

The Political Economy of Cinema (video film) in Tanzania

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Abstract

This article examines the film industry in Tanzania from the 1960s to 2012 and assesses how government policies, legislations and cultural institutions have been used as mechanisms of cultural control and thus shaped and impacted filmmaking. Through a critical political economy theoretical framework, the article explores succeeding administrations, from President Julius Kambarage Nyerere (1961–1985) to President Jakaya Mrisho Kikwete (2005–present). It notes that despite the social, cultural, economic, political, and ideological shifts that Tanzania has experienced in moving from socialism to capitalism, each administration, using different mechanisms, has retained a strong hold on the cultural (film) industry. These administrations in advancing their power and legitimacy established cultural institutions and film policies that saw to it that only government-sanctioned images and cultural values were projected to its citizenry. Yet, despite of the government's strong hold on culture, a private commercial film industry has emerged giving an alternative aspect to cultural products.

Introduction

Within the past ten years, the film industry in Tanzania has emerged as the dominant cultural product to be accepted and embraced by Tanzanians as a national past time. This national product, locally known as “sinema” (video film), a film shot on a digital video camera, is made by filmmakers and business entrepreneurs who use inexpensive digital technology to capture, what some Tanzanians have called “our experiences and traditions.” After production, the Product, is sold to consumers via video kiosks and DVD stores, and is devoured as soon as they hit the market. This trend has not always been the case with other media products and certainly not the case with Tanzanian films produced prior to this video film phenomenon. This

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article assesses the video film industry by examining what propelled its emergence, what preceded it and more importantly, what role has the government played in this transformation. The article uses a political economy approach that analyses government media policies and how those policies have influenced or dictated the types of cultural products produced. Taking such approach when studying a product of a post socialist nation like Tanzania, where the government controlled all major means of production such as banks, agricultural and textural manufacturing, and cultural industries, is both crucial and inevitable.

Therefore an assessment of government media policies, especially these pertaining to the film industry, is to guide this article. This will inevitably allow for an understanding of how policies, institutions, ownership and the market influence the content of a media product. Therefore, through a political economy historical account of the film industry, the article examines how from the 1960s and 1970s nation-building phase, to the world crisis of the 1980s and the introduction of multi party democracy in the 1990s and the spread and intensification of global capitalism/globalization in the 21st century, which ushered the video film industry, the government controlled, negotiated and even unwillingly succumbed to changes in an effort to influence cultural products and keep itself in power.

Political economists of the film media like Robert McChesney do not believe that the media system is natural or impervious to change, but rather they assert that it is a result of policies “made in the public’s name but often without the public’s informed consent” (2008:12). These policies therefore are usually made to advance an institution’s interest. The most important of these institutions, according to economist Robert Gilpin, are national governments (2001:38). Gilpin’s observation rings true for Tanzania, beginning with the introduction of socialism and now where global capitalism, as some scholars have diagnosed, threatens to take power away from the government. Gilpin’s book *“Global Political Economy: Understanding the International Economic Order”* defines political economy as “the interaction of the market and powerful actors” (45). These other powerful actors for Gilpin are International organizations, and powerful business groups. In Tanzania, the powerful actor is the government. This article reveals how the government through its apparatuses within the film industry, controls, manipulates and negotiates the market to its advantage by flashing the “national interest” and “gate keeper of national culture” card and how that plays a major role in defining the film content produced by filmmakers.

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History of Film Policies

Tanzania has gone through tremendous changes since its inception as a nation state in 1961. The changes have mostly been socio-political, but have affected the entire social, economic, cultural and political rubric of existence. In 1965 Tanzania was declared a one party state. The then political party TANU (Tanganyika African National Union) became a supreme organ of the state, silencing any voices against it. In 1967 Tanzania, through its Arusha Declaration, officially became a socialist state, giving the government ultimate power to control the social, economic and political development of the nation. Yet in 1990's the Structural Adjustment Policies (SAPs) were instituted to liberalize the economy. In 1992 the government allowed political pluralism. Throughout these changes the government has struggled to maintain its power over its citizens. This is evident in the film industry where policies and institutions served to legitimize and safeguard the government under the pretence of the "national interest."

