

SEXISM, STEREOTYPES AND PRODUCTION CONSTRAINTS IN THE TANZANIA VIDEO FILM INDUSTRY

Vicensia Shule

University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania
vicensiashule@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

In the current neo-liberal era, it is pertinent to interrogate the role of the video film industry in transforming societies beyond patriarchal and bourgeois gender stereotypes. The video film industry is popular in Tanzania, and bongo movies appear to focus on socio-cultural and economic issues, which largely pander to stereotypes as defined by patriarchy. In this article, I investigate the claim that “there are no female producers in bongo movies”. The statement invites analysis on gender roles in the film production industry in Tanzania as well as the content of the produced films. Meetings, participant observations and interviews were used to collect data and transformative feminism was employed as a tool for analysis. The analysis forms part of the process to document women’s struggles in various fields of occupation, linking products to means of production. The findings show that there are few female ‘producers’ in bongo movies. Depicted as ‘just actors’, they are substantially influential and have exhibited extensive survival mechanisms in the constrained film production environments in which they operate.

Key words: bongo movies; female producers; transformative feminism; Tanzania; video films; women

INTRODUCTION

“There are no female producers in bongo movies, they are all actors....” This is a statement by Single Mtambalike, famous as Richie Rich, a bongo movie actor-director and producer in a discussion that took place in Zanzibar during the 16th Zanzibar International Film Festival (ZIFF) in 2013. Mtambalike’s statement came in the midst of

UNISA  university
of south africa
PRESS

Imbizo
www.upjournals.co.za/index.php/Imbizo/index
Volume 8 | Issue 1 | 2017 | #2330 | 16 pages

<https://doi.org/10.25159/2078-9785/2330>
ISSN 2078-9785 (Print)
© Unisa Press 2017

the ongoing discussions on the nascent film industry in Tanzania. This article is zeroing in on *who* is a producer in the Kiswahili video film (also referred to as bongo movies) industry in Tanzania, and what the role and contribution of women in the development of the bongo movie industry is. The primary data collection methods included participant observation and interviews, as well as documentary review, which collectively inform the analysis presented in this article.

In this article, I interrogate the involvement of women in the whole production chain that reflects the way women are presented in some films. The analysis is guided by transformative feminist (TF) analysis which analyses gender, age and class struggles in the midst of neo-liberal policies and the continued dynamics in the patriarchal systems of domination. TF not only challenges patriarchy embodied in the capitalist modes of production and consumption but it provides a platform to explore “gender and class dynamics in both production and reproduction” (Mbilinyi 2015, 512).

This article is divided into six major sections. The first section is on transformative feminist (TF) analysis. The second section is on the historicity of the video film industry in Tanzania, followed by a documentation of women’s struggles in Tanzania. The fourth section is on the involvement of women in film production, while the fifth section analyses the representation of women in films. The last section documents some struggles and the resistance of women in order to survive in the film industry.

TRANSFORMATIVE FEMINISM

Historically in communities, art belonged to the community from which it originated. This means that even the ownership of art was communal. Under communal well-being, art was expected to be for the good of that community. Since it was a product of the community, members had an opportunity to use it to enjoy, learn, warn, and even forecast. Art, as a product, was integrated in the means of production. Women, as an integral part of society, could access art, which was linked and allocated to them according to their role in the production chain.

The assumption is that video film production has evolved as a male industry where the majority of women were regarded as a means of production, both as an instrument and a subject of labour. Hence, by not being able to own and control this means of production in the film industry, the women have not been able to receive a fair share in the accrued surplus. Regardless of being used as a tool for production, women in the film industry have engaged in continuous struggles to overcome the oppressive patriarchal structures using different approaches. Hence, the analysis links the patriarchal means of production and the products, and explores the way the product (film) is shaped by the system which produces it.

Without a proper tool of analysis, women’s struggles in the bongo movie industry are easily overlooked, because of the assumption that women are docile and subservient, doing nothing substantial apart from ‘acting’ and being ‘video queens’.

Transformative feminists call for a holistic approach to research, which takes into account all aspects of reality. The subjective, emotional side of our lives is as significant and open to scientific inquiry as the so-called logical and analytical side. Linking the creative and artistic sides of our brain with the logical and analytical has proven to be crucial in making transformation happen (Kitunga and Mbilinyi 2009, 434).

