent thus conveys negative Victorian ideology about Africa that permeated every sector of that society leaving political, moral, religious and scientific legacies that continue to influence stereotypical

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34Okaka Dokotum gives an elaborate list of literature that was initially adapted by the first films on Africa. “Notable colonialist novels about Africa include Henry Rider Haggard’s novels King Solomon’s Mines (1885), She (1887), and Allan Quatermain (1887); Joseph Conrad’s The Heart of Darkness (1899); John Buchan’s Prester John (1910); Edgar Rice Burroughs’ Tarzan of the Apes (1912 [1914]), Joyce Arthur Cary’s The African Witch (1936) and Mister Johnson (1939); Karen Blixen’s Out of Africa (1937); Elspeth Huxley’s The Red Strangers (1939), A Thing to Love (1954) and The Flame Trees of Thika (1959); Graham Greene’s The Heart of the Matter (1948); Robert Ruark’s Something of Value (1955) and Nicholas Monsarrat’s The Tribe That Lost Its Head (1956)” (Hollywood and Africa 22).
perceptions of Africa. The myth became the justification for colonial intervention in Africa and for the perception of Africans as savages and therefore as inferior to Europeans. It continues to be the benchmark for negative stereotypes about Africa and justification for neocolonialism (12).

While from this perspective Peck’s entire film oeuvre seems to be vested in countering the deep and ongoing legacies of Victorian racism, like other African filmmakers, however, he has also been specifically interested in contesting the misrepresentation of East and Central Africa history (as he has done in other world histories) through two films *Lumumba* and *Sometimes in April*.

Hollywood, through its globally dominant distribution circuit, has continued to misrepresent Africa in its depictions of post-colonial instabilities. Several films about East Africa, such as *The Last King of Scotland* and *Hotel Rwanda, Mississippi Masala,* and *Out of Africa* have received negative criticism from East African critics. For example, Matt Bish, a Ugandan filmmaker, views Hollywood’s representation of Idi Amin in *The Last King of Scotland* as “mere fiction” suggesting that its portrayal of Amin as a historical figure is not objective (Interview). African critics also draw attention to the ideological effects of Hollywood narratives that construct individual characters as singular heroes. For example, Urther Rwafa in “Film representations of the Rwandan genocide” faults *Hotel Rwanda* for using Hollywood’s narrative structure that is counter to the traditional oral storytelling narrative structure that employs communal and symbolic heroes and heroines. Such storytelling is identifiable in other films about the genocide such as *Kinyarwanda, Sometimes in April,* and *Imbabazi: The Pardon, Grey Matter.* Even though *Hotel Rwanda* dramatises a real character, most Rwandans (including filmmakers I interviewed) and critics say that it represents an episodic individual memory that is written by foreign screenwriters without proper research into what transpired at Hôtel des Mille Collines (Dokotum, *Re-Membering* 2013). The motive for Hollywood’s skewed representation is debatable. It could be to continue the justification
for the “horrendous colonialism” or commercial—to make an exotic film that will break box office records (Dokotum 2020). Otherwise, it could be another sinister plan of exploiting and profiteering from Africa’s misery and re-enforcing the ideology of the exoticisation of Black people in its film.

Similarly, other non-Hollywood films made about Africa by outsiders without involving locals at either script (research) or production are viewed as misrepresentations with the principal aim of economic benefit. For instance, Sharad Patel’s *The Rise and Fall of Idi Amin* is an exaggerated comic depiction of the diabolical Idi Amin simply because Amin expelled Indians from Uganda.35 There is also a bulk of NGO produced films that have twisted facts and intentions. The most striking example is *Kony 2012* by Invisible Children. *Kony 2012* can be categorised as unethical because it was driven by monetary gains rather than objectivity in showing the plight of humanity. Instead, the suffering of the people is turned into a fundraising object or a box office selling point (Nkunzimana 82, Thackway 113). Ugandan filmmaker Ayeny indicts Jason Russell’s *Kony 2012* that was made to shock the world. The film got 100 million views in six days which also corresponded with huge donations it received. Ayeny, therefore, was motivated to produce a biopic of Joseph Kony (Lord Resistance Army leader) to counter some of the misrepresentations about Kony. He also felt he would be a dependable source for this story that needed to be represented in film before a non-Ugandan/African had the chance. During the film’s preproduction, he relied on the existing foreign movies to rally support. He says:

I cited *Invisible Children*, an N.G.O film which was made by Bazungu [white people] to raise money. In one day, the film got 8 million views. Another film called *The White Light*, made by Bazungu too, has characters speaking

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35 While the *Last King of Scotland*'s skewed representation of Idi Amin can be attributed to Hollywood’s commercial and genre film inclination, I see Sharad Patel’s representation of Amin as lacking in objectivity because, as an Indian, he could have been affected by Amin’s expulsion of Indians from Uganda. The expulsion of Indians is seen as one of the most patriotic things done by Idi Amin.
Luganda\textsuperscript{36}. This is a total lie. The rebels, Vincent Otti, is speaking Luganda, is that possible?

Ayeny provides an insight into the fact that foreign filmmakers misrepresent or simply manipulate African people’s plights to appeal to unsuspecting spectators who are, in most cases, a targeted source of funding for NGOs.

Vividly, the motive of \textit{Kony 2012} is vivid in its end title: “Lastly, we need: your MONEY. [A]nd lots of it.” The Germany television channel, Deutsche Welle’s (DW) documentary investigations into the motives of the Invisible Children verifies the claims that it was a money-making project in addition to other ulterior motives.\textsuperscript{37} Besides \textit{Kony 2012}, many Hollywood adaptations are critiqued for misrepresenting the stories of Africa. However, it is not that Africans would not want anyone to represent their stories, they want objective representations. As Peck articulates on the issue of authenticity and objectivity of \textit{Sometimes in April} and the ethical responsibility of the filmmaker: “It was always important that I had the trust of the people over there and that they felt I was telling their story” (Trailer/behind the Scenes, \textit{Sometimes in April}). Peck is saying that authenticity is fundamental when representing a memory about a people trying to rehabilitate themselves. Hollywood and other irresponsible non-African filmmakers could be exonerated of any ulterior motives (financial gain and racial supremacy) if African stories are adapted to screen “with greater authenticity and respect for Africa” (Dokotum 236). With such dialectics between non-African and African imaginaries of Africa, there are high possibilities of many ‘damage-repair’ films, which may thwart or rather slow down the artistic development and contribution of African filmmaking to world cinema.

\textsuperscript{36} Luganda is a bantu language spoken the Baganda people of Buganda Kingdom in central Uganda. It is unlikely that the language was by the LRA rebels who were mainly Luo speaking people of Acholi ethnic group (though in fiction, the language of representation would not matter in case it differs from the story’s original language as long as the action has verisimilitude and are authentic). This shows the filmmakers recreated the LRA war with non-Luo speakers which makes Ugandan spectators to doubt its authenticity.

\textsuperscript{37} According to the investigative documentary, \textit{A US Crusade in Africa}. 1 April 2020.  
www.youtube.com/watch?v=D7pfDIWsW0
Whether the African filmmaker is making a historical film or a contemporary millennial social drama, they bring to their scripts the mental baggage of having to assert their identity, their ability to govern themselves, and their rich culture that informs their epistemes. East African filmmakers are joining “contemporary African historians and ideological movements” to continue vigorously protesting and resisting “these bigoted and myopic projections” of Africa as the ‘dark continent’ (Dokotum 14). The filmmakers, therefore, have a myriad of negotiations to make regarding the choice of subject because their rich history is barely represented in cinema. Ugandan filmmakers Ayeny and Bish, for example, see the urgency for alternative films on Idi Amin and their post-colonial leaders. Ayeny argues, “this history should be put in film before we embark on the colonial and pre-colonial history of Uganda. Hollywood’s representation of Idi Amin is too farcical. Obote, our founding father, needs such a film too” (Interview). And Ugandan filmmaker Hussein Omar reiterates:

We don’t have many films that are challenging the history written by the White men. We have oral history that is contrary to what is history books. One aspect we need to look at is contemporary post-colonial history, for instance, the image of Idi Amin, the real perpetrators of Rwanda genocide, the cause of post-election violence in Kenya, the wars in Eastern Congo among others, these issues need to be interrogated and corrected with immediate effect (Interview).

Like Omar, as argued by most filmmakers I interviewed, there is and should be a continued use of film to counter the misrepresentation of African history and culture in non-African produced films and redress the effect of colonisation, a ‘ghost’ which still haunts Africa.

Narrating the ‘Ghost’ of Colonialism

The subjective and reflexive representation of contemporary African history cannot be complete without the stressing the ‘ghost’ of the colonial period, which shapes the articulations of post-colonial Africa. Colonialism has shaped the unconscious discourse of self-assertion in artistic forms of expression. All “available forms of knowledge” are employed by the
filmmaker, as a post-colonial subject, to articulate the “essential African social, economic, political, scientific, and cultural selfhood” which was brought to a halt by colonialism’s colossal destruction and still threatened by neo-colonialism (Okoye 21). The impasse between the colonialists and the African colonies like elsewhere ended in conspiracy, massacres and wars. The representation of the clash between Africans and colonialists was a subject of early African films like *The Battle of Algiers* in 1966, *Sarraounia* in 1986, and *Camp De Thiaroye* in 1987. Towards the turn of the twenty-first century, there was a general shift in cinematic representations from the colonial experiences to the pessimistic post-colonial African experiences. The colonial experiences include civil wars, high levels of poverty, military coups, and African immigrants’ experiences in the West, as the most prevalent social realities represented in filmic imaginaries. The continued fighting in Burundi, DRC, South Sudan, and the genocide in Rwanda are all deeply rooted in the effects of the colonial strategy of divide and conquer that left a heterogenous Africa deeply divided along artificial ethnic lines that were accentuated by the colonialist.

Several films from and about East Africa are either entirely about the colonial confrontation or its continuing impact on contemporary East Africa. In the docudrama *Mkwawa*, directed by Seko Shamte, we see a deliberate attempt to reconstruct the authentic story of King Mkwawa of the Hehe people of mainland Tanzania, who defeated the Germans. Still, this reconstruction was edited out in the “official” African history books authored by non-Africans (Shamte, Interview). Kenya’s Mau Mau rebellion has been, for the most part, represented in documentary films, all of which encapsulate the fact that Kenya was meant to be ‘little Brittany’ of Africa and that Kenyans had to counter British colonial brutality with a

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38 African film is here taken to mean films made about African experiences written and directed by Africans and members of the African diaspora.
war that led to its independence. The horrors of the British rule in Kenya are still getting immense filmic representations. From the critical perspective of narrating colonial histories, Peck’s films *Lumumba* and *Sometimes in April* convey the post-colonial experience springing from the errors made by the colonialists and their impact on contemporary East Africa and Africa as a whole. Peck’s *Lumumba* and *Sometimes in April* foreground the effects of colonial experience even though they are about the post-colonial African state. Peck depicts colonialism through intercutting the negotiation of DRC’s independence in Brussels in *Lumumba*, and the montages of the first White men and Africans’ encounter in Urwanda kingdom in *Sometimes in April*.

Similarly, the historical conflict films in Uganda (such as the biopics of Museveni and Kony), South Sudan (*Our Biggest Fear*) and more overtly the films about recent conflicts in Kenya (*Something Necessary, Ni Sisi*) also subtly underscore the impacts of colonial administrations, in particular, the ethnicisation of Africa by the colonialist. My argument here does not in any way suggest that there was no conflict in pre-colonial Africa. The pre-colonial

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40 Uganda was colonised because of the collaboration of Southern Bantu, the Baganda who became mercenaries of the British in extending colonial rule to other regions including fighting to subdue Omukama Kabalega, King of the then Bunyoro Kitara Empire who for years had evaded defeat by the British. Upon independence, the King of Buganda (Kabaka Mutesa II) was left as a ceremonial president, working under a powerful Prime Minister, Milton Obote, who was from the Nilotic ethnic groups of Northern Uganda. Britain, as if determined to cause conflict between groups of people who were now forced to build a national identity, as Ugandans, a name picked from their collaborating Kingdom Buganda, supported a semi-illiterate military man Idi Amin to depose Obote in 1971. Two presidents from the same region gave the Northern tribes purgation and the false belief that they were supposed to be the post-colonial rulers of Uganda. It is from this background that when Yoweri Museveni (the current president of Uganda) from the Bantu group of Southern Uganda took power, he faced two rebellions from the Nilotics. One of them is the infamous Joseph Kony’s LRA. The motivation behind Joseph Kony’s claim to have received God’s 10 commandment to liberate Uganda from the Southern leader is more of a tribal resentment that was being clothed in a sort of spirituality to sanitise an illegitimate tribal war. Similarly, the largely Christian South Sudan was ruled separately from the largely Moslem Northern Sudan. The British decided to live the two parts of Sudan under one government, which was a recipe for conflict and war. Since independence to the present, Sudan has never been peaceful.
polity demonstrates that there existed some conflicts emanating from power struggles. These conflicts were exacerbated by the European imperialists’ divide and rule policy. Consequently, political survival in the context of a new power dispensed by colonialists created a further division of people into smaller power centres. Since the kings and chiefs were deposed, different ethnicities institutionalised power centres, derived from previous African political and organisational structures such as the family head, clans and inter-clan leaders to serve colonialists. The uncanny destabilisation of Africans by colonialism is vividly described by Fanon as the creation of “the existence of tribes,” which “also reinforces and separates them” (74). In Kenya, for instance, social cohesion is still primarily based on ethnicity rather than national identity, dramatised in Malooned, Ni Sisi and Something Necessary. To date, Rwandans are still dealing with ethnic tensions (that was solely responsible for the gruesome 1994 genocide) depicted explicitly in Kinyarwanda and Sometimes in April as a Belgian creation.

Peck’s Sometimes in April illustrates that colonialism had permanent damage to Africa’s political institutions. In the opening sequences of this film, Peck provides a brief history of Rwanda in montages of White men (possibly Belgians or Germans) arriving in Rwanda and meeting a Rwandan king (Omwami) who sceptically shakes the White man’s hand. Those familiar with the colonial history of East Africa will understand that Peck is in effect also representing the experience of Burundi since as a colony of the Belgians it was subjected to a divisive political system. Both Rwanda and Burundi have similar ‘ethnic’ conflicts, the parallel Hutu/Tutsi dynamic which was derived from the existing social class categories of the Banyarwanda and Barundi (the people of Rwanda and Burundi respectively).

41 Smaller kingdoms allied with more powerful kingdoms for security; often, big kingdoms with several chiefdoms in their control experienced secessions that led to a sprout of new kingdoms as culturally, two kings never lived in one kingdom. That is why most kingdoms in Northern Tanzania, Eastern RDC, and Uganda have monarchs with the same genealogy, names, rituals and symbols.
The contemplative narrative voice-over of the central character Augustine (Idris Elba) summarises the meaning of the encounter between Belgians and Africans:

From the start, even the conquest was a regrettable misunderstanding. Europe gave the land to its conqueror, and the King knew nothing of it. It was never about civilisation, never about tribe or race. It was always about greed, arrogance and power. And when we finally grasped the horror, it was too late.

(Sometimes 3:00).

Peck demonstrates the White men’s arrogance through their demeanour and costumes. They come dressed in military uniform, signifying their readiness to conquer even if it means by war. The montage also shows the infamous nose examination and measuring of Africans’ facial features which were used as a baseline to create tribes basing on existing social-economic categories of Tutsi (mainly cattle keepers) and Hutu (farmers). Therefore, the long-faced Tutsi and round-faced Hutus were pitted against each other in a highly segregated system.

The film reveals that the Belgian colonial political dynamics in Rwanda (and Burundi) are the cause of the ethnic tension that culminated in the systematic killing of people identified as ethnic Tutsi and moderate Hutu, leaving an estimated one million people dead in Rwanda (and instability in Burundi). Certain cultural and historical conditions inform the subtleties of the film’s representation of the colonial antecedents of the genocide. Burundi, DRC and Rwanda were ruled by the Belgians. Unfortunately, for Rwanda and Burundi was the presence of one language in each region—Kinyarwanda and Kirundi respectively—which made the colonialists use divide and rule as a means that would enable them to rule over the two nations with no resistance using the imperialists ‘convenient’ hypothesis of Hamites “Whites in Black skin” (84). It is argued that in between 1927 to 1936, the “Hamitic racial supremacy” was institutionalised (Mamdani 88). It meant that all the “key institutions—starting with education, state administration, taxation and finally the church—were organised (or reorganised, as the case may be) basing on created racial identities—Tutsi, Hutu, and Twa in which the Tutsi were
second in command to the Belgians in holding positions of power” (Ibid 88). This explains why the Hutus wanted revenge once they got power after independence. As a result, rather than using the strength of singular local language (a privilege not in most postcolonial African countries) to coalesce solid national identities and development, Rwanda and Burundi’s ethnic polarisation is viewed by political scientists as the grave contributor to East Africa’s complex conflicts (Daley 2007; Russell 2015; Palmer 2018).

African political scientist Mahmood Mamdani puts into context the ethnic identities created by the Belgians and the resulting polarisation of the society. The Tutsi (cattle keepers who composed the ruling class) were favoured over the Hutu (agricultural farmers), becoming part of the ruled. He explains:

The idea that Tutsi were superior because they came from somewhere, and that the difference between them and the local population was a racial difference, was an idea of colonial origin. It was an idea shared by rival colonialists, Belgians, Germans, English and of whom were convinced that wherever in Africa there was evidence of organised state of life, there the ruling groups must have come from elsewhere. These mobile groups were known as the Hamites, and the notion that they were the hidden hand behind every bit of civilisation on the continent was known as the “Hamitic hypothesis” (80).

The otherwise colonial construct of ethnic identities has failed to get naturalised and continues to haunt Rwanda and Burundi. Both Tutsis and Hutus see themselves as deserving of the privileges of power as the Tutsis claim that royalty is divinely given. The Hutu, on the other hand, want the freedom of self-determination. Peck suggests that the power struggle between the Tutsis and Hutus comes as a result of colonialism as explicitly narrated at the beginning of the film.

Films about the genocide tend to depict the effects of these historical colonial processes in emotional and personalised terms, dramatising their consequences in terms of everyday life.
For example, in *Imbabazi: The Pardon*, we see the extreme of changing power dynamics—whereby the Tutsis become the second-class citizens—hence portraying how the underprivileged majority Hutu must have felt under the Belgians and Tutsi rule. It is no wonder that the Tutsi boy, Karemera (Wilson Egessa), loses his job at the cafe because a Hutu general simply loathes looking at him. In *Imbabazi: The Pardon*, as in other Rwandan genocide films, there is a poignant depiction of the effects of decades of ideological grounding of Hamitic hypothesis, that positioned the Tutsis as foreigners just like the unwanted colonialists, who were forcefully removed or fought against in Kenya and Uganda. Mamdani makes noteworthy arguments while explaining the cause of the massive response to partake (including religious leaders, who would have been expected to be neutral) in the genocide ideology that was planned by a few extreme Hutus:

The Rwandan genocide needs to be thought through within the logic of colonialism. The horror of colonialism led to two types of genocidal impulses. The first was the genocide of the native by the settler. It became a reality where the violence of colonial pacification took on extreme proportions. The second was the native impulse to eliminate the settler (9-10). We might extrapolate from the preceding point that the idea of the ‘foreign’ or settler-like Tutsi needed to be exterminated once and for all, was easily be ‘sold’ to most men (since it was mostly men who engaged in genocide). As seen in *Sometimes in April*, Augustine and Xavier (both military officials in the Hutu led government) protested the Hutu extremist sentiments of exterminating the Tutsi race. But they were helpless when frenzied killings were taking place. Augustine and Xavier become victims to the cruelty that, as Mamdani argues, Africans seem to have perfected from their colonial masters.

In addition to the racialised colonial trajectory of Rwanda, *Sometimes in April* also highlights the neocolonial tendencies in the post-colonial African state. Peck employs excerpts from President Bill Clinton’s state visit speech in 1998 to historicise what unfolds in the film
regarding the portion of the blame to key foreign powers. Clinton’s speech falls short of an apology to Rwandans during the state visit to Rwanda in March 1998. Still, it attests to a geopolitical paradox: the world did not care what happened in Rwanda, yet the circumstances in Rwanda can be traced back to non-Rwandan intervention:

From Kibuye in the west to Kibungo in the east, people gathered seeking refuge in churches by the thousands, in hospitals, in schools. And when they were found, the old and the sick, women and children alike, they were killed—killed because their identity cards said they were Tutsi or because they had Tutsi parents or because someone thought they looked like a Tutsi or slain like thousands of Hutus because they protected the Tutsi or would not countenance a policy that sought to wipe out people who just the day before, and for years before, had been their friends and neighbours. It is important that the world know that these killings were not spontaneous or accidental. It is not an African phenomenon and must never be viewed as such. We have seen it in industrialised Europe. We have seen it in Asia. We must have global vigilance. And never again must we be shy in the face of the evidence.

(Sometimes 4:12-5:21).

Clinton’s speech is screened to young, inquisitive Rwandan students. Their curious question, to their teacher “Could it have been stopped?” is meant to ignite the spectator’s curiosity to ask and ponder about the responsibility of each person in the Rwanda genocide. The film’s early scene can be read as a subtle, caustic political commentary—and as framing the narrative that follows—as is suggested by the film’s opening epigraph citing Martin Luther King, Jr’s words: “In the end we shall remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.”

The excerpt from President Bill Clinton’s speech, moreover, is skillfully deployed at the beginning of the narrative to foreground the sarcastic depiction of the United States (US) as an ineffective superpower. The US failed to intervene and stop the Rwanda genocide, yet it had the capacity to do so. Peck is, in other words, saying that a show of brilliant political address does not in any way compensate for the suffering Rwandans endured.
While framing the narrative of *Sometimes in April* in terms of this international community’s failure to stop the Rwanda genocide, Peck portrays the diabolical presence of the US as one of the world superpowers and its capacity to act only for selfish economic interests (also see Sepinwall 32). The telephone conversation between the United States’ assistant to the secretary of state for foreign affairs, Mrs Bushnell, and Colonel Bagasura, the commander of the *Interahamwe* Hutu extremist militia, demonstrates the US’s double standards. When she fails to garner support from her country’s leadership, Bushnell decides to use her office and act in her capacity to intervene by calling the *Interahamwe* leader. Here is a snippet of the long telephone call in which a brutal exchange takes place:

**Mrs Bushnell:** You do not need a ceasefire to stop this hate radio broadcast. Monsieur Bagasura if you do not stop this killing there will be consequences.

**Col. Bagasura:** Really? You will send the marines? We have no oil here, we have no diamond, we have nothing you need in Rwanda. Why would you come? *(Sometimes 01:06:03-55).*

From the excerpt above, Bagasura’s words allude to the capitalist underpinnings of colonialism and neo-colonialism that has seen other geopolitical players, particularly the US, that intervenes in conflicts only in places that have mineral prospects (economic benefits). The scene implies that contemporary humanitarian acts could be covertly promoting acts of self-aggrandisement as was with the case of Christianisation of Africa that aided colonialism.

However, Bushnell’s call to Bagasura after work hours vindicates her from the blame that the film puts on America. She went an extra mile to stop the killing in Rwanda, but she was not given state support. From Bushnell’s dialogue, we learn that the CIA report that was done nine weeks before the genocide warned of the mayhem that was unfolding in Rwanda. But she is told not to discuss that report again. The film points to the United States’ failure to act on the issue, despite being fully aware of the impacts, and indicts the government as
complicit with the RPF. We learn that the CIA contemplated ‘jamming’ the broadcasting of Rwanda’s state radio but failed to do so because according to them “it was the people killing other people” and not the radio. Through parallelism, the call between Bushnell and Bagasura is depicted after an emotional sequence where the UN soldiers aggressively bar Rwandans from boarding the rescue vehicles that were sent to evacuate all foreigners from Saint Exupéry French School. In an immensely chaotic scene, we see everyone (both white and Black) trying to board the UN vehicles to take them out of Kigali. UN officials (military men) shove black people away to allow the Whites to board. Xavier, Augustine and other anonymous people decide to use the chance to run away from Rwanda by riding behind the UN convoy.

Peck also questions the relevance of the international community; the UN, and former colonial countries when Africans descend into the chaos that the West created. In the scene where a UN official is commanding militias to clear the road, the dialogue between a frantic Xavier (who had been riding along with the UN convoy together with Augustine), the militiamen and the UN official underscores the irrelevance of the UN during the 1994 genocide:

**Xavier:** (to the UN official) Hello Lieutenant. He does not believe I am with you. We are in the same convoy.

**Lieutenant:** What do you mean?

**Militia:** (aggressively) Is he with you?

**Xavier:** (hysterically) The same convoy.

**Militia:** Shut up! Let the White man talk. Are these people with you?

**Lieutenant:** Our convoy are the jeeps and the trucks. I am sorry. I have orders. Only expatriates.

*(Sometimes 01:02:17-01:03:09).*

What is troubling in this scene is the overt racism of the UN workers, privileging the white ‘expatriates,’ over the black Africans. The film questions the assumption that a black African cannot be an expatriate, evident in the official’s decision to distinguish the supposedly white
expatriates from black non-expatriates. Although the UN official was acting according to ‘orders’, it is hard to extend sympathy to someone who was capable of saving Rwandan lives against the frenzied militias. Xavier is killed by the Interahamwe militia because his name is announced on the radio as one of the traitors. The irony of the UN headquartered in the US and the US government that was aware of the capacity of the radio to spread hate speech and the fact that France and Belgium were helping the Hutu leaders and the militias to escape Kigali to DRC and other neighbouring countries as the RPF advanced to Kigali, is grave. This film expounds the external agencies role in Africa’s turbulent post-colonial times.

US’s involvement in Africa as a neo-colonial master is also represented in another film directed by Peck, *Lumumba*, a biopic of Lumumba Emery Patrice, the first elected prime minister of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The film depicts his campaign for the independence of Congo in 1960 and his short leadership that lasted only two months because he got assassinated in 1961 with the connivance of the US and Belgium. In preparation for independence, Lumumba’s dialogue with Kasavubu, a leader of another big political party, who later becomes the first sycophantic president foreshadows Kasavubu’s naive, psychotic approach. Kasavubu manages to keep the presidency for a few years simply because he was a rubber stamp to the Belgians, while Lumumba is interested in Africans taking charge of their minerals and politics. Lumumba fails to understand why the Belgians want to postpone the Independence Day for two more weeks, from the 15th to the 30th June 1960. The dialogue below between the two prominent party leaders Lumumba and Kasavubu (who later become Prime Minister and President respectively in post-colonial Congo) at the last negotiation meeting for independence in Belgium indicates that Lumumba was suspicious of the diabolical neocolonial plans of the Belgians. The Belgians wanted to postpone the date of independence which Lumumba objected to while his colleague, who represented as the puppet for the Belgians was vague in acceptance.
Lumumba: You are thinking of compromise. Independence is on June 15th.
Kasavubu: The minister will refuse.
Lumumba: You want to give in on the date?
Kasavubu: Only to preserve a United Stand.
Lumumba: They want to gain time. For what reason? To prepare their exit, or to plot against our future state?

Kasavubu: Plot?
Lumumba: The Katanga mining Corp. copper, diamonds. Will they leave it to our government?


Consequently, as the Congolese were celebrating the promise of independence, the Belgians were plotting their downfall. The Minister warns Lumumba that they will not find it easy. The well-meaning Lumumba rushes to inform his people: “I accuse Minister Ganshof and the duplicity of the Belgian government which considers me dangerous and won’t let me form the government of my choice. Brussels prefers a leaderless Congo on the 30th of June” (Lumumba 27:47-28 06). The Belgians continue with the divide and rule by supporting the Katanga militants under Tshombe to fight for the secession of Katanga. The censored speech that Lumumba makes forcefully on Independence Day is claimed to have sealed his fate—he was to be removed from power by the Belgians with the support of America’s CIA. The film emphases the event of this speech to draw attention to Lumumba’s pragmatism and political integrity that greedy Belgians would not have wished to see in DRC.

In Lumumba, the film’s narrative makes it clear that Lumumba’s assassination was a response from the neocolonial powers: Belgium and the US because they felt Lumumba’s government threatened their economic interest in the mineral-rich DRC. Peck effectively uses the narrative voice-over of the dead Lumumba, who is talking directly to his wife and implicitly to spectators, to highlight the culprits of Lumumba’s death. Early in the film, he says:

You never knew about that night in Katanga. No one was to know. Their mission was clear: 3 bodies to pick-up and get rid of. No tomb, no memorial. Even in death, I was still a threat to them!

(Lumumba 02:57-03:34).
The omniscient voice-over of the ‘ghost’ of Lumumba authenticates the narrative as it gives us the first-person point of view as a witness to these events. Most of African communities believe in life after death with traditional religions commonly asserting the concept that the dead are not dead (Mbiti 1969). Peck uses this common belief among Africans, especially the Bantu, to lend further narrative credibility to his representation of the detailed events of Lumumba’s covert killing. The story narrated in voice-over by the character Lumumba is depicted in a montage of shots of a big convoy driving in the wilderness of Congo where we see two White men exhume and burn in hot acid Lumumba’s remains. There are documentary films and literature which cover the confession of the people who destroyed Lumumba’s remains as well as his killers. Peck, therefore, adds a counter-representation of the otherwise manipulated account of pre and post-independent DRC, a history he says cannot leave to be told by Hollywood (qtd. in Sepinwall 6). Also, the film highlights minerals in Eastern DRC as a significant cause of instability. This scramble for DRC’s natural resources started early before colonialism and has persisted to date. As we see in *Lumumba*, the assassination of Lumumba is attributable to the Belgians and Americans. They were complicit with the leader of the mineral-rich Katanga province and Mobutu Sese Seko.

While *Lumumba* dramatises the pernicious influence of colonial and neocolonial powers in the regions, other East African films on war and conflict emphasise that it is *imported* weaponry, especially guns and bombs that cause pain and trauma to Africans. *Sometimes in April, S.R.B (State Research Bureau), Imbabazi: The Pardon, Kony: Orders From Above* and *From A Whisper*, attest to the bloodshed that the largely imported weapons have cultivated in

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42 See [www.youtube.com/watch?v=1B_gSBiSWRg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1B_gSBiSWRg), [www.youtube.com/watch?v=vjjVPuY3hwI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vjjVPuY3hwI). The documentary film which analyses the assassinated Lumumba, like the literature on the same matter, shows that the US and Belgium governments were responsible for the assassination of Lumumba. Agents of US and Belgian governments killed Lumumba and dissolved his body in acid. Also see Emmanuel Gerard’s 2015 *Death in the Congo: Murdering Patrice Lumumba*. 
Africa. The subtext of the films reveals that Africa is at war with itself not because Africans are warmongers, but due to external saboteurs that benefit from the chaos. Traditionally, Africans in their eclectic cultures never fought “wars of blame,” a fact poignantly represented in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. That is to say, there had to be justification for one to fight a neighbour. The films reveal that the old custom of negotiation did not apply in the charged post-colonial era. As Mamdani has earlier articulated, the Rwandan genocide depicts the Africans’ mastery of the barbarism introduced to them by the colonialist (settlers) (10). *Sometimes in April* highlights the fact that there was a peace deal between Hutu president Habyarimana and the RPF in which it was agreed that power is shared between the Hutu majority and the Tutsis to the effect that the vice-president was a Tutsi. But for reasons left to suspicion and conspiracy theory, the President of Rwanda was assassinated together with that of Burundi as they landed in Kigali which sparked the spontaneous killing by the militias and an advance of the offensive by the RPF rebels from their base in Uganda.

**A Subjective Representation of a Troubled Postcolonial East Africa**

I begin this section by reflecting on the last voice-over by Lumumba:

Don’t cry for me, my companion.

History will have its say one day.

It won’t be a history written in Brussels, Paris or Washington.

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I make a sweeping claim about the imported armory as responsible for the bloodshed in East Africa, basing on the fact that before the 1994 genocide there was no established factory to produce the weapons used in the wars in DRC, Uganda and Rwanda. In *Sometimes in April* we see a delivery of a consignment of machetes (that were used by militia’s who could not access guns) that are claimed to have been imported from China. In *Kony: Orders From Above*, there is scene in which Kony is negotiating with Sudan for ammunition support. In countries where there are no established arsenals, we can only be left to a wild guess that the apparent carcinogenic weapons are imported or rather supplied by foreign ‘allies’ who benefit from the chaos (as is mentioned in *Homecoming*, a film discussed in Chapter 4).

There are two conspiracy theories about the killer of the Rwanda and Burundi president that sparked the 1994 Rwanda genocide (see Young 68). One theory cites the Hutu extremists to have killed Habyarimana for taking a moderate stance towards Tutsi while the second one indict the RPF rebels to shoot-down Habyarimana’s plane in anticipation chaos ensues and they advance and take over Kigali. In all this the Rwandan genocide is interpreted as products of postcolonial chaos that cannot be explained in the African philosophy of engaging in a justifiable war (as suggested in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*).
It will be ours, the history of a new Africa.
And on that day…

*(Lumumba 01:44:14-40).*

Though in *Lumumba* the above are intimate words by Lumumba to his wife, symbolically the address by extension is to all spectators to whom Lumumba is the hero of Africa’s liberation struggle against colonialism. Peck skillfully plays with the end of *Lumumba* to symbolise a start of a ‘fire’ that I see consuming the new African screen-griot in their endeavours to self-represent their experiences. *Lumumba* ends with the burning of Lumumba’s body to ashes as if to erase him, while simultaneously, on the contrary, signaling the beginning of an endless reverence of Lumumba. In a close-up shot, we see a strike of a matchstick that is thrown on a drum of acid. The drum explodes into a fire that fills the entire screen as Lumumba says the last words, “And on that day…” The character does not tell what he expects of Africans on the day they begin to write their own history. Peck poignantly and skillfully addresses African viewers that the fire of such magnitude should continue to burn in every pan-African to motivate them to reclaim their lost glory, more so, through owning their narratives.