At independence, Tanzania inherited two types of cinema channels from the British colonialists namely the mobile instructional cinema and the private commercial cinema. Similar to other Third World countries during the euphoric 1960s nationalist struggle, cinema was seen as a tool for social change, emancipation, and cultural decolonization (Pines and Willemsen, 1989). In Latin America, for example, cinema was utilized as a weapon equal to a gun, as Glauber Rocha proclaimed "a camera in your hand and an idea in your head." (Burton, 1986) In Africa it was used as a night school that liberated and inspired the illiterate masses. Manifestos, conferences and film festivals were held throughout the Third World to proclaim and celebrate the heralding of this new social, political and military cinema, a cinema that gave a voice to the marginalized masses. Manifestos such as "the Esthetic of Hunger," and "Cinema Novo" by Glauber Rocha (1965 Brazil), "For an Imperfect Cinema," by Julio Garcia Espinoza (1969 Cuba), "Toward the Third Cinema," by Octavio Getino and Fernando Solanas (1969 Argentina), and cinema and underdevelopment by Fernando Birri (1965 Argentina), and revolutionary cinema in Bolivia, and "Movement of the new cinema" by African Filmmakers (Ouagadougou 1974) became blue prints from which filmmakers drew their inspirations. For Tanzania, this kind of cinema was to be found in the mobile instructional cinema, so one hoped. The commercial film industry was in the hands of private individual who imported foreign

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films, mostly Indian musicals, Chinese kung fu films and American action/adventure films for the sole purpose of making a profit.

Right from independence in 1961, the government led by the newly elected President Julius Kambarage Nyerere repatriated South African film experts, formerly commissioned by the colonial government to make instructional films for Tanzanians, and established its own film unit under the ministry of Community Development (Mpoguliana, 1984). The repatriation of the South African film experts was more a political position than anything else. The South African Film Company and its experts were kicked out of the country as a gesture of solidarity to the black South Africans who were being segregated and oppressed in their own country. Tanzania together with other independent African countries broke all ties with South Africa and banned its citizens from travelling to the country until the South Africa government rid itself of the Apartheid political system, which did not happen until 1992. During this infant stage of independence, government leadership embarked on a nation cohesion project which was seen as a stepping stone to an eventual social and economic development. Replacing South African filmmakers, the Tanzanian government appealed to the Yugoslavian government, a socialist country, for assistance. In 1963, the Yugoslavian government extended its hands of friendship to Tanzania with filmmakers to help with the film unit's establishment and strengthening. The main objective of the film unit was to produce newsreel, documentaries and feature films for various government ministries. These films were to be instructional/educational and in the end, would be disseminated to the Tanzanian urban and rural masses.

These instructional films made by the government were shown to the masses in the hope that the people would implement and /or learn what they saw. The films dealt with issues ranging from modern farming technology to how to prevent malaria. The effect of these films on people can be contested, but what is unquestionable is how the government found film to be an instrumental and potential tool. The government realized that if film was to fall into the wrong hands it could be used against it. Olivier Barlet, in a discussion of African governments and cinema, notes "African leaders are apprehensive about supporting the motion picture industry because they are afraid that cinema would be used by filmmakers to manipulate political situations" (2000: 59). To combat the possibility of film falling into the wrong hands the Tanzanian government strategized to control the usage of film and

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the film industry. The government's control of the film industry strengthened in 1967 by the inauguration of the Arusha Declaration.