Transformative feminist analysis facilitates the understanding of how female filmmakers have been navigating in a patriarchal system in the neo-liberal Tanzania. Transformative feminism (TF) explains how possible it is for statements, which exclude and humiliate women, to be taken at face value and perceived as correct without any counter-arguments. TF challenges both patriarchy and neo-liberalism, as Mbilinyi (2015, 512) points out clearly that “patriarchy and neo-liberalism are perceived to be interwoven and inseparable.” TF acknowledges the fact that all women are not the same and that women and men within the same class or ‘imperialized’ location may have much in common when it comes to questioning the right to sustainable livelihoods (Mbilinyi and Shechambo 2009, 95).

THE FILM INDUSTRY

In Tanzania, the production of video films in Kiswahili (bongo movies or films in short) has increased in the past two decades after the trade liberalisation in the implementation of neo-liberal policies. Initially, the term ‘bongo movies’ was used to identify individuals who started the movement to demand the establishment of a film policy in the early 2000s. The movement involved both women and men who at that particular time felt disrespected, exploited and oppressed by the operating structures, due to the lack of policy guidance. The bongo movie group included mostly actors who were involved in television drama production and had started to migrate to film production.

In the late 2000s, individuals who had contracts with Steps Entertainment, one of the leading film distributors in Tanzania, adopted the term bongo movie as an identity marker, and currently the term represents the Kiswahili film industry. The term bongo is derived from Kiswahili *ubongo* (brain). Dar es Salaam, the business capital of the country, is also referred to as Bongo, and for those in the diaspora or outside Tanzania is considered as Bongoland. Bongo movies are considered to be video films produced in Tanzania by Tanzanian crew and actors in Kiswahili, with most having English subtitles, and being distributed locally and regionally. Main themes revolve around social life with ‘love and sex’ included in almost 80% of the produced films. Unlike immediate post-independent African films, which focused on the decolonisation processes, bongo movies address socio-cultural, economic and political issues and are mostly produced for commercial purposes.

Starting in 1995 with a single analogue film known as *Shamba Kubwa* (literally translated as “The Big Farm”), directed by Kassim el Siagi, bongo movies have increased dramatically, replacing Nigerian video films (Nollywood). By mid-2000s, production

and duplication processes were digitalized and there was increased distribution in VCD, DVD and later in other digital formats, including online videos. There is no concrete figure of how many films are produced in Tanzania, but estimates show between 500 and 1300 new film titles yearly. It should be noted that not all released or produced films are registered with the Tanzania Film Censorship Board (TFCB). The numbers provided herein also exclude imported films. These figures position Tanzania as the second largest film industry in Africa after Nigeria (Otiso 2013, 93). With the austerity and on-going ‘economic reforms’ led by the fifth government which came into power in November 2015, these figures are however expected to drop.

Historically, film is a male-dominated industry in Tanzania. In the past, apart from the acting component, which required both male and female characters, the technical aspect was performed by the production crew, who had specific ‘male jobs’. These include the camera-MAN, grip BOY, Sound-MAN, best-BOY, lead-MAN, greens-MAN, weapons-MASTER, and props-MASTER. Make up and costume supervision (wardrobe) activities were left for women as they were termed ‘feminine jobs’. Current gender transformations have neutralised most of these terms and roles, including the word actor being used for both women and men.

WOMEN’S STRUGGLES IN TANZANIA

Women in Tanzania have been in a continuous struggle just as in other parts of the world. It is important to position the struggles by women in the film industry within a broader perspective of women’s struggles in other sectors. The notable struggles in Tanzania started before independence (popularly known as *uhuru*). Most of the struggles were led by patriotic women who constituted the majority of the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU), the dominant nationalist party which finally took over power from the British colonial government in 1961. One of the prominent figures in the struggle of the then Tanganyika before its union with the Zanzibar archipelago to forge the present United Republic of Tanzania in 1964 is Bibi Titi Mohamed (1926-2000).