In a similar manner of response to Lumumba’s call to take charge of the African history, East African screen-griots unanimously argue for the need of an objective self-articulation of their “post-colonial identity with all its challenges, grandeur, and charm as well as its greed poverty, and deceit” (Okoye 27). This is because Africans have a lot to learn from their histories. Damaris Irungu, a Kenyan scriptwriter who is currently producing a period film about Kenya’s Mau-Mau rebellion detainees, articulates the important decolonising dimensions of these sentiments:

As African filmmakers, we can change the narrative of our continent by first exposing the injustice done to us by the west. Because that will help us understand ourselves and more importantly reduce the self-hate. We judge ourselves so harshly, yet most of what befell us was totally beyond our control. It was a system planned to last over a century; we are only over half a century
in an imported democracy, which the neocolonial masters with business interest do control. Look at all Francophone countries, France is messing them up. Basically, when you have a background like mine, where all our past is erased through constant brainwash, your desire to assert yourself is high. We can strategically plan for our continent when we know our history, its impact on our present (Interview).

The social and emotional baggage that comes with the African creative complicates and at the same time, simplifies their purpose. Often colonialism, which is still in the people’s memory, is a frequent allusion as it signifies the starting point of all the popular negative images of Africa that preoccupy East African/African filmmakers. As Irungu proposes, decolonisation of the mind should begin from an honest dialogue with one’s past. Period drama films set in pre-colonial and colonial Africa give counter-narratives to the existing ones that were written by the West, which to a great extent is cathartic to the Africans who have been made to believe that they had no history and civilisation (Andindilile 2016).

Willie Owusu, a Kenyan filmmaker, expounds on the increasing synergy of representing history in film and arts as follows:

We are in a renaissance and aware about ourselves: our history. France wants to return the art stolen from Africa. Africans are at the moment telling their immediate history, their ancient history in line with the Sankofa theory. Much as we are having negative influence from the West there is something African that can’t be eroded. There is an arts renaissance despite the political failures by our governments: African fashion weeks all over the world, African music is more transnational, more African films about historic events have started to trickle in (Interview).

Owusu, though general about the arts, makes a significant observation about the Sankofa theory. Sankofa is “a return to the source” theory that argues that Africans need to look at their history and philosophies to solve their current problems (Dipio 40; Magara 53; Diawara 1992). One approach of accomplishing a “return to the source,” attempts to represent the history of a
people through a widely accessible medium, such as film. Through the representation of alternative history, film, like other arts, contributes to Aimé Césaire, Léopold Sédar Senghor and Léon-Gontran’s négritude movement. Négritude encourages a love for “blackness,” love for the African ideologies as epistemes. One way of raising Black consciousness and decolonise the spectators is by telling historical memory objectively.

East African filmmakers are exponentially representing their history in film. As Lizelle Bisschoff explains, “contemporary indigenous East African filmmaking has thus allowed filmmakers to find a voice, tell their own stories, and re-interpret their cultures and histories” (74). To date, like it was with the African filmmakers and writers of the 1960s, historical referent texts have continued to be written. Achebe argues, African artists “must begin to correct the prejudices…created about the Negro,” and this starts with taking control of their representation (*The Role* 7-8). Similarly, most interviewed filmmakers suggest that a narration of immediate history is for therapeutic purposes (come to terms with the state of affairs) and advancing the much-needed discourse of self-representation and self-determination. As such, in a bid to correct the presumed prejudices the narratives espouse objectivity, unlike the colonial and western films that exoticise and ‘other’ Africans. Film is deliberately employed by East African artists/creatives to change the negative stereotypes about Africans and how Africans understand themselves. In the trailer and behind the scenes footage of *Sometimes in April*, one of the crew members comments “the movie is gonna change the behaviour of many, many, many, men.” This evidences the fact that fiction film is perceived to function as a medium for self-assessment and education.

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45 The comment by the Rwandan artists show the mindset spectators bring into the movie viewing experience. They come to learn. To him, the men, because they masterminded and carried out the genocide, were the candidates for learning that extremism is bad. See minute 3:15 of the video on [www.youtube.com/watch?v=3DX0SCNI_rU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3DX0SCNI_rU)
As the filmmakers take a self-reflexive approach in representing their history, they do not underrepresent the grim post-colonial situation in East Africa. Films do what Mhando and Tomaselli call “Africa speak[ing] to itself” (2009). For instance, horrors of the Rwandan genocide are portrayed in Sometimes in April, Kinyarwanda, Imbabazi: The Pardon and Terror 94. Out Big Fear represents cattle rustling in war-torn South Sudan, Kony: Orders from Above, The Devil’s Chest, Imani and SRB: State Research Bureau about the wars in Uganda. The filmmakers have “decided to put Africa back on screen, not in any romantic or aggrandising way, but representing its miseries and its grandeur” (Nkunzimana 85). The films present more than the memory of a historical incident, and they transmit “ideas or information” about how the communities are impacted in the conflict and how to resolve the war conflicts (Barber 177).

Through the deployment of round characters that go through complex volte-face as the plots unfold, the films further stage the fact that genocide wasted both the perpetrators and the targeted victims as intensely dramatised in Raoul Peck’s Sometimes in April. Imbabazi: The Pardon, Kinyarwanda like Sometimes in April, have Hutu protagonists. Sometimes in April revolves around two Hutu brothers, Honoré Butare (a seasoned journalist) and Augustine Muganza, (a military man), who, by their status would have otherwise been safe from the Interahamwe militias. As soon as the genocide starts, Augustine is listed among those to be killed because he is married to a Tutsi, hence considered a moderate Hutu. Honoré Butera, when he is securing his brothers family to a safer place, hotel des Mille Collines, is attacked by the militia for carrying Tutsis and people who lack an identification card. In the genocide ideology, whoever did not have an identification card was considered an enemy (Tustis) because Hutus would be proud of their identity. In a tragic twist of events, Augustine is being coerced to kill his best friend, a Hutu military man, because he has also been listed and announced on radio as a moderate Hutu. As dramatised in Kinyarwanda and Sometimes in April, even religious leaders become accomplices of the genocide because they either had to
turn in lists of Tutsis to be wasted or they would be killed for being moderate or anti-genocide. The films show that the genocide dehumanises the perpetrators and victims alike.

As a result of the construction of rounded characters, the Rwanda genocide films depict the destructive effects of conflict. For example, in *Imbabazi: The Pardon*, like in many other Rwanda genocide films, Karekezi dramatises the harmful impact of war on individuals and the community. The antagonist Manzi (Joel Akuyo Atiku Prynce) is conscripted into the génocidaires militia group in which he loses his humanity, and he receives irreparable psychological disorder after participating in the killing of Karemera’s (his best friend) father and the little brother. His guilty conscience destabilises him even after serving his prison sentence. Manzi’s hopelessness is shown in the conversation between his parents and friend, all as an attempt to help him recover from the guilt-driven mental instability and alcoholism.

**Mother:** (with an imploring tone) Manzi! Think about your future.

**Manzi:** (after a dip sip at a bottle of beers) What future?

**Manzi’s friend:** Manzi, your father, is right. It’s time to start a new life. The past is forgotten.

**Manzi’s Father:** (Emphatically) It’s gone!

**Manzi’s friend:** That’s right. We were possessed by demons.

**Manzi:** You think you have a better future in deleting the past from it?

**Manzi’s friend:** Of course.

**Manzi:** You invited those demons. (He walks away from his father and friend).

(*Imbabazi 45:51-46:14*).

Karekezi constructs a narrative focused on a personal account of the impact of the war on the génocidaires by detailing how the genocide plan was orchestrated, the close-up shots of systematic killing per village and then the aftermath of the genocide. Manzi’s mental breakdown is a typical representation of a ‘génocidaire’ failing to live with his/her horrendous actions.
A similar representation of the genocidaires’ psychological break-down is depicted in *Sometimes in April, Kinyarwanda* and *Grey Matter*. In *Sometimes in April*, for instance, Augustine’s brother, Honoré, a journalist instigates ethnic hatred on radio by rallying the Hutus against the Tutsis becomes a victim of the horrors of the genocide when his sister-in-law, a Tutsi, and his nephews are killed in his presence. In a flashback, we see that Honoré was soon forgotten by the party he had dedicatedly served. He is arrested as his family and car are destroyed. After getting arrested as one of the genocidaires and presented to the International Criminal Court (ICC) in Arusha, Tanzania (where the Rwandan genocidaires were tried), Honoré decides to change his plea from not guilty to guilty. He realises his actions were inciteful, albeit belatedly. But in Honoré’s action, Peck is showing us that people have to be responsible for their actions. In *Kinyarwanda*, a young man chooses to mutilate himself because of the guilt of having killed a baby. Ruhorahoza’s *Grey Matter* also a narrative about the impact of both perpetrators and victims in a post-genocide Rwanda foregrounds the psychological break-down of the genocidaire as he is seen going mad due to being obsessed with killing the “cockroaches” (a derogatory name for the Tutsis) and two genocide survivors’ siblings (a young adult man and woman who must live on their own) trying to survive after the genocide. The filmmakers show that with or without preventive laws, human beings are ultimately responsible for their actions. Through the motif of the genocidaires’ mental breakdowns, the films attempt to raise the spectator’s consciousness against a repetition of similar incidents. There is also a potential for the films to raise sympathy towards the genocidaires and hence subtly portray reconciliation messages since the genocidaires must be reintegrated in the community and live in proximity with their victims.

In addition to the demonstration of the traumatic impact of the genocide on the genocidaires, most Rwandan genocide imaginaries also narrate the restoration of the ‘lost’ humanity of the genocidaire and links it to the potential for reconciliation with their victims.
In *Imbabazi: The Pardon*, for instance, Manzi regains his mental stability when he opens up a truth and reconciliation centre where he encourages people to talk about genocide. He also requests for any form of punishment from his friend Karemera. Manzi offers free labour at the construction site of Karemera’s house, which stopped because of the genocide. Karemera grants Manzi forgiveness (*Imbabazi* in Kinyarwanda), but Manzi loses his father. Karekezi’s narrative symbolises a more hopeful social future for Rwanda when the two friends turned archenemies, forgive each other and work together for a new future as symbolically seen in the act of building a house. As Young points out, the post-war genocide films of Rwanda promote a “narrative of memory [that] appears couched in the already problematised mantra of ‘forgive, but don’t forget.’” (Young 214). This is because the filmmakers are part of the discourse and, as is expected through their griotic role as philosophers, they espouse the popular reconciliation ideology in their narratives. By showing an open discussion about reconciliation in his film, Karekezi is saying that Rwandans should have an open debate on the genocide, forgive one another, and then work together as Rwandans for the good of their home country. Otherwise, as Karekezi posits, “the genocide needs to be carefully told because people have a short memory. If the genocide story is not handled very well, I can see it repeat itself” (Interview). Karekezi, like other interviewed screen-griots, including Ruhorahoza, Mutiganda, Dusabejambao and Kwezi, is suggesting that film has an important role to play in sustaining the cultural memory of the 1994 genocide and promoting a genuine discussion about the underlying factors of conflict in Rwanda.

All East African films on conflict foreground the effectiveness of community tribunals and include an open discourse on the subject of psychotherapy for traumatised victims. This is dramatised in *Sometimes in April, Kinyarwanda* and *Imbabazi: The Pardon, Grey Matter, Something Necessary* and *From a Whisper*. Like Karekezi, Kivu Ruhorahoza, the director of
Grey Matter, elaborates on the need to talk about the genocide and why most filmmakers in Rwanda begin with a film about the genocide:

For Rwanda, the genocide is a massive reality that effects of aspects of life. Even by walking down the streets you recognise, building that housed notorious government officials. I think it is good to deal with the genocide then afterwards you can write about other ideas. It [genocide imaginaries] happens in all other forms of art. It is not for only therapeutically purposes. I think people want to tell their side of this national tragedy (Interview).

As such, the films are bridging the gap of initiating a conversation that as argued in chapter 1, most ordinary people would instead not engage in at this time because of government policy. The government of Rwanda has decreed against public discussion of the genocide “under the auspices of eradicating (or at least limiting) hate speech” (Young 30). As much as the Rwandan government established truth and reconciliation centres immediately after the genocide as a means of reconciliation, today it does not tolerate any public conversation of the genocide. The idea that genocide is a prohibited subject of discussion is implied in Imbabazi: The Pardon when the antagonist’s friend discourages him from filing a case against his family’s killer, Manzi. In Sometimes in April also, the apprehension to discuss the genocide is shown among high school students in the film’s opening scene. “That’s in the past, those bad things are in the past,” a student firmly blames the other for asking whether the killing in the genocide could have been stopped (06:00-06:48). Peck ends the film on a point that encourages conversation through the participation of Augustine’s second wife, Martine Kamanzi, in the community tribunal.

After more than twenty-five years since the occurrence of the genocide and the establishment of the truth and reconciliation commission, the government of Rwanda would imagine that the memories about the genocide have abated. However, significant genocide and post-genocide themes are still predominant in Rwandan imaginaries. Eric Kabera, the
proprietor of the Rwanda Cinema Centre, re-echoes Ruhorahoza’s views by saying that “[t]hese themes clearly relate to the objectives of the Rwanda Cinema Centre: we wanted to represent our own stories, our own culture and history, through our own eyes. Clearly, the 1994 genocide and its aftermaths are a crucial part of our culture and history that needed to be represented from a Rwandan perspective” (qtd. in Hron 361). Despite Rwanda’s determination to construct its ethnic homogeneity as it was in pre-colonial times, Rwandan filmmakers are still grappling with how to represent what they witnessed as children (as most are younger than forty). As Karekezi argues, the young generation feels they too can participate in national healing by telling the various aspects of the genocide representations.

**Children and Youths as Victims of War**

From East Africa’s long history of conflict represented in film, we witness convoluted repercussions of war on children. The films spark a discourse on the predicament of sexual abuse of girls and women during the war with a hope that the political class may change the course of the region’s history. The children and youths are further shown to be victims of duplicity and manipulation as they are given guns and radicalised to kill (Kaitesi 2004). Using individual children’s memory as a springboard, the film on conflict foregrounds the role of the children and youths in the propagation and execution of war, above all, as victims.

The *State Research Bureau* represents the gravely conflicted Uganda during the transition from Amin, Obote 11 to the National Resistance Movement (NRM). Like the Rwandan filmmakers' narration of the genocide, Ayeny’s recollection of memories about the LRA war in *Kony: Orders from Above*, Bish represents his remembrance of the 1980s transition wars in Uganda. He says:

In SRB [*State Research Bureau*] I was talking about the things I experienced. I saw dead bodies almost every day, heard gun bullet sounds every night. I was ten years old. One day I looked through the binoculars and saw dead bodies on
Kampala streets. I wanted to tell that bit of my history, our history, and get people talking about it. I have never forgotten one Christmas Eve; bullets were everywhere, my Dad was driving around crazily to run away from the mess, my drunk aunt was cheering my Dad, just singing *driva yongeza omuliro* (speed up driver) (Interview).

Through the recollection of childhood memories, Bish relays the traumatic memory of all Uganda’s junta led governments that is characteristic of the polarised politics in most East African countries. In addition to taking a snippet of Uganda’s post-colonial history, Bish exposes the evil of corruption, the use of child soldiers, and human resilience in times of conflict. The film ends with the scene in which children are wielding guns that are strikingly taller than them.

The youth suffer most as their future is halted by war, whereby some are dislocated, orphaned and at the most extreme, die. The dire plight of children and young people is prominent in Ayeny’s *Kony: Orders from Above* which dramatises the thwarting of the future of happy children by Kony’s LRA conflict in Northern Uganda. Like the orphaned and wasted children in Rwanda’s genocide, Ayeny’s tale about the over two decades of war in Northern Uganda portrays how life for school-going children is brought to a halt when they are abducted. Kony was convinced that he was fulfilling God’s orders by organising a rebel group that he calls Lord’s Resistance Army. Instead, we see a rebel group that turns girls into sex slaves and boys into vicious killers. *Kony: Orders From Above* revolves around a love triangle between Kony, his trusted soldier Otti (Steve Ayeny) (who was abducted at about ten years and has become a teenager or young adult from the bush) and Aguti (Elizabeth Akullu), Otti’s childhood girlfriend, who is abducted later and chosen by Kony to be his next wife. Early in the narrative, we are introduced to a beautiful high school girl, Aguti, reading a letter from her boyfriend. The letter encapsulates the naivety, despair, and hope of Otti, whose aspiration was
to become a doctor. Ironically, he is forced to treat wounded soldiers despite having no training and no tools.

Dear Aguti, this marks the 720th letter I am writing to you. I believe you have grown into a beautiful woman with that *malaika* [angelic] smile of yours. Sometimes I wish we were both abducted that night. But no no no, I don’t want you to be abducted ever. But, Hmm! God is very funny. I would like to see him someday and ask him how he does things. Today I have treated more than 100 people… they really needed a doctor. It did not matter whether you went to that Kampala school or Lachan Penino Primary school…For the first time, even my father here was happy with me. And I am happy to say, even when you did not eat food on graduation, your husband has finally become a doctor.

*(Kony 04:25-05:51).*

From the personal letter, we learn that Otti was betrothed to Aguti. Otti was kidnapped while in primary school. Through Otti and Aguti’s love story, we witness the intricacies of betrayal, suffering, deaths, and dehumanisation experienced by ordinary people, particularly children, during the war in Northern Uganda.

The use of child soldiers and the potential manipulation of the youth is prevalent in conflict areas in Africa. Doro succinctly describes, “[t]he Great Lakes Region has always been a conflict-prone region that has witnessed some of the most horrendous conflicts on the African continent.” We see many films are dramatising the ripple effects of war, on particularly the children and youth (“The Geo-Politics”). In *Our Big Fear*, a short film about the post-independence war South Sudan, the filmmaker represents the multiplicity of the effects of war on young men amidst the government’s policy of disarmament. The gun is seen as a necessary item to have in a community that is still enormously tense with ethnic divisions and cattle wrestling. In Rwandan genocide films, the plurality of psychological damage on children who participated in the war is as enormous as that in *SRB* and *Kony: Orders from Above*. Through foregrounding child soldiers, Ayeny’s *Kony: Orders from Above* gives a close-up look at LRA
war that led to grim and horrendous human rights violation, particularly by child soldiers. Child soldiers are bodyguards to the old soldiers, and they are the ones sent to the front line. The children must not challenge the authorities lest they get killed. For instance, throughout the film, Otti tries to contain his feelings for his girlfriend Aguti (whom the LRA leader marries as soon as she gets to the war camp) to the extent that as Kony is forcefully consummating his marriage to Aguti, Otti is outside guarding Kony’s hurt. Otti vents his feeling by writing a letter to Aguti, that he could not even deliver to her in their circumstances. His hopelessness and pain are vividly expressed in the letter: “Dear Aguti, I will be lying if I said I know how you are feeling. Because I don’t know how you are feeling, but I know how I am feeling. I want to cut myself; I want to hang myself” (38:00-39:00). At the end of the movie, Otti is killed for securing the escape of his girlfriend, who by this time, has Kony’s child. As seen in the film with children and youthful protagonists, the children lose their innocence when they are manipulated as mercenaries and sex-slaves (which can cause multiple emotional complications).

Alongside the representation of the vulnerability of children and young adults in war, is a depiction of their potential manipulation to engage in radicalism and commit terrorist acts. Wanuri Kahiu, who recreates the aftermath and cause of the 1998 US Embassy Bombing in Kenya, in From a Whisper, explains:

I wanted to record our history; I wanted it to come from an authentic source and to make people realise the reason such things are happening is because of us. There are two Muslim youths; one gets radicalised into doing such an evil act while the other does not. The questions I am raising in From a Whisper are why, how, who, and what can we do so that it doesn’t happen again? (Interview).

In addition to reiterating the role of a screen-griot as a ‘keeper’ of history, Kahiu ignites a contemplation of how spirituality is muddled in people’s political agendas. In a scene where Fareed is conscripted into terrorism, we see an Arab looking man (hiding his true identity
through wearing fake beards) giving religion as a ground for killing innocent people in the guise of hurting America. He tells Fareed:

> We are here because in this age we are obligated to fight the unworthy. Those who forsake our faith…
> Do it because the West has planted terror and worldly desires. Because of the West our Muslims have forgotten their faith and courage and no longer have love for their fellow Muslims. [Do it] [n]ot for the love for a country, but for faith.

*(From 24:25-25:09).*

Fareed is convinced. He accepts to be a suicide bomber with the conviction that he will go to heaven after killing other people. Similarly, carcinogenic radicalism in young people is depicted in Karekezi’s *Imbabazi: The Pardon*. Manzi and Karemera are bosom friends until the training for the *Interahamwe* militia recruit Manzi (a Hutu), as Karemera is also getting tempted by the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) rebel group that was recruiting the Tutsi. While Karemera does not join the rebel group, Manzi gets radicalised through petty bribes and being given power as a leader of the *Interahamwe* in that suburb. Manzi orders for the collection of the lists of all the Tutsis, including his friend’s family, so that when it is time for exterminating all Tutsi people, the operation would be systematic and thorough. The only thing Manzi does for Karemera is to advise him to runaway from the country. Unfortunately, before Karemera can escape, the president of Rwanda, Habyarimana, is bombed, which sparks off the spontaneous killings of all the Tutsis and moderate Hutus as well as making possible the advance of RPF rebels from Uganda. The East African youths find themselves entangled in the constant conflicts of this volatile space.

The youth are further depicted as victims of East Africa’s political fragility as represented in *The Mercy of the Jungle*, a film about a multi-national war in a thick forest of the mineral-rich eastern DRC in 1998. In *The Mercy of the Jungle*, Karekezi foregrounds the
abuse of soldiers in wars for self-aggrandisement of East African leaders. Through a simple plot focused on the misfortunes of two Rwandan soldiers, Sergeant Xavier (Marc Zinga) with his junior, Private Faustin (Stéphane Bak), who are erroneously left by their battalion in the thick forest of eastern Congo, Karekezi represents the humanity and vulnerability of soldiers. Through various military costumes, the film demonstrates how Kivu, the epicentre for the Rwanda/Uganda clash in the DRC, is accustomed to seeing military men from various countries. This is sharpened by montages of non-descript military groups managing mines in Kivu to heighten Faustin and Xavier’s tension as they navigate the thick forest. When Faustin and Xavier attempt to use the road, they are chased by suspicious civilians which demonstrates the tense and highly saturated environment. Besides the civilians awareness of insecurity from multiple armies, Faustin and Xavier are also conscious of being attacked by either allied armies of Zambia, Angola, Malawi and Chad and their own alliance of Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda. From their conversation with the Congolese civilian leader who is also guarded by gun-wielding youth, we learn that Rwanda is fighting Uganda and another Rwandan rebel group (based in DRC), as well as having to protect itself from the pro-DRC government-led army, which has also exacerbated the conflict. The film complicates DRC’s conflict and implicitly indicates that various armies are plundering DRC’s minerals as seen in the montages. As Vlassenroot & Raeymakers argue, DRC is “a prominent example of how violent struggles over mineral resources have shaped internal warfare” (386). This does not take away the fact that the Congolese were fighting among themselves immediately after independence, which was fueled by neocolonial interests of America and Belgium (as dramatised in Lumumba by Raoul Peck).

46 See BBC’s documentary Congo: A Journey into the Heart of Africa, 2018 on youtube.com/watch?v=43xTvpxWLW4&t=1614s
Generally, films of conflict and war vividly portray the intricate geopolitical situation by illuminating the issue of an exodus of displaced people across the region as a result of war, hence heightening the volatility. Instability in East Africa and its neighbouring countries accounts for the various films about refugees that have come out of different countries. For instance, *Kony: Orders from Above* and *The Mercy of the Jungle* contain sequences of ordinary displaced people. The populace in conflicted DRC run to neighbouring countries, particularly Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi. In Tanzania (which has been peaceful from independence) there is a film *Najuta Shamsa* which is about Burundian refugees’ efforts to establish roots in a host country Tanzania in which their life is not entirely different from the one they had in Burundi.

Burundi’s *Kivumvu the Basket Boy* and *Reveal Yourself* depicts Congo’s refugees in Burundi. At the same time, *S.R.B: State Research Bureau* alludes to the fact that Ugandans during the volatile times of the early and mid-1980s sought refuge in Kenya. Ugandans have also made several films about the Rwandan refugees’ experiences in Uganda and the impact of Rwanda’s genocide to Ugandans as seen in the 2018 Richard Mulindwa’s *94 Terror*. This is because Uganda has been home to Rwandan refugees for a long time. When Rwanda had the 1959 revolution, most Rwandan refugees ran to neighbouring countries with the majority settling in Uganda, where they currently have recognition as an ethnic group. However, despite Uganda offering a home to Rwandan refugees, the refugees used Uganda as a launchpad to take over Kigali in 1994.47 The films about the Rwandan genocide such as *Sometimes in April, Kinyarwanda* and *Imbabazi: The Pardon* portray the fact that while in Uganda, Rwandan refugees formed a rebel movement called the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) to reclaim their

47 As seen in the opening titles of *Sometimes in April*, Rwanda has had many people displaced and many refugees flocking to Uganda and DRC earlier than the horrendous 1994 genocide. Uganda being the “core of the interlacustrine zone” (another name for the Great Lakes Region), receives many refugees from almost all its neighbouring countries (Doro 2011). By way of gathering support, Rwandan refugees helped Yoweri Museveni’s rebel group, the NRA to take over Kampala in 1986. In reciprocity, Museveni, as a president of Uganda supported Kagame’s Rwandan Patriotic Front to take over Kigali in July 1994 (in a bloody genocide that saw to the killing of about 1 million Rwandans).
homeland from which they had been ousted during the previous conflicts (Mamdani 164). The subjective films on conflict, therefore, highlight the issues of dislocation due to war. In most cases, the narratives about refugees raise the spectators’ pity for the set-back they encounter. In part, the films are pointing out to the ruling class that the entire region is affected by their foreign policies.

The East African films that I have discussed in this chapter underscore the discourse of the geopolitical state of affairs in Africa and how Africa should maintain its development amidst the numerous political hindrances that are accentuated by foreign influence. Rwandans films are, for instance, interrogating the creation of polarised ethnic groups and the ways through which ethnic conflicts can be resolved. The ideology of “We are all Rwandans” is a significant motif in all Rwandan films that it feels as if the same person produced them simply because the filmmakers want to put an end to the ethnic rivalry. Also, the films intensely foreground the use of traditional forms of knowledge in solving conflicts. In Rwandan films, the method of Gacaca, a local open court where genocidares confess their crimes and the victims are asked to forgive them, is stressed as a method of solving future conflicts (Mamdani 2001, Brehm et al. 2014). Similar systems have been used in Northern Uganda, where the Matoput (an Acholi traditional arbitration system) was used to encourage abductees to return to the community. In Kenya’s 2008 post-election violence that is represented in Something Necessary, we see the truth and reconciliation committee established to solve differences through the communal court process. All of these East African films are manifestations of the central political claim that the whole of Africa needs to use traditional forms of the knowledge, values, ethics and social practices of its civilisation to address its challenges of conflict and trauma.
Conclusion

The representation of traumatic memory in East African post-colonial films continues the trajectory of a politically charged decolonising phase which can be located in the Third Cinema aesthetics and the functions of the griot. In this chapter, we see the “formerly subjugated people’s desire to use film to reappraise their history, restore popular memory … affirm a new sense of identity” (Thackway 39). Even though film is not representative of an entire history, it is a bullet in the “battle over the perception of Africa” (Janis 4). The films further create a novel and objective perspective of Africa with all its multiplicity of conflict. African theorist, Mbembe points out, “the post colony is chaotically pluralistic,” but in that chaos, it has an “internal coherence” which it mobilises in “a specific system of signs, a particular way of fabricating simulacra or re-forming stereotypes” (102). This African led perspective is implicitly underlining an Afro-centric approach to African disputes. The films’ historical accounts of the flawed post-colonial East Africa is a space for self-reflection, particularly on how to end the ‘chaos’.

All these films show an intricate relationship between the nations and peoples of the Great Lakes Region. The narratives underscore the fact that the East African region is unified through its shared experiences. The conflicts in one country affect the other in terms of the exodus of refugees resulting in added pressure on the existing resources in the hosting countries which may breed further conflict. As seen in some films, the refugees become a source of insecurity in the host countries and country of origin as is the case with the continued instability in eastern DRC. The films highlight the filmmakers’ attempts to “re-writing the history,” even more, their immediate history objectively. The films make an objective exploration of post-colonial East Africa ravaged by war, with all its resultant impacts on ordinary people, amidst significant economic, social and political developments (Mekuria, “Representation” 8). Through historical imaginaries, the screen-griots demonstrate how Africa’s conflicted history
has led to trauma, displacement of people, and genocide. Significantly, like the borders that dissolve across the succession of maps in the opening sequence of *Sometimes in April* with which this chapter began, the East African films considered here underscore the subtle subversion of the colonial borders that seem to impede unity and development.
Chapter Four: The Great, Prosperous West Demystified: Narratives of Anti-migration

_The Griot distills the shared sentiment and offers analysis of its effect on the constituents of a particular time and society._

—Keyan Tomaselli and Phebbie Sakarombe

_I have been to Europe. I have got family there, the only difference between them and us is that they have the same or even more problems with clean roads and a sense of order._

—Willie Owusu, Kenyan Filmmaker

**Introduction**

East African cinema, unlike that of West and North Africa, is devoid of explicit hyper-visible negative representations of the migration experience. While there are no grisly images of aspiring migrants locked up in holding camps in transit countries or landing on European shores (especially in Italy) in overloaded boats, a significant number of films touch on the subject of migration to the European continent and the United States, that other ‘new world’. Rather than foregrounding the environmental dangers of sea travel, or the brutal processes of border control, East African films tend to accentuate more human-oriented hazards, such as conmen and human traffickers who export East Africans as bonded slaves. Migration is represented as a dehumanising process, seen mainly from the preparation stages to the negotiation of survival in a foreign country. The films make lucid representations of Africans’ experiences from the conception of the idea to migrate, as the characters prepare to travel to America and Europe, their lifestyle in the First World and the anti-climax when the characters return to Africa or cancel their plans to migrate. Through grim representations of postcolonial economic migrants, the films also depict what Bhabha calls the “poetics of exile” (7). Like the narratives concerning the African diaspora’s sense of exile, cultural clashes and nostalgia about home demonstrated in the essays in Elizabeth Bekers et al.’s *Transcultural Modernities: Narrating Africa in Europe*, East African films also reveal that migration gives rise to complex
issues of exile, a clash of cultures, and hybridity. These resultant effects of migration are vividly demonstrated in films such as Dream America from Uganda, Flight Path from Kenya and Welcome Home from Burundi. The sense of ‘self-exile’ is depicted in the migrants’ nostalgia which is reinforced by the hurdles of learning the culture of their new ‘home’, where, in some instances, the migrants do not even understand the language. While these filmic representations foreground individual’s motivations to migrate such as the desire for adventure and travel and/or exploring better economic opportunities, a close analysis shows that the impetus to migrate is symptomatic of the grave underlying cause: Afro-pessimism—the negative representation and perception of Africa that has persisted in Western media and film and sometimes with Africans as “agents” in the construction of the negative image (Poncian 73).

East Africa’s subjective representations of migration subtly engage with Afro-pessimism as a significant cause of the bizarre migration trends, and they also implicitly critique the policies that complicate the migration process. Despite the complexities involved in migration, as seen in the representation of extreme miseries accompanying migrants on their journey and following them to their destination, it is argued that “migration is an intrinsic aspect of social and economic development, not a problem to be solved” and the films show that if migration processes are streamlined, people will not get desperate to migrate (Grandi 82). The notion that migration is a problem has thus been exacerbated by politicians whose “poor management, reactive, improvised, and piecemeal responses, and inadequate integration measures can give the impression” that migration is problematic (Grandi 89). It is from the management loopholes that cabals and cartels of human traffickers have infiltrated migration processes. In part, migration discourse subtly underscores aspects of border control, nationality, identity and can serve as the basis for inequality. As Bridget Anderson argues “people have always moved,” they will continue to move, and not all mobility of people is subject to “scrutiny” (1532). But Anderson further adds that “‘migration’ already signals the need for
control and in public discourse is often raced and classed,” hence it is problematised by various governments’ creation of categories of people among those in exodus (1532). The problem here is when migration becomes a point of segregation with racist undertones. This implies that if policies of immigration would be objective (devoid of any racism and xenophobia), there are high chances of deterring illegal immigrants and a potential reduction in the hypervisibility of news headlines about migration. Some curious prospective migrants, as seen in *Dream America* and *Flight Path*, would legally migrate to their ‘dream’ countries, only to discover the grim reality and remember the familiar adage, “East, west home is best” (as said by the narrator of *Flight Path*), prompting them to return home (as portrayed in *Dream America* and *Flight Path*).

The films point to the fact that financial losses are incurred by desperate prospective migrants as they try to circumvent bureaucratic legal migration systems as well as illegal cartels. Consequently, most migrants end up in very difficult circumstances unable to fund a return ticket home. Such scenarios complicate migration and make it a subject of interest because it has become an industry and a phenomenon where there are grave human rights abuses, especially in holding centres. In Africa, Libya is a classic example where studies have discovered that the rights of migrants in holding centres “were being violated” (Rodier 57). Claire Rodier in the 2012 article “Libya: an Outpost of Externalised Migration Controls,” further argues that Sub-Saharan Africans, in particular, were “victims of racism, harassment, extortion, physical attacks and police violence” in addition to being exposed to slave-like labour conditions as they work to get money to pay the smugglers (Ibid). Yet, globally, border policies remain a point of contention in each country even as the world becomes more globalised and with increased movement.