The Declaration set out the principles of socialism and alluded that the government was to build a socialist state, insure economic development and control the major means of production. Just one month after the declaration was articulated in January 1967, the state implemented it by nationalizing all major means of production such as, commercial banks, milling companies, insurance companies, import and export companies, alcohol, tobacco and shoe companies. Political economist Andrew Coulson notes, "in less than ten years from the Arusha Declaration, the state had taken a controlling interest in virtually all productive institutions that could easily be nationalized" (1982:188). However, commercial film importation and distribution circuits were not easily nationalized. This is because the film industry was in the hands of powerful foreign companies that colluded and threatened to block films from entering Tanzania if the government interfered. This is not to say the government did not try to nationalize, just as in other African states; the nationalization of the commercial film industry was a top agenda for Tanzanian political leaders.

Commercial film importation, distribution and exhibition channels, in the majority of the African states, have been and continue to be in the hands of foreign or private companies. Tanzania, together with other African states have on different occasions, tried to nationalize film importation and distribution but as Roy Ashbury *et al* notes, "the result was" a complete cutting off of film supplied by the monopolies" (1998: 44). In Guinea for example when the government nationalized the film industry it was faced with stiff sanctions that resulted in having the cinema close down for a year (Ashbury 1998). In Tanzania, the powerful American distributors the Motion Pictures Export Association, threatened to boycott Tanzania if it ever went forth with its nationalization agenda. These distribution companies: Anglo-American, United film distributors, Pan-African distributors and promoters networked together and blocked the government from acquiring films abroad (Mponguliana, 1984; Brennan, 2005). When the government clearly understood that it was waging a losing battle, two initiatives were undertaken; the first was the establishment of a film company, the Tanzanian Film Company (TFC) and the second was the control and censorship of all imported foreign films by the government National Film Censorship Board (NFCB). In 1968 the Tanzania Film Company was established with the

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mandate of producing, buying distributing and exhibiting films. TFC was later given more teeth when it became the country's sole film distributor, with the exception of the powerful Anglo-American distributors, which was allowed to distribute its films after passing them through the National Film Censorship Board.

Film Policies: A Brief Look

From the 1960s to the mid 1980s, the government continued to control the film industry. It controlled not only the production and distribution of instructional cinema but also had power over what was imported and screened to the public. This control manifested itself through government apparatuses such as the National Film Censorship Policy, The Film and Stage Play Act and the co-option of filmmakers into the system.

The National Film Censorship Policy, an inheritance from the British colonial rule, was set up to monitor and control the content and infiltration of foreign films screened in Tanzania. It was also set up to scrutinize scripts and synopses of films to be shot on location in Tanzania. It also intended to prevent any negative portrayal of Tanzanian people and their culture (Brennan, 2005). The censorship board's composition reveals its connection with the state and how it is used as a government instrument of power. The board is comprised strictly of the government and the ruling political party officials who are appointed by the concerned minister. The board's major task is to make sure that the films are in line with the country's ideology and values; they must not threaten Tanzania's cultural values, customs and ethics (Mpongoliana, 1984; Brennan, 2005; Film Censorship Policy). Thus, among other things the films must promote community development, national culture, and cooperation among Tanzanians (NFCB, 2005).

The Film and Stage Play Act enacted in 1976, vehemently prohibits the production of films without the approval or consent of the ministry and minister concerned. The policy gives the minister the power to suspend, ban, or revoke licenses of any individuals or company that the minister found objectionable, which made it practically impossible to appeal the minister's verdict, his words are final. In his study of "The Media History of Tanzania," Martin Stumer notes that media policies "gave far reaching and subjective rights to the president and the minister in charge of the information sector (1998:193). The government controlled the kind of films produced and the content of those films. All of the films produced by the government, through its film unit and later the film company, depicted the government sanctioned

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developmental activities and placed the government at the centre of this development. Chamblikazi, a former production manager of Tanzania Film Company, notes that government films “insured only positive images of the government and its activities were recorded...for public consumption” (1995:23).