Bibi Titi Mohamed, a political veteran and *uhuru*’s heroine, is considered to be one of the most powerful nationalist Tanzanian figures in the 1950s under TANU. She mobilised women across age, class and localities in the struggle for independence. In the process, Bibi Titi Mohamed used multiple approaches, including traditional dances. The famous dance groups were those organised by women performing *lelemama* dance. The *lelemama* dance groups headed by women were significant in both the independence struggles and the post-independence deconstruction of the political struggle stereotypes that perceived political power to be vested in the hands of men.

In the liberation movement, women actively took part and led in fund-raising, rabble-raising, house-to-house mobilisation, and pressure groups. As Bibi Titi Mohamed aptly puts it, “Kama sio juhudi za wanawake, uhuru ungekuwa mgumu kupatikana kwa sababu wanaume walikuwa waoga” (literally translated “If it had not been for the women’s hard

work, independence would have been hard to attain as the men were cowards”) (Geiger 2005, 107). Indeed, men, including educated ones with white-collar jobs, were afraid of losing their jobs in the colonial system. As a result, their participation in the liberation politics and movement was limited.

Women devoted their energy, creativity and the little resources they had to enable TANU to reach and gain members across the country. Women were the ones who distributed most of the TANU membership cards through various channels. These included their *lelemama* dancing sessions which they used to meet and discuss politics under the ‘right to cultural association’ caveat provided by the British government. They met at night-time when they held women caucuses and hid their membership cards on their bodies, and aggravated the task of the colonialists to inspect and discover these. In this regard, one can argue that women were the constructors of nationhood in Tanzania.

Bibi Titi Mohamed’s involvement in the liberation struggles represents the struggles of women of her era in challenging and transforming patriarchal dynamics. She went through several divorces and many rejections in the process of defending what she believed was the only way to emancipate women to participate fully in nation-building. Her use of *ngoma* (traditional dances) to pass on messages and mobilise women was pivotal, and it illustrated the role of art as an empowering force. Looking at the story of independence in Tanzania, as elsewhere in Africa, performing arts, especially traditional dance led by women, were used to deconstruct and openly challenge what Meena (2003, 148) describes as “the colonial and patriarchal systems, which were based on ideologies of exclusion”.

After independence, various forms of art were transformed into the implementation tools of the ruling party TANU, which later morphed into Chama cha Mapinduzi (CCM), the Revolutionary Party in 1977. Art, especially *ngoma* and music, continued to feature prominently on the national platform when political leaders wanted to communicate social policies and other political messages to the people. At the community level, art has continued to cater for the ‘traditional’ roles (entertainment, education, communication), but with some transformations. However, in the hands of government, art lost its emancipatory content and positioning, and became a tool of subjugation and propaganda on behalf of the state. The same happened to film. The early films of the 1970s, such as *Fimbo ya Mnyonge* (“Poor Person’s Salvation”, 1976) and its sequel *Yombyomba* (1985), played a crucial role in the *ujamaa* (African socialism) conscientisation.

WOMEN IN THE FILM PRODUCTION INDUSTRY

The postcolonial narrative shows clearly that women owned and mastered various art forms, particularly *ngoma*. They used it as a tool for the liberation and emancipation of the Tanzanian society. Since its introduction in Tanzania during colonial times, film came with the agenda of creating stories for African audiences and teaching Africans ‘good manners’ and ‘civilization’, depicting stories of the liberation of the slave from

the slave owner, the oppressed from the oppressor, and the citizen from state tyranny. The post-independence film production did not enable citizens to tell their own stories through films. Thus, the process of making films remained in the hands of producers who dictated the content, a process which has been carried through generations to the bongo movie era.

The exclusion of women's stories (her-stories) and emphasis on men's stories (his-stories) in the 'history' of Tanzania is one of the patriarchal legacies of the country. Many film stories in Tanzania are told from the producers and screenwriters' eyes, the majority of whom are men. Records of the Tanzania Film Censorship Board (Film Board) of July 2014 to June 2016 show that about 833 Tanzanian films were submitted for censorship and classification (including bongo movies, TV series and music videos). The records show that only about 83 of the submitted films had female producers, while only 49 had female directors, equivalent to 10% and 6% respectively. Similarly, there are more male screenwriters and creators than women. The existing records show that 11% and 12% of the submitted bongo movies had female screenwriters and creators, respectively.