Similar to the concerns of chapter three, where films of memory are deployed as a political statement, in this chapter, we see how filmmakers develop a political stance toward migration. This chapter reveals how East African cinema participates in and responds to an
expanding discourse regarding the movement between the global South and North and its regulation. The response to migration is mainly due to mainstream media representations of migrants and migration that tends to focus on sensational and highly emotive situations of which the most significant image trope is the capsized boat of illegal migrants trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea to land in Europe. These kinds of representations participate in and sustain a discourse of the alleged “non-stop migration towards Western countries” (Ebanda de B’béri and Louw 339). Once in the receiving countries, migrants are often further dehumanised, since in the psyche of some of the Western political class as exemplified by France’s President Nicolas Sarkozy, the migrants are seen as the unwelcome “misery of the world” (Ibid). Such perception and treatment of Africans have motivated filmmakers to use their art to dissuade migrants from going to places where they are not wanted. In some cases the films are rather implicitly lobbying for better migration policies as seen in Dream America and Welcome Home.

In this chapter, I focus on the representation of economic immigrants from Africa to the West because they are focalised in the narratives. The category of economic immigrants includes cases of illegal and legal immigrants to the West in search of better economic opportunities. Economic migrants are distinguished from the contingent of migrants that entail refugees and asylum seekers, whose movements are differently motivated, and whose status and dynamics of movement/passage to the desired destinations differ. Refugees may go through a slow, systematic process of resettlement in and outside of Africa, depending on the interests and policies of the would-be host countries. Economic immigrants, on the other hand, will seek legal processes to enter a country of their destination, and if that fails, they may also explore illegal means. The economic migrants, as we shall see in the movies, are not a ‘useless’ or unwanted category of person, as has been popularised by mainstream media, but are portrayed as productive people only interested in exploring new horizons. It is true that the
unstable political situation in Africa can cause the migration of refugees. These migrants are depicted as victims of the continued propaganda that spreads the myth of the West as a success and Africa as a place of misery, poverty, and diseases. The films, therefore, stage a contestation of misrepresentations of Africa that has led to an Afro-pessimism where the youth are covertly instigated to hate anything African. This is vividly depicted in *Dream America*, a film about three Ugandan boys attempting to go to America in search of economic prosperity, but they instead end up campaigning against America after their discovery that the land of the free they saw in movies was a myth. A film like *Dream America* exemplifies a tendency to privilege anti-migration that is also common in the narratives that I analyse in this chapter. Like *Dream America*, the other films, as a consequence of their anti-migration and anti-Afropessimism, facilitate a discourse of Afro-optimism.

**Why a Migration Discourse?**

Since the beginning of African Cinema in the 1960s, leading African filmmakers and world cinema auteurs, such as Ousmane Sembene, Pauline Vieyra, Med Hondo Abderrahmane Sissako and Mahamat-Saleh Haroun, have “been engaging with issues of the global North and South, borders and boundaries, migration, exile, and the diasporic consciousness” as evident in films such as the 1955 *Afrique Sur Seine* by Pauline Vieyra, the 1966 *Black Girl* by Ousmane Sembene, the 1967 *Soleil O* by Med Hondo, the 1999 *Bye Bye Africa* by Haroun and the 2002 *Waiting for Happiness: Heremakono* by Sissako (William 17). From the late 1990s, to date, the theme of migration gain more potency. As the late Samba Félix Ndiaye, a Senegalese documentary filmmaker observed: “When I see the young taking boats, preferring suicide because they don’t have the answers to their fears and their future, we have a duty to find a response, we can’t be silent. Once again, Africa is being won over by a sort of fatalistic resignation!” (qtd. in Ballet, *Contemporary* 5). The insinuation of Afro-pessimism from the migrants’ decision to the unknown has been unnerving to many African filmmakers. As grim
as the results of migration are for Africans since it signifies enslavement, racism and police brutality, exploitation and deaths in some sense, African films have continued to illuminate the subject of immigration. This is because, as Anjali Prabhu posits, “African filmmaking has come a long way in representing the fullness of African experience to audiences who care to heed it” (Prabhu 7). As such most films employ an overtly political film aesthetic and, in this case, the anti-migration stance is explicitly deployed to create a reflexive dialogue with the audience.

The subject of migration has various angles of representation ranging from circumstances that lead to immigration, the effects of immigration to the community that receives or loses migrants, the life of migrants in foreign countries, the results of ‘exile’ (being away from home), and the role of globalisation in migration. Moreover, there has been an exponential increase in migration narratives in both literary and cinematic forms, and they have received considerable critical attention throughout Africa (see for instance Bekers 2009; Mohammed 2012; Prabhu 2014; Jøholt’s 2019; Thackway 2019). In Transcultural Modernities: Narrating Africa in Europe, a collection of critical essays on migration in both literary and cinematic forms, the editors acknowledge that migrant narratives are an artistic way of creating and negotiating their “Euro-African affiliations”—the hybridity of migrants (xiii). The creative expressions in both visual arts and literature considered across the essays in the book depict some of the critical themes of migration: dislocation, hybridity and a sense of exile. Based on a plethora of creative works on immigration, the reader/viewer is given a pan-African vantage point from which to analyse the perspective of the diaspora narratives. This

48 There are studies that have only focused on the representation of migration in film, such as the 2012 Abdullah Mohammed’s PhD Dissertation: The Representation of Globalisation in Films about Africa, in which globalisation as a priori to contemporary migration is highlighted. Anjali Prabhu’s 2014 Contemporary Cinema of Africa and the Diaspora makes critical observations that migration is among the many political issues underpinning African cinema. Beti Ellerson examines the cinematic experiences of African women in the diaspora, which oscillate around the theme of migration (“Travelling Gazes” 2017). In the 2019 A Companion to Africa Cinema by Kenneth W. Harrow and Carmela Garritano there is an entire section titled “Movement/Fluidity and Aesthetics/Migration” that contains well-articulated articles on migration, such as “Crossing Lines: Frontiers, Circulations, and Identity” by Melissa Thackway and Sheila Petty’s “Relational Histories in African Cinema.” These publications significantly focus on the subject of African migration in film.
point of view underpins and expands the discourse of migrations and dislocation as it relates to two questions. When did Africans begin to migrate or forcefully get moved to other continents? And why is there an exponential rise in the economic migrants and refugees from Africa?

Migration from its denotational meaning may seem a benign topic, but to most Africans, it has a strong traumatic connotation. Immigration appears to, first, signify death, suffering, pain and exile. Therefore, East African filmmakers, like elsewhere in Africa and other communities that are facing migration challenges, have given it a priority. James S. William, an avid African cinema scholar in his 2019 article “On the Border, Becoming World: Migrant Beauty, Migratory Narratives, and The Transmigration of Cinematic Form,” contends that “migration has become one of the most urgent issues of African narrative and documentary cinema” (214). Thus, migration is one of African cinema’s pertinent discourse, particularly in the way it underscores the role of Africans “vis-à-vis the tragedy of prospective migrants” (Barlet Contemporary 9). Considered from a griotic point of view, films that thematise the experience of migration are key examples of the “vigorous informal means by which the ordinary people productively [foreground and] contest their precarious social and cultural conditions” (Okoye 26). All of the films selected for this chapter, therefore, clarify two significant issues concerning the African migration experience: xenophobia and exploitation of the migrants by the receiving community.

See for instance Haile Gerima’s 1993 Sankofa, a film about the transatlantic slave trade.

Globally, migration discourse has gained currency because of the change in global capital in the twenty-first century, which has seen a twist in the flow of migrants and the xenophobic reactions that ensue. The new phenomenon is that “the migration ‘problem’ for both migrants and the receiving countries is no longer identified as migrants from the Global South but those from [central and] ‘eastern Europe’” (Anderson 1534). The West has its own migrants to deal with amidst the surge of migrants from the global South. Consequently, the West eschews helping genuine immigrants and asylum seekers who are flocking to Europe and North America, particularly from Africa, South Asia (Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan) and the Middle East.

The UK has been in the spotlight for exploitation of migrant labour force particularly from Central and Eastern Europe according to an article by Oxford university, “Young Migrants From Central and Eastern Europe ‘The Hardest Working in the UK’” in which it is said that “Young EU migrant citizens work long hours, often at lower pay and worse conditions than UK youth, despite the fact that many of them are highly qualified”(2016). This exploitation is informed by a kind of xenophobia that significantly contributed to Brexit. (See Jamie Gough’s “Brexit, Xenophobia and Left Strategy,” Capital and Class, vol. 41, no.2, pp. 366-72). In Africa, South Africa has also been cited in exploitation of migrant workers in addition to xenophobic
East African films are responding to particular conditions and policies shaping both legal and illegal migration discourse in the region and by extension Africa. As already argued in the introductory paragraphs of this chapter, the process of migration has come under scrutiny with many voices against Europe’s emerging anti-South migrants’ stance. Stephen Castles argues, “If there is a normative goal, it should not be to reduce migration but to find ways in which it could take place under conditions of equality and respect for human rights” (1568-9). But restrictive migration policies targeting “[p]ostcolonial subjects and migrants outside the European Union, and in particular, asylum seekers and refugees” have continued (Ponzanezi 657). If anything, the holding centres and the monetary exchanges between Europe and countries that are willing to offer externalised migration controls (Libya as a case) for Europe demonstrates that migrants “are barely welcome or integrated into the New Europe, which has expanded its boundaries but closed its borders” (Ibid). These restrictive and segregative migration policies have, in a way, given impetus to illegal migration, and an upsurge in the profiteering cartels that deal in human trafficking. For instance, the most travelled route by migrants from Africa and the Middle East through Libya exposes migrants to “danger, even death from a range of natural and human elements including unscrupulous human-traffickers who aim at a profit by transporting as many people as possible at one time, with the additional risk now in Niger and Libya of kidnapping and extortion through torture and enslavement (including in the case of female migrants sexual slavery) at the hands of criminal gangs, militias and mafias” (William 213). Many films by both African and non-African filmmakers have been made to expose the suffering of aspiring migrants, especially foregrounding the experience of those in holding centres and in receiving communities. Notable among such films are documentaries by news media organisations, such as Aljazeera’s K’Nel’s two seasons of

Surprising Europe series that highlights the living conditions of African immigrants in Europe\textsuperscript{52} and “African Migrants: What Really Drives them to Europe”\textsuperscript{53}, and Channel 24 France’s “From Brazil to Canada, the new Odyssey for African Migrants.”\textsuperscript{54} These media representations are part of the broader discursive context that influences the perspectives of East Africa’s migration narratives.

Though the subject of migration is only manifest in a few films in my total sample, the East African films I consider in this chapter represent critical engagements with this subject. The films give a subjective and everyday tempered perspective on the otherwise daunting and sensitive subject of migration. The films contrast with Western media representations that tend to focus on the visual spectacle of the tragedies of sea migrants, not as individualised characters but more anonymous clusters of “rescued survivors,” the “already dead” or a mass of “sufferers” (Jøholt 282). Such sensationalised images of migrants that render them as depersonalised bodies in groups are “an essential part of the political regulation of migration that enforces the categories of legality and illegality and fosters discrimination stereotypes” (William 214). The films expose the fallacy of the West as the only place that will guarantee a better livelihood, to discourage as many migrants from attempting to travel to the West. This aesthetic strategy, coupled with the more detailed exploration of the causes and deleterious effects of migration, is meant to “induce audiences to act, rather than remain passive” about a subject which is a matter of urgency because of its colossal impact on society (Teshome 25).

\textsuperscript{52}The documentary Surprising Europe started airing in 2011 when the number of migrants going to Europe by boat had increased and the tragedies of capsizing boats had reached alarming levels. The 2013 Lampedusa accident that left over 300 people dead was the deadliest and it directed the issue of illegal migrants to popular discourse. See Nick Squires’ “Italy Mourns 300 dead in Lampedusa Migrant Boat Tragedy.” www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/italy/10355661/Italy-mourns-300-dead-in-Lampedusa-migrant-boat-tragedy.html

\textsuperscript{53}See “African Migrants: What Really Drives them to Europe” video on www.youtube.com/watch?v=HOYUZJWkIkk&list=PL0NknTCV1reI3iQ_am369n3RCyeI XDvr1&index=4&t=0

\textsuperscript{54}See “From Brazil to Canada, the new Odyssey for African Migrants” video on www.youtube.com/watch?v=x_92f_DZ_2s&list=PL0NknTCV1reI3iQ_am369n3RCyeI XDvr1&index=4
Similar subjective representations are portrayed in contemporary West African films such as 2018 *Le Cri de la Mer* (The call of the Sea) by Aïcha Thiam and the 2012 *Les Avales du Grand Bleu* (The Gulped of the Deep Blue) by Maxime K. Tchiancoun that explore the perspective of West Africans who have lost family at sea during their illegal boat trip to Europe. Generally, contemporary Africa films on migration represent the migrants’ perspectives and experiences that are often glossed over in conventional news genres and other forms of reportage. Here we have a focalisation of fully developed characters to enhance the urgency of the issue of migration.

The key filmography for this chapter includes both short and feature films: *Flight Path* by Willie Owusu from Kenya, *Dream America* by Hussein Omar and Paresh Gondalinya from Uganda, *Welcome Home* by Joseph Ndayisenga from Burundi, and *Homecoming* by Sheko Shamte from Tanzania. Film has been appropriated by each of these filmmakers to contest and revise the misrepresentation of migration, and for a collective, community assessment on migration. The films contribute to the debate about why Africans migrate by representing the struggle through the eyes of the migrant herself. The adverse experiences in the West, where desperate young Africans fail to achieve their dreams, are symbolised by Johnny and his friends in *Dream America*. They return to Africa disappointed, and their return is further complicated by having to manage another dialectic of cultural hybridity. The East African screen-griots appropriate cinema in this regard as pedagogic one tool which they galvanise to address the African spectators directly. As Ukadike has argued:

African filmmakers have recognised the importance of Cinema as a medium for speaking to people, especially when the majority of these people are either illiterate (an in Africa) or simply ignorant of African affairs (as in Europe). In turn, these artists have employed film as a pedagogic tool for not only dispelling the fallacies about Africa but for exposing the contradictions in the North/South dialogue (*Critical Approaches* 186).
The films demystify the “fallacies” about Africa as a place of poverty, misery, and static development (Afro-pessimism) and the West as a place for economic and social success. Through a gaze that is subjectively African, the films examine the ‘myth of a successful West’ as one of the factors for migration. On the other hand, they expand the scrutiny of Afro-pessimism, a narrative that drives migration. A discourse on Afro-pessimism highlights Afro-optimism—a positive perspective of Africa that is intended to reduce unnecessary migration.

The Journey Motif: Desperation, Criminal Gangs and the Irony of Social Class

The films explore migration through an idiosyncratic portrayal of the characters conceiving of the plans for their travel and return. Even though the films do not have an elaborated linear plot of migrants’ excursions, they nevertheless have a journey motif. Through the journey motif, the films illuminate the desperate circumstances that aspiring migrants find themselves in and the dangerous repercussions, such as encountering criminal cartels that, as I have already argued, take advantage of the loopholes in the migration policies to exploit those motivated to move beyond the borders of their nation-states.

*Dream America* and *Welcome Home* are quintessential examples in which the extortion from cartels faced by aspiring migrants forms a central part of the films’ narratives. In *Dream America*, three university students desperately want to go to the United States. Their desire is catalysed by the protagonist, Johnny, who dreams that he and his friends are in a night club in the United States. In the dream, they over-indulge in what Johnny calls “a good life.” In the night-club, hip-hop music is blaring in the speakers; men and women are dancing in a kind of carnivalesque atmosphere. After Johnny’s narration of the dream to his friends, they get excited and begin to see their casual jobs as complicated and not worthwhile. Johnny works as a labourer in a warehouse/carpentry workshop, Bruno as a casual cleaner, and Dan as a porter at a construction site. The film narrates how they embark on the process of getting documents to enable them to migrate to the USA, where they envision an ‘American dream’ of ‘success’.
Before they can commence the journey, Johnny and his friends must get visas, an important plot event that then sets up the series of cartels and criminal gangs that the prospective migrants encounter. The process of getting a visa to travel is cumbersome and risky, both financially and physically. Because of the regulated migration process from the global South to North, the prospective migrants, none of whom fall into the migration categories of a prospective international student or a skilled labour/expatriate, are legally blocked from getting a visa to any country of their choice. This situation, in which their movement, and therefore desires, are regulated and pre-determined, only increases the desperation of the prospective migrants. The characters are figures who condense and represent a commonly shared experience. Until the aspirants are demoralised by either running short of money or running out of options, “they remain, constantly planning, perpetually striving to find money and the contacts to make another attempt” to migrate (Barber 134).

*Dream America* depicts the process of migration as not only a cause of financial loss but as a high risk to the life of the prospective migrants. Johnny and his friends, for instance, are conned of their money at the initial stage of getting a passport from the masquerading migration agent. After that setback, they pose as refugees from Congo, which also does not get them visas to the United States. Instead, they are arrested for false-pretense and assaulting a criminal visa agent. Before their refugee cover is blown, Johnny, who has fraudulently obtained money from his girlfriend, runs into an ambush of thieves. In the process of trying to migrate to America, Johnny and his friends are conned of their money twice, arrested and narrowly survive being trafficked to the US as housekeepers.

*Welcome Home* also includes a plotline in which the prospective migrant is conned of his money. Cédric loses two-thousand euros to a man who pretends to be working for the Netherlands Embassy from which he was expecting to get visas for himself and his wife, Elysée, and his daughter Nelly so that they could return to Europe. Cedric has deceived all his
relations, telling them that he is in Burundi for a holiday while desiring to return to Europe, which is, apparently, also home for his daughter. After all their savings have been taken, Elysée rises to the occasion and goes to find a job so as to provide for his family. Nelly has to be initiated into Africa, a place and culture from which she has been dislocated. Migration is shown as extremely costly and risky. *Welcome Home*, like the other films in this chapter, exemplifies migration as a signifier of “problematic mobility”; the characters’ desperation draws pity from the audience as the prospective migrants encounter bizarre situations in the quest for a presumed better life in the First World (Anderson 1532).

The emotional, physical and financial strain of East Africa’s prospective migrants is comparable to the exploitation in North Africa, mainly, Libya, where African and Middle Eastern people attempting to migrate to the West are held or rather blocked in detention centres, like prisoners and slaves. These migrants have become a source of modern-day slave labour in Libya, where they work to get the money to pay their smugglers, and in Europe where they are not protected (Rodier 2012). From Johnny’s excitement, it is evident that migrants are oblivious to the horrid labour conditions in Europe, as is the case in Italy and Greece, where the migrants get involved in informal jobs where they are underpaid and overworked (Giglioli 2019; Castle 1568; Ponsenazi 684). There are also riveting narratives of sexually abused African migrants that, contrary to the known record of Europeans exploitation of Africans are often representing established Afropeans as the forerunners of trafficking fellow Africans for sex exploitation (for example the Netflix’s 2018 film, *Joy* directed by Sudabeh Mortezai). These uncanny depictions of sex exploitation are hinted at by Owusu’s *Flight Path*. Owusu

55See Aljazeera’s “African migrants: What really drives them to Europe?”

www.youtube.com/watch?v=HOYUZJWkilk&list=PL0NknTCVlreI3iQ_am369n3RCyeIXDvr1&index=4&t=232s

The Migrants confess that if they knew what awaited them in detention camps, they would never have attempted to illegally migrate to Europe.
employs a dramatic monologue through which the narrator, a Kenyan returnee from Italy, gives us a direct address about the joys and tribulations he encountered in Europe. He describes the awful living conditions an illegal immigrant undergoes such as living in illegitimate premises (garages and warehouses) and old cars. With systemic complications to acquiring legitimate documentation that can enable migrants to rent houses or get formal employment, they are susceptible to subsisting from the dehumanising, illicit sex industry. The narrator tells us that he participated in mock-sex with his Tunisian friend, a sex worker in Milan for the pleasure to an old white client who was paying for the visual spectacle—all this demonstrates the exploitation and dehumanisation. Most African migrants in Europe and America live on the periphery where they can access only informal employment as underpaid labourers and in the sex industry.

While representing contemporary, well-established discourses on the particularities of the experience of African migrants in Europe, all the films represent the irony that ‘economic migrants’ who journey to the West are not always disadvantaged or desperate people, but they instead expose themselves to exploitation. Drawing on William’s linguistic analysis of the terminology used to describe Senegalese migrants as “self-styled” adventurers who migrate as a sign of becoming men, we are given some insights into the potential social-economic class of prospective Black African migrants (215). Indeed, when it comes to East African films, we see working to middle-class Africans aspiring to migrate and experiment working in the West. For instance, in Dream America, Johnny and his friends are university students from the middle and working-class background. Similarly, in Welcome Home, Elysée and Cédric are middle-class professional Burundians who, after failing to return to Europe get decent jobs in Burundi, which is more respectable compared to the imagined odd jobs they were doing in Europe as illegal migrants.
The representation of working and middle-class Africans desperate to migrate is employed by the filmmakers to enhance the irony of the apparently productive ‘human resource’ that ends up in dehumanising informal jobs. The characters in *Dream America* accentuate this irony. The university students with high potential decide to abandon university to go to America to do “anything” for as long as they are in America where they hope to become ‘stars’. Bruno’s father runs his company in which Bruno is assured of employment upon the completion of school. Johnny’s father is a middle-class man, while Bruno’s mother is a seamstress. The boys are not homeless; neither are they hopeless. As much as the film is a comedy, the farcical effect of university students abandoning university to run after the ‘dream’ of going to America to do “anything” is ironic but also demonstrates the impact of popular culture. The boys believe the US to be “paradise” on earth (*Dream America*). Also, in *Welcome Home*, Elysée and Cédric are educated Burundians who have been living in the Netherlands as illegal migrants. Upon failing to get a visa back to Europe, Elysée looks for a job in a hotel that is coincidentally managed by her aunt. Reluctantly, Cedric also begins to look for a job as an electrician. This depiction can be compared to West African films, where, as Williams argues, it is not the “statusless” people that migrate (215). For instance, in the 2016 film, *Those Who Jump*, we see a self-recording of a “young, university-educated Malian called Abou Bakar Sidibe [who] documents with a video camera the extreme living conditions experienced by himself and fellow migrants on Mount Gurugu in Morocco” (William 212). Also, in *Les Avales du Grand Bleu* (**The Gulped of the Deep Bleu**), the only son of a secondary school teacher dies at sea on the journey to Europe. The point to note from these films is that as long as Africans continue to be deceived about the fantasy of a good life in Europe or the West, Africa will continue to tragically lose its productive people. The films present protagonists that have skills that can best be utilised in their own country. Their misfortunes, as they attempt to migrate or
while in foreign countries, are carefully constructed to enhance the absurdities of self-enslavement to an environment where most end up doing informal, casual jobs.

The protagonists in *Dream America* and the narrator in *Flight Path* embody and address the desire presumed to be shared by large numbers of East Africans to have an opportunity to explore and live outside of their countries. They aspire for a better life than they currently have. For example, in *Dream America*, there is a sequence where a female human-trafficker intends to take one of the boys to America as a ‘husband’ while in essence, she wants to get a housekeeper whom she will pay below the housekeeper’s wage by Uganda’s standards. The boys decide to back-off from going to America as someone’s chattel. A disillusioned Dan says they would rather stay in Uganda and work for such meagre pay, which, in part, augments the view that it is not that the boys cannot find anything productive to do in their country, but they are excited by the allure of finding better job opportunities in the West. The narrator in *Flight Path* also is a professional artist who uses marriage to acquire legal passage to Italy but ends up living hand to mouth by earning a low income from casual jobs because he did not have legal documentation. The portrayal of such scenes entails the filmmaker’s suggestion to spectators—when life is discovered to be hard in the West, Africans should return to Africa, as we indeed see the protagonists in *Dream America* and *Flight Path*. Several films on migration share a common journey motif: preparing to travel, travelling and establishing shots of curious African returnees looking through the car windows marvelling at the changes in the town or city. The return journey demonstrates that movement is not always a one-way route out of Africa. From the films, we conclude that people can always return if circumstances allow.

**Demystifying the Myth of the West**

While in the previous section, I looked at the representation of the journey out of Africa and back to Africa, here, I will offer a deconstruction of the myth of the West through the migrant’s varied experiences in the West. By the depiction of variegated experiences of settling
in the West, the filmmakers expose the dialectical contrasts and fallacies about the West and by implication about Africa. The films depict the West, not as a haven, pure and simple. Nor is Africa a bad place. This absurd migrants’ experiences in the developed countries are meant to depict the West as not a favourable place perse. As argued earlier, the films exemplify the fact that most youthful migrants are lured to migrate to the West because of the illusional glamour they get from Hollywood’s popular films and the US’s hip-hop culture that is seen as ‘cool’. In demystifying the life of the West as not ‘cool’ per se, the films are starting an anti-migration campaign.

In Dream America, Flight Path, and Welcome Home, there are both subtle and overt attempts to counter the narrative of America and Europe as places where people’s dreams come true. Their counter-narratives are each characterised by a sharp contrast between African and Western experiences. The filmmakers portray the positive, economically stable, side of Africa so that prospective economic migrants can be discouraged. For instance, in Dream America, Johnny dramatically changes after he experiences a horrible life in the US. In a scene where Bruno and Dan are keenly listening to Johnny as he tells them about their ‘dream’ country, they are surprised that Johnny could not afford a telephone call to Uganda:

Dan: Didn’t you get a job?
Johnny: I got the job, but I spent most of the money paying bills. I was being paid peanuts. Out there, people with no qualifications suffer…I was one of the poorest in America.
Bruno: (very surprised and disappointed) Really!
Johnny: Truly. There are poor people in America. There are Africans [migrants] who have succeeded but most importantly those that are highly educated, professionals ...
Bruno: I thought America was like paradise. A place where anyone can make it.
Johnny: There is nothing free in America. You pay for everything. Uganda is a great country; we have a lot that is not in America. You don’t have to
leave your country to be successful. You can make it here; it’s just a matter of choice.

(Dream, 01:50:34-01:51:49).

The boys are shown in a medium shot looking forward contemplatively in a manner that puts their childish dreams of going to America behind them. Although Johnny is shown briefly after his return, his previous hip-hop dress code (buggy trousers and T-shirts) and walking style have changed to the conventional fitting jeans and T-shirt. He no longer walks like the music stars he aspired to be and does not break into the Micheal Jackson’s ‘moonwalk dance strokes he often did whenever he was excited. Johnny has changed. He is a quintessential product of migration. As Anderson puts it, “‘[m]igration’ is, of course, change, and it can lead, in turn, to further transformations in sending and receiving societies” (1544). We do not see how Johnny impacts the receiving community, but we learn from his narration, when he ardently talks to his friends, that he does not wish to return to North America unless he is an expatriate. He is able to persuade his friends from aspiring to go to the US.

Co-directors Omar and Gondalinya further underline the anti-migration discourse through the use of diction and coincidences. As a way of venting their disappointment in Johnny, for failing to communicate or invite them to America, for instance, Bruno and Dan resort to writing on the board in their hideout place. One of the most visible inscriptions is “Johnny is a Fool.” Indeed, Johnny’s foolishness applies to everyone who has fallen for the American illusion of a prosperous country. Bruno and Dan are also shown as childishly ‘foolish’ from their sheer disappointment as Johnny narrates his experiences of the US. However, their irrational behaviour towards the next white person (possibly a tourist) they come across demonstrates their anguish as a result of their duplicity of the West as ‘paradise’. Their barrage of insults to the innocent white man elaborates their stupidity. Dan, the most aggressive of all rudely asks, “What do you want from our place?” Johnny adds, “[y]our
country has disappointed us, now you want our help.” Bruno also contributes, “[we] go through a lot of difficulty in your country; what do you want from here?” (Dream 1:52:20-42). From this exchange and overall characterisation, the film demonstrates that the fantasy of America engenders mystery, ignorance and hostility. Also, in the incident when the boys naively assume that every Mzungu is North American is comical, but it indicates that the ignorance these university students are displaying is due to the hegemonic American popular culture. Johnny’s narration is disappointing to his friends Dan and Bruno, but it is the kernel of the filmmakers’ key message—Africans should return to Africa if they cannot live the decent lives they aspired for in America or Europe.

More overtly, Flight Path deconstructs the mystery of Europe by graphically and intimately describing, via the central character’s monologue, the lifestyle and the overall unfriendly environment to migrants. Flight Path’s narrator, a disillusioned returnee migrant, reminisces about his travel to, around and from Europe which is heightened by the asynchronous diegetic soundtrack of the announcements in the plane. The sound seems to spark but also sonically represent the memory of his experiences in Europe. The filmmaker presents subjective thoughts of a man seated in his lounge, smoking plenty of cigarettes which intensifies his contemplation and focus of feelings that he eventually verbalises in a monologue. The beginning and end of the film, marked by his storytelling, are intercut with close-up montage shots of an airplane and the diegetic sound of the plane instructions as it takes-off or lands, conjuring in visual and auditory terms the journey trope. We learn that he went to Europe hoping to develop his career as an artist, which does not materialise. He narrates that on his way back to Kenya, “at a train station in Milan,” he meets an African who discourages him from returning. When he decides to live in Milan illegally, he witnesses the worst and best of Europe. He sleeps in a hostel, cannot get his desired job, does mock sex for a job, sees people who sleep in cars, falls in love with a fake art dealer with whom he lives a
better life until she is arrested, and finally, he returns to Kenya. Europe is presented as an exotic place, suitable for holidays but not a ‘home’ for an economic migrant. This is because, as demonstrated, migrants are not socially supported, which drives them to the illegitimate and underground world in Europe, where they operate on chance and contingency. With migrants left to survive on contingency and chance in the underground world, the films show that the ultimate journey for any migrant after living both worlds would be a return journey home where, as the narrator of Flight Path says, life may not be good, but it is different from Europe, a place where “every man [is] for himself and God against Earth.”

Like Dream America, Flight Path employs a dramatic monologue in a contemplative and moralising tone aimed at discouraging Africans from migrating to Europe. The narrator’s closing words in Flight Path create a mental picture of hell on earth. He says:

This African went abroad…[it is] hellish cold weather, the negre, the negre does speak the fuckin’ language, he doesn’t know a single soul in this fucking city. Hmm! To make matters worse, he is not that loaded. The perfect scenario for a spaghetti Western saga. The movie started there…

(Flight 27:56-28:37).

The allusion to the Western genre is vivid in as far as it signifies the bizarreness of the first days of the African migrant in Europe. Like the predictable plot in a Western genre film, he alludes to—that is also often critical of the ideology of America’s conquest of the untamed frontiers—the narratives of the African migrants are predictably melodramatic as seen in almost all of the films. Flight Path’s narrator changes the focalisation from the first person to the third person through the use of the demonstrative pronoun “this.” It could mean himself or any other African he can remember in his escapades in Europe. The narrator here symbolises other migrants who have had horrible experiences in Western countries.
Similar to Johnny in *Dream America*, *Flight Path*’s narrator blatantly discourages the prospective migrants (spectators) from trying to migrate to the West if the only reason for migration is to work. In a moralising tone, the narrator says:

Kenya, here is just poverty-clogged, you know? You wake up…No jobs! You hustle from morning to night; guys work so hard for nothing, Eeh? So, you go abroad. “Maybe I will land a job over there…the good life.” And then you get there it’s…East or West home is best. Don’t be fooled by pictures and movies. Life is [a]reality, not literature. Capisci (*You get it?*)?  

(Flight 12:11-53).

Although the narrator is relaying to us his subjective experiences of Europe, he tries to be objective by acknowledging that there are high unemployment rates in Kenya. However, despite the challenges in Africa, the solution is not the West because of the nostalgia and dehumanising conditions Africa migrants undergo. To show the gravity of loneliness, the narrator dramatically articulates how he was elated to talk to a fellow Kenyan whom he says he could “sniff” from a distance. He, further, self-reflexively invalidates the illusions of the Western world created by movies, when he says, “don’t be fooled by the pictures and movies” (*Flight*).

Also, Shamte’s *Homecoming* implicitly critiques the illusion of the West as the only place that guarantees a ‘good life’. Through a dialogue between Abel (Daniel Kijo), a young Tanzanian graduate who returns from the US to work in Tanzania and Alpha (Issa Mbura) his immediate supervisor at work, we see great Afro-optimism and reverence for African beauty and “consciousness in the modern world” as was proposed in Aimé Césaire, Léon-Gontran and Léopold Sédar Senghor’s Négritude Movement (*Irele* 75). Abel’s boss, Alpha, applauds him for deciding to return to Africa; he says: “[t]here is no better place like Africa in the whole world. We have good food, good women…if you work hard, you will enjoy this life”

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56 My translation.
Alpha believes in the potential of Africa, in what exceedingly looks like a utopian form of Afro-optimism. We see sequences of Alpha and Abel driving expensive cars, being served by “beautiful” women as they dine from luxurious bars and restaurants. Though completely underrepresenting the female migrant experience, Shamte like Owusu is covertly urging Africans to remain in their continent by juxtaposing the two worlds and often exaggerating the representation of each world to enhance the anti-migration stance.

Although there is some mention of ‘successful’ African migrants, the films depict success overseas as ambivalent and near impossible. The migrants who have been able to sustain a life in the West, such as Johnny’s uncle in Dream America, are shown as incapable of hosting someone for more than two weeks. Omar and Gondalinya stress that it is only the educated legal migrant that stands a chance to compete favourably in a Western foreign world and afford a decent life. But again, the narrator in Flight Path, who is a professional artist, fails to get an agent for his artwork and ends up hardly surviving in one of the worlds artistic cities, Milan. Johnny’s testimony that he lived as one of the poorest suburbs in America and all his earnings are spent on bills, concretely juxtaposes the two worlds. For Johnny, America proves to be a hard place contrary to his previous notion that he and his friends would “work, live a different life, live the American dream” (Dream 11:31). Johnny does not get the glamour, the music, and the good life that he visualises in a dream. Flight Path and Dream America, Homecoming and Welcome Home deconstruct the obsessive fetishisation of the West and construct an alternate reality for the spectators.

