



Rachael Diang'a

# African Re-creation of Western Impressions

A Focus on the Kenyan Film



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## DEDICATION

To Melvin  
whose *joie de vivre*  
always gave me the impetus to move on.

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## DEFINITION OF TERMS

Film	-	Feature-length audio-visual electronic theatre
	-	Film industry
Image	-	Characteristic way of appearance, behaviour and way of life in general
Kenyan film	-	A film made and shot in Kenya with Kenyan film practitioners in control of the major roles like directing, editing, acting, producing and (sometimes) funding. It tells a Kenyan (African) story taking the Kenyan (African) perspective
African	-	This is used in this work to mean a black person of African origin
Kenyan Filmmaker	-	An indigenous Kenyan involved in making Kenyan films
African Film	-	Visual works on Africa, telling an African story from an African perspective
Western film	-	In this study we will consider this to mean films made by Western directors
Exoteric	-	Of an outsider, or one who does not belong to a certain community
Isoteric	-	Of an insider
Positive image-		The representative characteristics of an object or a person
Negative image-		The usually undesired characteristics of an entity which unfairly represent the entity

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## CHAPTER ONE

### 1. INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Background to the Study

For many African filmmakers, cinematic expression is closely linked to decolonization, a theme that has largely dominated the post-independent creative works in Africa.<sup>1</sup> In most African countries, filmmaking gained roots after independence. Consequently, African filmmakers have used film to bring out the impact of Western ideologies on the Africans.<sup>2</sup>

Over time, Western films have characterised the African by an incapacity for rational thought.<sup>3</sup> The African has been portrayed as a debased individual in various works of Literature. This portrayal is part of the false historical and cultural ideology formed about the African, which is best disseminated by cinema (and its by-product, television).<sup>4</sup> According to Michael Parker and Rodger Starkey, this image "... can be seen in much of the television representation of Africa by the Western media, which portrays Africa in perpetual crisis and continues to fix the indigenous peoples as passive, infectiously smiling or suffering backdrops for white politicians and aid workers" (p.6).

Lola Young says "the Africans' skin colour became the defining characteristic, and black, from operating at the connotative level, shifted to a denotative plane: to be black was to be evil, to be hypersexual, to be morally debased, to be inferior" (p.40). Most Western films on Africa were therefore products of this colonial mentality.<sup>5</sup> The films are replete with this falsifying image of the African. Recently, subversion of the image

of the African in cinema has emerged as an area of interest to many scholars.<sup>6</sup> Several Kenyan filmmakers have shown specific concern about the image of the African as portrayed in the western film. Anne Mungai, a Kenyan filmmaker says that in general, this is one of the several concerns of an African filmmaker.<sup>7</sup>

Mungai's position is shared by Wanjiru Kinyanjui, another Kenyan filmmaker, who believes it is her duty to re-present the African through film. She says:

... in every film I do, I try to correct the negative image we have of ourselves by trying to portray Africans, from the human side. Of course human beings err, and are never perfect, but there are also positive sides to us, which never surface in films made by outsiders. These I try to include in my films. And if I portray a character as basically negative, it is because we also have such characters, which (sic) exist everywhere. It is a quest to question, to probe, to rediscover qualities using cinema as a tool.<sup>8</sup>

## **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

The problem examined in this study is two-fold. From the above accounts, this study postulates that among other preoccupations of Kenyan filmmakers, responding to the portrayal of the African in the Western films is pivotal. Formally or informally, several Kenyan filmmakers have admitted that re-presenting the African is one of their major roles.<sup>9</sup> This is however a claim of responsibility whose validity needs to be established. Therefore, this study is an endeavour to ascertain whether these claims are evident in *Kolomask* and *The Battle of the Sacred Tree*. In doing this, the researcher relied on the

negative portrayal of the Africans in two Western films, Harry Cook's *Kitchen Toto* and Sydney Pollack's *Out of Africa*, as a backdrop of analysis of the two Kenyan films.

The second part of the problem that this study investigates rests on the nature of the existing studies on the Kenyan film. In reviewing these works, the researcher observed that very few of them have paid attention to the image and re-presentation of the African in the Kenyan film. These studies (Beatrice Mukora and Beti Elerson) have based their studies on the African woman. However, one gets the impression that the African woman is metonymically viewed as a representative of the African fraternity. These studies are quite atomic in their approach and fail to give an overall picture of portrayal of the African in the Kenyan film. The current study therefore attempts a more holistic investigation of the (re-) presentation of the African, whether male or female, child or adult.

### **1.3 Objectives of the Study**

The objectives of this study are to:

- a. Identify the images assigned to the African in the sampled Western films.
- b. Analyse the impact of these images on the re-presentation of the African in the selected Kenyan films.

