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L'Afrique et les défis du XXIème siècle
Africa and the Challenges of the Twenty First Century
A África e os desafios do Século XXI

إفريقيا وتحديات القرن الواحد والعشرين

DRAFT VERSION
NOT TO BE CITED

Reconstruction in the Making: Gender and Film in Tanzania

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5 - 9 / 12 / 2011

Rabat Maroc / Morocco

Introduction

This paper demonstrates the contribution of film in reconstructing gender perception and stereotypes in Tanzania. It explores the process of engaging creative artists especially those in the film industry in the gender and feminist movement building. Unlike the general perception of ignoring creative arts in the transformation movements, this paper sees the role of film producers, scriptwriters and directors as central to the building of transformative feminist movement in Tanzania.

Looking at the story of independence in Tanzania, as else elsewhere in Africa, performing arts especially traditional dance groups led by women were used to deconstruct what Meena (2003, p. 148) described as “the colonial and patriarchal systems, which were based on ideologies of exclusion”. These groups, for example like *lelemama* dance which were headed by women were significant in both independence struggles and post-independence deconstruction of the political struggles stereotypes that perceive political power to be vested on men. After the independence such role was then transformed into the implementation tools of the ruling party Tanganyika African National Union (TANU) which later evolved to Chama cha Mapinduzi (CCM) – Revolution Party in 1977. This means, performing arts especially *ngoma* featured prominently at the national platform when political leaders wanted to communicate social policies and other political propagandato the people, while at the community level, they continued to cater for their ‘traditional’ roles but with colonial transformations.

The exclusion of women stories (her-stories) and emphasis on men stories (his-stories) in the ‘history’ of Tanzania is one of the characteristics of patriarchal dominant thinking which was contributed to by a number of factors, socio-cultural and religious being the key. The low profile given to women regardless of their contribution to the national economy and development has resulted into attempts to reconstruct the deconstructed image of women. Affirmative action in its widest spectrum is seen as one of the solutions. Special seats in the parliament, education bursaries and scholarships, cut-off points for girls and women entry in higher education are among such attempts. The establishment of gender policy and special ministry to deal with gender issues has been regarded by the Tanzanian state as key achievements and key process in the reconstruction of women image and as a starting point to reclaim their denounced positions.

In order to understand the challenges of patriarchal system in the neoliberal era, there should be multiple approaches to the reconstruction of the deconstructed story. As it was for the dance groups like *lelemamain* the struggle of independence, this paper identifies and analyzes film as one of the possible approaches in the reconstruction of balanced stories rather than the dominant his-story. The main argument of this paper is that, film can be used as one of the mechanisms to deconstruct patriarchy and reconstruct a gender balanced community through transformative feminism. It begins with the conceptualization of transformative feminism as a reconstruction movement, followed by a discussion about gender and film in Tanzania using the story of *Kipute*. Discussion about gender reconstruction in filmmaking follows and lastly challenges ahead are reviewed. *Kipute* film will be used so as to shed light on the reconstruction process through film.

Transformative Feminist Movement in Tanzania

Working as a film producer is a process, which one can be able to realize the reality that performing arts especially, films contributes to the concretization of the stereotypes. As defined by Aje-Ori(2010, p. 85) stereotype is considered to be “mental judgment about a person or a group of people” based on how they appear or considered within the society. Such judgment can be in terms of their gender, race, class, age and other related variables. Film as a cross cultural genre and a communication medium has been playing a major role in constructing uneven stereotypes which in most cases pose a certain gender as superior or inferior to the other. Most of the films have consciously or unconsciously been perpetuating such stereotypes which often paint a picture of certain group to be inferior to the other.

There are various stereotypes which call upon intervention. The process of deconstruction of gender stereotypes took a long way and its evolution passed through different phases. In Tanzania a number of related interventions and theoretical frameworks have evolved for the past two decades. One of them is transformative feminist. According to TGNP(2011, pp. 1-2):

transformative feminism links struggles of women and men against all major forms of exploitation, oppression, human rights violations and discrimination, including male domination, class exploitation, imperial domination,

compradorialism, corruption, authoritarianism and dictatorship, racism, ethnicism, fundamentalism, traditionalism, and discrimination on the basis of disability, HIV, age and gender identity.

This conceptualization of transformative feminism is broad and seems to touch and cover many issues from social to political, economic to cultural. Such inclusion is deliberate as it is done to create a phenomenon salient to Tanzania and Africa in general addressing issues raised or nurtured by patriarchy such as capitalism and neoliberalism. According to Gerder Lerner (1986, pp. 228-229), "the system of patriarchy seems to have nearly run its course - it no longer serves the needs of men or women and in its inextricable linkage to militarism, hierarchy and racism it threatens the very existence of life on earth". From Lerner's quote, patriarchy is transformed from the struggle for equal representation in the decision making bodies, equal pay etc. to more on the regulation of dominant global systems which discriminate and denies rights of marginalized people, especially women and those in the periphery.