Cultural Hybridity and Identity

Cultural hybridity and its relation to the formation of identity is yet another facet of the migration discourse addressed in the films. The films depict the contradictions stemming from hegemonic Western culture indelible mark on migrant’s identity. The migrants are represented as cultural hybrids who must negotiate a place to exist in their former cultural establishment.
Cultural hybridity, in its denotational sense, implies a “mixture” of two or more cultures (Webner and Modood xiv). As a product of cultural and racial mixing, hybridity, affects the very foundation of difference (Otherness) and stability of established norms (Bhabha 1994; Hall 1997; Webner and Modood 2015). Hybridity engenders infirmity to the established cultural order. This is because, as Bhabha avers, hybridity creates “a political object that is new, neither the one nor the other” (emphasis in the original) (37). This section examines the representations of hybridity and identity crises emanating from migration, the uncontrolled consumption of hegemonic popular culture, and globalisation. Many Africans go to the West to study, work and return to work in Africa or even acquire dual citizenship, and others were migrated forcefully. Therefore, for Africa and the African diaspora, the question of identity, hybridity and belonging comprises the ‘everyday’ discourse.

Shamte, who studied in America, uses her experience to frame the social setting of Homecoming: She explains:

> I tried to be true to my world. In Homecoming, I was reproducing my own experiences in film. I have lived out of Africa. When I am TZ[Tanzania], I feel like I don’t belong when in America, where I spent a lot of time, I also feel like I don’t belong. Surprisingly, we are still having about the same conversations that Achebe had 50 years ago (Interview).

Shamte, who now runs a film production firm and a myriad of other businesses in Dar-es-Salaam cites Chinua Achebe as a significant influence on Homecoming. Achebe, one of the first writers of African literature in English language, represented the ambivalent and dialogical conflicts of Western culture to Africans in his classic novels Things Fall Apart and its sequel No Longer at Ease. No Longer at Ease explores the identity crises which the culturally hybridised Obi Okonkwo undergoes when he is sent by his community to study law in London. However, Obi instead studies some other course, returns home culturally “creolised” in
Glissant’s sense\textsuperscript{57}, lives beyond his means and ends up getting caught in a corruption scandal. Instead of using his other cultures’ knowledge to improve his community, he becomes a liability, a social disgrace. \textit{Homecoming} parodies this story without a tragic end. Abel, a contemporary of Obi, confesses to his girlfriend, Tina, “I had one simple dream to come back and help my people.” The only difference between Abel and Obi is that he escapes being recruited into cartels as he struggles to be of service to his people. Abel, as a result of his resoluteness, ends up losing his family (since he got his uncle into prison) within a short period of his return. Abel, unlike Obi Okonkwo, contributes to his community by becoming a university lecturer. He lives a lonely life, and he is seen only in the company of his nuclear family. Through Abel, we witness how an ideal hybrid product can collate the best of both cultures.

From Shamte’s case, I argue that the filmmakers deploy existing discourses from the media and everyday conversation on migration to make representations that, in their griotic role, deliberately provoke spectators to think about migration, especially its total erasure of cultural identity on the second generation of migrants. Ndayisenga in \textit{Welcome Home} ingeniously depicts the challenges of reverse adaptation. Unlike the expected scenarios of an African learning non-African cultures, here we see an African struggling to learn the African cultures. Nelly, an ‘Afropean’ child—that is a child of African parents raised in Europe—finds it complicated to live in Africa after her parents, who have been living in Europe illegally, are deported. This underscores what Bhabha calls “a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction” as the child is seen taking hesitant steps to leave her house and play with other children which symbolises the bizarre reconfiguration of the Africans who have lost touch with

\textsuperscript{57} Glissant’s theorises “Creolisation” as a condition “marked by the coming into contact with several cultures or at least of several elements of various cultures, in a specific world-space, and resulting in a new reality, one completely unforeseeable in terms of the sum total or the synthesis of these elements”(\textit{Traité} 37). I see Glissant’s articulation as another definition of hybridity using the term that is relatable to Africans who are ‘creolised’ on the ethnic level to the present-day negotiation between the forces of globalisation and its impact on cultures and identity.
their culture (2). Africans, signified by Nelly, are at identity crossroads despite Sheila Petty’s argument that the identity of an African today is fluid and relational rather than being fixed in racial terms. Petty here brings in the aspect that cultural identity cannot only be racially identified in a more globalised world. Yet for the Africans, mainly black Africans, they relish their identity of being African first before any suffix that may be added. However, the films suggest a moderate navigation of hybridity in which “Afropeanness” or any sort of diasporic identities should imply migrants are negotiating and “navigating both African and European spaces, identities and thought patterns” (Petty 428). Nelly, from her conduct, diet and general demeanour signifies a complete displacement and disorientation of African children born in Europe and outside Africa. She is represented as totally misplaced. She does not know the language, is unfamiliar with the seasons, lives by herself in her room, and finds entertainment in viewing pictures of her Caucasian friends in the Netherlands. She has to be taught how to relate with African children when her parents fail to secure a visa to take her back to Amsterdam, a place Nelly calls home. Nelly is a metaphor for the “complex figures of difference and identity” that migrants find themselves in a kind of lost identity (Bhabha 2). One is oxymoronically both an insider and outsider of African and European cultures, which can be a source of either exclusion or inclusion in the home community or recipient community. Albeit with no concrete answers, the films are extending the dialogue to how the “third space” is to be navigated—with flexibility and pragmatic discernment (Bhabha1990).

Despite the arguments for a middle ground for hybridised characters, the films depict the potential for total acculturation to override hybridity for the postcolonial migrant and citizen, which in tandem cause a kind of exile. The films such as Dream America and Welcome Home clearly show insiders and outsiders of both cultures as seen from Johnny and Nelly. Johnny behaves like an African American in Uganda while Nelly is like a European in Burundi. These characters in part pose a question to Bhabha’s theorisation of hybridity as “the ‘third
space’ which enables other positions to emerge” (“The Third” 211). If anything, the third space can suffice where two equally strong cultures come in contact. But the films depict characters that have succumbed wholly to the hegemonic cultures hence leaving no space for a dialogic relationship between the cultures in question. Omar, the writer and one of the directors of *Dream America*, explains in general terms the grave impact of acculturation on East Africans:

> Contradictions of our identity and our high levels of neocolonialism are evident in our films. Our dress code compared to West Africans influenced by the West. Successful people are usually those that are leaning towards Western culture; they are in towns. We rarely show successful people from the village setting (Interview).

Omar is arguing for more representation that showcases African culture in positive terms. Seko Shamte succinctly adds, “our identity is on a crossroad; we have had several influences that we need to redefine Africanness” (Interview). What is notable from these two filmmakers’ assertions, also as is depicted in the film, is the issue of hybridity versus preservation of African cultural purity. African cultures are threatened by globalisation which makes possible hegemonic popular culture and multiculturalism, cross-cultural marriages and the growth of a subversive “third space” (Bhabha1990). Basing on *Dream America*, acculturation is explicitly happening even without migration. Africa is portrayed as borrowing from the West without lending the West anything.

Besides characters who have been dislocated, hybridity is further shown in East Africa’s multiculturalism, which in part contributes to diversity and underscores the image and role of naturalised Africans. In East Africa, multiculturalism cannot be easily classified according to race (in this case ethnicity), as a majority of Africans transcend physical difference (cannot be easily identified from the physical features). Therefore, the films only use the binaries of black and white as one way of foregrounding multiculturalism through casting a character or characters of Indian or Caucasian origin. This casting is for purposes of enhancing
‘foreignness’, or rather ‘non-African-ness’ in this context. The stereotypical nature of these kinds of depictions consciously prop up the dominant African cultures, while remaining oblivious to, or indeed masking, the multiracial composition of Africa. The films take an ordinary sense of Africa to be synonymous with people of colour. The films also complicate identity and multiculturalism by demystifying the fact that East Africa unlike South Africa, for example, is not generally a settler society. It has naturalised foreigners who claim citizenship. Shivji puts in perspective the multicultural terrain of Tanzania and how African cultures have acculturated the ‘foreigners’:

Tanzania compared to other East African countries, after independence, everybody disregarding the race was considered Tanzanian. We don’t fall into narrow-minded categories of [racial or ethnic] identity. However, with capitalism, it is happening now...Even though the Indian community, ever since the colonial time, is still maintaining the middle class in the economy. We all speak the same language, Kiswahili. I don’t speak any Indian language, like a majority of Tanzanians, I speak Swahili and English only (Interview).

From Shivji’s articulations, we learn that Tanzanians would not recognise someone of the Indian race as a non-African as long as he/she speaks Kiswahili. Although used for the comedic effect, the representation, mistrust, and mistreatment of a perceived foreigner in Kiumeni highlights the colonial racial hangover of mistrusting a racially different person, especially if one belongs to races known to have exploited Africans. Kiumeni represents the misfortune that befalls Gue, a mixed-race Tanzanian whose car is vandalised when he visits his girlfriend in the slums.58 Gue is a hybrid of an African father and possibly an Indian or Arab mother, which

58 Since the Indians and Whites have maintained a middle-class status in Tanzania and generally in East Africa, it is probable that Gue is treated as the foreigner, who has much from stealing from the common goods just like the greedy, conniving character Michael Cauffman in Homecoming. Gue can be stolen from with impunity. But once he is identified as one of them, his stolen property is returned. Therefore, we see a new power structure that is formed by the class/racial boundaries with subtle innuendos regarding multiculturalism.
makes him fair-skinned, hence readily mistaken for a foreigner or a Mzungu (White person). It is when he speaks Kiswahili that assumptions about him being a foreigner change.

At another level, the film depicts the mentality of mistrusting foreigners, especially those who are seen as ‘thieves’ coming to steal from Africa, justifying the idea that ‘stealing’ from the Mzungu would be permissible. Kiumeni instead promotes reverse acculturation, whereby the tables turn, and the foreigners are forced to adapt to African cultures for them to be trusted and accepted into the community. Much as there are films that depict multiculturalism and hybridisation as a new norm for a globalised East Africa, there is also an emerging school of thought that is against complete acculturation by the hegemonic Western cultures. Instead, the films promote reverse acculturation. The characters depicting traits of “the third” space are portrayed as having to re-acquaint themselves with their first space (African culture) to be reintegrated into the community.

**Questioning Afro-pessimism and Afro-optimism**

In the previous sections, I articulated that certain films are responding self-reflexively to the problem of migration starting with the journey, the migrants’ experience in the receiving country and the impact of the migrants’ cultural identity. This section elaborates on the two ideological standpoints—Afro-pessimism and Afro-optimism—that subtly seem to be informing the filmmakers’ representations on the theme of migration, particularly the anti-migration discourse. As screen-griots, the filmmakers are informed by both Afro-pessimism—a shorthand for a view which holds that “no hope for sub-Saharan Africa because the continent is poorly run and unable to govern itself” Ebanda de B’béri and Louw 338-9)—and Afro-optimism—the view which holds a positive outlook of Africa as absolute “departure from pessimism as the dominant master text of imagining Africa” (Dokotum 233). Borrowing from Dokotum’s word “imagining,” it is evident that the films are staging a counter-
representation to the misrepresentation of Africa as problem-prone, the result of which has contributed to migration. The screen-griots also construct a careful but systematic critique of Afro-pessimism by interrogating who is responsible for Africa’s negative images that have affected the psyche of young people to the extent of creating a massive exodus of Africans to the West. Through the reflections on Afro-pessimism, the films mobilise Afro-optimism as one of the solutions to curbing economic migration.

Before I discuss how Afro-optimism is constructed, I would like, first, to reaffirm that the films represent the fact that the negative representation of Africa has, in turn, impacted young people’s esteem and goals. They portray economic migration as a result of the illusionary world created through mainstream media and popular film, which coalesce with the Afro-pessimism narrative created by media and film that promote the belief of ‘hopeless’ Africa. *Dream America* and *Flight Path* indicate, albeit in very different registers, that Afro-pessimism breeds self-hate. This idea is built on a series of negative representations by mainstream media and non-African produced films (discussed in chapter three) where “anything associated with the African continent might have to contend with the quick ascription of inherent poverty, backwardness, or political dysfunction film” (Prabhu 7).

*Dream America* dramatises this self-hate (which is a bizarre kind of pessimism) through the characterisation of the three boys (Johnny, Dan and Bruno) that are firmly determined to go to America because Africa is not as good as America. As already mentioned earlier in this chapter, Jonny and friends change their accent (from Ugandan to America English), their lifestyle to the extent of moving on the street with a blasting hop-hop music to simulate the African American popular culture lifestyle. Johnny once tells his friend Mugisha to stop listening to Ugandan music and tune in to hip-hop music. Their resoluteness and self-hate can also be deduced from the dialogue between two of the aspiring migrants (Johnny and Bruno)
and Mugisha, their friend, who after hearing their enthusiastic plans to migrate tries to dissuade them:

**Mugisha:** What if you are out there desperate to come home, and you are stopped. How would you feel?

**Bruno:** Normal! (scoffing) it is like paradise over there, why would we wish to come back here?

**Mugisha:** Your plan seems like a fallacy or illusion to me.

**Johnny:** Do I look like a joker or a clown?

**Bruno.** Mugisha, you can’t understand our plan, because you belong to the 19th Century.

**Mugisha:** Africans with a foreign mentality should be referred to as aliens. Which means you are born in a wrong place.

*(Dream 39-40).*

Mugisha foretells the anti-climax when Johnny actually finds life in America complicated and returns to Uganda a changed man. Mugisha reframes and expands the question of migration from one concerned with material conditions and the ‘good life’ to one that interrogates the African identity that gets creolised. The young adults exemplify the negative impact of Afro-pessimism that is depicted as exacerbated by acculturation from dominant cultures spread through Hollywood movies, American music and the scarcity of counter images showing the positive side of Africa.

The films depict Afro-pessimism and Afro-optimism as dialogical. The two are intricately connected, whereby to understand the former you have to put in perspective the latter and vice-versa. The intricate connection of Afro-pessimism and Afro-optimism is explained by Ebanda de B’béri and Louw as follows:

Because it is these crossroads of socio-political, economic and theological ideologies that both the discourses and practices of representation of afropessimism have emerged, we are certain that it is also on that same field that potential optimism about Africa will surface (336).
The “crossroads” of Africa indicated by Ebanda de B’béri and Louw alludes to the fact that traditional knowledge systems have been replaced with Western-centric paradigms that have created a façade of failure. But, in reality, Africa is not failing; it is negotiating a postcolonial space from which new approaches must be created. Those approaches have to be mostly Afro-centric. As such, films position Afro-optimism as a starting point for a positive reconstruction of Africa after a long and systematic negative representation as a place without history, civilisation or culture. The films underscore pan-Africanism’s ‘new’ approach to directing the “Africans Rising Movement” towards a call “for democracy, good governance, and economic development” that is deep-rooted in African or Africanised epistemologies (Ezodie 146). For if Afro-optimism is to make sense as an ideology that positions Africa as emergent, in a renaissance that should lead to “Africa’s ‘coming of age’,” it should be driven by Africans, and devoid of neocolonial tendencies (Dokotum 233). Otherwise, Afro-optimism in neocolonial Africa risks being criticised for not entirely benefiting Africa. Rita Kiki Ezodie in her study of Africa’s two largest economies posits, “through the exploitation of Black people” and their resources, and massive “eviction of the poor, and the exclusion of the masses from the economic process”, Africa Rising has exacerbated the poverty levels (vi). At least the ordinary people possessed land, which was an assurance livelihood, but with land removed from them, they are forced to run to urban centres where they face horrid living conditions.

The filmmakers are responding to the debates of Afro-pessimism and Afro-optimism through a critical representation of the Africans Rising mantra that emanates from Afro-optimism. This is evident in Shamte’s Homecoming, Shivji’s Fish of the Land and Omar and Gondalinya’s Dream America. Despite the criticism of Africa Rising as a continuation of economic neocolonialism, the films depict Afro-optimism as one of the avenues to counter the unnecessary loss of productive human resources through illegal immigration. For example, the encounter between Johnny’s group and Mugisha represents a kind of Afro-optimism that is led
by Africans with a pan-African outreach (here signified by Mugisha), as opposed to the first wave of Afro-optimism that was popularised by Western journalists in the 1960s because “the continent had been freed from the rapacious and greedy colonial power” (Ebanda de B’béri and Louw 339). Still, immediately after independence, most postcolonial African states failed both politically and economically, hence igniting the Afro-pessimism narrative. As discussed in chapter three, much of the failure of the postcolonial African countries was due to neocolonialism. “Afropessimism actually deepened during the first decade of the 21st century, and Western portrayals became harsher” often due to either economic factors, getting more humanitarian funding that is claimed to be used to fight hunger and poverty in Africa, or the horrid pictures of capsized boats and dead bodies of Africans on European shores (Ebanda de B’béri and Louw 339 342). This chapter’s key films the 2013 Welcome Home, the 2015 Flight Path and Homecoming, and the 2016 Dream America responds to the intensification of Afropessimism that spiraled out of proportions with the sensational mainstream media reports of African migrants in Europe in the second decade of the 21st century.

Omar and Gondalinya depict Afro-optimism by employing vivid characterisation contrasts and hyperbole in Dream America. For instance, after contemplating Mugisha’s lethal reference to Africans who hate their continent as aliens, Johnny decides to meet Mugisha without the former’s other friends to earn the latter’s support to migrate to the US. In a sequence of a heated argument between Mugisha and Johnny, we see Johnny’s bizarre detachment from his culture. This extreme portrayal of Johnny as an estranged African before he can even travel out of Africa enhances the dire impact of an identity crisis due to the hegemonic popular culture and throws more light on Afropessimism.

**Mugisha:** You are a human being today, as soon as you go to America, you will be considered an alien.

**Johnny:** Who cares? As long as I get to live the American dream.

**Mugisha:** You’ve not even lived the Ugandan dream!
Johnny: (Scoffing) Is there a Ugandan dream?
Mugisha: Yes, of course, there is even an African dream
Johnny: Really?
Mugisha: If you were a pan-African like me, you would be knowing these things.

Johnny: Well, that means I can also be Pan-American. Talk to you later.

(Dream 45:35-46:40).

The contrast between Mugisha and Johnny is further enhanced by the film’s setting and costume. Mugisha works as a manager at the horse stable. He is smartly dressed, and the physical setting implies he works at a large waterfront property in lush green (a sign of affluence). It makes much sense, then, when he tells Johnny to live the Ugandan dream first before he aspires for the American one. Generally, the setting, from workplaces to homes, is employed to accentuate the fact that Uganda is prospering, driving home the point that there is no need for migration. The fact that a seemingly stable young man, Mugisha, is depicted as more grounded than Johnny illuminates the weight of pan-Africanism—which is a global movement for Africans to co-operate and take pride in their cultural identity.

Shamte’s Homecoming complicates the conversation between Afro-optimism and Afro-pessimism by foregrounding the question of who is responsible for the continued pessimism in Africa. Homecoming is about the hardships faced by Abel, a young Tanzanian returnee from the US (where he was for university education), as he attempts to contribute to nation-building, which is in line with the Afro-optimism goal of Africans taking up the challenge of building their continent (Dokotum 233, Ezodie 7). Therefore, the focalisation of the returnee character, Abel as a cultural hybrid and foreign white migrant, Michael, as an investor, reveals that neocolonialism is one of the key instigators of Afro-pessimism. Shamte
makes a self-reflective film because she is also a US-educated Tanzanian. She argues, “Homecoming is based on everyday conversations,” on broad issues of identity, the role of diaspora Africans, corruption, and neocolonialism in African. As a screen-griot, she employed film to comment on what she felt was vital to community discourses.

The confrontational dialogue between Abel and his White boss, Michael, after Michael’s hitmen have tortured Abel, is a metaphor for the contrast between Afro-pessimism and Afro-optimism and signifies the agents of each. Abel believes he made an excellent decision to return to Tanzania when potentially many African elites decide to remain in the developed world. Abel works dedicatedly as a bank marketing officer until he notices that illegal transactions have been done in his password portal. After investigating that the illegal finances were deposited by suspicious NGOs that were funding insurgencies in the region, he decides to report the matter to Michael. Michael was expecting Abel to be corrupt like the other Africans he had been using to funnel colossal sums of fraudulent money through his bank. Michael confronts Abel:

**Michael:** We noticed you may not be so easily initiated. So, we had to do something about it.

**Abel:** So, ruining my life was the answer? [Was] financing wars the answer?

**Michael:** I’m gonna miss you up on this Ab., sometimes I wish I still had your sense of idealism.

**Abel:** I am going to turn evidence over to the police. Your Bank will be investigated. I don’t care if I rot in here.

**Michael:** Just be careful you don’t end up on the wrong side of history? You can’t choose to live outside the system and hope to benefit from it.

**Abel:** If enough people oppose the system, we can create a new one.

**Michael:** (Menacingly walking around Abel) So you’re gonna change the system? What you don’t realise is that we own you and
everything around you. You just have the illusion of ownership. We control your budgets, natural resources, employment, your finance systems, your wars. We decide who lives and dies. We control your culture, your deities. Do you not kneel before our Gods? Africans, you are so gullible. Always have been, ever since we first put mirrors in front of your faces so you could marvel at your reflections. I am gonna give you one last chance, join us and we will drop the charges.

Abel: (Emphatically) No.

*(Homecoming 53:45-54:45).*

Michael’s views summarise the condescending attitude towards the people from which he makes illegal money. Through characterisation, the filmmaker wants spectators to think about Michael as a symbol of neocolonialism and the continued exploitation of Africa and Abel as a symbol of Afro-optimism.

Besides hinting at the media and film’s negative representation of Africa, Shamte and other filmmakers do not give definite answers to indicate who is responsible for Africa’s misfortunes. Shamte, however, makes a bold step to indict some of the Black elites or ruling class for conniving with foreigners (Whites and Asians) with whom they continue to exploit and plunder Africa.59 Through Abel’s discovery that some wars in Africa are created and financed by African elites and foreigners like Michael, Shamte reveals the gravity of cabals, who use wars and pessimistic images as a bargain for collecting humanitarian aid from unsuspecting people (from all over the globe). The archetypal characterisation of Abel (a good, hard-working, well-meaning African man) and his boss Michael and Uncle, Mshindi (greed and insensitive), are symbolic representatives of Afro-optimism and Afro-pessimism.

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59 Much as Shamte shows only one Indian character as a member of the NGO that was funneling money from donors by creating proxy wars, her representation of an Asian and Caucasian man in connivance with the African political class can be understood in the broader terms of neocolonialism and new imperialists. Also see Fantu Cheru and Cyril Obi’s The Rise of China and India in Africa: Challenges Opportunities and Critical Intervention (2010), and Kwame A. Insaidoo’s China: the New Imperialists and Neo-colonialists in Africa? (2016) which demonstrate how Asia has exponentially hinged itself in the mineral rich African continent.
respectively. Shamte reproduces the deeply rooted neocolonial discourse of Africa plundered by foreigners with the help of the one per cent ruling class at the expense of the poor who are the majority. But through Abel and his generation, the trajectory of neocolonialism can be changed if more Africans firmly reject colonialism and become more pan-African.

In *Dream America*, Omar and Gondalinya skillfully portray Afro-optimism through setting and characterisation. At Johnny and friend’s hideout, we see a construction site of apartment complex symbolically signifies the exponential development of Africa. The new construction site is surrounded by mostly plain chunks of lush green land, which indicates a lot of room for expansion. Also, the characters in *Dream America* comprise of a hard-working middle-class family that is contrary to the characters in Afro-pessimistic films that majorly show poor Africans. The youth as seen by Johnny and his friends are depicted doing all sorts of jobs and going for dates in affluent restaurants. This carefully choreographed narrative of a progressing Uganda aims at discouraging Africans from migrating to Europe. As much as the boys continue searching for a better country to migrate to, their naive discovery that not all white people come from America implies that if America is not a good destination for migrants, possibly other countries in the West should be unfavourable. Africans may not stop migrating, but the films are explicit in showing its realities as opposed to the illusions prospective migrants typically witness in the cinema.

All the discussed films advance an anti-migration discourse through an overt Afro-optimism narrative that is constructed through the return journey trope. In *Dream America*, Johnny dramatically returns home as a changed person, preaching against migration and more determined to work in Africa. Similarly, in *Flight Path*, the narrator is presumed to be talking from his apartment in Kenya. In *Welcome Home*, the migrant family fails to return to Europe and settles into normal life in Africa. Symbolically, the film ends with their daughter Nelly, the young child who signifies the future, taking a step going out of the house to play with other
African children after a long time of feeling out of place. Also, in *Homecoming*, Abel returns to Africa to build his country. Although Abel discovers the harsh reality of why systemic cartels and cabals were looting Africa or “his people,” his decision not to participate in corruption at the expense of his extended family signifies Africa’s bright future. The films affirm that the starting point for an optimistic Africa is an optimistic attitude towards Africa by its elites as signified by Abel’s decision to return to Tanzania and his insurmountable effort at fighting corruption. If there are more people like him, Africa’s rising narrative could become a reality sooner rather than later, and it can be a starting point for reverse migrations (diaspora Africans migrating to Africa).

**Conclusion**

Despite coming from different countries and different filmmakers, the films discussed in this chapter promote an elaborate discourse on anti-migration. The films presented demystify the negative perception of Africa as a place of misery, which is aggravated by the illusionary portrayal of the West as a place for better livelihood. *Dream America*, which is about the quest to go to the US, a quest inspired by the messages emanating from popular film and music, is ignited by a real dream about life in America which turns out to be delusional. *Flight Path* deconstructs and critiques the misconceptions about Africa and the West by urging African spectators not to be duped by movies because the reality of life in Europe is grim for an economic migrant. Similarly, Ndayisenga and Shamte in *Welcome Home* and *Homecoming* respectively dramatise the complexity of the identity crisis resulting from the dislocation that migration engenders. The harsh reality of migrants represented in the films is a systematic discouragement of such adventures. These subjective representations of the problem of migration are thus purposefully made to highlight the migration phenomenon, in this case, for prospective migrants to be conscious about the conditions in the other world.
As I argued in the previous chapters, cinema is here deployed as an instrument that can be used to engage in a productive discourse about contingent social realities. In this chapter, we also saw that with sobriety, the filmmakers underline and assess the Africans’ rising narrative, which radiates from the hyper-visible and potent afro-pessimism that drives young Africans to migrate—beginning with a re-examination Afro-pessimism and Afro-optimism. The films represent Africa with all its discontent as continuing to grow, and its growth is the sole responsibility of Africans and by extension, the pan-African community. Throughout the films, protagonists are symbolic of the ideal global African elites that should change the narrative of Africa from Afro-pessimism to Afro-optimism. The depiction of returning Africans in part highlights that Africa is potentially for Africans to develop. And as Omar and Gondalinya foreground in Dream America, if Africans should migrate, it should be to provide skilled human resources that can compete in the international job market. Implicitly, the narratives on migration touch on the segregative migration policy and the mistreatment of African migrants in Western countries.
Chapter 5: Representation of Gender Power Relations in East African Films: An African Feminist Perspective

We should be using the dynamics of popular movies in order to interrogate gendered power relations, sexuality, African culture, and many more issues.

—Willie Owusu, Kenyan filmmaker

In trying to be in line with the ongoing discussions about gender and women empowerment, we ended up losing the main point when we give a one-sided view of gender. Women empowerment should not be at the expense of men’s awareness and their role.

—Daniel Manege, Tanzania Filmmaker

I represent strong women. Being strong does not depend on the sexes because there are weak men and women. Life is based on the interaction between men and women. Once the filmmaker is true to the story, the power struggle comes out.

—Ilian Ndagire, Ugandan Filmmaker

Introduction

In East Africa, like elsewhere on the continent, films have increasingly become arenas to discuss and interrogate gender conflicts. In this regard, the films participate in a broader discourse focused on specific issues of gender identity and socialisation, sex/gender relations, power struggles, and sexuality. As discussed in chapters three and four, where the screen-griots engage in subjective narrations of East African history and develop an anti-migration theme, this chapter focuses on yet another dimension of the work of East African screen-griots in popular films: the representation of the complexity of sex/gender relations. The interviews conducted with the filmmakers reveal that they, like other African filmmakers, are especially conscious of the political and cultural implications of their representations of gender relations, since “cinema, for most African filmmakers” is not only “a popular form of entertainment … but rather a critical political and ideological instrument” (Dipio, Gender 193). A focus on gender, the screen-griots aver, can bring about significant social development, especially if it
is consonant with the contemporary debates in Africa over gender equality. Despite the fact that not all the filmmakers are intentionally representing the topic of gender, this study uncovers the film’s underlying ideology on gender. The pertinence and recurrence of gender power conflicts in East African films attest to the fact that the filmmakers are inescapably part of a broader feminist ideological landscape.

One of the major contentions in African feminist cinema discourse is how it distin-

guishes itself from the hegemonic Western feminism. African feminist and by extension Black feminist discourse is fundamental to the debates on gender perspectives, such as identity and gender roles (Dipio 2014; Lewis 2001; Acholonu 1991; Davies 1986). The filmmakers interviewed also contend that Africa’s adaptation of foreign feminisms and gender identity discourses stimulates further gender conflicts in Africa, particularly of gender roles, sexuality and gender identity. Western feminism is claimed to complicate the contemporary African understanding of gender equality, sexuality, and gender-roles as pertaining to the binary of femininity and masculinity. Owusu elaborates that gender discourse for Africa may not be entirely disassociated from the global one, but it should be considered hierarchically. Despite having a filmography that critically touches on sexuality of both men and women, he posits that in Africa, for example, “sexuality is not a priority on the gender agenda hierarchy” (Interview). To him “the basics should be equal gender opportunities” among sexes, and the rest would fall in place (Ibid). Manege, on the other hand, criticises feminism’s proposition for gender equality, particularly the empowerment of women, claiming that this is a catalyst for more gender conflict because gender equality is “instead creating women who are beating men” (Interview). Other filmmakers also share Manege and Owusu’s perspectives, and have employed film to create discussion over how men and women might work together to find solutions pertinent to the micro-issues, such as gender roles conflicts, identity and sexuality, and to the macro-issues, such as globalisation, neo-colonialism and racism.
Within this study’s filmography and across a plethora of films from East Africa, there are many films that can be viewed as feminist films by virtue of their depiction of gender power relations, especially the conflicts emanating from the oppression of one sex by the other. Some of these films include Disconnect, Malooned, Roadside, Pumzi, Jongo Love, Something Necessary from Kenya, Dear Mum, Girl Child in Dilemma and Fate from Uganda, Forced Marriage from Sudan, Dar Noir and Kiumeni, T-Jucntion, Tumaini from Tanzania, Grey Matter, A Place for Myself, The Secret of Happiness from Rwanda, and Welcome Home from Burundi. What stands out from these films is that they seem to signal a rethinking of patriarchy’s definition of gender roles to sex, yet not being explicit. With great ambivalence the filmmakers prompt an interrogation of Simone de Beauvoir propositions of masculinity and femininity as not to be tied to biological sex because they are socially constructed (1953). This provocation is evident in the intense dramatization of the conflict between men and women’s gender roles in a manner that stimulate a decoupling of femininity and masculinity from sex in today’s context. In this study’s context, African feminism, especially the early voices, forms this chapter’s conceptual lens to the understanding of gender relations in East Africa and Africa as a whole. This is because early African feminist thought takes a conservertive stance similar to that expressed in the study’s filmography see for instance Acholonu 1991; Guy-Sheftall 2003; Dipio 2014). African feminism underscores equality among men and women as its most significant tenet. Even if only a few films are discussed in detail, the rest of the study’s filmography, indeed a large corpus of films from East Africa, represent and negotiate the primary feminist principle of equality between sexes, hence igniting the gender equality debate.

Gender is highly political and has recently been widened from the traditional sense of referring to the binaries of femininity and masculinity to include other gender categories. In their study of gender dynamics of African Americans, Johnetta Cole and Beverly Guy-Sheftall give a a complex definition of gender as implying “not solely to women or sexism, but also to
the experiences of men, cultural definitions of womanhood and manhood, and the interconnections between race, gender [sex identity], sexual orientation, age, class and other oppressions” (xxii). Cognisant of this complexity of the term gender, for present purposes, it will be used to refer to the category of people who identify as male or female and it will be taken to have inflections of womanhood or manhood (femininity and masculinity) and their impact of relational power. Gertrude Fester, a South African feminist, activist, and politician, in her exploration of women and gender studies in Africa, gives a succinct interpretation of gender in African academia: “The use of the word gender also implies that a central aspect of the investigation is to interrogate the unequal and hierarchical relationships between women, men, girls and boys and to explore strategies to challenge them” (7). Fester, like Cole and Guy-Sheftall are, by implication, drawing on the sexes of male and female and its relationship to equality. Otherwise, women activists and particularly feminists for the hungover of being the oppressed sex for centuries, almost use the word ‘gender’ equality to imply women empowerment. Fester argues that gender equality, as a significant aspect of feminism, “privileges the improvement of women and all people in general” (6).

Feminist scholar Joan Scott explains the political innuendos of gender as it is used in feminist and women’s studies: “the term gender is part of the attempt of contemporary feminists to stake [a] claim to a certain definitional ground, to insist on the inadequacy of existing bodies of theory for explaining persistent inequalities between women and men” (Scott 1066). Scott, interestingly, argues that the use of ‘gender’ as a neutral word is an attempt to avoid criticisms from those who may be threatened by women, in case a word that is ‘gendered’ was used. Cognizant of other attempts to deconstruct the term gender, some feminist studies prefer to continue to use the term gender, rather than some of the specificities of what it signifies (female or male, women or men) because “it does not name women and so seems to
pose no critical threat” to those terrified by the political nuances of feminism such as women empowerment (Scott 1056).

It is also important to note that to most interviewees and spectators of African films, when you mention gender, it implicitly signifies feminism especially the empowerment of women. The complexity of gender today is overlooked by the East African screen-griots by presenting gender through binaries of female and male as dramatised in conflicts emanating from a clash between femininities and masculinities. Specifically, this chapter explores eclectic and complex ways in which gender equality and feminism present a new power order that is either subversive to or sustaining patriarchy. In most films, patriarchy’s established binary of gender socialisations—femininity and masculinity—as it is traditionally recognised, are central concerns and hotly contested.