Such an imbalance can partly be ascribed to the reality of women being marginalised in education and decision-making positions, in addition to their having less capital and severely less access and control of resources than men. But the most 'cultural' reason has been the perception of the art industry as a 'hooligan' profession that fosters loose morals and film as a male-dominated industry. Women who were engaged in the early bongo movie industry were more victimised than their male counterparts.

The low profile given to women, regardless of their contribution to the national economy and development, has resulted into attempts to deconstruct patriarchal, colonial and capitalist images of women and to construct new alternatives. Commenting on the performativity of Tanzanian music, Sanga (2011) argues that composers, as creators of music, carry and convey their gender orientation and norms in their music compositions. In film, the screenwriter plays the role of the composer and the impact is substantial. If he/she creates characters for the film, these characters are enacted from the audience's point-of-view to be 'real'. Therefore, the process of creating what the audience should see is initiated by screenwriters and visually facilitated by producers.

It was reported by Mtambalike (2013) that in commercial Kiswahili film in Tanzania, there were only a handful of producers – only five MEN to be precise: the late Steven Kanumba (Kanumba the Great), Jacob Steven (JB), Issa Musa (Cloud), Vincent Kingosi (Ray) and Mtambalike himself. Mtambalike further elaborated how they collectively influenced the production and distribution of bongo movies. The so-called big five started their career as actors, were elevated to directorship and are now producers. All of them, with no exception, retain all the major roles in many of the films they produce, that is, they are the main actors, directors and producers of their own films. This male domination in bongo movies is not peculiar, as men control the means of production in other sectors.

Julieth Samson Kakuru (also known as Kemmy), one of the Tanzanian screenwriters and actor-producers, provides a counter-explanation of how the ‘big five’ control the industry. According to Kakuru (2017) the ‘big five’ plotted to conquer and dominate the film market: they ensured that women producers did not have access to distributors to sell them their films and created obstacles so that women who were hired as video queens in their films, such as Jackline Wolper, Irene Uwoya and the likes of Aunt Ezekiel, could not produce their own films. This plotting still poses a challenge to women producers today, particularly because when they want to distribute their films in the male-dominated distribution systems ‘they have to go through men’. What can be noted from the big five’s plot is the fact that if women were allowed to become producers, they would be financially powerful and difficult to control. Hence, the only position in which they were allowed to ‘prosper’ was acting: in acting they helped male producers to sell more copies of their films. That is why it was easy for Mtambalike (2013) to blatantly conclude that women in bongo movies “are just actors”.

What Mtambalike claims is of significance for further analysis as it confirms what Kakuru (2017) explains about the big five above. On the one hand, the proceedings of the occasion necessitate further research into the validity of the statement which received much acclaim from the audience after Mtambalike’s clarification of what he refers to as producers in the context of Tanzania. On the other hand, there is a need to comprehend further the word ‘actor’ which has been reduced to a female role, a weak role, a subservient role, and ‘a tool for the director’ to use as he wishes.

In reality, there are many male actors who are not producers or directors. The struggle for producer or director position is a struggle for power and according to Nye (2009, n.p.), “power is one’s ability to affect the behavior of others to get what one wants. There are three basic ways to do this: coercion, payment, and attraction.” The majority of women do not own cash capital as men do. Mostly in the economic struggle, women offer their labour as capital. The labour force is more crucial for any production. Since the so-called modern economies rely on capitalist principles of payment, cash – hard currency – is seen as capital, as opposed to human capital.

Some male producers accept the fact that women hold a significant stake in the industry. Perhaps if it was not for the labour women actors have ploughed in the bongo movie industry, the industry would not have achieved the significance it has at the moment. The popularity of these female actors is notably the key factor behind the male producers’ survival – they simply cannot do without the women actors. In conversation with the author, Jacob Steven (2013) once admitted: “Wema [Sepetu] is hot. You have her in your film it’s a bingo [as the] audience wants [to see] her but to get her, she is expensive”. Reading from this comment, it is obvious that the contribution of women in bongo movies is significant. The only challenge is to accept that women are the bongo movies’ driving force, whereas the production structure has kept men at the top as key decision-makers. The description of Wema as ‘hot’ is linked to depictions of women as ‘sex kittens’ and seductresses. The description of women as actors comes with the

misconception that the majority are cheap, and some want to be seen in films just to be known as celebrities.