The co-option of filmmakers as government employees became a strategy that the government used to rid itself of oppositional views. Filmmakers were not recognized as artist but as public servants who were answerable to the state. To turn filmmakers into government puppets, the government made it mandatory that all government employees, including filmmakers, be members of the ruling party. This tight control of the film industry granted the government the supreme power to decide what is permissible to the public, and more importantly, gave the government the power to continue ruling. This government control of the film industry hit a bumpy road in the mid-1980s.

Tanzania's Crisis of the 1980s

In the mid 1980s, Tanzania came under gradual but radical social and economic crisis precipitated by both internal and external factors that necessitated fundamental changes. These changes emerged at a time when Tanzanian policies and outlook were still rooted in socialism and a system of political oligarchy. Tanzania saw itself stumbling away from its socialist framework, with the “advice” of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and moved towards liberalization of politics and economy. This new framework came to fruition in 1986 with the introduction of IMF's Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs). SAPs combined privatization and liberalization with [a] new form of political governance in which the state was marginalized in favour of a strengthening of civil society (Hoogvelt, 2003:176). The provision of SAPs in Tanzania as in other Third World countries, were trade liberalization, foreign investment, privatization of government enterprises, civil service reform and eventually the dismantling of the single party state and the introduction of multi party democracy. Under these reforms, the Tanzanian government could no longer continue to control the major means of production.

Julius Nyerere, opposing SAPs and recognizing the inevitability of the reform, retired as president in October 1985. Ali Hassan Mwinyi became the second president of Tanzania. Mwinyi accelerated the SAPs implementation

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and, as Juma Mwapachu, an analyst of Tanzania's politics, notes, "June 1986 marked the beginning in the turn of events for the Tanzanian economy" (2005:38). The government was forced to sell its companies to private investors and remove barriers to foreign trade and investment. Overall the government reduced its role/control of the economy. Free competitive market economy became the blue print to development in Tanzania. The heralding of neo-liberal policies meant that the government could no longer continue to control and finance filmmaking.

The implementation of the free market economy entailed a transformation that brought about retrenchment of government employees, liquidation of government institutions, introduction of privately owned media production houses, and an influx of foreign cultural products. With regards to the Tanzania Film Company, the government retrenched some of its employees and shifted others to other government offices and ministries. In 1995 TFC was declared bankruptcy and closed.

The government was not the only actor hit by the neo-liberal policies; the private sector also felt the pinch. Film Exhibitors witnessed a decline in attendance and the eventual closure of their business. Factors leading to the decline in attendance are many but the obvious ones are: unemployment and the introduction and establishment of television stations. In the 1990s, due to government retrenchment, unemployment sky raked, which translated into less money to spend on leisure activities such as film viewing. The mushrooming of privately owned television stations in 1994 meant that more people stayed at home to watch televised "free movies." Thus, film exhibitors were forced to sell their business and/or convert them into a more profitable venture. Within a short period of time, the majority of the theatre halls were converted into churches, malls, fast food restaurants, supermarket and even embassies such as the American Embassy which used to be a driving-in cinema.

Multi-party Democracy and the Film Industry

The 1989 collapse of communism brought about an examination of the Tanzanian political system and a brainstorming of a road map forward. In 1991 President Mwinyi formed a commission led by the Minister of Justice, Francis Nyalali, to gather people's views on whether Tanzania should remain a one party state or re-institute political pluralism (Mwapachu, 2005). In 1992 Tanzania made its entrance into multi party democracy. This followed the 1980s liberalization policies of the economy. Hence, Tanzania was on its way

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to become a capitalist state. This change ushered in an era encapsulated in the slogan “Ruksa” (literally meaning allowed), coined by the president to represent the transformational and transitional period the country was in, from socialism to capitalism. With the slogan as its motto, Tanzania’s doors were open to private and foreign investors. Local media investors took the opportunity and, in 1994, established three television stations Independent Television (ITV) in June, Coastal Television Station (CTN) in February, and Dar Es Salaam Television (DTV) in December (Stumer, 1998). At the moment of this writing Tanzania housed twenty-five national and regional television stations and four satellite pay-TV cable each with more than 30 channels (Tanzania communication regulator authority 2013; BBC World Service Trust, African Media Development Initiatives: Tanzanian Context 2007). All this, together with the establishment of private radio stations and print media, has led to the establishment and booming of the video film industry.