Filmand Gender

Filmmaking has three major stages with equal importance that is, pre production, production and postproduction. Pre production is basically a planning stage. This is when the story idea is being conceived and developed into a script by the scriptwriter ready for finding a right funding agency or sponsor. Once enough funds have been secured, the producer - the overall in charge of the film production taking care of production schedule and finances - has to select the director. The director is the one who deals with the creative part of the film. Here the producer becomes a key person and has the final decision while the scriptwriter remains as the originator of the idea or main contractor of film content. In most cases the scriptwriter will remain with his/her moral rights that is, s/he has to be acknowledged as the scriptwriter even if s/he has sold all his/her economic rights to the producer.

Once the producer, scriptwriter and director have agreed in their terms of production, casting is done based on the instruction and description provided in the script, director's choice and in some cases the producer can also provide his/her opinion on the cast. In professional filmmaking, casting director is deployed to do the casting or conduct audition. Once the casting is done, the producer has to make sure production equipment and other logistics are in place.

Then the director becomes in charge of the location and in the studio recording managing both actors/cast and crew - cameraperson, light and sound technicians. This stage is known as production stage in film production.

The postproduction is basically done in the studio. Even though the editor is responsible for editing, the director is the one who guides the whole process and the producer has to be consulted to verify the edited version of the film. If it is a purely commercial film, marketing people/department is then in charge of ensuring that the film is packed to suit market demands. In circumstances where the film is being sponsored; the sponsor assumes the role of the executive producer. This means that the executive producer in most cases can provide funds for film production and at the same time oversee other projects. While most of the film producers are expected to understand all the dynamics of the film industry in the place where they work, for an executive producer, it is not always the case.

In this paper gender is simply contextualized as a role-play or a mask whereby it can be changed to suit the character and the situation. In a theatre performance there are no fixed roles according to one's sex; that is, the director can cast a woman to play a male role and vice versa. This is the same especially when defining gender as socially constructed attitude as opposed to sex which is biologically determined. Stoltenberg(2000, p. 233) shows how gender is a constructed phenomenon which can be separated from our biological being.

The penises exist; the male sex does not. The male sex is socially constructed. It is a political entity that flourishes only through acts of force and sexual terrorism. Apart from the global interiorization and sub ordination of those who are defined as 'nonmale', the idea of personal membership in the male sex class would have no recognizable meaning.

This statement positions this presentation on the need for gender reconstruction to eliminate male domination and women subordination. It shows the role of filmmakers in the reconstruction of balanced and representative stories in the produced films in Tanzania.

It should be understood gender as a concept was developed by transformative feminist as a process to oppose patriarchy and also to avoid generalizations done by liberal feminists. The intention was to look at women as the most oppressed and exploited group by the system. It is not by chance to link gender and women as gender analysis was based on that. There should be a critical view on the way gender has or is perceived to take into account issues of

women equally to men. The evolution of gender was not that in such rather, deconstruction and reconstruction of image of the subordinated women over male domination.

Reconstruction as for deconstruction is a process and should be integrated in the community activities as a crosscutting issue. There are many portals of reconstruction ranging from socio-cultural to political. One of the portals of reconstruction is film.

Various individuals produce films in the world for different purposes. In Tanzania, the production of video films has increased in the past decade. Most of the films tend to reinforce the stereotype of women being inferior to men and this is not peculiar to Tanzanian films alone. In the Nigerian films for example Aje-Ori(2010, p. 85) shows clearly how women especially in-laws are being presented as evil and violent the view which is also shared by Mascarenhas(2007, p. 74) who argued that in most cases “women are presented as gossipers and liars, jealous of other women’s success, rumormongers, and sugar mummies lusting for men younger [than] themselves”. In understanding the complexity of reconstruction, film as for other art forms has been seen as key to such process.

The Story of *Kipute*

I do take the story of *Kipute* as a reflection of fifty years of women in the political struggles in Tanzania. It echoes the hustles which Bibi Titi Mohamed a political veteran and *uhuru* heroine, went through in the struggle for Tanganyika (later Tanzania) independence. An independent company produced this film with initiative from Tanzania Gender Networking Programme (TGNP) one of the leading activist organizations in Tanzania found in 1992.

In *Kipute* film we see women of Kigwaza village selecting Bi Kipute, Mzee Kibwana’s wife to vie for councilor position. In the process we see Mzee Kibwana also vies for the same position. The stereotype based campaign against Bi. Kipute as a woman and inferior is central to the story. Some people, including her husband Mzee Kibwana are not happy with Bi. Kipute desires to become a leader, as they believe women are weak. At the end we see Bi. Kipute fairly and democratically elected.