Regardless of the fact that female actor-producers such as Wema Sepetu, Rose Ndauka, Yvonne Cherrie, Blandina Chagula and others have produced fewer films than men, their social media influence is higher than that of men. For example, in their Instagram accounts, with Instagram being the most popular social platform for artists in Tanzania as of August 2017, Wema Sepetu has 3.0 million followers, Jackline Wolper 2.8 million, Yvonne Cherrie 1.2 million, Jenifer Kyaka 0.9 million, and Irene Uwoya 0.9 million. By contrast, JB (Jacob Steven) has 0.85 million followers, Issa Musa 0.6 million, Vincent Kingosi 0.4 million, and Richie Rich only 0.18 million. The huge difference in the number of followers attests to the global popularity of these women over their male counterparts.

The social and personal relationships of many female film-makers in Tanzania are marked ups and downs, which in most cases affect their involvement in film production. Such setbacks are not peculiar to women in the bongo movie industry. According to Bibi Titi Mohamed, politics and marriage are not compatible. In her interview with Ruth Meena (2003, 146), she states: “After engaging in politics, it was not possible for me to keep a husband in the traditional way”. Many female actors’/producers’ aspirations escalate between retreat and surrender, empowerment and revolution. The resistance they get from their partners, in many cases, pushes them back to their ascribed position of being a man’s property, an object rather than a subject, and forces them to play gender-prescribed subservient roles in movies. Although many film actors prefer to be in stable relationships, the challenges of the working environment reward them with the opposite. The majority of the women in film have accepted the fact that the public affects their private life; thus, the majority are single and a small number divorced.

The main argument presented on women being actors rather than producers is based on the assumption that female producers get funds to produce their films from men with whom they have had sexual affairs. Mtambalike’s words below support this misconception:

We men have to fundraise every single shilling in our films but they [female producers] do not have to. That is why someone can sell a film which she has produced for fifteen million [shillings] to a m hindi for fifteen million [shillings] and she thinks she has made thirteen million profit. Just because her initial capital has been two million [shillings] only and the rest has been collected from male friends. (Mtambalike 2013, n.p.)

Mtambalike raises two issues here: men as sexual partners and men as funders, which means in either case the film produced are produced by men, and women are ‘used’ as a means to such production. This assumption does not take into account the fact that ‘there is no free lunch’. Whether women receive money from men in exchange for sex or popularity, the fact is that women toil for the money they receive, and they are paid capital in exchange for the services men receive.

WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION

Working as a video film producer, one realises how the script contributes to the reproduction of gender stereotypes. As defined by Aje-Ori (2010, 85), a stereotype is considered to be “mental judgment about a person or a group of people” based on how they appear or are considered in a given society. Such judgment can be in terms of their gender, race, class, age and other related variables. Since few women are producers or screenwriters, less space is given to reflecting on and expressing their views and challenging patriarchy, capitalism, neo-liberalism and other oppressive and exploitative systems. In situations where women are producers or screenwriters, few are conscious of their potential transformative role, particularly when the audience has been constructed to celebrate patriarchal stories and acting.

Women are more exploited and oppressed than men within the same exploited class of subsistence peasants, pastoralists and fisher people, and low-income workers. They are also exploited and oppressed by men within their own class, community, and family as well as by capitalist and imperialist globalizers through the exploitation of both paid and unpaid work (Mbilinyi 2015, 513).

Gender stereotypes dominate each of the film-making processes, from pre-production, through production to post-production. Activists seeking to transform film into a liberating force have to pay close attention to the numerous decisions to be made in each stage of production. For example, if the screenwriter is not gender-conscious, he/she will continue with the stereotypical characterisation in the script. The same applies to the director. He/she might not notice the negative stereotypes by the screenwriter and, hence, will continue with the stereotypical casting and directing which results in a continuous cycle of male-biased films.