African Feminism

Before examining how masculinity and feminity manifest in the films, I will explore African feminism in a manner that distinguishes it from other feminist thought. Broadly speaking, African feminism or Afrocentric feminism comprises a pan-African paradigm that considers how women in Africa and the African diaspora can address intersecting issues such as neo-colonialism, racism, gender, ethnicity, sexuality and the way they affect the wellbeing of black women. In this case, I use the term African feminism as collage of all varied feminist thoughts of people of colour with a link to Africa and all races on the African continent. Carole Boyce Davies in the Introduction to Ngambika: Studies of African Women, articulates a seminal and succinct account of African feminism as:

a common struggle with African men to the removal of the yoke of foreign domination and European/American exploitation. It is not antagonistic to African men, but challenges them to be aware of certain salient aspects of women’s subjugation which differ from the generalised oppression of all African peoples...[it] recognises that certain inequalities and limitations
existed/exist in traditional [pre-colonial] societies and that colonialism reinforce
them and introduced others...[It] examines African societies for institutions
which are of value to women and rejects those which work for their detriment
and does not simply import Western women’s agendas. Thus, it respects the
African woman’s status as mother but questions obligatory motherhood and the
traditional favouring of sons … it understands the interconnectedness of race,
class, and sex oppression (8-10)

Davies’s broad frame of African feminism can be summed up as a subset of the common
agenda of feminism but with cultural and race-specific concerns such as equality between men
and women. The view that African feminism is not opposed to Western feminism regarding its
quest for equality among men and women, but instead aims at dealing with “issues that directly
affect Black women” (Davies 10) is later reiterated by other diverse African feminism scholars
and activists (see Hill Collins 1990; bell hooks 1984, 2013, 2015; Acholonu 1991; Cole &
Guy-Sheftall 2003; Dipio 2014).

African feminist scholars contend for a different strand of feminism because African
women, in and out of Africa, did not feel represented in the first and second waves of Western
feminism. The first wave was influenced by the abolitionist movement where suffrage rights
were important, and the second wave was, in turn, influenced by the civil rights movement that
demanded equality and justice. However, at the time of both the first and second waves of
feminism, women of colour in Apartheid South Africa were being dehumanised. While African
women’s experiences in Africa may not significantly differ, South Africa is an exceptional case
because it was still under the claws of horrendous colonialism and Apartheid at the time of the
intense feminist activism in the West. As such, black people’s experiences were not a priority
for the proponents of Western feminism, a kind of feminism that later is critiqued by pan-
African scholars as a white women’s empowerment movement (see Mohanty 1988; Mikell
1995; hooks 2015). Besides that, white women in South Africa were generally blamed for being
accomplices in the oppression of the blacks or at least they did not protest against the double
oppression that Black women were subjected to a racist regime under Apartheid (Davies 10; Muiu 85-6). The various complexities of racial segregation and oppression galvanised pan-African feminist voices and exposed the racial limitations of Western feminism.

From the beginning, feminism, albeit being universal in its aspiration for gender equality, was criticised for not being racially inclusive. Some African women felt they were being objectified by white feminist scholars (see Mohanty 1988; Nkululeko 1987). Similarly, in America, African Americans were critical that they were not represented in feminist discourse. The exclusion of African women in the feminism rubric was the invention of African feminism with a pan-African outreach. Boyce Davies posits that pan-African feminists negotiated “a variety of complex positions around race, gender, class, national origin and culture within the larger goals of the liberation of African peoples internationally” (“Pan-Africanism” 78). For us to better understand the racial indictments of feminism Patricia Hill Collins’ first book, Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerments is evident of labours by African Americans to address the subject of the exclusion of Black women from feminist intellectual discourses in America. This means Black people were segregated on two levels—for being black and women—be it in the diaspora or post-colonial Africa. Therefore, Collins draws on the experiences of ordinary women of colour (feminist writers such as Alice Walker, bell hooks, and Audre Lorde) to propose Black feminism that is specific to her American cultural experiences. Scott Appelrouth and Laura Desfor Edles, in their analysis of Collins’ suggestions on feminism, explain that:

Black feminist thought offers individual African American women the conceptual tools to resist oppression. Black women have historically resisted, and continue to resist oppression at individual, community, and institutional levels. A women’s blues tradition, the voices of contemporary African American woman writers and thinkers, and women’s everyday relationships with each other speak to the outpouring of contemporary black feminist thought
in history and literature despite exclusion or marginalisation in the hegemonic framework (335).

As such, African diaspora feminism was a response to the racism and subjugation of what Appelrouth and Desfor Edles referred to as the “whiteness of both feminism and academia” (ibid). It is on this canvas that we approach African feminism as a claim for an Afrocentric epistemology, and a means to achieve the holistic empowerment and development of African peoples globally.

Within a broad rubric of African Feminism, which is also known as Afrocentric feminism, there are several feminist paradigms. When we look at African feminist scholars from the Caribbean, Africa, and Americas, there is evidence of a multitude of culturally specific varieties of feminisms—Bantu feminism, Igbo feminism, Arab feminism, or African American feminism—all of which coalesce into a plural African or Black feminism. Within this plurality, the core position shared by these feminisms is to prioritise African epistemologies in solving contemporary challenges such as neocolonialism in Africa, racism in the diaspora and South Africa, and other cultural-specific gender issues. For Africans in North America, racism, equality and sexuality are some of the most important concerns, as seen in Collins’ Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice and Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender and the New Politics, Johnnetta B. Cole and Beverly Guy-Sheftall’s Gender Talk: The Struggle for Women’s Equality in African American Communities. Also, some African American feminist writers, such as bell hooks (1984, 2013, 2015), and Audre Lorde (1984, 1986, 2013), take a pan-African stance in advocating for black women’s involvement in theorising and writing about their experiences.

Similarly, African feminist scholars from the African continent such as Amina Mama, Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, Oyonke Owuyumi, Obioma Nnaemeka, Gertrude Fester and Dominica Dipio are specifically inward-looking by focusing on continental issues such as
colonialism, neocolonialism and repressive cultural practices namely, female genital mutilation, forced early marriages, favouritism of boys over girls, systematic segregation and gender-based violence. As such, African feminism stresses African women’s issues globally that are also, in part, universal issues faced by other women in the world. The major difference with Western feminism is that men are viewed as partners at various war fronts to end inequality between the sexes, and it deals with cultural-specific issues faced by women. Gwendolyn Mikell in the introduction to African Feminism: The Politics of Survival in Sub-Saharan Africa argues that cultural clashes that are influenced by race, ethnicity, and religion are critical dynamics in the intellectual landscape and popularity of African feminism(s). She notes that “African feminism owes its origin to different dynamics than those that generated Western feminism. It has largely been shaped by African women’s resistance to Western hegemony and its legacy within African cultures”(4). African feminism domesticates Euro-American feminism (that positioned itself as a global feminism) as an expression of self-determination against the Western cultural and ideological hegemony that threatens to subsume the African identity. African feminism takes a liberal approach by emphasising collaboration between men and women in the contexts of diverse cultures, identities and needs of the pan-African community. In a nutshell, African feminism aims at restoring the dignity African women had before the advent of slavery, colonialism and Apartheid. It demands to disassociate its paradigm from the ‘bad’ cultural influences (patriarchy) that came with colonialism and the extreme propositions of Western feminist ideology. African feminism horns a culturally specific approach to major conflicts in gender relations.

**Feminism in Africa: A Tool for Development**

On the African continent, African feminism has had a significant corpus of research which, as Desiree Lewis, one of Africa’s feminist voices argues has “become increasingly less concerned with critiquing western feminisms and progressively less oriented and pro-active”
This new feminism stance is evident in the re-orientation and grounding of African feminism on African epistemologies and experiences. Scholars such as but not limited to Amina Mama, Beti Ellerson, Boyce Davies, Dominica Dipio, Guy-Sheftall, Filomena C. Steady, Obioma Nnaemeka and Molara Ogundipe-Leslie argue that Afrocentric feminism can have a positive socio-economic impact on the continent and the diaspora.

African feminism, therefore, is fundamental to Africa’s social development because it advocates for both men and women to be holistically empowered and conscious about the things that engender conflict such as gender hierarchy. Amina Mama, as a special editor of *Feminist Africa*, an academic and activist journal by African Gender Institute, articulates the foundation and importance of this journal dedicated to gender studies on the continent: “*Feminist Africa* emerged as one thread in an ambitious, multifaceted continental project which treated feminist intellectual work as integral to socio-cultural and political transformation” (4).

Similar views had been earlier expressed by cultural theorist and critic Ogundipe in the 1984 “African Women, Culture and another Development,” where she articulates the notion that more development will occur in Africa when oppressive cultural practices are eliminated.

The filmmakers have been influenced by the contemporary debates on African feminism, particularly its ability to contribute to development. From the perspective of women as the oppressed and disempowered gender, the filmmakers represent strong women that are often juxtaposed with weak men and other women to catalyse the gender equality debates challenging traditional assumptions. Like many such films (as we shall see later in the chapter), they oscillate between subtle to overt didacticisms about gender relations, particularly how gender roles merge or conflict amidst a crisis. The films’ messages are contributing to the gender agenda, a discourse that is influencing decisions at the policy and implementation levels. Dipio observes:
A wave of change in gender relations is currently sweeping through most African countries. The constitutions of most countries have been amended (or are being amended) to accommodate the demands for gender equity and the rights of marginalised groups like women, children, and persons with disabilities (196).

Affirmative action to moderate gender imbalances, especially towards women who are subjugated by retrogressive cultures (boy favouritism, excision, and domestic violence/battering) and unequal access to education, is galvanising reforms in relevant government agencies in African.

Throughout Africa, there are many films about women’s affirmative action. In East Africa, a case in point is Anne Mungai’s 1992 Saikati a film in which the protagonist, Saikati, defies restrictive traditions in a bid to strike a balance between Western modernity and traditional African etiquette. Saikati dramatises the voicelessness of a traditional Massai girl whose education ceases as she is forced to marry a chief’s son. Saikati, as a disempowered girl is soon disillusioned in Nairobi city where the only option for survival is sex-work. She returns to the village she had run away from. Mungai’s strategies of gender representation can be argued to have influenced the later East African films that touch on aspects of gender equality and oppressive cultural practices such as excision, forced marriages and gender-based violence as seen in but not limited to Tumaini, Supa Mama, Dar Noir and Aisha, T-Junction from Tanzania, Girl Child in Dilemma, Dear Mum and You Can’t Break my Will from Uganda, Forced Marriage, A place for Myself and The secret of Happiness from Rwanda, Jongo Love, Something Necessary, The Captain of Nakara and Malooned.

Besides feminism being deployed as a means for women’s holistic development, in sub-Saharan Africa, two major schools of thought explain the kind of feminism that is appropriate to the challenges of gender power conflicts that arise from systemic imbalances between men and women: the treatment of the African woman as subaltern without political and financial
power. The first school of thought validates the African woman as a mother suggestive of a key term: motherism. Catherine Acholonu in *Motherism: The Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism*, rearticulates Davie’s view of respect for motherhood by proposing that Africa’s much-venerated role and symbol of a woman as a mother should be a paradigm used to advocate for the honour of women (1995). Dipio critiques Acholonu’s view as “leaving no room for single or childless women” in the trajectory of equality (*Gender 21*). Prophetically, Davies had earlier indicated that motherism should not be promoted at the expense of those who could choose not to have children. Thus, motherism would symbolically suffice in as far as venerating a woman is concerned, but it cannot be the only paradigm in the struggle to holistically liberate a woman as it carries a dimension of segregation toward other women who choose not to procreate.

It is evident in the films that the image of a mother is revered. In instances of broken homes or conflict in a family setting, the mother is a symbol of stability in the children’s lives. The fathers are often represented as irresponsible—they abscond from their responsibility of caring for children (pay tuition provide food and shelter) and attempt to ‘sell’ their daughters into marriage while the mothers stay with their children. The other African feminist school of thought is the middle-ground approach as advanced by Obioma Nnaemeka. Nnaemeka builds on Davies’ view of equality between both genders without one oppressing the other, neologised as “nego-feminism.” To Nnaemeka, *nego-feminism* is adaptable and accommodative, for it, first, predicates itself on a “negotiation” between genders and, second, “nego-feminism,” to Nnaemeka stands for “no ego” feminism” (377). The supposition is that when men and women relate without the ego of superiority, the threat that men feel by hearing words such as women empowerment would be minimised. Only then could the words of Chimamanda Adichie “We
should all be feminists,” become a reality.  The films in discussion here, attempt to demonstrate how both men and women embrace the idea of gender equality by often blurring the gender socialised roles that continue to create unnecessary difference and conflict.

The thoughts on African feminism can be clearly split into two categories. The first seeks to end gender hierarchy, and the second aims at the complementarity between the sexes. But African feminism, in its quest for equality, continues to be cognizant of the unique realities on the continent, which, as Dipio suggests, propels “a different emphasis in the application of feminist principles,” whereby specific realities deserve different approaches (Dipio, *Gender* 20-21). For instance, issues of gender equality and sexuality may require careful negotiation depending on one's location in Africa. South Africa may be more progressive to what is in some contexts understood as a third sex or gender, while other parts of Sub-Sharan Africa are conservative towards a discussion of gender and sexuality in a non-heteronormative sense.

Most of the interviewed filmmakers are of the view that the feministic dialogues are getting lost in the sensationalist conversations over sexuality, particularly homosexuality that they think is not a priority in contemporary Africa. There are films that carefully hint at sexuality

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60 The 2014 Chimamanda Adichie’s essay “We should all be Feminists” became very popular and was translated into Swedish in 2015 and given to every high school student in Sweden. These are the new voices of feminism that unlike the old feminists are not ashamed to say they are feminists. Feminism needs to be decoded and demystified for all to understand that the principle of equality, respect for human dignity are the epitome of civilisation.

61 East Africa’s first narrative film to explore same-sex relationships was banned in its country of origin, Kenya, which meant it could not screen in other countries in the region as well. *Rafiki* (2018) was banned in Kenya because it was about a lesbian love affair which resulted in Kahiu suing the government of Kenya. As Spronk, Rachel and Thomas Hendriks postulate “African leaders in nationalist and religious discourses” view “same-sex sexuality as “un-African”” (20). As such the ban was lifted for only seven days in which all the tickets sold out. “During the #SevenDaysOfRafiki the movie was shown in cinemas in Nairobi, Mombasa and Kisumu. Movie-goers were asked to provide ID to prove they were over 18 (*The LGBT Sentinel*, October 2018). The overwhelming response was because the film was banned, which encouraged people to watch what the government was hesitant to screen. Such films are still perceived as taboo. For such an opinion is dramatised in the film itself when the protagonists are beaten by the public. *Rafiki* shows that African society is not ready for a conversation about certain sexual identities. Also see, Josh Jackman and Patrick Kelleher. “Banned film Rafiki Claims acting award at African film festival.” *PinkNews*, 4th March 2019. Pinknews.co.uk.
(both heterosexual and homosexual), as seen in Kahiu’s Rafiki, Owusu’s Roadside, After Sour Before Sweet, Her Moves His Thoughts, and Me First. The fact that these kinds of films are received with negative responses might be explainable, given the fact that sex is usually considered to be a private matter in African cultures. Perhaps audiences were scandalized by such representations. Despite the negative reception, there are many films that explore sexuality and gender identity, such as Owusu having most of his filmography interrogating the subject of sexuality and gender equality. Like other filmmakers he is quick to disclaim:

We [Africans] are borrowing too much from the Western modernity, but we need to fuse the modern empowerment with the traditional role that both genders are expected to play. That is if feminism or modernity is to be of value in our context (Interview 2019).

Owusu’s views hinge on the propositions that the ongoing socio-cultural transformation in Africa needs to be contextualised and adapted for African cultures. In a way, even the discussion of sexuality should be cushioned by realistic cultures’ perceptions because as Kahiu suggests in Rafiki, homosexuality is not something that will forever be a taboo because it is becoming the subject of public discourse in Africa. As such, East African filmmakers often prioritise the subject of gender equality over more nuanced films on sexuality. Even where sexuality is foregrounded, it is from a gender relational dynamic point of view, in terms of who has more power.

Because of the complexity and cultural specificity of African feminisms, this chapter draws on the tenets of African feminism espoused by theorists such as Dipio and Obioma Nnaemeka because they are from Sub-Saharan Africa and understand the cultural values. Their views also converge at a point where African feminism is not antithetical to Western feminism, instead, it seeks to approach inequality issues in a culturally specific manner and to address the numerous challenges African men and women face under the hegemonic patriarchy (Nnaemeka 376; Dipio, Gender 201). For instance, Nnaemeka’s concept of “nego-feminism” resonates with
the majority of African feminist scholars whose overarching argument is a coexistence between men and women. Dipio, on the other hand, argues that patriarchy as the major hindrance to equality should be *forced* to metamorphose into a negotiated tolerant ideology because, in its present form, it puts “power in the hands of a few men” and consequently renders “the majority of men” to be “oppressed” together with the women (*Gender* 157).

The present sensibilities expressed via masculine and feminine discourse may not change overnight, yet as evident in the films, patriarchy's conception of masculinity and femininity is undergoing a renegotiation. Dipio further posits patriarchy could formulate a “‘new’ masculinity based on feminine ethics,” and be “built on the nurturing attribute of motherhood, [that] is pure gift-giving without the expectation of reciprocity just like in the often-sacrificial relationship between mother and child” (*Gender* 179). As I analyse the films, I will be highlighting how the gender roles polarisation is negotiated, and its subversive implication on patriarchy.

**Dynamics of Gender Representation in African Films**

Cognizant of feminism’s potential to shape socio-economic and political development, African film studies continue to interrogate the nuances of gender representations (Harrow, 2016, Dipio 2014, Dovey 2012, Mukora 2003, Ukadike “Reclaiming” 1994). In African arts, feminist representations begin to appear in the first anti-colonial imaginaries of the 1960s (both literature and film) as part of the concerted efforts by Africans to end colonialism and its effects. Kenneth Harrow in the seminal article that traces the changes in gender representations in African art and popular films: “Women in ‘African Cinema’ and ‘Nollywood films’: A Shift in Cinematic Regimes” explains: “Gender was once crucial to the framing of ‘Third World’ perspectives at the beginning of African cinema” (244). This was at the time when the Third Cinema Movement was sweeping through Africa. The fact that African film is political is a fundamental and convergence point of third cinema (the ideology), which influences
contemporary filmmakers. As a result, earlier films were overt in raising the spectators’ consciousness on liberation, racism and gender imbalance. But because of the primacy of political liberation, gender issues became a secondary matter in the hierarchy of liberation. The heroic deeds of women protagonists were only appreciated in the context of the national struggle—anti-colonialism, anti-neo-colonialism, and exploitation of black people. Examples of such films include Sembene’s *Black Girl*, Pierre Dikongue Pipa’s 1975 *Muna Moto*, Med Hondo’s 1988 *Sarraounia*, Sarah Maldoror’s 1972 *Sambizanga* all of which depict women in the struggle against colonialism, and neo-colonialism. In such a revolutionary gaze that was replete with exceptional women, women’s concerns get subsumed in the national liberationist struggle.

Most of the contemporary representations of gender in East African films gravitate towards the contemporary debate over equality as it appears in two settings: the rural and urban. Owusu explains:

Right now, there is an agenda of affirmative action for the girl child. In the cities, you get an illusion that the girl child is empowered, but in upcountry places, the girls are still oppressed. Girls are being circumcised forcefully among the Masai and other communities that practice circumcision. Early marriages, cattle rustling, such stories are still coming out, even in urban settings, the subtle conflicts between men and women come out [in the narratives] (Interview).

It can be argued that a liberationist stance has been promoted by the NGOs that have been sponsoring films on the empowerment of girl-child and gender-based violence. These overt representations of gender relations in East Africa can be traced to the beginning of filmmaking by East Africans (see *Saikati* and *The Battle of the Sacred Trees* from Kenya and *Harusi ya Mariamu* and *Tumaini* from Tanzania) all of which represent the hardships of girls and women.
To date, the overt liberationist gender aesthetic also is prevalent in East African films, as exemplified in the 2016 *Girl Child in Dilemma* from Uganda and the 2018 *Forced Marriage* from South Sudan. Tabu's *Girl Child in Dilemma* is a film about a poor girl, Sonia Magezi (Magezi Thabitha) who faces two obstacles to her education, one being a father who wants to sell her into marriage for a hefty dowry and the second being the headteacher who is interested in marrying her. Tabu illuminates the hardships girls go through to study such as sexual abuse by their teachers and irresponsible fathers who would not hesitate to sell their daughter off for dowry. Again, here the gender conflict is highlighted through a situation where the father, who is expected to provide and protect the daughter and the entire family is instead *selling* her like merchandise. The father also abandons his sick wife by eloping with another woman. Gender inequality is thus framed conservatively, as the effect of the perversion or abandonment of socially condoned gender roles and responsibilities.

Like Wasswa’s *Girl Child in Dilemma*, Bebe Joel Hillary’s *Forced Marriage* poignantly dramatises the usefulness of education in war-torn South Sudan in which he lays more emphasis on the education of girls because girls and women, in general, are doubly disadvantaged. *Forced Marriage* which was funded by USAID revolves around three school children, Emelia (Vobia Mami Venson) and her school mates, two brothers Lubani (Jacob Doga) and Komowa (Richard Ritti Silivan). Emelia’s father beats Lubani and Komowa for talking with Emelia. Emelia’s parents, spontaneously command Lubani to marry Emelia with immediate effect. Emelia’s father, as if he had been waiting to sell off his daughter, says: “God has answered my prayers…this girl is not going to stay at my home today” (*Forced* 10: 48). Emelia’s family begins making a long list of materials, including money that they are expecting to demand as a dowry from Lubani. Lubani, who is about 16 years and below the legal age of marriage, is being forced to marry an equally underage Emelia. When Emilia is returned home (because Lubani’s family cannot have their boy getting married when he cannot afford his bride
price), she is physically abused by her father, an act supported by her mother. Emilia runs to the wilderness where a passerby picks her up and she is taken to the village chief. Later, she returns as an educated and empowered girl to which the entire village celebrates. Emilia’s changed status—a middle-class lady—serves as evidence for the benefits of empowering women through education.

The NGO aesthetic (discussed in chapter 2) together with the didacticism embedded in oral literature has continued to shape topic-focused films in East Africa. Despite the plurality in topics and genre, the dramatisation of gender relations is outstanding. For instance, Omar Chande’s Aisha (Tanzania) explores the gruesome effects of gang-rape and patriarchy’s concept of family honour in times of such shameful acts. The central protagonist, Aisha, is abandoned by her husband because she was gang-raped. Meanwhile, her brother fails to take her to the hospital and report the case to the authorities because it will embarrass the family when the community learns of such a shameful act. At the same time, her little sister is being forced into marriage as a source of income for her brother, who cannot afford to keep her in school. The girls/women are depicted as extremely powerless and victims of unjust practices. Christina Pande’s Supa Mama (Tanzania) explores a mother’s attempt to save her daughter from excision. Clementine Dusabjeambo’s A Place for Myself (Rwanda) explores the tribulations of a single mother as she tries to get a school for her albino daughter. And Mariam Ndagire’s You Can’t Break my Will (Uganda) challenges the segregation over gender by dramatising the favouritism of boys over girls (as the girl is here being sold in marriage by the father). However, unlike the films that foreground gender issues, most films are more subtle in their portrayal of gender power relations. Kibenge, whose films depict gender power conflicts in middle-class Kenyans, explains the characteristics of the first wave of films in Kenya: “the older generation, my age and up, many of them have messages and looked very Kenyan [cultural specific], they tackled themes of victimisation of women, the girl child, and other
gender issues” (Interview). Noteworthy here is the fact that these gender imaginaries are highlighting the underlying gender inequality, a gap between the genders that has continued to widen, slowing down the holistic development of both African men and women.

Many (if not all) films in East Africa represent the convoluted suffering of women as victims of men’s violence and oppressive cultural practices. For instance, because of gender hierarchy, women are deterred from owning property in some societies. The suffering of women is evident in the films Dear Mum, Athlete, State Research Bureau, Bella, Welcome Home, and Grey Matter. In Dear Mum, three generations of women, Mama Di (a widow), her daughter, Delilah, and granddaughters, Monica and Jemima, struggle for a decent life in a male-dominated world where the protagonist, Nkwanga, uses blackmail, manipulation, and even murder in an attempt to steal their land and house. As I argue in my earlier analysis of Ndagire’s films, the portrayal of Monica and Jemima’s triumph of “avenging their mother’s death and reclaiming her property and dignity” signifies a new approach to feminism (Magara, “Imaging” 183). Put briefly, the females in these films have agency; they turn victimisation into motivation to question the oppressive patriarchy.

Another dynamic in the representation of gender today is that unlike the 1960s, when primarily men represented women’s voices, there is a growing number of women making films. Women are reclaiming their space in storytelling as was pre-colonial African setting. These representations may not appear to be astounding because, in some African societies, matriarchy—the centering of power around the mother figure and her kin—is still prominent (Amadiume 2016). In line with Amadiume’s postulations that Africa was largely a matriarchal society, African feminist scholars have always argued that African women, before colonialism, held prestigious positions in society as priestesses, queens, caretakers of crowns, and historians (griotte); and that even in patriarchal societies, women held power (Dipio 2014; Guy-Sheftall 33; Ogundipe 1994; Davies 1986; Nnaemeka 1998). But these circumstances were abruptly
changed by Arab, Greeko-Roman, and colonial influence that, in part, turned women into being subservient to men under the hegemonic patriarchy. The representations of gender relations in African feminist films hinge on the need to reclaim the respect and rights women had before colonialism. Although East African women are reclaiming their cinematic voice, they are yet to have the desired numbers of filmmakers compared to the male filmmakers (apart from Kenya, the rest of East African countries have very few female filmmakers).

Despite the inadequate numbers, East Africa’s growing number of women making self-reflexive and subjective representations complement the existing and increasing portrayals of women’s stories by some male directors. Wanuri Kahiu, a Kenyan female filmmaker, explains the merits of women making movies and how it changes the perspective of gender representation:

I make my films because of the body I was born into. As a woman, I am very unlikely to write a story where the lead character is male. I have only done it in a short film. Even then, the main character is dealing with the question of who a mother is. I have grown up surrounded by strong, complex women (Interview).

Similarly, Mariam Ndagire, a Ugandan female filmmaker, deliberately tells stories about “gender equality” in which she depicts “strong women” (Interview). Ndagire, Kahiu and all the feminist East African screen-griots are continuing the explicit liberationist film aesthetic started by Mungai in *Saikati* and Wanjiru Kinyanjui’s *The Battle of the Sacred Tree*. *The Battle of the Sacred Tree* dramatises a woman that decisively walks out of an abusive marriage. At the turn of the twenty-first century, when film production exponentially grew in East Africa, we get eclectic subtleties from representations of working to middle-class African women. These representations increasingly subvert repressive cultures or rather seem independent of conventional cultural restrictions such as Judy Kibinge’s *Dangerous Affairs* and *Project Daddy*, Ndagire’s *Dear Mum* Kahiu’s *Pumzi* and Gitonga and Jone’s *Disconnect*. Notwithstanding a rise in subjective representations by women about women, male filmmakers...
are also foregrounding gender issues in their films as exemplified in the films selected for this study.62

Depending on the filmmaker’s intention, two kinds of liberationist gender films—the explicit and implicit—run parallel to other binaries: rural vis-à-vis cosmopolitan settings and public versus private spaces to highlight gender identities and their resultant powerplay. The representation of the binaries of femininity and masculinity demonstrates how the film is functioning as a “gender apparatus” (Garritano 16). Carmela Garritano uses the word “gender apparatus” while studying West African popular films, the films that have most influenced East African cinema. On the role of cinema in shaping the gender discourse, she observes:

African popular culture as a gender apparatus, a technology that produces and naturalises particular gender ideologies. Gender is not incidental or supplemental to the worlds and identities imagined in the videos, but necessary to the articulation of these identities (16-17).

Garritano’s propositions apply to most of the filmmakers interviewed. They were conscious of the need to participate in the discourse on gender and contribute to shaping the “gender apparatus” (ibid). For example, in Disconnect Tosh Gitonga and Michael Mwangi Jones dramatise gender politics in an urban setting where educated men and women live. Disconnect is about a group of corporate young men with one protagonist, Josh (Nick Mutuma) a friend to Celine (Brenda Wairimu) another protagonist in a group of corporate young women. Through Celine and Josh’s friendship, we get to know the intimate lives of Nairobi’s elites whom this

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62 In reference to table 2. Key Filmography per Country (Chapter 1), the number of female filmmakers selected per country is on average one out of five films selected, yet the study intended to have at least 2-3 films by female directors in each country. Because of the scarcity of films by female filmmakers, besides Kenya where there is a substantial number of female filmmakers, the present study used at least one film by a female filmmaker in the productive film industries. In Burundi and South Sudan, I could not acquire any films directed or written by women that suited the study’s selection criteria.
group of characters represent. The film depicts men as under the mercy of overly empowered women who can call off, for example, a marriage, propose to men, hire men, and sexually abuse men. Gitonga and Jones invert gender roles, which brings into question the established hierarchy where femininity is subject to masculinity.

As in *Disconnect*, there are many films portraying gender segregation and gender-based violence affecting both men and women. Daniel Manege’s *Safari ya Gwalu* dramatises the predicament of an uneducated boy/man. Gwalu, a poor, uneducated man decides to return to school as an adult because of public rejection and humiliation for lack of formal skills. At about twenty-five years old, his girlfriend leaves him for another man since he is poor and perceived to be without potential. *Safari ya Gwalu* challenges the notions held by African feminists and activists that lack of education and early marriages are the significant causes of gender inequality and mostly the disempowerment of African women (Nnaemeka, *Development, Cultural* 286). For Gwalu, like Lubani and Komowa in *Early Marriage* and Muntu in *The Captain of Nakara*, suffers from the lack of empowerment and unfavourable cultural practices of expecting boys/men to be exceptionally strong (emotionally), and to provide a livelihood to women. Yet they are as vulnerable and possibly also in need of attention like women.

While some filmmakers make films that deliberately critique gender socialisation and power struggles, there are also other filmmakers such as Judy Kibinge, Matt Bish, Bob Nyanja and Kivu Ruhorahoza who claim that they do not think about gender representations in their films but only endeavour to be true to the story. Bob Nyanja, for example, posits, “I choose strong characters who bring out the story as it would happen in real life. I don’t think about the gender innuendos in my film; I remain true to the story. I leave that work to the critics” (Interview). Noteworthy here is the fact that the oeuvre of such filmmakers epitomises ‘political’ films with subtle or even explicit gender power struggles. For example, in Matt Bish’s *The Athlete*, the protagonist is a determined young woman who challenges any
oppressive authority. She, for instance, exposes a boss who is sexually prying on girls in order to exploit them for a promotion and she disobeys her mother’s suggestion of selling her to an old man for a dowry. Still in The Athlete, Susan’s mother represents a woman held hostage by the repressive tradition of dependency on men. The mother herself was married off to an older man she was not acquainted with; in the same manner, she wants to marry off Susan. She was denied a chance to education and remained as a dependent housewife subsisting on her husband. When her husband dies, her daughter, Susan, assumes the responsibility of the home. Susan’s mother felt completely disempowered that even when she is given a job, she does not report to work. She is only interested in subsisting on her prospective son-in-law. Bish, like other filmmakers, makes polarising contrast between characters, their actions, and agency which enhances the gap between the empowered female characters and the ones still held by oppressive cultural practices.

East African films, therefore, entail both advertent and inadvertent representations of gender power relations. Most of the films base on the education levels and urbanity to juxtapose the modern African woman—educated with equal opportunities to a man—in a position to assert herself beyond the limits of culture, and restrictive gender socialisations, with those of a semi-educated rural and vulnerable woman—powerless in the patriarchal power structure. It is evident that gender conflicts principally emanate from the masculinity and femininity binary which, as Bateman argues, the filmmakers use in cinema to “systematically construct restricted or imbalanced gender roles and impose these on spectators” (Bateman 793-794). The films are representing swopped gender roles to challenge patriarchy’s conception of gender, though in some case, the films remain ambivalent on the way forward or rather maintain the conventional masculinities and femininities. There is an overt subversion of gender socialisation in films such as Matt Bish’s Friends for Life, Judy Kibinge’s Something Necessary, Wanuri Kahiu’s Pumzi, Emma Bodger’s Jong Love, Mugurusi’s Bongo na Flavour and Mwapachu’s Dar Noir
where the women seem to run their affairs without men. Again, extremes cases of women choosing to run their life without men contradict the aspirations of African feminism which works toward a future where men and women are equal. Otherwise, for most of the films, patriarchy’s established gender roles are maintained. In instances where patriarchy is shaken, conflicts ensue, as depicted in the Disconnect, Dear Mum, The Athlete, and Fate. Patriarchal ideology is complex, an aspect vividly dramatised in the case films. Patriarchy is generally portrayed as in need of constant improvements in its strict oppressive stances foremost of which is the idea that men are the providers and women are the caretakers.

**Film as a Tool of Subversion: Questioning Patriarchy’s Masculinity and Femininity**

While the films interpreted as feminist films in this chapter are understood to be reclaiming women’s dignities, they also begin a conversation about the places of both men and women under the hegemonic patriarchy. In this section, I analyse films that portray the susceptibility or insusceptibility of both men and women to patriarchy through questioning and critiquing the concepts of masculinity and femininity. The supposedly justifiable social prescriptions of femininity and masculinity are represented as holding people hostage in oppressive cultural practices. The films subvert these oppressive cultural practices, as seen, in Grey Matter, Dar Noir, Jongo Love and Disconnect. However, in films such as Dear Mum, Early Marriage, the patriarchy’s status quo is ambivalently maintained. In this section i give a detailed analysis on Disconnect. The analysis is interspersed with references to many other East African films that highlight the same message to show the expansiveness of conflicts over gender in East African cinema.