Kipute represents one of many stories of African women and their engagement in the liberation struggles and nationbuilding which in most cases has been neglected, omitted or altered. It stands to show their struggles as exploited working class and owners of the resources in their communities which has been exploited by the capitalism and other exploitative systems.

It is through films like *Kipute* whereby women and other marginalized people are given space to reflect and express their views and challenge patriarchy, capitalism, neoliberalism and other oppressive and exploitative systems.

The story of the film is simple and/with predictable ending of melodrama or most of the edutainment (e-e) productions. In melodrama and e-e there is a competition between the good and the evil and usually the evil will lose the battle to allow the audience to see the reward of being good, hence change attitude or behavior. This implies that, *Kipute* seeks to restore the lost identity of women, set momentum to abolish patriarchy and create an alternative world of justice and peace.

The internalization of patriarchal values is evident in Bi Kipute's husband, Mzee Kibwana. With support from Bi Nyasiko – a woman who believes in patriarchy – and Yangumasikio – corrupt man who can do anything to get money; Mzee Kibwana argue that it is not safe to give a woman mandate to oversee and manage community resources. He publicly claims that women are weak, as they have 'plastic hearts', which can easily melt. This means women can easily be manipulated and 'torn apart'. Although Bi Kipute's aspirations escalate between retreat and surrender, empowerment and revolution; her husband's denial in the process of campaigning for councilor position reveals her position in the eyes of some men in her society that is, Tanzanian society where a woman is perceived to be a man's property – an object rather than subject.

The concept of 'our customs and traditions' resurfaces in the whole story of *Kipute*. Bi Nyasiko, the closest ally of Mzee Kibwana and a member of the village executive committee is used to propagate such oppressive message further. For example in the meeting, we see Bi Nyasiko advising Bi Kipute to withdrawal from the campaign rally as she is pretty sure that women are inexperienced leaders. So they need to wait for some time to get experience so as they can lead. In that aspect Bi Nyasiko sees Mzee Kibwana as more experienced and capable leader than Bi Kipute. On the issue of experience which Bi Nyasiko argue for has been refuted by Ruth Meena (2003, p. 143) when challenging the patriarchal system in the Tanzanian independence struggles and the aftermath. She argues that, "we are still searching for women with experience in leadership positions! How long is this search going to take?" It is through the script of *Kipute* that women and other marginalized people are given a podium to express their concern, and the ballot box support their thinking and aspirations.

Reconstruction in the Making

Looking at Bi Kipute it is obvious her story is similar to BibiTitit's story on her involvement in the political platform in the 1950s under TANU later CCM. According to BibiTitit, politics and marriage are not compatible. In her interview with Ruth Meena(2003, p. 146) she said, "after engaging in politics, it was not possible for me to keep a husband in the traditional way". In the *Kipute* film as a process of deconstructing gender stereotypes and reconstructing the woman image we see Bi Kipute struggling to maintain her marriage. At the end of the film we see her proudly cheering her victory and in her inaugural speech she pointed out that regardless of the campaign hustles, her marriage is well and strong. Looking at it critically, Bi Kipute comment also represents the patriarchal dominant thinking. If the winner was MzeeKibwana, it was not necessary and perhaps it could sound awkward to prove to the audience about his victory and marriage being intact. Or during campaigns Bi Kipute could not be in a position to ask MzeeKibwana to chose between their marriage and being a councilor, the statement which MzeeKibwana said openly to Bi Kipute.

Gender-based violence (GBV) is one of the key themes in the film. Many studies have shown the magnitude of GBV being prolific in Tanzania. It ranges from psychological, emotional, verbal to physical violence; physical beating being the major one. In the film we see MzeeKibwana threatening to slap Bi Kipute if 'their' tractor, which he claims to be his, is not returned immediately. We are informed through the film storyline that Bi Kipute decided to offer free service to some low-income farmers in her ward. This annoyed MzeeKibwana as he saw it as a threat to his ambition to vie for a councilor position. That is, Bi Kipute could receive credits for serving people while he will not be acknowledged as the 'owner' of the tractor.

In the process to deconstruct GBV and reconstruct a culture of peace, Bi Kipute decides to take a lead in convincing MzeeKibwana to settle the issue in a diplomatic way rather than confrontational. Her proposal to settle the violence diplomatically is ideal but it works within limited circumstances especially when a woman has secured economic independence and hence she is psychological stable. It is most likely not to be safe to react as Bi Kipute if one is seriously violent.