The portrayal of women in some films is both unrealistic and realistic (Okunna 1996, 32). Transformative feminism tells us why we have such varied opinions on the same issue. Though women as human beings are equal, this equality is not the same and is subject to the system which produces them. Differences in socio-economic and political backgrounds and orientation dictates perceptions of what is ‘real’ and what is ‘not real’ in the portrayal of women. Therefore, one gets mixed opinions on whether women are oppressed by the system or not. As White (1998, 119) aptly puts it, “dominant cinema deploys unconscious mechanism in which the image of woman function as signifier of sexual difference, conforming man as subject and maker of meaning”.

Men are represented differently in African films and fiction. Lahoucine Ouzgane (2011, 2) argues that “any study of African men cannot ignore the reality that patriarchal power is still in place across the continent”. This implies that the African continent, similar to many other places in the world, operates under the tentacles of patriarchy which allows male domination and supremacy to be embraced largely unquestioned. The powerful will always suppress the voices of the weak and minority. Bryce (2011) explains how the presentation of masculinity (constituted by patriarchy) in African films is significant and historical: the reflection of male superiority is based on the

representation of ‘female inferiority’ in the typical way of patriarchal systems that use one side to dictate the presentation and behaviour of the ‘others’.

The nature and the production style in bongo movies allow men to control the whole production process. In bongo movies, the screenwriter can be the director, main actor and producer – three roles rolled into one. As the director-producer, one can choose who to pay more in cash or in kind and what role/character each actor should play. Regarding creativity, the director decides to what extent an actor should deploy his/her creativity so as not to overshadow the main actor who happens to be the same director-producer.

Earlier research on the work of one of the renowned bongo movie personas (Shule 2017), Steven Kanumba (1984-2012), shows that he plays the role of main actor, director and producer and, sometimes, the story creator in most of his films. In such circumstances, the content of the film cannot be dissociated from its creator. In the analysis (Shule 2017) of his fourteen films which were produced by his Kanumba the Great Films Company, only one film *Kijiji cha Tambua Haki* (“Village of Justice”, 2011), did not contain derogatory statements against women. Some examples from two of his films, *Big Daddy* (2012) and *Moses* (2011), illustrate the derogatory manner in which Kanumba perceives and presents women. In the film *Big Daddy* (2012), Kanumba is the main actor, Big Daddy, as well as the director and producer. In one of the scenes, when speaking to his house-help Selengo, he states:

I don’t like to blame women. They are tempted so easily [...] Look at the holy books, Eve was tempted by the devil and ate the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden and gave the same to her husband. The same [happens] to Samson and Delilah, the wife of Loth, the wife of Ayoub [...] they are tempted so easily. (*Big Daddy* 2012)

Here we see how Kanumba uses “holy books” to justify his patriarchal ideas. The underlying meaning is that women’s weakness is historical, well-documented and cannot be changed because that is how they were created.

In his other film, *Moses* (2011), Kanumba plays Moses, the main character and the owner of a company. When speaking to Lucky (Ndumbagwe Misayo) about the women’s performance in his company, he says:

[Women] do not have alternative thoughts in solving issues, they love shortcuts. You can even look at young women of today, stupid, bastards. They don’t want to think about life. [...] She is ready to sleep with an old man like her father or grandfather because she knows at the end she will get money [...] A girl is approached today, in the evening they have sex with the man. They are cheap, they like shortcuts, they want money, stupid bastards. But we men know life, know what to do; that’s why I was defending the company. (*Moses* 2011)

Kanumba goes on with many negative insinuations about women in his films to the point of painting women as having “plastic hearts” which can easily melt (*Moses* 2011). To him, women can easily be manipulated and ‘torn apart’. Of course, Kanumba is pandering to long-established myths about women which have been created and propagated for centuries.

I have used Kanumba as an example to show how the so-called ‘great’ male bongo movie producers perceive women. Many examples can be drawn from other actors-directors/producers such as Jacob Steven (JB) in films such as *Dj Ben* (2011), *My Fiancée* (2011), *Senior Bachelor* (2011), *I Think I Hate My Wife* (2012) and *Danija* (2014). The same can be seen in Mtambalike’s film *Gentleman* (2012) and Vincent Kingosi’s *Fair Decision* (2010).