As outlined in my earlier discussion of African feminism(s), activism and social development, women’s education and economic independence are understood as the primary means to propel gender equality and the empowerment of women. Education is represented as a means to liberate women from some of the deleterious effects of significant economic
dependency on men, to explore their sexuality and compete favourably in the job markets. *Disconnect* is a Nairobi (implicitly African urban tale) romantic comedy-drama that dramatises a negotiation of a power struggle between men and women. This is possible because women, mainly professionals, are financially empowered and can subsist on their own, unlike an uneducated and economically dependent woman who, in most cases, relies on her partner (see *Girl Child in Dilemma, Forced Marriage, Kiumeni*). On the choice of producing such a script, one of the directors, Gitonga explains:

I just wanted to show the world we are in now. The women are bolder, and they are questioning patriarchy and its way of life. A lot of men are, however, misunderstanding what women want as feminist. Of course, there are extremes in feminism. For me, I wanted to present a space for us to discuss that (Interview).

*Disconnect* represents empowered young women who subvert patriarchy’s socialised expectations of a female. A similar juxtaposition between educated and illiterate women is demonstrated in Ndagire’s *Dear Mum*. The protagonist’s educated daughters are empowered to defend themselves from oppressive men with potency more than their illiterate grandmother and semi-illiterate mother (who were restricted by culture and lack of education). Delilah and Mama Di were both married off young. They are also not educated, which means that they cannot compete favourably in the contemporary job market where someone is expected to have formal skills normally acquired through some form of schooling. The polarised contrast woman denied education and the one who has access to education heightens the urgency to avail equal opportunities to women.

*Disconnect* subverts the norm of femininity and masculinity by presenting ‘female-like males and male-like females. For example, Celine’s friend, Robin, is set to marry Nicholas, Josh’s friend and business partner. At Nicholas’ bachelor’s party, he confesses to his friends that he wants to get out of his shell and flirt because, to him, marriage meant the end of being
free to meet other women because he envisions himself as Robbin’s ‘wife’. The conversation between the four friends—Josh, Otis, Nicholas, Khalid—shows the vulnerability of men and the fact that some men believe it is unconventional that women are increasingly more assertive in decision-making especially in matters that are socially perceived as a man’s responsibility, such as proposing for marriage. It is also evident that there is a degree of acceptance among men that women are holding the mantle in some aspects that were conventionally attributed to men. The half-drunk Nicholas begins the conversation:

Nicholas: This is my last time to make poor decision before I become Robbins bitch!
Otis: (holding Nicholas consolingly) This is the first time I have heard you curse.
Nicholas: I don’t do it often; I never do anything.
Josh: Well, you are getting married.
Nicholas: She proposed.
(The boys speaking simultaneously)
Josh: What?
Khalid: Yeah, I can actually see that.
Otis: Fuck me!
Josh: Wow!
Nicholas: (noticing all his friends are scandalised)
She is planning everything, from the wedding, the honeymoon, the gender [sex] of our fourth child, whom we will say is an accident but actually wasn’t.
Otis: Yeah, I think she is a bit (signalling that she is crazy)
Nicholas: (aggressively interrupts, graping Otis by the neck) if you say crazy…(Josh separates Nicholas and Otis). This is the only thing she has let me have. So, right now I just want to black out drunk…

*(Disconnect 49:30-50:37).*

Nicholas submits to his fiancé’s control entirely to the extent that when Robin decides to call off the wedding, a night before the ceremony, he cries and threatens to commit suicide. Despite
the marriage, Robin stays with her clique of single women. She is married on her terms. Potentially, Robin could have a successful marriage with Nicholas, but there is a great possibility of her falling in love with another man when she is bored with Nicholas. This is depicted through her expression of anxiety to Celine as she wonders whether her decision to marry a man, to whom she proposed and for whom she financed the wedding, will guarantee her a successful marriage. The film remains ambivalent about whether particular feminine and masculine norms should be subverted or left in place because it is unclear whether Robin and Nicholas have a successful or failed marriage.

Similar instances of ambivalence concerning shifts in gender power relations and women’s independence are evident in films such as *Fate* and *Friend for Life*. In *Fate*, Kate, a working-class accounting officer, subverts society's norm by financing her marriage only to discover that she is married to a thief. As an empowered woman, she chases the man out of her house and raises her son as a single mother. While in *Friends for Life*, three working-class women take charge of their life, to the extent of vowing to raise their child as collective parents because the man who made one of them pregnant was in a sexual affair with all of them. The films, thus, present the possibility of overturning gender roles. Since *Friends for Life* does not actually depict the women raising their child without a man or the child’s father, it leaves room for speculation hence the ambivalence.

*Disconnect* also questions femininity and masculinity through characterisation of Celine and Neema, who are notably assertive and unconventional in their approach to getting partners. These young women, both successful in their careers, fortuitously love the same man, Josh. After being challenged by Neema to attend Josh’s birthday dinner with a date, Celine begins ‘chasing’ men which is not conventional is her setting where a man is expected to be the initiator of a relationship. In this case she finds herself having to defend her dating several
men by arguing that her virtue is not connected to how many men she dates. The film characterises Celine as a bold, aggressive woman who knows what she wants and does not allow any man to dismiss or take advantage of her for being a woman. Neema, like Celine, decides to propose to Josh as a way of winning his commitment. As I have argued, most filmmakers interviewed for this thesis articulated a desire to mediate new and traditional gender roles. In keeping with this proposal, Neema is depicted as making a fool of herself by proposing to Josh because her boss, Willie, dupes her: “It is 2017!” The nuance in the statement is that these are modern times where it is normal for a woman to propose to a man. The film seems to interrogate the perception that in modern times, the norm of waiting for a man to propose to a woman is irrelevant. However, Neema’s actions instead breaks up the relationship suggesting that perhaps that social gender role cannot be swapped as yet. Despite the presumed progress made by education, contemporary East Africa seems not ready for women who take on the conventional social roles of men.

Through Neema and Josh and Robin and Nicholas’s relationships, Disconnect demonstrates the complex negotiations of femininity and masculinity in any relationship. Their relationship contributes to gender equality debates and feminism. It is vivid that men and women should not oppress or be dismissive of the other for a pleasurable experience. Instead, they ought to strike a balance between the existing gender roles vis-à-vis the apparent postulations of feminism regarding gender equality. Through the contrast of Neema’s farcical proposal and the rocky relationship between Robin and Nicholas, the film indicates that society is not ready for radical gender role transformations (reversed masculinities and femininities or feminine men and masculine women, to be exact). This rejection of reversed gender roles is apparent in Neema’s speech that is delivered as a monologue during her proposal to Josh: “I am proposing to you, silly. Well, you are actually proposing to me but semantics” (Disconnect 01:30:40). As if to pass judgement on the impossibility of the act of a woman proposing
marriage to a man, Neema pulls out a ring and earnestly asks the dumbfounded Josh, “Ask me, ask me.” She thinks she has read Josh’s mind or rather played a complementary role, but Josh fails to seize the moment to propose to a woman who has bought herself the engagement ring. Neema perceives Josh’s confusion and decides to respond, “yes, I will,” and puts the ring on her finger. Here the film transforms women’s social agency into a narcissistic and egotistical one—the men do not matter at all or have abandoned their part in the relationship of marriage, which may not be the case, universally.

On the other hand, Neema and Josh’s engagement scene portrays an extreme case of misunderstanding feminism’s call for gender equality. For it is evident that even the ladies in the films disapprove of the changing gender roles. When Robin’s friends learn of her broken engagement with Nicholas, highly opinionated TK says, “Urgh, I never even liked that guy; he is kind of soft” (Disconnect 55:00). It is implied that TK, like her friends, would like a man who is masculine, takes the initiative, and leads. Coincidentally, TK’s statement and the girls’ reaction is juxtaposed with the boys’ scene. What stands out from the series of intercuts is a sequence of the scuffle between the boys outside the club where Nicholas is upset, crying inconsolably to the extent of attempting to commit suicide because he feels heartbroken by Robin. The exaggeration of Nicholas’ weak, feminine character is to show that men are vulnerable like women. Though in a patriarchal society, Nicholas is not the kind of person that would have a place on the table of men.

Albeit comical, Disconnect portrays yet more bizarre reversed gender roles paused by changing gender socialisation as seen in Belinda, a chief executive officer of a multimillion company, who sleeps with any man she desires because of her financial influence. For instance, Belinda explicitly lusts over Josh, and presses it upon him that she will only do business with Olive Bridge, Josh and his friends’ advertising company when Josh succumbs to her sexual demands. The film subverts the usual norm where men are mostly depicted as prone to
promiscuity and sexual abuse. However, despite Belinda’s aggressive advance toward men, her ‘femininity’ still holds when Josh goes to her hotel room, the only communication she gives Josh is to undress as she waits for Josh to initiate the next move.

Despite its seeming maintenance of traditional gender roles, *Disconnect* further opens a discourse on negotiating those who cannot be cocooned in the femininity or masculinity gender roles: the men who act like women and women who act like men. Nicholas’s portrayal as a subservient and honest emotional man who is determined to be loyal to his wife is contrasted with an erratic woman (Robin), who is unsure of her marriage herself is to demonstrate that masculinity and femininity are not monolithic. Otherwise, passing judgement on these characters is evidence that patriarchy oppresses many men together with women, and it should find a middle ground if harmony is to prevail (Dipio *Gender* 157). Otherwise, as seen in this film and other films where women are depicted as increasingly empowered and men are having an unprecedented decline in masculinity, there is a clash (incessant conflicts). Like most filmmakers interviewed and the African feminist scholars I have mentioned, gender equality does not mean an abdication of femininity and masculinity. Owusu explains:

> With or without empowerment, the men should lead the home. The challenge is with “Ben Ten” (men who behave like women) who are embarrassing the male gender. In the patriarchal society, where a man is positioned as the leader, it causes major debates and embarrassment to see, these days, men shamelessly leaving their homes, go to live off women. That is an apparent gender power play that we should continue to debate (Interview).

The traditional gender roles of what a man or woman should do in a relationship are foregrounded in *Disconnect, The Athlete,* and *Friends for life.* Though the films are meant to spark conversation about gender socialisation, they do not make definite indications of the way out of the contemporary gender conflicts.
*Disconnect* also directly engages with the ideology of feminism, particularly how it is understood in Africa today. *Disconnect’s* diction as deduced from the phrases used in film’s dialogue alludes to feminist ideology in many ways. First, the film makes a direct allusion to Eve Ensler’s *Vagina Monologue*[^63], in this case, to emphasize that it is a woman’s time to talk about issues that deeply concern them. Second, the word “feminism” is used directly in the film, which, as Gitonga argues, is to direct the spectators’ attention to evaluate the concept of feminism. For example, Celine asks her male best friend Josh to help with carrying some suitcases, to which Josh retorts: “What is the fun in that? I am a feminist!” (*Disconnect* 22: 19). Josh’s response is a testament to his misunderstanding of feminism as equality between men and women. To perceive feminism to mean that women should do everything for themselves independent of men is contrary to the propositions of African feminism, which asserts the complementarity of men and women.

The film, therefore, highlights the contradictions that emerge when feminism is perceived in a limited sense as merely an ideology that is against cooperation between the sexes. Although feminism is satirically alluded to in *Disconnect*, Gitonga and Jones create and expand a conversation on various aspects of life and particularly on the contradictions surrounding gender equity, subjectivities, and relations. The film debunk the perception of extreme feminists as anti-men by re-enacting Nnaemeka’s *nego-feminism* seen in the close relationship between Josh and Celine. Despite Josh’s cynicism to Celine’s claim to be a feminist, he helps Celine carry her suitcases and drives her to and from the countryside to attend

[^63]: *The Vagina Monologue* was controversial in East Africa. It raised debate about its content and the fact that it was too crass to be using a female genital in a cultural context where such conversations are held in restricted contexts. The play was showed at the Kenya National Theatre on March 20th, 2018. In 2005 when it was performed in Uganda, it received backlash from the conservative section of the population including government officials. The arguments in Uganda’s leading newspaper, The New Vision, are, “This vagina monologues show is a pure ‘kimansulo’ intended to betray our rich African cultural values. There was a need to protect our culture values from the invasion of western decadence. Let us oppose these forces that intend to destroy and degrade our rich culture values” (Vision Reporter, 2005). Such a claim wants to frame the play’s reception in a particular way as part of a politicised cultural struggle between different sections of society.
Robin’s traditional wedding. Josh and Celine are dependent on each other, not simply as lovers but as friends. The “complementarity” between the sexes theorised by African feminism creates harmony between Celine and Josh (Dipio 2014; Nnaemeka 2004). Josh and Celine, both with problematic relationships, can confide in each other and find happiness with each other, unlike their contrasted duo Nicholas and Robin, who for lack of communication, have swapped their gender roles in their relationship.

*Disconnect* further satirises the appropriation of feminism and its gross misconception among middle-class East Africans. For instance, the conversation between Josh, Celine and her female friend, TK, reveals the conflict between men and women and insinuates that women turn to other women if they are disappointed by men. In the beginning sequence, Celine speaks of her heartbreak after finding her boyfriend, Ken, with another woman. Her best friend, Josh, is the first one to look for her after a week’s absence from the dental clinic she co-owns with another young woman. The narration of Celine’s predicament shifts from the first-person as told by Celine to Josh to the second-person as Josh tells the story to TK when she joins the duo. The story is complex in its recreation of the oral tradition of storytelling where there is a first-person narrator and an audience as demonstrated in the film. In this multifaceted narrative, the following conversation alludes to the caricature of extreme feminism and the contradictions it brings to those trying to follow it.

**TK:** (surprised) Weren’t you guys in an open relationship?

**Josh:** No one really understood that.

**Celine:** Uhm, actually, the correct term is non-monogamy.

**TK:** Uhm, babe, you are not going to uhm actually your way out of this. You are the one who made a big deal about being progressive, giving a man space. Not being contained by the flawed expectation of the human condition that go against our very nature.

**Josh:** That is quite a speech.

**TK:** Quite the vagina monologue, Josh.
Babe, tell me what really happened?

J***: (noticing the talk has turned to feminine things) Oh now, I hate to interrupt this little sisterhood ahead of traveling pet’s moment (taking leave of the girls, he kisses Celine on the forehead), I have to work, goodbye.

Celine: Why are men so fragile?

J***: And by the way, Kenneth is an ass for losing you.

Celine: (elated) Oh my Gosh! I feel so much better now, now that you have said that, like I am healed, I can’t, men are so much trash, you are awesome, thank you so much, goodbye.

T**: Okay, let’s go I pick an outfit for you. Something certainly lesbian because you need to be off men, for a while.

Celine: Yeah.

T**: We’ll scheme for them.

Celine: Eeh, Alleluia!

(Disconnect 05:23-07:11).

Even though T** consoles Celine, she does not manage to change her sexual orientation as T** jokingly insinuates. Instead, Celine shows up at her dental clinic in a feminine dress. T** and Celine’s dialogue is the filmmakers’ attempt to make spectators think about their perceptions of feminism in the broader context of ‘progress’ and the global debates on eclectic sexualities.

Gitonga and Jones use relationships between men and women to deconstruct feminism and their continued misappropriation. Feminism as a means for women empowerment under the guise of cultural ‘progress’ is depicted as antithetical to African norms since it is identified as a Western concept. The film presents advocates of ‘progress’ as confused hybrid characters who have not synthesised what they are trying to practice. For example, when Celine explains the incident in which she finds her boyfriend, Ken, with another woman, she says they were in an open relationship that was a kind of “non-monogamy.” She pauses to be an independent
woman who would not mind an open relationship, yet she is emotionally dependent on Ken. Despite Celine’s awareness that she was not Ken’s only girlfriend, her anguish at Ken for finding him with another woman underscores the shallowness of using concepts such as autonomy, feminism and progressive ideals that are untenable or rather not comprehensible in their context. Clearly, non-monogamy has similar semantic properties with polygamy, and it applies to the ‘open relationship’ between Celine and Ken. Disconnect challenges spectators to think about monogamy in a globalised and gender-sensitive world. In characters like Robin, it is possible to detect the beginnings of polyandry. Perhaps Robin could as well marry as many men as she can afford, which would again be culturally unacceptable. In this sense, Disconnect demonstrates that African feminism is still overshadowed by misconceptions of Western feminism.

East African cinema is replete with imaginaries that elevate a woman beyond the socialised patriarchal gender roles. Kivu Ruhorahoza’s Grey Matter, like Disconnect, contests patriarchy through depicting a daring and strong woman who in instances when expected to be ‘feminine’ (show weakness), is poignantly courageous. This is depicted in the contrast of two young adults, Justine (Ruth Nirere Shanel) and Yvan (Ramadhan Shami Bizimana) who are dealing with the post-war trauma in post-genocide Rwanda. Justine is portrayed as a heroine. After the death of their parents, Yvan, Justine’s big brother, fails to recover while Justine goes into survival mode, to the extent of becoming a sex-worker. In a totally dysfunctional post-war environment, Justine performs ‘a blow job’ to the doctor, in order to get medication for her mentally unstable brother. Immediately after doing that blow job, Ruhorahoza presents Justine in a medium shot gagging herself to vomit. It is evident that Justine is disgusted by her actions, but it is also evident she is doing all of this to support her brother. The dialogue between Justine and Yvan, after Justine finds her brother hiding in the ceiling, reveals the reversed roles.
Justine: Yvan, the war is over. You don’t have to cook avocados. We cooked avocado because there was a war, there was no food. You have to pull yourself together. There’s no need to hide in the attic. No one will hurt you. Do you understand?

(Yvan still looking down)
Have you taken your medicine?
(Yvan nods “no”) I have brought you some stronger ones.

Yvan: (Yvan gets the pills and eats one pill) I hear gunshots

Justine: There are no gunshots

Yvan: I hear gunshots!

Justine: There are no gunshots. It’s all in your head.

(Grey 1:01:23-1:02:48)

Justine bears the responsibility of the family and manages to get her brother out of depression. Culturally, the boy is expected to be the leader, but in Grey Matter, this gender role is reversed. For survival purposes, Justine temporarily erases from her memory the horrors of losing her parents and siblings during the genocide. She does not hesitate to slap her brother, who insists on reminding her that she was raped by the genocidaires. When asked of his intention of presenting a strong woman such as Justine, Ruhorahoza argues that he was “sticking to the reality of the story” and presenting reality where “the women are generally victimised” (Interview). Justine, her mother, and other women are abused during the war. Even after the war, Justine is sexually abused by the doctor, a civil servant who should be protecting young adults as they could potentially be his children. Justine symbolises a complex multi-dimensional portrait of a ‘strong woman’ whose resilience signifies the potency of women as leaders. However, in some African cultures, it is unsurprising to have strong women like Justine. Ruhorahoza is presenting a social reality.

Throughout the selected filmography, there are explicit reversals of gender roles in a manner that subverts masculinity and patriarchy by extension. Contrary to the social
expectations of a man as the provider for the family, in most films, there are instead archetypal male characters who are always drunk and abdicate their duties. In this case, women as wives, girlfriends, or daughters become the source of livelihood. In Bella by Matt Bish (Uganda) the sex-worker, Sharon takes care of her boyfriend, an aspiring musician, while in The Athlete by the same filmmaker, Susan, whose mother wants her married to an older man for a dowry, is the sole breadwinner for her uncle and mother. Ironically, the older generation that was socialised to depend on men, as seen by Susan’s mother, is portrayed as demobilised of any passion for asserting their autonomy. Susan’s mother fails to run a simple business after her husband’s death. Her failure is a contestation of gender inequality in East Africa. The film gathers pity and at the same time distaste for such behaviour which only makes a woman reliant on a man. Empowered women such as Susan, who can survive in today’s changing world (where the complementarity of genders is a must) are presented in a manner that gets the spectators admiration. In Welcome Home, Elysée takes charge of the home by looking for a job when her husband loses all his savings. In Dar Noir, a sex-worker manages to rehabilitate a cop who is a drug addict. In Jongo Love, a teenage mother living in the slums, Tash, who has been abandoned by her estranged boyfriend decides to take charge of raising her son as a single mother and focus on being financially independent. In Dear Mum by Mariam Ndagire, there are three generations of strong women who operate their homes with minimal help from men. In all these films, women bear witness to the fact that the responsibilities and tasks traditionally reserved for men, can be performed, with compelling results, by women.

On the other hand, because of the assumed understanding of masculinity to signify physical strength, aggression, providence and leadership (Isike 2012), it is obvious in the films that otherwise ‘good’ men are abused or suffer at the hand of patriarchy’s norms if they are found short of such traits. In the Captain of Nakara, for instance, Muntu, an honest, hard-working man, is pushed to criminality because, in a patriarchal African society, a man must
pay a bride price or evidence potential as a nobleman. The concept of bride price would suffice to massage the man’s ego whereby he would feel he is in control, he has won the best ‘wife’, but for many poor men like Muntu, the pressure from prospective in-laws to be given gifts is intense and prohibitive. Muntu plans a robbery to raise money for dowry and the wedding. The point of contention here is that a man is seen as being manipulated by patriarchy. He has to work doubly hard to marry his partner. The social role of a man paying bride price or taking the lead in marriage is upheld in the films. In a few instances where the woman decides to help their boyfriends by financing the wedding as seen in Fate and Disconnect, the marriages are presented as unstable. The films are thus subtly critical of oppressive cultural practices to both men and women a criticism which echoes the tenets advocated by African feminism.

The films make a case that equal opportunities derived from basic needs such as education should not, however, destabilise the status quo of the traditional gender roles. Instead, the traditional gender roles should be carefully renegotiated with an inclination towards feminine principles of inclusiveness (Dipio 2014). This common point of view among interviewed filmmakers is succinctly captured by Tanzanian filmmaker Manege: “In my films, I portray strong women, but they don’t have to fight anyone” (Interview). Manege demonstrates the potent of contemporary gender conflicts in the apparent era of gender equality. To him, women have become abusive of men with the gender equality movements, which is contrary to the African feminist ideal of mutual respect between men and women. The films are presenting critical views to discuss the way forward in achieving a potentially permanent solution to gender conflicts (Adichie 2015; Dipio 2014). Otherwise, it is vividly demonstrated in the films that when either women or men are not empowered (particularly women in this case), the children are the victims of negligence in instances when the man, who has been framed as the sole provider for the family, is incapacitated or absconds from his responsibility. In other words, the films indicate that patriarchy in its present monolithic state engenders
gender conflicts. Considerations of gender ought to re-evaluate and employ new approaches to its strict binary between femininity and masculinity.

**Conclusion**

While film scholars might analyse African cinema in terms of specific periods, paying attention to their differences and developments, a feminist perspective draws attention to long-standing cultural structures and persistent experiences of inequality. Albeit with differing opinions, the screen-griots use film as one of the cardinal “responsibilities towards their communities” empowerment and development (Dipio, *Gender* 193). From a close reading of the filmography, the films aim to spark a conversation about gender relations. Though there are some attempts to challenge patriarchy’s status quo and others that propose a new direction through a mutation of gender roles, all the efforts, no matter the perspective, maintain the status quo. The screen-griots’ choice of revolutionary and trailblazing characters can be understood as symbols for change. As Dipio suggests, “Cinema is a carrier of cultural values and myths, and the representation of gender relations mirror how men and women are viewed in society” (*Gender* 23). The films do not necessarily overturn the status quo on how women and men have been viewed, but they represent a façade of change, which, in this case, is to instigate a genuine dialogue on conventional gender roles in the contemporary gender dynamic.

The films also begin a complex discourse about gender equality since a failure to interrogate the critical strides made by affirmative action in all East African states, may leave men disempowered. I have discussed the oppressive cultural practices that mainly marginalise women. However, the practices that oppress men are also deserving of critical attention. As a step towards an awareness of the oppressive patriarchy, women’s subjectivities are beginning to be foregrounded through the increasing number of narratives with female protagonists. Through the gender discourse in the films and the interviews with the filmmakers, African feminism’s quest for gender equality is confused with the idea that women ought to be
aggressive or violent against men, which leads to many filmmakers denying the feminist label, yet their works are seen to be promoting feminist ideology only that their sense of feminist is not “defined by extreme individualism, by militant opposition to patriarchy, and ultimately, by a hostility to males” all that are associated with Western feminism (Mikell 406). A denial of the feminist label could be, in part, a result of a discourse by which others seek to diminish feminist thought, activism, politics, and transformations in everyday life. The films, however, indicate otherwise when they depict African feminism subtly subverting patriarchy by reversing the gender roles. As much as the films also represent, in some instances, a complete reversal of gender roles, this reversal is not yet feasible, and neither is it favourable in East African contexts. Nevertheless, patriarchy is portrayed as developing fissures as feminism galvanises its quest for gender equality.
Chapter 6: Deconstructing Class: A Discourse on Relational Politics in East African Films

*A great number of East African films are about the lower class, slums, and the hoods... I think filmmakers are grappling with social classification, and how we can help bridge the gap.*

—Wanuri Kahiu, Kenyan Filmmaker

*A lot of Tanzanian stories talk about the working class more than the middle class. I see this also in other East African films.*

—Seko Shamte, Tanzanian filmmaker

Introduction

In almost all the films in this study, whether popular or independent festival films, the politics of class is foregrounded thematically, or it propels the narrative in some form. Thus, many of the films can be understood to share a socio-political project: to make East African class visible in order to expose the growing economic gap between the rich and the poor, between the ruling class and the ruled. All the filmmakers interviewed for this study also contend that one of the more significant shared characteristics of East African cinema is its representation of the relational undercurrents between the rich and the poor, and its scathing attack on the corruption and inefficiency of the political class. By exploring these claims, this chapter will demonstrate that East African screen-griots aim to deliberately catalyse debate on the grave disparities between the ruling class and the ruled.

Achille Mbembe has argued that ever since “the collapse of Marxism as an analytical tool and all-embracing project, … economic explanations of contemporary social and political phenomena have, with consideration of the draconian character of external constraints, all but disappeared, all struggles have become struggles of representation” (6). While in this passage, Mbembe is critiquing a certain anti-materialist tendency of poststructuralist African scholarship, I reorient his point more positively to suggest that class struggle has shifted to and
now proliferates in the popular arts. Class struggle manifests at the level of “representation” that creatives employ to draw attention to and fight social and political injustices, in particular the oppression of the poor by the ruling class and the growing disparity between the “two great hostile camps,” the ‘bourgeoisie’ and ‘proletariat’ as articulated by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (80). While Marx and Engels’ classic description of a binary class system may not entirely fit the socio-economics in contemporary Africa as it did in industrialised Europe, in essence, the films dramatise the social experiences and inequalities between what colloquially is known as the “haves and have-nots,” a division that resonates globally in an ordinary person’s understanding of class (Acheraïou 122).

The films represent East African middle and upper classes (the politicians and the business community) as entangled in a system in which their political and economic independence is questionable and precarious. Their independence is questionable because of the complexity of class and class formation in East Africa in the immediate aftermath of African ‘independence’ (Wallerstein 1973; Mamdani 1975; Shivji 1975; Shule 2016; Neubert 2019). With the independence of African states, political and economic power structures were established that constituted a new African ruling class who were not members of the precolonial elite or aristocratic classes but rather intelligentsia and businesspeople formerly from peasant communities (Mamdani “Class Struggles” 43; Shivji 13; Neubert). East African political theorist Mahmood Mamdani, using the case of class struggle in Uganda, explains the position of the African political class in the changed neocolonial economic structures:

What was old about it was the system of appropriation: the economic structures of under-developed capitalism, formed during the colonial period, remained, as did the entire apparatus of the colonial state. What was new about it was that political power was now transferred to an internally based class. And yet, this was not a ruling class in the classical sense of the word. It could not use its control over the state to appropriate the surplus for itself. The appropriation in
the neo-colony was principally imperialist exploitation and its ruling class, the petit bourgeoisie, could not survive independent of imperialism … The petit-bourgeoisie was a dependent class (“Class Struggles” 43).

In the above claim, Mamdani points to the presence of a Western class establishment which is still prevalent in the African postcolony. East Africa is navigating both precolonial and postcolonial modes of production and class structure, which is problematic because the postcolony is engrossed in negotiating the evolving classes that are now determined by levels of education, political power and economic status. Sociologist Dieter Neubert in his study of class in Africa posits: “in Africa, we do not find social classes with a common class consciousness defined by relation to the means of production or occupational positions,” as it is held in classical Marxist economics (2). Neubert is reiterating Mamdani’s theorisation of a problematic class system emanating from the existence of both capitalist and pre-capitalist economic classes in contemporary Africa. Recognising these difficulties in conceptualising class, the focus of this chapter is on the political class who are indicted for mismanagement and corruption, the result of which is the unfair distribution of wealth (with natural resources monopolised by the political class).

Although social stratification seems to manifest most vividly as a distinct binary (rich versus poor), East African films also represent varied nuances of class and foreground the multiple dimensions of iniquity. These films aim to raise spectators’ consciousness with regard to class inequalities. This claim parallels that of Jonathan Haynes in his analysis of the representation of class in popular Nigerian films. He argues that society is bifurcated into the ruling class and the ruled, which are broad categories and heterogeneous in make-up. For instance, “the elites such as politicians, military men, businessmen, and the traditional rulers jointly form the ruling class”, and the ruled class has multiple constituent groups from working-class to lower middle-class and peasant farmers (Haynes, “Between” 254). However, it is vital to acknowledge that the different professions and occupations that make up the ruling class
signals to other potential institutional and social allegiances. Therefore, the seemingly polarised class categories encompass other fluid subcategories whereby an individual may traverse many social classes or a given class group that contains other subcategories.

In the films discussed in this chapter, the broad category of the “haves” is comprised of those characters who have a steady and disposable income; who in sociological terms would be considered lower-middle-class, upper-middle-class and upper-class and in some cases form the ruling class. The “have nots,” who are the majority, comprise the lower class—the working class—and they survive on ‘hand to mouth’. These fluid class subcategories are explicit throughout films such as *The Captain of Nakara* and *Jongo Love* (Kenya) *Amaguru n’Amaboko* (Burundi), *Grey Matter* (Rwanda) *T-Junction*, *Samaki Mchangani* (Fish of the Land) and *Bongo na Flavour* (Tanzania). The films, in this case, underscore the precarity of social class in Africa. For one’s social status can change and, in most cases, does not depend on the means of production but also a person’s job or occupation, or their political placement within a government institution, or their other familial and kin relations. Aside from the more explicit critiques of the ruling class, and the attention given to these complex dimensions of class and social precarity, the films via their character-driven narratives also model tactics of social relationality and attitudes that people might be able to adopt in order to live under such conditions in their everyday lives.

**A Plethora of Representations about the Lower-class**

Despite the fluidity of class categories in East Africa, the films portray two prominent polarised class categories. However, most of the films, as I argue in this chapter, dramatise the social conditions of the poor versus the rich, the ruled versus the rulers. Thus, the films aim at stimulating a discourse about the imbalances in society that the filmmakers as *griots* feel must be exposed. To stress class disparities, the middle-class is usually not prevalent in the imaginaries where they endeavour to depict classes via costumes and setting. This is potentially
playing into Neubert’s argument that the middle class means neither rich nor poor, and it refers to the middle position “between the lower and upper classes” (Neubert 12). As I alluded to in the introduction to this chapter, the films construct a kind of collage of class so that what is known or familiar to the audiences as the ‘ruling class’ encompasses the middle-class and the upper-class—political and cultural leaders, military personnel and civil servants, business people and any person who has financial security from occupations that are perceived to establish social & political relationships. The ruling class also implies those people with access to “regular income or consumption” and “entitlements that are available in case of need,” such as a pension or social security fund (Neubert 63). In the above eclectic categories, the rich play minor roles for purposes of enhancing the plight of the poor.

Most films from East Africa, therefore, tend to foreground the experiences of the lower echelon of society because of the filmmakers’ film and literary heritage. As evidenced in most films analysed for this chapter, they reveal that the poor are the protagonists while the middle to upper-class, whom the films tend to critique are given minor roles. As articulated by Kahi and Shamte (cited in the epigraphs) and by all the interviewed filmmakers, focusing on the perspectives of the lower-class characters captures the heart of East African cinema, almost constituting its unique identity. This focalization of the lower-class identity can be located in the genealogy of African cinema and literature. The first independent African film, the 1963 short film *Borom Sarret* (The Wagoner) by Ousmane Sembene via the episodic scenes of the everyday life of its protagonist and his work, portrays the casual and daily forms of racial and social discrimination in colonial Senegal. Representations that foreground the same subject of relational dynamics are evident in the works of Ngugi wa Thiongo and Okot p’Bitek (see for instance Ngugi wa Thiongo’s *I Will Marry When I Want* and Okot p’Bitek’s *Song of Lawino*) some of the first significant literary imaginaries in East Africa. Stemming from the same discursive milieu as these literary examples the first films by East Africans also centre on
peasants or lower-class protagonists, whose status can only change through hard work or education. In films such as Sao Gamba’s 1983 *Kolor Mask* (claimed to be Kenya’s first film), Nangayoma Ng’oge and Ron Mulvihill’s 1985 *Harusi ya Mariamu* (said to be Tanzania’s first fiction film), and Anne Mungai’s 1992 *Saikati* (Kenya), there is a realist representation of the kinds of social divisions that have persisted in postcolonial Africa where education, economic and political power determine one’s social status and opportunities. These works focus on the ordinary person’s contestation of their imposed penury life in neocolonial Africa.