Unfortunately the social and economic changes that have taken place have not translated into film policy changes; what has taken place is the creation of new policies supplementing the old ones. The Film Censorship Policy and the Film and Stage Play Act are still operational, although it could be said in theory only. For example, with the introduction of Multiplex theatres Hollywood blockbuster films are screened without ever going through the hands of the film censorship board, and secondly video films, to be discussed later in the article, are so numerous that one wonders if the understaffed Board can review all scripts and synopses. In the end, can they screen all of the video films produced to make sure the films stayed within agreed parameters?

In 1995 Tanzania elected its third president, Benjamin William Mkapa who embraced and whole-heartedly carried the neo-liberal policy to a new level. Mkapa informed his people that they had no choice but to embrace and follow neo-liberal policies even if the result seemed grim at the time. Mwapachu notes of this era “Whilst the reform programme commenced in June 1986, it is from financial year 1997/98 that Tanzania seriously began to take great leaps forward in pursuing bold and radical economic reforms, including privatization” (39). Mkapa became the poster child for the West and the country was heralded as a country to emulate. He went so far as to privatize profitable national companies and allowed foreigners to invest in small scale businesses such as selling ice cream and roasted peanuts in the streets, which traditionally was a domain and a source of income for women.

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The influx of foreign investors in the media, however, has been minimal. Foreign investors have not bombarded the media as much as have foreign cultural products. In these media houses, especially television stations, foreign programs take a larger share of the program scheduling, although this has dramatically changed in recent times. To curb this infiltration of foreign products, which is seen as a threat to national security and interest and to government stability, the government has been forced to rethink its media policies and to come up with new policies that either take into consideration this globalized aspect of the economy and culture or try to create a mechanism to slow it down. In its cultural development plan document, the government notes the infiltration of foreign product and has vehemently denounced the phenomenon and has promised to rid Tanzania of such influences. The document goes on to note "the current situation is a grave confusion. It is not clear what actually constitutes a Tanzanian way of life anymore...television, films, video shows [video films] often espouse cultural degeneracy (47). To this end in 1997 the government established a cultural policy document which stipulated as its main objective "to safeguard Tanzanian national culture, values, customs and ethics" (23). In 1998 the government established the Tanzanian Cultural Trust Fund which was/is to grant financial assistance to individual artists and companies that proposes to advance and promote Tanzanian cultural activities. This presents some of the efforts to counteract the dominance of foreign product and globalization and to give the government more leverage to continue to control the content of cultural products.

It must be pointed out that the government not only took stern measures against the influx of foreign products but also recognized the intensification of global connectivity and cultural flows and thought to act quickly by stipulating in the cultural policy document that "it recognized the social economic and political transformation influenced by neo-liberal policies and globalization" (27). It goes on to postulate that the government would support the film industry, by giving incentives to individuals and/or organizations to establish and manage cinema halls; give incentives to local producers of art (film); encourage television stations to give more air time to national programming; and, among other things, noted that the public shall remain free to earn a living from cultural activities such as film production (cultural policy document 1997). This ambivalence or schizophrenic stance toward the media sector is one of the ways the government continues to

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survive; it recognizes the winds of change and negotiates its place within the new landscape.