### **1.4 Research Assumptions**

- a. Most Western films have misrepresented the Africans.
- b. The Kenyan filmmaker consciously or unconsciously subverts the image of the African in his/her films.

## **1.5 Rationale of the Study**

Very little study has been conducted on the film industry in Kenya.<sup>10</sup> As such no research has focused on re-presentation of the African through film. This study aims at locating the different images of the African along the history of filmmaking in Kenya. The need to re-present the image of the African has emerged to be of great concern in post-independent African Literature.<sup>11</sup> Maureen Eke, Kenneth Harrow and Emmanuel Yewah see the need to support issues of representation and image of the African in African Literature and Cinema (p.7). It is this recreation of self-image that Chinua Achebe refers to as “re-creating the past in the present” (p.79). This study therefore emerges as one of the contributions towards the corpus of this concern.

## **1.6 Theoretical Framework**

This study was guided by Postcolonial literary theory. This theory deals with the reading and writing of literature written in (formerly) colonised or (former) colonising countries and focuses on the colonisation process, its ideology and aftermath. These include literary works whose writing were in one way or another influenced by the colonial contact. Generally, the theory is concerned with the way in which literature by the colonising culture distorts the experience and realities of the colonised, inscribing inferiority of the latter in the literature produced. This action has resulted in the discourse of the ‘centre’ and its ‘margins’ or the ‘self’ and the ‘other’.<sup>12</sup> The theory is also built around the impact of these classifications on the literature of the colonies.

Postcolonial studies are influenced by a number of reading techniques. Post-structuralism, Deconstruction, New Historicism and Post-modernism are among the

theoretical currents that have informed various considerations of the Postcolonial approach (Pieterse and Bhikhu, p.10). Some of the key proponents of Postcolonial theory include Edward Said (*Orientalism*), Homi Bhabha (*The Location of Culture*) Gayatri Spivak (*The Post-colonial Critic*) Leela Ghandhi (*Postcolonial Theory: An Introduction*) Frantz Fanon (*The Wretched of the Earth* and *Black Skin White Masks*) and Ashcroft et al. (*The Empire Writes Back*). To these critics, cultural and spatial displacements originating from colonial contact is a major concern in postcoloniality. The crisis these displacements have caused has led the (former) colonies to question their self-image and try to re-present themselves.

In its re-definition of Literature, this theory transcends artistic frontiers, relinquishing classicism and purity of literary genres.<sup>13</sup> It is at this moment that postcolonial theory gives room for analysis of film. At this point, it can be argued that reading and viewing become synonymous just like writing and filmmaking. In this study therefore, the 'synonyms' are used interchangeably.

Postcolonial literary theory addresses questions of culture and power in Literature. Re-reading and re-writing of the Empire's historical and fictional record is a vital and inevitable task at the heart of the postcolonial enterprise. Employing this feature, the study attempts to re-read the portrayal of the African in the Western fictional film. The role and personality of the African in the selected films is re-examined.

Leela Gandhi, one of the proponents of this theory says, "writers from diverse, formerly colonized areas have adapted the Western form (...) to suit their own purpose: to relate life in their region from the inside, as it is experienced by those who live there" (p.9). In

this respect, subversive and appropriative strategies employed in the sampled Kenyan films was explored in order to get a better understanding of the films.

Throughout the history of Eurocentric theory, ownership of meaning has almost always been locked in a contest between the language, the utterer and the recipient. The nature of postcolonial writing has revealed that the situation is not that simple. The theory has shown that all these three 'functions' of the exchange participate in the 'social situation' of the text. Postcolonial critics like Aschcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin believe that writing is a social practice, with a social function. It therefore follows that the meaning of such writing is a social accomplishment in which the participation of the writer and the reader function within the event of that particular discourse. It frees language from the contingent situation (CS) and opens up horizons within which many more relations than pertaining to the CS can be established. A postcolonial text does not 'create meaning' through the mere act of inscribing it but rather indicates a potential and shifting horizon of possible meanings. The study explores these possible meanings in the selected Kenyan and Western films. Such meanings were obtained from thorough examination of the social informants of the films. Postcolonial theory therefore allowed the researcher to contextually analyse the films, rather than restricting herself to the referents in the texts.<sup>14</sup>