Broadly put, recent East African films tend to focus on ordinary people overcoming the daily challenges of living. These generic narratives are in part determined by the ruling class, which has stifled freedom of speech and labelled filmmakers and all critical artists enemies of the state (discussed in chapter 1). In some cases, contemporary East African filmmakers seem to avoid depictions of the ruling class altogether, engaging in a kind of self-censorship that excludes both the ruling class and the middle class. Kenyan filmmaker Hawa Essuman draws attention to the effect on little visibility of middle and ruling class: “the middle class [bourgeoisie] of Africa feels like a dirty secret. Because you hear so little about them” (qtd. in Steedman 4). There are filmmakers who circumvent state censorship and persecution by devising other methods such as focusing on the stories of the poor and the use of symbolism in order to mask their critique on the ruling regimes. Again, this approach can be traced, in part, to Sembene’s cinematic legacy and to the griot aesthetic. For instance, his 1975 film *Xala* (The Curse), employs symbolism and satire to expose corruption and “the political impotence and ideological confusion of the African elite” steering postcolonial Africa (Mushengyezi 51). In other words, the representational strategies of East African filmmakers, and in particular their focus on the ordinary experiences of the working-class, can be understood as part of a decades-long political aesthetic tradition in African cinema as seen in, but not limited to, critical works
such as Sembene’s corpus of literary and film works, Gerima’s *Harvest 3000*, Idrissa Ouedrago’s *Tilai* and Dani Kouyate’s *Sia le Rêve du Python*.

By focusing on the lower-class, the narratives embody implicit commentaries on the failures of the ruling class. For instance, Novatus Mugurusi, an experimental Tanzania filmmaker with a filmography of eight films all exploring the ‘underbelly’ of the lower-class people, gives the context of his production decision:

> In Tanzania, we have a problem of censorship. This means the artists have to leave out stories that involve the upper class, which is mostly made up of corrupt government officials. You can’t make a movie about the president etc. So, I am left with stories about the lower class whom no one has an interest (Interview).

Mugurusi’s complicated conditions of filmic expression can be extended to other filmmakers in the region who often face state censorship. Yet, their challenges have not deterred them from harshly criticising the ruling class through narratives that seem to be revolving around ordinary folk with whom the ruling class interacts on a daily. In *Jongo Love*, a film about the bustles and hustles of slum dwellers in Kenya, for instance, the businessmen procure sex and henchmen from the slums. In a wide shot, we see that Jongo and Manyatta slums are surrounded by wealthier neighbourhoods. The sharp class division between the rich and the poor in Kenya is vividly demonstrated through contrast of setting. For instance, the people in the slums live in a “labyrinth of DIY dwellings” while the rich businessmen live in luxurious and spacious homes (Kings 73). One of the businessmen lives in a waterfront house in Kisumu, while the other has a horse stable at the house that is seated on large chunks of neat lawns). The extremes in class disparity depicted in *Jongo Love* enhances the social gap and the underlying conflict, which, when not addressed, complicates the relations between the two groups and may result in insecurity.
Making visible the narratives of the lower class is a strategy to deconstruct class in order to create a new poetics of representation which vulgarises the depiction of the upper-class. These filmmakers and more from East Africa evoke what has been described by Kenneth Harrow—one of the scholars of African cinema—as a cinema of “trash.” Harrow describes “trash” cinema as that which uses the trope of garbage, depicting the dire poverty of the poor in contrast with the affluence of the rich to make a critical point about contemporary experiences. By focusing on the narratives of the lower-class, East African filmmakers are not far from African cinema’s significant critical trope. Harrow further explains:

Trash has haunted African cinema from the start, when the decision was made not to make films that would be Hollywood dream machines, not films of escapism but of reality, even of harsh reality, daring to portray those who take advantage of their power and means to cheat others; of thieves who come to define the nature of the ruling classes; of conniving and unscrupulous people, immoral figures for whom notions of community are lost (Trash 1). Harrow’s description applies to some East African films. This representation of the uncanny is mobilised through bizarre juxtapositions between the lower-class with the upper-class, of which the latter is portrayed as insatiable “thieves” and irresponsible as seen in Nyanja’s The Captain of Nakara, Mugurusi’s Ishu ya Simu and Shivji’s Fish of the Land and Shoeshine. The films’ portrayal of the sharp division between the ruling class and the ruled can be problematic to critics who see representations of only the poor in Africa, contributing to the Afro-pessimism narrative. However, the poor Africans are depicted to unsettle the spectators into action to end the class polarity. In short, the films here are negotiating the pro-Africa rising trajectory vis-à-vis Afro-pessimism (as seen in chapter 4). The films pose questions such as if Africa is rising, how come many people seem not to share in the collective developments?

Throughout the study’s filmography, most films revolve around the predicaments of the urban and peri-urban poor, bringing out a labyrinth of issues such as lifestyles, aspirations
and daily manoeuvres and creativity in multifaceted urban settings. We see these kinds of portrayals in Mugurusi’s *Bongo Na Flavour* and his entire filmography, Amil Shivji’s *T-Junction* and *Fish of the Land, Shoeshine*, Emma Bodgers *Jongo Love*, Bob Nyanja’s *The Captain of Nakara*, Jean Kwezi’s *Umutoma*, Mutiganda’s *Rockabye*, Ruhorahoza’s *Grey Matter* and *Things of the Aimless Wanderer*, Matt Bish’s *State Research Bureau* and *Bella*, Stephen Wasswa’s *Girl Child in Dilemma*, Roland Rugero’s *Amaguru n’Amabako* Jean Richard Tuguru’s *Les Gros Cailloux* and Hamadi Mwapachu’s *Dar Noir*. All these films focalise the poor and are told by filmmakers who identify with the oppressed. As Barbers posits, “it is the ordinary, unprivileged people, whose experiences are so rarely documented and whose opinions are so rarely sought, who have been hard-pressed and also the most creative” (164). Barber is arguing that most filmmakers or popular artists who represent the lower echelons of society, sometimes portraying their own oppression, are the most creative because they understand oppression. For instance, Mugurusi, a marginal filmmaker in Tanzania (and whose films are banned), is expanding the film genres in Africa. He is specialised in producing a hybridised ‘Hollywood-African’ crime, thriller dramas focusing on the criminal gangs of Dar-es-salaam, that comprises of all classes while most filmmakers are mostly producing social dramas. It is evident that representations of the urban poor illuminate the class differences and conflicts in East Africa.

**The Urban Poor: An indictment of the Ruling Class**

The films’ excessive dramatisation of the urban poor demonstrates an indictment of the ruling class. The narration of Africa’s lower-class can be contextualised in the Third Cinematic orientation of African cinema that was and is still employed to contest oppression. Harrow explains the revolutionary aesthetic embodied in the representation of the lower class:

“Trash had to be present for the struggle to be given meaning, to show the face of oppression and of worthlessness that had never been seen before because the maids, the servants, the lower classes, the labourers’ hardscrabble lives did not
make for good entertainment in an economy run by dream machines. Trash was there in all those films dealing with the unjust pressures placed on women for sex; on children who beg, street children victims of marabouts, abandoned by foolish or credulous parents. And the handicapped, the paraplegics, the lepers without hands, the squint-eyed—les déchets humains (Trash 1).

An exemplar of Harrow’s description of the ‘trash” is seen in T-Junction where we see the urban poor living in a dystopian world where there is subversion of the law, anarchy and thuggery. The city’s lower-class traders are hunted out of their workspaces by the police, the arm of the ruling class. The poor living in the outskirts of the city and subsisting off the city streets through vending meagre merchandise in boxes are harassed by incessant arrests and clobbering by the police, their source of livelihood destroyed simply because the ruling class fear to surround themselves with such people.

T-Junction presents this brutality faced by the urban poor at the hands of those supposed to protect them through a story within a story, a narrative strategy that makes the story credible because of the first-person point of view. Maria (Magdalene Christopher), the victim of the ruling class’ terror and the protagonist, narrates to her newly found friend, Fatima (Hawa Ally) the dystopia that they have to contend with daily:

The city police have been our nightmare. They break our stalls, kick, and beat us. They want to move all of us into the building somewhere in Ilala. All in the name of keeping the city clean. It’s as if we are the dirt (T-Junction 30:34-31:05).

Maria meets Fatima at the hospital lobby when both are in the queue to get medical help. Maria is hospitalised and wheelchair-bound because of the injuries she gets from the brutal attack by the city patrol police policing the neighbourhood where Maria and her mother operate a food kiosk. Emotionally, Maria adds, “[t]hey have broken homes, skulls and lives with their batons. Their leader, Commando, will do anything to climb up the ladder” (T-Junction 31:06-31:25). From this line of dialogue, we learn that the city police leader is driven by selfish ambitions
(securing a promotion), which motivate his ruthless actions as he implements his boss’s instructions.

Shivji’s use of Maria as a griotic character also relies on dialogue and montages to neatly weave the T-Junction’s community (traders) and sharpen their misery. From the dialogue between the traders, we learn that they have not been officially consulted and informed by their local leaders about their eviction. This exposes the uncoordinated activities of the ‘leaders’, which further reveals their incompetency. The ruling class (politicians and civil servants) are inorganic in their operations and the poor pay the price by being brutally evicted and physically abused as evidenced by Maria’s state: wheelchair-bound, hospitalized and traumatised.

Similarly, in The Captain of Nakara (Kenya), the poor are arrested capriciously by the greedy and corrupt police, in addition to being described derogatively as Chokora, a Bantu languages word used to signify something useless, at worst, rubbish. The Captain of Nakara is about a young ex-convict, Muntu, (Bernard Mbidyo Safari) who is released from prison with his friend Sunday (Charles Kiari) on a presidential pardon as a way of commemorating his birthday. The presidential pardon may also suggest that Muntu and Sunday could have been arrested based on petty cases simply because they are poor. They decide to celebrate by going into a nearby pub. Unfortunately, they are unwelcome because the pub is a frequent venue for the ruling class, highlighted by the presence of the Captain. The drunken Captain is shown staggering around the bar and touching women inappropriately, all of whom are sex-workers except Muna (Sharleen Wanjari). The Captain’s performance emphasises his crude and vulgar treatment of women that he is also shown beating a woman who later dies from the injuries he inflicted on her. Muna is a character of interest because she becomes the protagonist’s (Muntu’s) centre of admiration. Muntu falls for Muna, who happens to be the sister of the sex-worker that the Captain beat up after suspecting her of stealing his money—this chain of
kinship and sexual transaction links the ‘good’ Muna to this world of economic exchange and implies the precarious nature of her own position. Muntu, who was in the vicinity where the incident happened, saves Muna’s sister from the Captain’s wrath and returns the wallet to the Captain. Apparently, the wallet had been stolen from the Captain by Sunday, who is presented as a petty criminal and has resigned to his lifestyle because the system cannot provide anything better for him.

The above plotline sustains a parallelism between the class and social status of Muna and her sister, and Muntu and Sunday, whereby their status is understood to be precarious and conditioned by external forces rather than individual virtue. Two other incidents in the film foreground how the everyday life of the poor is predetermined by the corrupt institutions of the ruling class. When police officers come into the bar to calm a fight between some drunkards and the Captain, they arrest everyone and enforce an ultimatum: either pay two hundred shillings for freedom or be taken to the police cells. In another incident, Muntu is arrested by the city police for vending in the city without due certification; yet, the civil servants supposed to issue certificates to traders are not effectively doing their work. The film demonstrates that, like Maria, Muntu and Sunday, the predicament of the poor are already predetermined as long as they are under the leadership of such disorganised ruling class.

The films further direct the viewers’ attention to the fact that the urban poor are not only harassed by the police but also segregated by other people. In T-Junction, makeshift stalls are erected in an upscale suburb depicting the excesses of the ruling and ruled classes in Africa. The rich have high wall fenced mansions, wear expensive clothes and jewellery, which, when juxtaposed to the excesses of the misery of the poor, brings out the “uncertainties of life under contemporary conditions” from which the rich must protect themselves by high fences (Harrow “Between the Informal” 231). The precarity of the poor people’s is vividly expressed by Mama Maria, who sells food at the Junction when she argues that if they (the poor) do not work, they
will not have anything to eat. And if they all go to the one place designated by the government, they will not all make money. So, in their efforts to survive from their meagre capital and street clients at the Junction, the gated neighbourhood responds by stopping school children from passing at the Junction. Maria emotively tells her friend Fatima that they are called all sorts of names: “That we sell ourselves. We are thieves and gangsters. We gamble and lie. We are reckless ruffians” (*T-Junction* 28:00-29:00). Shivji enhances the nomenclature used to describe Maria and her compatriots by later showing spectators slow-motion montages of the city police beating the traders and destroying their market stalls, an ultimate display of the helplessness of the poor. The brutality meted out on the traders heightens the fear and tension the traders have to live with. Even when they are attacked, they are left to die in cold blood, as seen by the death of Arbo. In this sequence, Shivji is attempting to inspire viewers to protest such ill-treatment.

The films complicates the representation of the elites (civil servants), who as I argued earlier are presented as part of the ruling class by virtue of the public offices they hold. The films depict most of the civil servants as greedy, selfish and utterly incompetent, traits that are depicted as a hindrance to delivery of services to the disadvantaged peoples. In *T-Junction*, for instance, Fatima walks into the hospital to seek treatment over a common cold, but the first contact—a doctor on duty—is engrossed in a telephone conversation, laughing hilariously as if she is not in a public office. The dialogue between Fatima and the doctor shows the casualness with which some elites execute their duties.

**Dr Belinda:** (On phone) Ehne! You don’t tell me. Ooh, that is hot news! (Laughing hilariously).

**Fatima:** Excuse me? Who is seeing patients right now? (Dr Belinda without even looking at Fatima, point to the notice board).

Fatima goes to the noticeboards and sees that it is Dr Belinda on call.

**Dr Belinda:** (continuing to laugh) Wait till the others hear!

**Fatima:** (Not sure whether the doctor on call is Dr Belinda) Dr Belinda?

(*T-Junction* 13:36-14:59)
Dr Belinda, who is continuing the telephone call, picks a folder from her table and tosses it to Fatima without changing the focus or giving Fatima eye contact to acknowledge her presence. Fatima finds her way to the long cue where she sees another doctor after protesting. The other doctor is equally rude. She talks to Belinda without looking at her. We are shown the doctor finalising the procedure by taking the blood sample from Fatima. She wears a tough countenance which could mean a variety of things like she is either stressed because of too much work or she does not have good public relations:

**Dr:** (concentrating on writing in the file) Tomorrow morning.
**Fatima:** Tomorrow morning?
**Dr:** The results will be ready tomorrow morning.
**Fatima:** Do you think it is Malaria?
**Dr:** Tomorrow morning. (Fatima turning away to leave)
**Dr:** Your papers.
**Fatima:** Do you think RITA [Registration, Insolvency and Trusteeship Agency] is still open?
**Dr:** Tomorrow morning.

*(T-Junction 51:17-50).*

However, the following day Fatima meets another female doctor who is cordial and answers all her questions. The point Shivji makes here is that not all middle-class Africans are inefficient, but the majority are either disrespectful to the people they assume to be of lower class or do not take their work seriously. Maria’s sarcastic statement to Fatima, that people do not want to leave the hospital encapsulates the fact that outside of the hospital is worse than in the hospital for people like Maria. It is again because of the ruling class’ laxity in governance that Maria is in the hospital.

The corruption of the ruling class manifest through insensitivity and greed is also seen in *Amaguru n’Amaboko* from Burundi. In this film, a talented teenage orphan footballer has his scholarship stolen from him by the corrupt civil servants, who sell his scholarship to a rich
man’s son. The films, in a way, demonstrate that unless there is an action against the injustices which arise from inequality, the poor, despite their hard work and resilience, may not easily breakthrough. In *Amaguru n’Amaboko*, for instance, Tuguru’s aunt holds the officers accountable. With the support of a kind public servant, the corrupt officials are reprimanded. Also as shown in *Homecoming*, a middle-class young executive is scandalised to discover that his uncle, a politician, together with a group of foreign investors, use proxy wars and the misery of the poor people to exploit money from unsuspecting donors. Homecoming’s protagonist firmly takes action to reprimand the corrupt officials including his kin. The poor are mere pawns to the rich, used only to profit money either as a source of bribery or an alibi for a bribe.

Similarly, in *The Captain of Nakara*, ordinary people’s efforts to have a meaningful life are frustrated by the corruption prevalent among public servants. Muntu’s determination to operate a simple legal business as a city street vendor is frustrated by the civil servants and the corrupt police. The civil servants and business community’s inefficiency is apparent when Muntu has gone to the issuer of the certificate of good conduct so that he can retrieve merchandise held illegally by a businessman. Muntu wishes to raise money for a dowry, and his plan is to sell the merchandise upon which he is dependent. Muntu, finds in office a middle-aged female who is attentively knitting. Without looking at Muntu, she asks, “what are you doing in my office?” Muntu retorts quickly, “I am next.” The officer still intent on her knitting, rudely answers, “there is not next until next is called in?” (*The Captain* 41:47). Muntu exits the office to wait for his turn. While outside on the waiting bench, he meets another young man who dramatically tells him he has spent three days waiting to be served. He talks to Muntu frantically thinking Muntu has come to finally pick his papers and get him served. This short sequence suggests that it is only people who have paid money (bribed), that the lady officer attends to.
People such as Muntu are not only denied services because they cannot afford a bribe; they are also disrespected. However, Nyanja uses stereotypical characterisation to arouse pity for the poor and anguish towards the civil servants. The civil servants and the military leaders are archetypes of the unethical aspect of early independent Africa, where Africans had to run governments after a long period of systematic disempowerment. In another sequence, when Muntu is coming from the washroom (which in this case indicates he has been in the hallway for a long time, waiting for his turn to be served), he bumps into the officer who refused to attend or even look at him. The officer sneaks out of office so that the people waiting for her do not ask to be served which brings to light the fact that the civil servants are aware that they are doing something wrong by not serving people. The dialogue that ensues between her and the desperate Muntu further reveals the decay in the public service.

**Muntu:** (noticing the officer is moving home) Hey! You haven’t attended to me yet!

**Officer:** (Hurriedly) Sorry. I am through for the day.

**Muntu:** But the day is not yet over.

**Officer:** I said I am through for the day (continuing to walk quickly away from Muntu).

**Muntu:** (trotting behind the lady as he explains himself) Yes, madam. It is like this, I need a certificate of good conduct so that I can get the certificate…

**Officer:** (continuing to walk hurriedly) A certificate of good conduct?

**Muntu:** (speaking hurriedly to the lady who is not interested in hearing what he has to say) Yes. When I arrived, they told me to come here and get a certificate. And after that they told me it would be best if I go to room 12, room 12 told me to go to room 16, then room number 2 told me to go to your room, room number 9.

**Officer:** (As she enters her car) Then you are in the right room.

**Muntu:** So, you can help me?

**Officer:** You need a new generation identity card.

**Muntu:** What?

**Officer:** (Igniting her car) A new generation Identity Card. Are you deaf?
Muntu: (Competing with the sound of the car) Where can I get one.
Officer: (Driving off) Central Registry
Muntu: (Speaking to the almost the tail end of the car) But where is the central registry?

(The Captain 43:00-43:56).

Due to incompetence or sheer disrespect, even basic services such as information are denied to an ordinary person. Muntu’s a name which means “person” in Bantu languages, metonymically represents the entire class of ordinary people (bantu in plural). Muntu’s youthful ambitions and desire for effective systems also symbolises the aspirations of a youthful Africa, which has over seventy per cent of the population under thirty-five years of age facing high levels of unemployment and underemployment (Williams, “Africa’s Youth” 30; Anyanwu 2013). The officer in charge of issuing new generation identity cards reflects the rot that is characteristic of many civil servants in Africa.

Through characterisation, The Captain of Nakara also exposes and indicts the grave corruption and its impact on service delivery. Nyanja highlights the fact that not only does systemic corruption in all sectors (from the police to other civil servants) contribute to poor service delivery, it also dehumanises both the receiver and giver. The civil servants as evident in the incident of the woman described earlier to the man, the issuer of the new generation identity cards, the doctors in T-Junction and the traders are represented in what Mbembe calls the “aesthetics of vulgarity” (2001). The filmmakers employ ridicule and ‘vulgar’ words since they are only left with the power of words and art to express their power in an environment where there is immense oppression. As seen in this film and in others, the characters representing the upper and ruling class in their myriad shades are portrayed as too fat, too stupid, and too insensitive. All of them have similar character traits, especially when juxtaposed with the ones from whom they get the bribes. The conversation between Muntu and another
public officer (this time a male in charge of identity cards) underscores the extremes lengths that corrupt officers can go and corruption’s dehumanising effect.

**Officer:** (shouting) Next!

(Muntu enters and stands still not knowing where to go until the officer at the desk directly opposite the entrance door rudely asks:)

What do you want? (Muntu briskly walks towards the man until he is rudely stopped). Eehe, step back, stand back (Muntu follows instructions) Back, back, back, okay, okay, *tena, tena* [again back (my translation)].) Stop! No citizen is allowed to come more than three and a quarter feet from this table. You may be coming here to read our official documents.

**Muntu:** (Not bothered by the silly rules) I need a new generation identity card.

**Officer:** Your name?

**Muntu:** Muntu.

**Officer:** Age.

**Muntu:** Twenty-five.

**Officer:** Height.

**Muntu:** Two feet and (stammers) sorry, sorry.

**Officer:** Occupation?

**Muntu:** I am in the process of getting one.

*(The Captain 44:50-45:35).*

Through a wide shot, the above officer is portrayed as a boss in a large open space office with about four other workers who are inattentive to their work. One is reading a newspaper while the others are engaged in following up the conversation between their boss and the people whom he is serving (Muntu as an example). The officer asks Muntu more questions such as “any scars?” “last known address?” because he is looking for an entry point on how to ask for a bribe from Muntu. Upon discovering that Muntu does not know his father, the officer thinks Muntu may not be a citizen of Kwetu64 and thus asks him to get “tea” a bribe of five thousand

64 KWETU is an imaginary state in Africa. Its nomenclature is derived from the Kiswahili word to mean our place/home
shillings for him to get a card. When he is talking about the bribe, he calls Muntu close to the table he had previously prevented him from coming close to evidence of a double standard. As if feeling guilty for his actions, the officer laughs sardonically telling Muntu that the identity card will be ready when the tea is ready. Nyanja uses such representations to evoke the audience’s repugnance towards the corrupt civil servants and aligns the sympathy of spectators with Muntu. Nyanja understands that his film is a “tool to contribute to awareness” and “fix” the many problems in his society (Interview).

Not only are the civil servants portrayed as incompetent, their colleagues, the political class are also shown to be incapable of supervising the middle class. The Captain of Nakara, moreover, concerns the over-militarisation of African governments in postcolonial Africa, extending the ridicule to the army generals. As if playing to Mbembe’s apt observation that the “realm ridicule” is the only way “that ordinary people locate the fetish of state power…tame it or shut it up and render it powerless,” Nyanja portrays the military leaders of Kwetu as wallowing in drunkenness (109). General Lumumba, who is an important figure in Kwetu, is given an up-close analysis when he crosses paths with Muntu at the cemetery. Muntu is at the cemetery to pay respects to his mother, whom we come to know about through his dialogue with his stepfather that she had passed on two years ago (when Muntu was in prison). Coincidentally, General Lumumba, a gigantic man dressed in military gear, is crying nearby attempting to commit suicide by gun. Muntu swiftly runs to him and struggles to take the gun from his hands. In the scuffle, they shoot a bird in the tree. The general is grateful to Muntu for saving his life. He takes Muntu to his usual drinking venue and orders “the usual two,” which implies he is a regular customer. After several drinks, Lumumba takes Muntu with him to his house and asks his butler to bring decent cloths for Muntu. Muntu later appears dressed in a suit to general Lumumba’s delight. His delight is derived from the similitude between Muntu and his son, who are of the same age. From this incident, we see the humanity and vulnerability
of the ruling class through General Lumumba. It is as though they know what should be done for their citizens, as we see Lumumba not wanting to see Muntu in clothes that are not pleasant.

However, Lumumba, like his colleagues, is shown as comfortable and far removed from the reality of ordinary folks. For instance, Lumumba sleeps in his chair after drinking himself silly. He is under the care of workers (the lower-class) at the taxpayers’ expense. They are suffering from the curse that Sembene’s novella Xala (The Curse) (adapted into film of the same title) symbolised in the curse of “political impotence of the new … African bourgeoisie class” (52). Despite Lumumba’s good nature, he is not represented as a leader whom the audience might entrust with their lives. Ironically, a general with four workers looking after him attempts to end his life, yet people like Sande and Muntu who have nothing good out of life are still optimistic—hence Nyanja’s indictment on these categories of leaders and excesses.

To enhance the ridicule of the ruling class, General Lumumba can be juxtaposed with the drunken Captain we see in the bar. Both are portrayed as social failures to get the viewers antipathy towards such leaders and empathy for a desire to liberate themselves. The president, another military man, is shown mostly in a pictorial representation save for the last sequence where he is dancing senselessly, which indicates his absence from the pressing issues of the state and demonstrates his incapability to govern Kwetu. Similarly, the drunken Captain whom Muntu impersonates is said to have failed in maintaining relationships: his wife chased him, he has misunderstandings with his mother, and we can speculate that he is a failed father. In the three appearances he is shown on screen, first, he is causing mayhem in the club; second, he is drunk, sleeping in prison and undressed by Muntu who mockingly tells him “a soldier doesn’t get drunk, he only gets tired” (The Captain 1:28:50). The third time, he is at Muntu’s wedding dancing staggeringly, which implies that he is already drunk. With the ruling class comprised mostly of social misfits, their inefficiency is debunked, and the sustainability of power seems
highly improbable. The film highlights that it is only a matter of time that such people lose their grip on power, and a new social order be established.

Muntu’s last speech through which he turns himself in for impersonating an officer is a vivid indictment of the ruling class and functions to condense the film’s social message. It also portends to what the lower class can do. Muntu passionately says:

If I had the option of getting a decent job, things would be better. I worked hard to get money, but they would not let me. It is not my fault that things have not worked today. I do believe every citizen has a right to get the right documentation from the government and not to be harassed when they put any business. Why should a civil servant be above the law? Why should we fear the police? Why should we get arrested for being jobless while the government is not providing any jobs? I provided and I did try to provide for myself and for the woman I love. And if that is a crime, arrest me. I am here. I am ready. (The Captain 1:19:30 -1:20:45).

The montage shots of the civil servants, the police, and the army generals reveal that they are clueless to the fact of Muntu’s crime, and their embarrassment, affirms the absence of effective leadership. Muntu signifies a social reality faced by ordinary people at the hands of the inefficient ruling class. The fact that Muntu is not prosecuted for the crime and instead becomes a legendary leader of Kwetu liberates and purges the spectators. His flaws were motivated by the unfair system. Muntu embodies the filmmaker’s example of an ideal African leader.

Another critical facet of the urban poor’s predicament is demonstrated in the way women are treated in the films. The films’ portrayal of women as victims of poverty and abuse (as already mentioned in chapter 5) elicits a contestation of the systematic inequality engendered by patriarchy. Even though there are varying portrayals of women with regard to class, it is clear that educated women can voice their opposition to oppression, while poor women are depicted as another social class that suffer doubly among the urban poor. In T-Junction, Maria, who is very poor, is contrasted with Fatima, who is from a middle-class
family. But Fatima is not significantly different from Maria since she is a child of a maid working with a middle-class Tanzanian family of Indian descent. From Fatima’s heated conversation with her mother, it is probable Fatima was a product of rape since the men in that home stead are presented as teetotalers and aggressive as evidence through an off-screen diegetic sound that revealed horrors of physical and sexual abuse Fatima’s relative (who one time employed Maria) endures. Much as Fatima’s mother remained in the that family, her status as a maid did not change. Here, we again see a subtle indication of the misery the poor and in general women contend with at the hands of men and a classed society. Maria, who appears to be in her twenties, says she has seen her father only three times in her lifetime. She is uneducated and can work only as a maid since her mother endures the uncertainties of operating a street food kiosk to provide for herself and her daughter having been abandoned by Maria’s father.

Similarly, in *The Captain of Nakara*, poor women are presented as sex-workers and sex objects, who can be abused both physically and emotionally. Muna’s sister, a sex worker, is beaten by a drunken army Captain and she later dies from the injuries. When Muna and Muntu report the case to the police, they are discouraged from pursuing legal action because the Captain is a ‘powerful’ nephew to a ‘general’. In such a power dynamic, the women are helpless. In *Kiumeni*, Faith and her sister go to the police to report her boyfriend’s vandalised car. The policeman is keen to help them because he is expecting sexual favours from them. In a clear instance of sexual harassment, he is shown drooling at Faith. In *Girl Child in Dilemma*, a poor but brilliant girl, Sonia is rescued from getting abused by a headteacher because she could not pay her tuition and her father is intent on marrying her off for a hefty bride price. Only Muna, in *The Captain of Nakara*, is empowered enough to dare to slap the drunken Captain for touching her inappropriately. But Muna is also held hostage by her father, a cult leader who uses her as an exorcist in his church. The *Captain of Nakara* and *T-Junction* are
unambiguous about the fact that women suffer poverty and then suffer abuse both by similarly disadvantaged people and the well to do. In other words, poor women are portrayed as the most vulnerable in East African society.

Despite the representation of the poor being treated as non-entities with endless financial problems, the filmmakers underscore the strength and unity among them. They are united and care for each other more than their leaders. For example, the traders in *T-Junction* overwhelm the leaders who want to forcefully evict the them. In the same film, when Arbo is injured, all his colleagues help to drive him to the hospital, and they stay awake at the hospital. When Arbo dies, they mourn together. In another instance, Mangi, one of the makeshift businesspersons, helps to get Maria a job at the middle-class Indian family (Fatima’s home). Mama Maria, despite her meagre capital, can give food on credit to colleagues who have no money to pay, and we see her giving free food to the drunkard cart pusher, Mussa. The traders at the Junction are depicted as concerned about Mussa’s alcoholism. More solidarity is portrayed when the Iman, who also works as a bicycle repairer at the Junction, shields his colleagues in a Mosque when the city police want to arrest them. Meanwhile, the ruling class that should have engaged in a dialogue with the street vendors is absent. Yet, it is evident that the traders care for each other. Shivji uses Maria’s narration to Fatima to give character details of each trader, indicating the depth with which the traders knew each other. Maria, the youngest person of the traders, knows private details about her colleagues.

In *Jongo Love*, a self-reflexive film about the poor youth in Nairobi as they come of age, engage in relationships and hustle to survive in a competitive world, we see solidarity among the slum youth. Bea (Stella Situma) runs away from criminals who are chasing her as a suspect in the death of a wealthy businessman, Kizito. Bea’s mother, a Kisumu sex-worker, has sold her to Kizito, who this time wanted a virgin. He gets excited upon seeing Bea, starts to dance around because he is sure Bea is a virgin he was craving. He pushes his phone under
Bea’s Bra. As his hands reach his zipper, he gets a cardiac arrest and falls on the ground. Bea runs to her mother, who instead of protecting her, just informs Kizito’s henchmen that Bea has arrived. Bea runs to her cousin, Zedi (Samuel Njenga) in Nairobi’s slum, Jongo, where she gets support from Zedi’s business associate Flex (Stonee Jiwe) with whom they become friends. Bea gets support from people in the slums, particularly the youth who we see provide both social and economic aid to each other. Bea is for the example given capital to buy beads for making bracelets by Flex, and she is able to sell them at another friend’s kiosk. As the youth manage their life in the underbelly of crime in Jongo, the ruling class seems far from them. The affluent come to the slums to pick sex-workers and henchmen. As seen in this film and others that focus on the urban poor, the only probable thing is that the poor tend to resort to illegal means of survival.

As Barber elucidates, the films and popular arts about the urban poor tend to revolve around crime because they show “urban hustling, especially by youths who feel themselves to have been abandoned by their elders are put in a position of having to survive on their wits” (Barber 135). It is a common trope to see the youth dealing in drugs and other forms of crime. Unfortunately, the films, subversively show drug dealers as living a decent life. In Bongo na Flavour, and most of Mugurusi’s films, the operations of lower-class people “often crosses the border between legitimate entrepreneurship and theft, deception, fakery or violent crime” (Ibid 135). In the same film, the slum youth decide to sell drugs in the suburbs of the upper-class because they need money to survive. In Manege’s Kiumeni, the drug dealers are presented as rich while in The Captain of Nakara, Sunday and Muntu engage in theft for money. Sunday and Muntu end up planning to steal a drug consignment days after getting out of prison, which only returns them to prison. Muntu escapes from Nakara prison to attend his wedding by impersonating the drunken Captain after stealing a uniform from him. Though Muntu does not become a criminal, to survive in his environment, he is forced to live on his wits: He becomes
a petty criminal. As people become more impoverished and desperate, they drift to crime. The films show that when the powerful steal and enrich themselves from the common resources that would otherwise help everyone, the poor consequently devise other means of survival, one of which is selling drugs to the children of the affluent and stealing from them. The filmmakers illuminate the underlying social insecurity arising from the poor if the ruling class does not set systems that provide opportunities for equitable development.

**The Revolutionary Stance**

As already hinted at in the previous section, the films subtly stress the abhorrible standards of living the poor to arouse pity towards their poverty. As it is evidenced in the films, most filmmakers interviewed claim that they intentionally foreground class disparity issues to awaken the people to use the available structures to demand for equitable distribution of resources. The fact is that Africa is not deficient of resources that can afford all its citizens a decent life. The problem, the filmmakers suggest, is mismanagement by the political class and external influences, the foremost of which is neocolonialism. Irungu, the writer of *Jongo Love*, articulates the ethical responsibility that most filmmakers have to use film “to awaken Africa completely” (Interview). Similar to Irungu’s militant point of view, most films in East Africa foreground the relational injustices to stimulate action from spectators. Shivji, Nyanja, Mugurusi’s oeuvre, among other films discussed in this chapter, are revolutionary films *par excellence* because of the inclusion of overt incidents that model how to struggle for change from undesirable status, or they represent a beginning of action for change. For instance, in *Samaki Mchangani* and *The Captain of Nakara*, we see revolutionary acts that nuance the director’s indication of alternative power paradigms and bold steps towards ending the exploitation of the working poor. The women in *Girl Child in Dilemma* are key figures leading to the arrest and incarceration of the serial molester of girls. In *T-Junction*, the patients in the
hospital complain about delayed services, and the traders refuse to leave the streets at the Junction despite the brutal force used by police.