Government tactical positioning can be analyzed in three ways; first, by creating a cultural policy that works both as a document that gives space to individuals to earn a living in the cultural sector as well as a document that promulgates the government as the custodian and gatekeeper of a Tanzanian culture, the government finds a balance to continue to rule. Second, by establishing the cultural trust fund that gives prominence to individuals who are in the forefront of promoting Tanzanian culture, thus combating foreign influences; the government continues to give itself the prominent role of safeguarding Tanzanian national culture. Thirdly, by establishing a government owned and funded television station, the Tanzania Broadcasting Company (TBC) to challenge privately owned television stations, the government continues to hold the view that it is the people's mouth piece. In its charter, TBC stipulates that it:

shall produce and air local in house produced programs constituting not less than 70% of the total programming...commission independent producers to produce programmes and submit the same to TBC contributing up to 20% of the total programming and in terms of foreign programming, it may procure or acquire foreign programmes particularly, educational and documentaries and other programmes including soaps, films, sports, games and music which shall constitute not more than 10% of the total programming (2006:5).

To come to terms with global capitalism, the Tanzanian government came up with an interventionist package that not only recognized and encouraged cultural exchanges but also strengthened and promoted local cultural goods.

Where the Foreign meets the Local: the Video Film Industry

The video film industry was born out of the intersection and convergence of the global and the local. Foreign film, especially American films and later Nigerian video films, dominated television scheduling in the mid 1990s and became the staple diet for most Tanzanian viewers. Nigerian video films took the lead in scheduling and popularity because of their cultural proximity to that of Tanzanians. Most viewers expressed identification with the environment, issues, traditions, and appearances of the characters. American films suffered from cultural discount, Colin Hoskins *et al* notes "cultural

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discount arises because viewers in importing markets generally find it difficult to identify with the ways of life, values, history, institution, myths and physical environment depicted (1997:3). Tanzanian viewers saw in Nigerian video films similarities to their own ways of life; and Nigerian films became extremely popular when shown on television. This phenomenon refutes the argument that people (viewers) usually prefer and are drawn to high production value products, such as and especially Hollywood films. Nigerian video films can be praised for many things but high production value is not one of them. Critics of Nigerian films have always pointed out how the films are of poor technical quality and the issues chosen for depiction negatively represent Nigeria. And the filmmakers have always replied we give “what many people care about” (in Film International 2007) and certainly from the popularity it garners all over Africa, production value is the furthest in the minds of viewers. Thus the cultural proximity theory which stipulates that viewers usually gravitate toward products that are culturally closer to them is the right theory to explain why Tanzanians are drawn to Nigerian video films.

Tanzanian filmmakers, business individuals, and media house bosses were not blind to the Nigerian film phenomenon that swept Tanzania; they quickly got on board by acquiring Nigerian VCDs and DVDs and selling them to the public for home consumption. Now viewers could not only watch Nigerian videos on television but they could also purchase and play them at their own convenience at home. As the demand for Nigerian films increased, quick thinking entrepreneurs and filmmakers, and just about anyone with a digital camera, jumped on the opportunity to produce videos to supplement the demand. They made video films for television stations and then sold them to the public, and they also made video films that went straight to the market. Kang’anga notes this trend; “they started by compiling popular soaps programmes that had been shown on local TV stations in VHS format for sale to the public...they later graduated into making commercial video films (36). The liberalization of the economy that brought an influx of foreign cultural products and inexpensive digital technology, and the introduction of a cultural policy and trust funds, that gave attention and encouraged individuals to invest in the cultural sector, became a landscape from which the video film industry emerged. The control of the video films industry is strictly in the hands of private individuals, filmmakers and companies whose interest is solely commercial. The government only lingers in the background through its cultural policy, and the outdated Film and Stage Play Act.

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Conclusion

The history of Tanzania's film industry cannot be analyzed without paying close attention to the nation's political economy. How the government controlled, supported and intervened in production matters dictated the types of films and content produced. The introduction of neo-liberal policies and globalization has witnessed a clash of ideas that have forced the government to revisit and re-examine its policies and create new policies that take into account the global perspective of this new social, economic and political world view. This new globalized perspective has ushered in an era where through the collision and mingling of ideas, a new form of cultural product emerged, the video film industry. It is an industry that through cultural convergence, Tanzania's contemporary experiences are revealed and marvelled.

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