There should be a deliberate move to change the prevailing negative stereotype against women. The process of arriving to the final film script was sufficed with a lot of challenges and

contradictory ideas between the producer and TGNP as an executive producer. This was due to the fact that while the producer was much concerned in balancing both the form and the content of the films, the executive producer was more on pushing the transformative movement agenda forward.

The process of building characters was complex and to a certain extent de-capacitated the form/artistic part of films. This was due to the fact that the producer wanted to balance between 'social realities' that is, stereotypes while the executive producer was focused on deconstructing the stereotypes. The aim - though the film carries all elements of propaganda - was to look on the possibility of fighting against masculinity and male chauvinistic behaviors. In the end of the film we see how Bi. Kipute played a major role in portraying that women can perform as good leaders as men when given an opportunity and facilitated to do so. This is in line with the transformative feminism philosophy of animation; giving people chance to share and learn, participate rather than considering them as 'empty pots'.

To subvert the asymmetrical power relations between women and men, in which men are seen to be dominant and women subservient, Kipute's story uses Bi Kaalamo to pass the message across. As one of the women leaders, she takes a stand to show women's socio-political and economic contribution to the society. She aptly argues that while women are the majority, bearer of the society, they are still being marginalized in education, health and ownership of resources. Hence by choosing Bi Kipute to whom she trusts, the society will change. In many dialogues in the film, she has been stressing that it's only when women take a lead, all exploitative and oppressive systems will be corrected.

Looking at the story of *Kipute*, one can conclude that women oppression is political than social and for that matter it is entrenched even in the nationalist movement. The elimination of patriarchal systems, based in imperialistic approaches and enclosed in neoliberal policies will result into a transformed society where justice is a value.

Challenges of Reconstruction

Challenges outlined in this paper are basically associated with the use of creative arts especially, film in the process of reconstruction. Apart from success of *Kipute*, it is obvious one film can contribute marginally to the process of building transformative feminist movement, and there should be more support on such initiatives. One of the most challenging situations for

producers of developmental films (film for development) is on finding the right sponsors for such productions. Most films depend on sales of DVDs and therefore it is expected that the audience will remain the main sponsor. This practice is not the case for developmental films which mostly depend on donors, especially foreign donors. These donors in most cases provide support tied with conditions on dos and don'ts. Furthermore, if foreign experts are involved especially from the funding organizations they tend to demand upper hand on the content of the film. The fact is such films are being perceived as gifts for the funding organizations which are to be distributed for free.

Since development films are produced for specific purposes – development campaigns – it is not easy to market, therefore, they end up being shelved if not in the libraries and donors portfolios. Furthermore, the products that bear logos and information from the donors, by itself, discourage marketing such films in the normal markets. This implies that such development films have to be marketed on a reverse channel that is, the donors who provide production funds act as customers. In other words, once donors demand is satisfied, the market demand is satisfied too. Such situation is not healthy for producers and artists as they become mouthpieces for foreign donors who some of them represent imperialists through neoliberal policies implementation.

It is expected that the transformative feminist films have to be produced in line with the TFMB practice. This means the process of production has to be born and nurtured by marginalized people through animation and the message has to spread across like bubbles. By allowing donors or individuals to lead production of such films, it can be easy for them to manipulate it, if they are coming from a capitalist organization and believe in neoliberalism oppressive policies.

In terms of numbers, in Tanzania there are more male producers than women likewise for scriptwriters and directors. Such imbalance could partly be explained by the whole concept of women being marginalized in education, decision-making positions and also in the possession of capital as compared to men. But the most 'cultural' reason has been the whole perception of art industry being regarded as a hooligan profession. If so, women who are engaged in the industry are more victimized than men. This means men have more opportunities than women in accessing and controlling resources.

The process of suppressing stereotype and myths can make characters such as Bi Kipute to be seen as superhuman and unnatural. The audiences in many films for development are expecting to identify characters to whom they can associate with. The creation of super perfect and spotless characters can be seen as social fiction movie. This also results to another challenge on the way the client/ executive producer wants his/her opinions to be included. Since majority of the clients are not conversant with the film making processes, some of the suggestions are impossible to be implemented when the film production is in its final stage, because some need reshooting which is expensive. In this situation, some clients are not ready to cover any additional costs out of the agreed budget.

Conclusion

While film continues to play a major role in gender transformation, the role of film producers is un-debatable key and vital. Even though it is effective to use films as infotainment and edutainment, there are critical challenges ahead. If the process of film production does not go hand in hand with informed producers and scriptwriters and the need to use their creative works as a platform for reconstruction, the film production will continue to reinforce gender stereotypes. The transformative feminism should deliberately guide such productions. It should center on the use animation to unfold and share stories of unsung heroines; otherwise donors who are proponents of patriarchal systems, capitalism and neoliberal policies of marginalization will continue to take a 'driver's seat'.

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