Shivji oscillates between an overt and covert revolutionary stance in his films. The overall image he presents is of the poor rising to demand for their rights and protesting corrupt leaders, as exemplified in his debut short film Shoeshine. In his second film Samaki Mchangani, Shivji dramatises the workers for the young Tanzanian telecommunication entrepreneur, Godfrey, revolting against him for killing their workmate in a car accident and then disposing her body in the sea. The death of one of their colleagues signifies the ending of the lives of many of the poor whose suburbs we are shown getting razed to the ground for new development enterprises. The people in Samaki Mchangani would have been resettled elsewhere before their neighbourhood is destroyed, but it is not done. The workers, here representing the poor, fault the ruling class signified by Godfrey and his father, the politician, for killing them: they say “[y]ou stole our lives a long time ago…You killed us, Godfrey, you never knew us, and you never will” (Samaki 25:00). In the last shot of Samaki Mchangani, the ordinary citizens decide to forcibly partake of the fish (share) of the land. We are shown everyone picking a handful, but the fish does not reduce in quantity. This is symbolic of the availability of enough resources for everyone. Shivji is suggesting that the problem of inequality only needs good leadership and no corruption for “all citizens to be happy” (to use Muntu’s words). As mentioned in chapter 4, Samaki Mchangani is an exemplary film that represents the contemporary operations of neocolonialism and the apparent pessimism coming from the development of Africa that is blind to the poor. In the same film, Shivji shows close-ups of slums being demolished, people made homeless as forklift demolish their humble dwellings.

A subtle revolutionary stance is also seen in T-Junction. The film begins with the funeral procession of Fatima’s father and ends with the burial of Maria’s friend, Arbo who is
killed by the city patrol police. The deaths may not be related, but the fact that Maria and Fatima are now connected as friends and Fatima’s (from another social class) curiosity to learn about Maria’s world makes the burials scene significant. Maria is resigned to her status quo to which with disillusion she says “we will always be under these people’s feet. Alive ...or dead. This is just how things are” (*T-Junction* 1:38:50-1:39:11). Maria’s resignation to suffering is effective in stimulating her friend and, by implication, the spectators to act upon the imbalances. These two aggrieved girls’ issues are illuminated through the parallel sequences of the funeral, but, even more, their humanity is dramatised when Fatima breaks down into tears after learning about Arbo’s death. Much as *T-Junction* foregrounds Maria’s story, it also wants us to question Fatima’s story. Overall, the lower and middle-class are both suffering in different ways. However, both the poor and rich share a cemetery as portrayed in a sequence of Arbo’s funeral, both the poor and rich end in the same cemetery which levels class. Shivji is suggesting that Maria and Fatima’s group should act and resist the upper-classes’ “feet.” Shivji is hinting at potential solidarity across class sections which should reduce polarisation and galvanise momentum for change.

Using Muntu as a symbol of hope for the young generation, Nyanja in *The Captain of Nakara* is also telling the youth not to give up in the struggle for equality. Muntu pursues the right certificates allowing him to trade legally even if it means breaking the law by impersonating a drunken Captain of Nakara and raiding the public offices to force the officers to issue him an identity card. This desperation is also seen in Mugurusi’s *Bongo Na Flavour* (Tanzania), where a young man comes to the city hoping to find a job. Upon realising that he cannot easily acquire the certificates (almost equivalent to the ridiculous certificate of good conduct in *The Captain of Nakara*) to enable him trade legally, he decides to deal in drugs that he sells to the children of the ruling class. The decision of the peri-urban folks to deal in
illegitimate entrepreneurship is subversive and portends an instability that will affect all. Hence these narratives draw attention to their urgency.

Several films conclude their narratives with subversive scenes that allude to or overtly indicate a dramatic overturn of the present system of government. In *The Captain of Nakara*, we see Muntu taking over the leadership when he impersonates the drunken Captain. On the contrary, unlike the corrupt and lazy ruling class, he is applauded by the military that he commands for being efficient. Muntu is used here to indict the inefficiency and corruption prevalent in the civil servants. For when he decides to supervise the civil servants, albeit, for selfish reasons—to get an identity card—he almost causes a revolution on the street. In one sequence, outside the public servant’s office block, Muntu orders the people who are outside waiting to be served to ask the officer to return their ‘tea’ (the bribe), which elicits revolt. The people believe they were getting orders from a government official, which in a sense implies the start of public’s demand for accountability. Muntu then also recovers a lot of items from the corrupt policemen, items that range from jewellery, money, alcohol, and chicken. As much as the viewers know that Muntu has stolen the drunken Captain’s uniforms (a nephew to the president), escaped from prison together with his friend Sunday (they were taken back to jail for stealing a drug consignment on his wedding eve) because he wants to attend his wedding desperately, the spectators can only pity him and applaud his wits and resolve. Muntu’s escapades foreground the over-militarisation, corruption and inefficiency that are rampant in Africa.

Nyanja further ridicules the militarisation of the government to imply that ordinary people should not support such kinds of leadership. As already argued in the previous section, all military men are present in a farcical manner. The drunken Captain is seen saluting the president’s picture, which hung in the toilets as if for patrons to ask for permission to urinate. These extreme reflections of the infallibility (or rather inefficiency) of the military junta is
demonstrated when Muntu, by merely dressing in military uniform, commands a section of military men who were returning to the barracks. They obey him without any queries or even suspicion that they could be dealing with an imposter. Under normal circumstances, the military men would not follow an unfamiliar captain’s instructions without resistance. But Muntu’s uniform is similar to that worn by the president and general Lumumba. Muntu uses his power given to him by the military uniform to command all the errant civil servants and police to order. He threatens the issuer of the new generation identity card with execution for “failing to deal with the people the government is paying” her for (The Captain 1:14:00). Surprisingly, Muntu is able to acquire his new generation identity card and certificate of good conduct in minutes. This short sequence is a vote of no confidence in military leadership. It shows that instead of establishing systems that have checks and balances, it uses threats and fear which the civil servants learn to circumvent while the ordinary people continue to suffer.

Nyanja’s revolutionary stance is further epitomised by the film’s elevation of an ordinary character like Muntu as the epitome of ethical leadership, a characterisation that further furnishes the narrative’s evidence of the failure of the ruling class to govern the country effectively. Despite having the power of the military, Muntu follows the right procedures to get his identity card. Otherwise, Muntu was capable of getting a certificate of good conduct without presenting the identity card. He shares the money he gets from the corrupt police officers with the team of military men he worked with, for which his juniors commend him. With precision, Muntu was able to bring changes into the two officers he intended to teach a lesson. Muntu’s short military stint is what becomes the legend of the Captain of Nakara. Of course, legends are usually stories of heroes of past times. Using a real traditional storyteller who directly addresses the spectators (discussed in chapter 2), Nyanja is urging spectators to learn from this story to address the present loopholes in governance in East Africa and Africa at large. It is evident in The Captain of Nakara and in Shivji’s films that there is an attempt to
raise the consciousness of the working-class and generally the oppressed majority to resist the ruling class and, where possible, overthrow them.

**The Precarity of Social Class**

Despite the representation of extremities between the poor and the rich, the films depict social class as unstable. This precarity of social class is encapsulated by Tanzanian scholar, Issa Shivji in his proposition: “today’s capitalist arose from the yesterday’s petty bourgeoisie...[and] today’s African bureaucrat can trace his class origin to yesterday’s African peasant” (15). Shivji is implying the fluidity between social class in postcolonial Tanzania. But his insight can be applied to the rest of East Africa as I have sought to show. The filmmakers interviewed for this thesis, to recall, foreground the social instability of African economic life in a manner that blurs class lines. The films capture this precarity of social class by depicting the fluidity between the binaries of being rich and poor, being peasant and elite, having political power and losing it (as seen in, for instance, *The Captain of Nakara* and *T-Junction*).

Furthermore, the films sometimes show social class as non-existent because of their temporality or rather they are not absolute, but contingent on a whole host of factors. Instead, there is a temporary political and economic fortune or power that determines the temporal class of characters, of which such power is not permanent. As I have already argued in *The Captain of Nakara*, the protagonist’s social status changes by the time the narrative ends. Similar changes in social status are evidenced in *Bongo na Flavour*, in which a poor aspiring musician, Zopa (Harry Kaale), keeps focused on his goal with the support of his old friend, Anita (Gordliver Gordion). It is extremely challenging for Zopa, living in the slums of Dar-es-Saalam where he does all sorts of casual labour jobs, including vending drugs and having to humble himself to subsist off his female friend, Anita (a condition he struggles to come to terms with as an African man who is socialised not be dependent on a woman). Zopa is more determined to change his status. In many other films, formerly impoverished characters are given hopeful
and joyful endings, such endings which amount to typical representations of the rags to riches narratives. Education is presented as an ultimate game-changer in the protagonist’s fortunes as they swing from lower to middle-class) as seen in films such as Girl Child in Dilemma, Forced Marriage, Windows of Hope, and Les Gros Cailloux.

From a sociological perspective, Neubert points out that “individual up and downward mobility is possible, but in general, people keep their class position” (93). Despite this social reality, the films stress that class mobility in both directions is possible, with high prospects for upward mobility. Upward mobility is suggested as a likelihood due to the coexistence of “capitalist and pre-capitalist structures” in East Africa (Neubert 94). The owners of capital—the economic bourgeoisie—are often portrayed as the stooges of neocolonial interests (which affects their class as a result) while the peasant farmers (who mostly) have absolute control of their means of production, farming and may be able to generate wealth, educate their children and change their social status. The conflict between the economic and political bourgeoisie against the working class is demonstrated in Nyanja’s The Captain of Nakara, a film that subverts power structures by presenting the lower-class as better leaders than the corrupt ruling class. Shivji’s films T-Junction, Samaki Mchangani and Shoeshine, too, question the beneficiary of Africa’s economic development and expose the neocolonialism and sheer inefficiency of the ruling class. Nyanja and Shivji, like other filmmakers exploring class conflicts in East Africa, are exemplars of Mbembe’s imagined postcolony scenario, in which the “subordinates” vividly “re-affirm or subvert the power” (133). Sometimes, power is subverted by creating parallel power structures or deliberately remaining oblivious of the existing power structures. This is made possible when the narratives portray the ruling class as absent or far removed from the ordinary people, as demonstrated by the youth in Jongo Love and the traders in T-Junction. In Jongo Love, we see intense episodes of criminal activity in the Kisumu and Nairobi slums, which suggests the absence of police, a branch of the ruling class.
In contrast, in *T-Junction* the police who are expected to enforce law and order are seen using unlawful means to evict traders off the streets. With such representations that subvert power structure, the power of the ruling class is contingent on the mass consciousness of the injustices at stake.

Instability of social class is shown by the fluid interactions between individuals of varying social classes through either the suburb of residence or the nature of the job. As already argued, because the rich live off the labour of the poor, the poor live in the same suburbs as the rich or on the outskirts, making possible daily interactions between them as shown in *T-Junction* and *The Captain of Nakara*. In *T-Junction*, Maria works at Fatima’s home while in *The Captain of Nakara* general Lumumba keeps about four servants in his house. The poor and the rich intermingle at local drinking venues. Even in exclusive venues, the poor can bribe their way into them. Also, in *The Captain of Nakara*, General Lumumba meets Muntu at a cemetery where both have buried family members and friends. Muntu becomes acquainted with the General, and his social class changes when the general orders his workers to get for Muntu decent clothes. Muntu’s costumes transform him into an executive, and he is able to hide his true identity from Muna because he is dressed like a working-class man. Besides Muntu’s new outfit foreshadowing his later role as a leader, he is a typical example of the fact that social class in Africa is unstable. One’s social status changes depending on education (that secures one a decent job), political position and money. Poor people, whose livelihood is from doing illicit business, such as drug and human trafficking, are portrayed as living an upper-class lifestyle inexpensive houses, cars, clothes and all the commodities that elevate their status (cf *Kiumeni*, *Bongo na Flavour*, *Ishu ya Simu* etc.) Even for drug dealers who are seen to be financially stable, they face potential downward mobility when they, for example, get arrested.

Another highlighted factor that determines mobility in social class is romantic love. Love bridges the gap between people of different social class and ethnicity. This is critically
dramatised in Jean Kwezi’s *Umutoma* (Rwanda). *Umutoma* is a lyrical representation of the dynamics and complexity of ‘love’ when a young woman, Bwiza (Kate Katabarwa), has to choose between two men from opposite social classes—the working-class mechanic, Richard (Edward Bamporiki), or the middle-class businessman, Mario (Yves N. Nkusi). The film opens with a conversation on whether love precedes class or class determines love. Kwezi critiques materialism when the protagonist prefers the rich man over the poor childhood boyfriend. Yet the film develops the spectators’ sympathy towards Richard, who is warm-hearted, hardworking, honest, and poetic (he sings his love for Bwiza). On the other hand, Mario is seen as physically aggressive and non-committal since he has another girlfriend to whom he is abusive. Through Bwiza choosing Mario, a potential abuser over Richard, Kwezi is suggesting that people are increasingly marrying for status rather than love. We can assume that Bwiza’s status is changed by her marriage to Mario. Similarly, Manege’s *Kiumeni* complicates or rather debunks the presentation of materialism in *Umutoma*. Manege represents love triumphing over materialism when a rich boy chooses to relate with a poor girl over a rich one.

Besides love bringing people from two different social classes together, there is a certain romantic conception of class that emerges across these films, exemplified mostly in films that centre on a love plot. What is strikingly explicit is the idea that love in relationships and marriages as an elevating factor of social status is not only portrayed in narratives where a poor girl meets a rich boy, but also in cases of a poor boy meeting a rich girl which introduces a dynamic of gender equality discussed in chapter 4. In all these narratives, there is an exaggerated idyllic moralisation that underlines the character traits of a potential partner versus their economic status. The films contrast the rich and the poor in terms of their ethical values such as honesty, respect for humanity and hard work. Manege’s *Chausiku* and *Kiumeni*, for instance, depicts the poor, lower-class women as preferred by middle-class men over the rich, middle-class women who are characterised as materialistic and vain. Most films seem to imply
that a high social status erodes the virtue of humility. Similarly, the poor men as exemplified by Zopa in *Bongo na Flavour* and Jasper in Mariam Ndagire’s *Belated Trouble* are depicted as simple, honest and focused as opposed to the high-class men in the same films who are conceited and disrespectful. As I have already mentioned, Zopa is helped by his high school mate, Anita. Anita leaves a middle-class boyfriend because he is very possessive, controlling and abusive. She also foregoes the comfort of being a chauffeur driven by a rich boyfriend for Zopa, who has no financial wealth except for his talent of rapping and virtue. Zopa’s social class changes when he is supported by Anita, an independent and professional woman. Likewise, in Ndagire’s *Belated Trouble*, a doctor from a wealthy family divorces a man from another rich family because he is disrespectful to the extent of bringing women in his marital home. She then falls in love with a poor man from the slums of Kampala (whose status changes) because of his genuine disposition. In all the narratives about love, there is upward and sometimes downward mobility of social class because of love and relationships.

As much as there is there is a significant moralistic dimension to the depiction of class status and mobility that hinges on characters’ dispositions, their values and virtuous actions, connect to the overarching subversive intention by screen-griots to collapse class distinctions. The revolutionary actions of characters to overcome oppression, whether from the upper class or lower class, seem to be guided by and intertwined in love which is a classless relation. Love reorients and modifies collective, revolutionary action. It is evident that relational politics is a subject to continue being discussed in order to archive equal opportunities uninhibited by class. For the films depict everyone disregarding class as capable of good leadership and virtue if given enabling conditions to test their potential. Through the heroic actions of the characters from poorer backgrounds such as Muntu, it is evident that any solution to the problem of class inequality is driven by charismatic individuals who can guide collective action and systemic change.
Conclusion

Two key points are drawn from the preceding analysis of films representing social class. First, social class is most often characterised across the films in this chapter as dependent on social connections, levels of education and financial status. Second, social class is unstable because there is both upward and downward mobility. For those belonging to the lower class, their genuine hard work, education and relationships of love are seen as a means by which one’s social class can change. The established elitist and foreign class structures set by the ruling class can be subverted by the ruled, as seen in The Captain of Nakara, where the filmmaker proposes an ex-convict for exemplary leadership. Like in Achebe’s Things Fall Apart a classic African novel in which an African sense of social stratification is highlighted, we see filmmakers such as Nyanja foregrounding the African ideals of class—hard work and decency of character—that Okonkwo embodies. Okonkwo, a son of a leper, works hard and builds his reputation as a strong family man with big farms and a sense of patriotism. Through his achievements, he joins the table of elders of Umuofia village. In contrast, at the end of The Captain of Nakara, Muntu, a fatherless ex-convict, becomes a leader in Kwetu simply because he was virtuous and determined to change his class-status. The film seems to suggest, like the other films discussed in this chapter, that class is not only dependent on political and economic power, but that it has a social nuance to it: class is shaped in part by the values, agency and intention of characters. Indubitably, most East African films represent social class to expose the growing gap between the ruling and ruled class to elicit a discourse on the class injustices, particularly the corruption and inefficiency leadership of the ruling class elites, who have consistently exacerbated the relational conflicts between them and the majority working-class.
Chapter 7: Conclusion: Framing Regionality and Cultural Identity in Film

In this thesis, I set out to explore the emerging themes and aesthetics in East African cinema of the 21st century via third cinema theory as an over-arching paradigm from which I located the concept of the griot aesthetic. I initially began the research with a hypothesis that East Africa should have a unique film aesthetic, mainly because of its geopolitics, geolinguistics and complex social-cultural connection within East African Community states and the neighbouring countries. As ambitious as it seemed, the study hinged on existing political and social structures, such as the EAC and regional arts festivals to conceptualise various national cinemas into a single entity—East African cinema. As much as a semblance of homogeneity existed on macro-political level, this study aimed at exploring the social aspect of identity through the films’ emerging discourses, presumed to be subtly creating new ideologies that can be understood to be supplanting the political-ideological mantras usually far removed from ordinary people. As Andrew Higson has argued, “the process of nationalist mythmaking is not simply an insidious (or celebratory) work of ideological production but is also at the same time a means of setting one body of images and values against another, which will very often threaten to overwhelm the first” (54). In this case, an exploration of East Africa’s cinematic imaginaries, still in its budding stages, is beginning to shift toward visualising how the arts are framing the regionality of East Africa, rather than mythologising a super-state. This study established that there are major similarities in themes and aesthetics, despite the complexities of the films emanating from various national cinemas in East Africa and the different screen-griot’s artistic interests and influences.

This study established that the different regional cinemas begin almost simultaneously and are kickstarted by more or less similar factors and interests. The homogenous industry dynamics are key in determining the aesthetics and themes of East Africa cinema. That is, most of the industries are influenced by dominant cinemas, such as Hollywood, Nollywood and
Bollywood, and they operate in a neo-liberal economy whereby film production is contingent on the rules of demand modelling themselves on the Nigerian and Ghanaian film industries with little systematic government support. The economic structure has its drawbacks as it creates room for mainly commercial films and little space for artistic festival films as seen in most of the selected films. As much as the films emanate from various countries across the region, their primary market is the Swahili speaking African countries (concentrated in East Africa and the Great Lakes Region), the pay-tv M-net African Magic channels and local television industry that broadcast to a wider audience in and out of Africa. To harness the potentially large East African market, there has been tremendous increase in collaboration between the region’s practitioners through co-productions, and casting of actors. Film festivals have also become popular platforms to exhibit films across the region with each country having an annual festival, in which an East African category has been designed created in order to recognise and affirm the sense of regionality, as well as promoting “film collaborations across borders” (Villazana 26). Despite the films having their national identity underlined (potentially at use of specific national languages), their themes and paraphernalia engender a regional signature of an East African identity which distinguishes East African cinema from other major African regional cinemas.

Remaining cognisant of East Africa’s geopolitical dynamics that were enabling a conception of a homogenous cinema, this study explored films from the EAC community to see how they frame the region in terms of its themes and aesthetics. The study used mainly textual analyses through which films from six East African countries were selected to be analysed, specifically for emerging themes and aesthetics. This was enhanced with interviews and a plethora of critical material on African cinema. The method of my analysis was chosen because of the conspicuous absence of East African Cinema in the broad locus of African cinema. A mixed research method enabled me to locate the region’s cinematic imaginaries in
two significant ways: the emerging themes that I broadly determine from their discourses and the emerging aesthetics that I derive from the overarching formal aspects on the films. From my film analysis and the filmmakers’ own sense of the closely-knit regional cinema, the study made the following findings.

Aesthetics

*The East African film oeuvre is not big enough for us to be measured on whether we have a concrete style. But generally, our movies tend to be social realist. Maybe the themes influence the style.*

— Bob Nyanja Kenyan filmmaker

Nyanja’s assertion sums up East African cinema in terms of industry and aesthetic directions. The study has discovered two parallel aesthetic trends operating side by side—the artistic experimental side consisting of people who want to contribute to world cinema by showing how African film aesthetics can grow the language of film, and filmmakers who parody dominant filmic codes but maintain their sense of identity through overt didacticism in what manifests as edutainment, otherwise called didacticism. In summary, the latter category consists of popular filmmakers who experiment from the genres and audiovisuals at their disposal by largely drawing on Hollywood, Bollywood, Chinese and Nollywood styles. What both categories share, as evidenced in the films and the interviews, is a concern to explore the best ways to adapt oral literature entirely or its aesthetics into film. Indeed, early scholarship on African Cinema has linked the exaggerated makeup, costume and acting to the influence of traditional drama (Ekwuazi 23). The filmmakers rely on the traditional oral literature aesthetics, particularly orality, narrative structure and didacticism in varying degrees which are contingent on a filmmaker’s interests. Just as Haile Gerima observed that African filmmakers are taught film outside of Africa, which complicates visual storytelling as filmmakers struggle to
“sustain” the African “ways of telling” stories as they continue to “learn how to use the [film] medium” and indigenise it (Gerima, qtd. in Ukadike “Questioning” 274). Among East African filmmakers, indeed, there is a unanimous understanding among the interviewed filmmakers that the griot aesthetic is part and parcel of their creativity that they are struggling to depict concretely.

The films exhibit a collage of aesthetics—the realistic Sembene aesthetic that is interwoven in the didacticism of the griot aesthetic, the Hollywood genre aesthetic and the Second Cinema auteur aesthetic (manifested in the Euro-African collaborations). However, the latter two groups of aesthetics are subdued by African filmmakers’ ethical, social, and political responsibility which is a kernel of Third Cinema aesthetic. The overall foregrounding of social issues is an aspect of the griot aesthetic, which aims to spark debate and continue the discourse on what the screen-griots deem as significant. As shown in the body of my thesis, there is a deliberate effort to use film to address the discourses of immigration of Africans to the West, gender hierarchy and its resultant effects, the increasing gap between classes and above all the narration of African history. However, film’s social clout is increasingly getting challenged. As African diasporic auteur, Raoul Peck argues: “[w]e have done all we can, yet the world hasn’t changed: so much conviction for nothing!” (qtd. in Barlet, Contemporary 10). Peck’s rather pessimistic assertions problematise the contemporary African filmmakers who foreground the didacticism of their art/films, hopeful that their films could cause social change.

Despite scepticism about the efficacy of film as a tool for social change, East Africa’s screen-griots are undeterred from employing edutainment accentuated by realism. Moreover, after six decades of African cinema and two decades of East Africa’s cinema, the filmmakers are partaking of oral literature’s primary role: to educate and entertain. Nyanja sums up this aesthetic orientation while commenting on his work: “when I look at my society, my country, I see so much that fixing. As a filmmaker, I can use my tool to contribute to awareness.
Therefore, I tell a story to entertain as well as make firm comments on the themes that the film is delving into” (Interview). A similar position is held by most East African filmmakers interviewed for this study. Even among filmmakers who claim that their primary goal is to entertain, interestingly, their films entail a strong sense of didacticism in their work, as seen in Stephen Wasswa, Daniel Manege, Matt Bish and Kivu Ruhorahoza’s oeuvre.

As much as contemporary studies on Africa cinema claim that “there is no one predominant trend, and each filmmaker is fashioning a personal authorial style and recognisable signature running from extreme minimalism to large-scale dramatic action,” East African filmmakers are distinct in their foregrounding of the socio-political aspect of their narratives for identity (William 15). The focus of didacticism and social realism is of course informed by the filmmakers’ perception of the griot’s role. East African cinema may still be looking for its signature on the continental and global cinema stage. However, from the analysed films, it is evident that the emerging trend is determined mainly by its themes and ideas—the films’ social function is critically identified as didacticism (Diang’a 2016). Kahiu elaborates on her filmmaking experience and how it relates to style:

I think my style is my themes, and I don’t usually do one genre. My theme for a long-time standing has been belonging. Usually, my main character is looking for a sense of belonging. Also, another thing that I am actively injecting into my films is a theme of hope and joy (Interview).

Kahiu’s articulation resonates with the majority of East African screen-griots’ approach to narrative film. Her views can be extended to many other filmmakers, who agree that filmic codes are universal, but the difference is only in the specificity of the language of the story and the historic incidents. As evidenced in this study, a film representing gender or class conflicts in any East African country mostly underscores the same ideas in another country in the same region, a fact that can be extended to the rest of sub-Saharan Africa. What marks out the region or country will be the languages used in the film. For instance, the Kiswahili language hints at
East Africa or Kinyarwanda may help locate the film in Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda and DRC. The universality of themes and discourses with culturally specific codes of representation underscores East Africa’s niche on world cinema and is a means to achieve an authentic African aesthetic.

**Emergent themes**

As the study examined the major thematic strands that were emerging out of East Africa’s films from the 2000s, it faced the crucial challenge of determining select themes and ideas for the criterion which guided my research. The broad scope, which I opted for, gave the thesis an unbridled breadth in terms of emerging themes. Thus, for a better understanding of the emerging discourses, films were categorised along simple but broad thematic lines and then were condensed into the most significant aspects that are dominant therein. The study discovered that East African screen–griots, like any other millennial filmmakers in Africa have eclectic themes that range from the “longstanding issues such as neocolonialism and neo-exploitation, state corruption, and the clash of traditions and modernity,” to the novel subjects that depict the contemporary issues such as migration, social stratification, poverty, gender and Afro-optimism and the reclaiming of African identity (William 13). It is these similar experiences that account for homogenous representation, yet also bring out the unique experiences in each country.

This thesis claims that the emergent themes reflect a complex homogeneity of East Africa. I call it complex because of its geographical width and the numerous nation-states therein, from which the screen-griots operate and pick stories that are meant to reflect local experiences. The homogeneity in representations is deduced from what the screen-griots distil and capture as pertinent discourses. The similarity in themes is mostly due to analogous social and political developments and a shared history of borders enforced by colonialists. Thus, despite the disjuncture of East Africa separated as it is by national borders,
the interconnection more than the disconnection between East African countries emerge as stronger determinants of East African subjective imaginaries. It is evident from East Africa’s historical imaginaries that the region contends with borders that divide people of same pre-colonial African states, the forced Western concept of democracy and all the complex dynamics of neo-colonialism which manifest, in some sense, in “horrendous tragedies” of war and other social instabilities (Nkunzimana 82). This is demonstrated in films such as *Kony: orders from Above*, S.R.B: *State Research Bureau* from Uganda; *Sometimes in April*, *Kinyarwanda*, *Imbabazi: The Pardon*, *The Mercy of the Jungle*, *Grey Matter* from Rwanda; and *From a Whisper* and *Something Necessary* from Kenya; and *Our Big Fear* from South Sudan. However, as argued by the filmmakers, the significance of these historic films is the authenticity of representation and self-determination in a broader context of gross misrepresentations of Africa as devoid of a “past,” “history” and philosophy (Andindilile 2016). The colonial and postcolonial instabilities prominent in the films are dramatized from a subjective point of view in what I see as the screen-griots’ attempt to write history, highlighting the factors that underlie the internal cohesion, conflicts and the potential solutions to the predicaments.

The historical imaginaries are aimed at countering the misrepresentations of the region that were spread by Hollywood films about the region’s history, particularly the turbulent postcolonial history. Besides the region’s dramatic history, its geographical magnificence had drawn Hollywood and other international film producers into using it as a setting for exciting and controversial films, in which the representations of East Africans are contested. Films such as *King Solomon’s Mines*, *Mogambo*, *Hatari*, *Out of Africa*, *Mountains of the Moon*, *The Rise and Fall of Idi Amin*, *Mississippi Masala*, *Congo*, *The Ghost in the Darkness*, *Hotel Rwanda* ,*The Constant Gardner*, *The Last King of Scotland*, are contested depictions of the region. Western films that promoted the patronising and stereotypical representations of Africa stimulate a counter-discourse that aims at challenging those misrepresentations and taking
charge of images coming out of Africa. These subjective articulations of East African experiences, particularly its turbulent times, by Africans or African diaspora point to a positive step towards a reconstruction of the damages caused by Western film, literature and media.

All the emerging themes in East African cinema are in some sense playing out the tagline of one of the most prominent East African film mentoring organisations, Maisha Film Lab: “If we don’t tell our stories, no one else will.” This tagline encapsulates the filmmakers’ griotic aspiration to look at their histories, experiences, contradictions and achievements. The many rhetorical questions emanating from the discourse in the films aim at raising mass consciousness as they are presented in Franz Fanon’s “literature of combat” (155). A subjective representation of history in film is not just entertainment but a version of history from a given point of view. As Raoul Peck avers, representing history in film demonstrates a growing consciousness of Africans to own and shape their history, and it is a much-needed bold step to rectifying their identity (Pressley-Sanon and Saint-Just 2015). The films on conflicts, be it in relational, gender conflicts and other East African social realities historicise the wars, violence, radicalisation, and the determination of East Africans to overcome these challenges.

As such, film is one of the mediums Africans (and in this context East Africans) are using to challenge the negative stereotypes of the continent by providing storylines that counter the existing provocative images that promote and maintain the ‘dark continent’. As Kabore rightly observes that film should be used for “development”, it is evident the portrayal of positive narratives highlighting Africa’s developments, to a large extent, are to spark a conversation to discourage unnecessary and risky migration to the West (as seen in Owusu’s Flight Path, Home Coming and Welcome Home (Kabore qtd in Pfaff 2). The tendency to use film to correct misrepresentations about Africa by the West is not the only preoccupation of East African filmmakers, there is, however, immense desire for representations that touch on
immediate social issues. East Africans appropriate film to tell themselves and the world their history, their intricacies, and their culture. To use Michael Andindilile’s words, the filmmakers are using “their own world view and their own interpretation of Truth and Being” after a long time of “operating on the margins of the centre of Western discourse” (129). The subjective representations of migrations, for example, underline the misconceptions about economic migrants. The migrants are victims of Afro-pessimism and the systematic misrepresentations of Africa which manifests as a subtle self-hate that drives Africans to migrate to the so-called first world, who then anticipate finding a ‘new world’.

The screen-griots are cognizant of the potency of film as a medium of communication. Nkunzimana claims that a contemporary African filmmaker has the “ability to transfigure their own world, to transform ordinary people and everyday situations into inspiring heroes and extraordinary moments, so as to make individuals and communities come to terms with themselves and live with dignity despite hardships” (86). There is a plethora of films about the dynamics of social stratification in contemporary East Africa in which class (understood as a Marxist category of stratification) is deconstructed and constructed in light of the practicalities of how class manifests in East Africa. Class is seen to comprise of complex subclasses. The most privileged are the political leaders, the intelligentsia and the businessmen, who, together make the petit bourgeois that is pitted against the lower-class: peasant and urban working-class people. The complexity and conflicts caused by social stratification in East Africa is the locus of what the screen-griots are communicating to spectators. As identified in my analysis, the films thematise the desire for a bridge to be constructed between the social classes. The poor have to be respected and poverty alleviated since ending poverty is key to the UN’s Millennium Development Goals and Sustainable Development Goals. The films also highlight the hindrances to equitable social development such as neoliberalism, corruption and neocolonialism that must be stamped out of Africa.
Drawing on the mode of the filmmakers’ social responsibility to relay messages that entertain as well as educate, the gender conflicts are presented with a subversive stance. Most of the filmography reveals a representation of strong women who are in prestigious positions in public spheres contrary to the norm under patriarchy where women are mainly depicted, as leaders in private life sphere: as mothers, supporters and nourishers of the family. As I argued in chapter five, the representation of empowered women is not new in African cinema; it is a re-appropriation of the power that women had and should have (Amadiume 2016). Yet, the films also suggest a careful negotiation of patriarchy’s discourses of femininity and masculinity. For both are shown to require readjustment to suit the contemporary challenges in a world increasingly showing signs of equal opportunity and pay between men and women.

Conclusion

Cognizant of its broad ambit, this study focused on the renowned aesthetic that has defined African cinema—orality (griot aesthetic). Even in the griot aesthetics, only a few formal aspects were explored. As aptly expressed by the filmmakers, East African cinema is comprised of novel and small national cinema industries that need more research into their stylistics. This study, therefore, has sought to situate East African cinema historically and geographically, with close attention to its unique aesthetic in comparison to films produced in Nollywood and Hollywood. If we take Dusabejambo’s observations that “East Africans are kind of shy, you see something that could come out as a distinct style, but again it varies with various filmmakers,” it means that future studies could as well follow auteurs across the region to establish what East African cinema is contributing to world cinema. East African cinema’s growth will be accelerated by criticism. Film, like other arts, entails cultivating Africa’s cultural relevance on the continent and in the global domain. This study underscores the region’s visibility in film academia. However, African film aesthetics does not have to be judged by other film aesthetics. For instance, East African comedy does not have to be like a
Hollywood comedy for it to deserve critical attention. Despite the complexities that come with visualising oral, formal styles, the filmmakers, continued appropriation of the griot aesthetics adeptly makes space for East Africa’s cinema both on the continent and globally.
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