WOMEN’S RESISTANCE IN THE FILM INDUSTRY

Historically, women have been engaged in a constant struggle to get rid of oppressive patriarchal regimes. In many cases, they are locked up in a vicious cycle, that is, they escape one system (lack of capital) and get trapped in another (using their bodies as capital), mainly because of the unfair and uneven operational environment patriarchy has established for women. From the discussion above, it is apparent that actors (women) are associated with frailty and poverty, which implicitly puts them at the mercy of producers (men). This is an issue fraught with ambiguity and deserving of further analysis.

The situation of having only a few female producers in the bongo movie industry and the stereotypical representation of women as weak cannot pass without being challenged. At present, within the industry, efforts are in place to escalate the empowerment of women for them to be able to take part in decision-making in film production and to train more women as scriptwriters so that they can tell their own stories. Women in bongo movies have employed various mechanisms to strengthen their struggles against exploitative systems. Their struggle includes resisting exploitation perpetuated by male producers who pay female actors less money. Being a producer means having resources and the capacity to control production. Women are capable of producing films but they lack resources – hard currency. Thus, the target of transforming the industry is to get more women to become producers with capital.

Neema Ndepanya, also known as Fontana, is one of the key figures in the bongo movie industry. She started her career in 2009 as a screenwriter and director. She is now one of the leading female producers in the industry.¹ Ndepanya (2017, n.p.) admits that distributors, specifically male distributors, do not respect female producers: “Distributors with huge capital do not trust us [women] that we can produce best films that will perform well in the market. This led us to lack markets to sell our films”. This lack of trust in women is a big problem in the bongo movie industry.² Another related problem is sextortion. Ndepanya highlights this problem when she states: “It is a common practice to be asked for my body in exchange for [an] offer to distribute my films. This has happened to many women in the industry, but there is no space to speak about [this]”.

Kakuru (2017) cited earlier shares similar experiences of what I describe as reverse sextortion. As a producer, the male actors and directors she employs tend to seduce her

so that she can pay them huge amounts of money while on location. The assumption is that men deserve more pay than women. Kakuru's strategy to overcome what she describes as "exploitative distributors" was to distribute her films on her own (Kakuru 2017, n.p.). She narrates how she had to change the title and cover of her film *Omtima* released in 2005 to *Mateka wa Moyo* ("Heart Hostage") and re-distribute it on her own once it became apparent that the distributors with whom she had contracts distributed fewer copies than she had thought. After rebranding the film, she was able to distribute more than five thousand copies. To her, this was a great success because it encouraged her later to distribute more than ten thousand copies of her film *My Daughter*.

One interesting point which Ndepanya (2017) highlights is the definition of a 'woman' in the bongo movie industry. She notes:

A woman is a person who cannot direct men. So if you cast a male actor in your film, as he arrives in [at] the location he starts criticizing your script, change[s] the story and acts the way he feels which destroys your film[']s story and leads to a bad story which cannot far[e] well [o]n the market. (Ndepanya 2017, n.p.)

This statement points to the issue of male dominance which continues to pervade film production in Tanzania. However, it also indicates that women are fighting this tendency of men to take over and run women's shows.

Other challenges facing female producers include lack of proper education on film production, including screenwriting, directing and acting, which leads to most of the bongo movies not performing well internationally. To overcome that, women in film in Tanzania have looked for professional training in filmmaking. Their desire for knowledge is seen in their positive and eager response to training programmes and discussion forums about the development of bongo movies. However, they tend not to do well in film courses and training programmes as a result of their limited secondary and university education. Thus, when training is expected to be conducted in a language other than Kiswahili or when it is going to take longer hours, they tend not to attend as they have to prioritise their ascribed gender roles as family caregivers.

The exploitative experiences of female film practitioners have necessitated solidarity among women, which enables them to form groups and associations to support one another. In 2016, women actors who had been working in the film industry from the early 2000s decided to establish a group known as *Malezi Daima*. Members of the group include Grace Mapunda, Hidaya Njaidi, Susan Lewis and Thecla Mjata. The main objective of the group is to look for possible ways of increasing their income and to break away from the tradition of waiting to be cast in films by making their own films.