According to Gandhi, Postcolonial criticism favours hybridity and syncretism (p.151). Third world creative writers have appropriated Western genres and moulded them into indigenous realities. Africans have used film, a western invention, in giving local experiences as they tell their own story. Critics like Aschcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (pp.195-6) and Stam (p.287) have noted the necessity of this appropriation. They agree

that it is not possible to return to or to rediscover an absolute pre-colonial cultural purity, nor is it possible to create national or regional formations entirely independent of their historical implication in the European colonial enterprise. This concept suits well the approach of this research to the image of the African in the Kenyan film. It enabled the researcher to explore how the Kenyan film (as art) has been shaped by the interaction between Kenya and the Western colonial powers. Due to racial supremacy enjoyed by the 'centre', for instance, it portrayed caricatures of the Africans using negative attributes that were constructed to justify its dominance over the Africans.<sup>15</sup>

We have seen that cultural undermining emerges as one of the numerous yet divergent social informants of the creation of the Kenyan film.<sup>16</sup> Postcolonial theory therefore guides this study in discussing the various ways in which Kenyan filmmakers have projected the image of the African in their films.

### **1.7 Literature/Film Review**

In this section, the study pays attention to documented material on the Kenyan film. Several scholars have researched on the Kenyan film though with different findings.

Wanjiku Mukora, in "Beyond Tradition and Modernity" widely discusses the problem of and need for identity through creative works; basically literary and cinematic creations. She bases her argument on Wanjiru Kinyanjui's feature film, *The Battle of the Sacred Tree* (1994) and Anne Mungai's *Saikati* (1992). The two films revolve around women who find solace in traditional values yet engage in "modern" practices. She sees the films as a "rich resource for understanding complexities of the postcolonial situation" (p. 220). She finds in the post-independence films what post-independence novels too struggle to represent; the indigenous experience. Mukora focuses on the experiences of the post-colonial African woman. She examines two issues: First, she dwells on how the

two films inscribe women within the antagonisms of traditions and modernity, within the contradicting and complex nature of these two forces. She also looks at how women strive to accommodate their individual experiences within the changing socio-cultural circumstances while avoiding conflict between the two.

Mukora's study is a great resource to this study. She shares with this study the position that film is an important and versatile medium through which the postcolonial condition is well understood. Her examination of the representation of the post-colonial African woman provides fresh insights into the researcher's understanding of the image of the African, especially in indigenous Kenyan film. Some of the approaches she has used are also of great importance to this study.

In "Dangerous Affair: Narrating Popular Experiences in Kenya," Florence Sipalla examines ways in which Judy Kibinge's film, *Dangerous Affair*, outlines popular experiences within the urban sphere. This film explores the lives of young elite urbanites in Nairobi. It revolves around the lives of two women, Rose and Wangui, who are caught in a love triangle with Muraguri. Confused, Muraguri takes too long to choose between the two women. Reality dawns on him only when Wangui divorces him because of infidelity. To Sipalla, *Dangerous Affair* is a popular film inasmuch as it has the ability to give the public a sense of the familiar.<sup>17</sup> Her study delineates the contribution made by *Dangerous Affair* to the whole body of visual works in Kenya.

Beti Ellerson's book and documentary film, *Sisters of the Screen*, make a critical inventory into the works, thoughts and practices of African women in the various areas of Cinema. In the book, Ellerson interviews two Kenyan filmmakers, Catherine Muigai

and Wanjiru Kinyanjui. The interview with Wanjiru Kinyanjui focuses on the misrepresentation of the African by the Western filmmaker. Kinyanjui explains that her works aim at portraying the African as a rational human being as opposed to the distorted image that the Western filmmaker has assigned the African. In interviewing Catherine Muigai, Ellerson reveals that the image of the African woman has been very negative in the African films made by men (not necessarily of Western origin). The women are portrayed as lesser beings compared to their male counterparts. They are portrayed as weaklings, sex symbols, dumb, not focused, always just sitting in the house, among other negative presentations.<sup>18</sup> She concludes that, as a woman's position in the society is very important, there is an urgent need to uplift the woman's representation in the film as well as her participation in the film industry in Kenya. This study derives a lot from Ellerson's interviews. These two interviews elicit a representative opinion of the Kenyan filmmakers about the image of Africans in film. The interviews also equip the study with the contribution the interviewed filmmakers make towards re-presentation of the African through film.

Nyamwaya et al., in "Evaluation Report: Kenya Film Corporation Ltd," find the film industry in Kenya wanting. They acknowledge work in existence like *Mlevi*, *Bushtrackers* and *The Rise and Fall of Iddi Amin*. Yet they are not satisfied with the part played by film in the promotion of indigenous Kenyan experiences. They see film as a medium for shaping up both social and economic development in a country. They observe that Kenya's film industry lacks confidence and blame the government for not giving the necessary support to the industry. This situation, they say, has made the local filmmaker almost lose hope in ever producing a quality and up-to-international-standards film. But they argue that given the relevant support by the government, the industry can compete fairly well at the international market.