In order to avoid the bureaucracies established by film distributors, female producers have developed their own applications (Apps) which enable them to sell their films online. The Apps offer various services which they could not access if they had to follow the conventional ways of film production and distribution. With technology, women producers not only distribute their films, but also communicate directly with

their fans and buyers to receive comments and appreciation for their work. It is through the use of Apps that audiences get to know exactly who the film producers are. The likes of Ndepanya and Sepetu use the Apps space to share their résumés and thoughts and to advertise their projects.

In order to keep on transforming male attitudes towards female film producers, female filmmakers have had to work with men. This includes writing scripts, directing, and even acting in films produced by men. Ndepanya (2017, n.p.) admits: “I try to produce good scripts about our lives, how we live and send them to male producers so as to show them not only men can do everything”. This shows how women have continued to prove to men their capabilities and to seek collaboration without antagonising them.

Experiences from producing activist transformative films reveal how challenging the transformation processes are. Internal and external donors focusing on specific projects have funded many of the produced films. This is one of the on-going debates, that is, whether donor funded or developmental films should be considered as bongo movies. In some cases, the process of arriving at the final film script is beset with many challenges and contradictory ideas between the assigned producer and the funding agency (as executive producer). Many producers, who are conversant with the commercial film industry, strive to balance both the form and the content of the films, whereas the executive producers are obsessed with inserting institutional rhetorical agendas into the film. In such scenarios, the process of building characters becomes complex. While the producer’s primary concern is to project ‘social realities’, in most cases using stereotypes, the ‘realities’ of the executive producers centre on deconstructing these stereotypes.

To subvert the asymmetrical power relations between women and men, in which men are seen as dominant and women as subservient, the director has to use specific characters to convey the message. This means that at least one character has to remind the audience that women contribute to the socio-political and economic base of the society. Looking at the films produced by activist organisations, one can conclude that women’s oppression is more political than social, and it is entrenched even in the nationalist building rhetoric. The elimination of patriarchal systems based on imperialistic approaches and enclosed in neo-liberal policies needs commitment and holistic approaches from both public and private sectors.

One of the most challenging situations for producers of developmental films, let alone transformative ones, is finding the right sponsors for such productions. Most bongo movies depend on the sales of DVDs and online downloads and, therefore, the audience remains the main sponsor. Developmental films, on the other hand, are mostly donor-dependent, especially foreign donors. Donors in most cases provide support with strings attached – the do’s and don’ts. If foreign experts are involved, especially as funding organisations, they tend to demand having an upper hand in the production, particularly to ensure that the content of the film is in line with their taste or the conditions attached

to their sponsorship of the film. Such films are usually perceived as gifts by the funding organisations which are to be distributed for free.

In the scenario where donor-funded or developmental films are sold, they do not perform well on the market. They hardly reach the numbers which bongo movies do. There are several reasons for this, the most important being that they are not produced to cater for the bongo movie audience. The developmental films are of a high quality and are professionally made, sometimes with foreign members of the crew, mostly from South Africa, the United States, Germany and Great Britain. Ironically, the 'quality' does not influence buyers or boost sales and/or distribution, because in many cases the adopted storylines are 'foreign' and not related to Tanzanian stories. Characters and their acting styles are seen as 'foreign' to most of the bongo movie audience. The audience does not identify the characters with the ones they know in their real lives and, perhaps, relate them to the ones 'who are not yet born'.

The process of countering the stereotypes and myths in the bongo movie industry makes female characters appear superhuman and unnatural. The creation of super-perfect and spotless characters is almost a social fiction movie. The advice given by the funders in the making of the films, sometimes, is from people who have no idea how films are produced. This gives credibility to the view that "the identification of types and generic conventions is an important step, but simply replacing stereotypes with positive images does not transform the system that produces them" (White 1998, 118). It is imperative to transform the perceptions of the audience for whom the images are produced to suit them rather than the opposite. Some of the so-called negative stereotypes are the ones regarded as conflicting points to build a story on, as a good story is the one which has multidimensional conflicts. Hence, many such films are left in the funding libraries and government offices' cabinets.

Regardless of such challenges, transformative feminism proposes transformation as the cornerstone of the evolution to a better future. As Okunna (1996, 34) illustrates, "there is a need for alternative video – alternative that is, to conventional male created video". Films should be made to embrace multiple identities, ambiguities in characterisation in the midst of free market economy and trade liberalisation.

CONCLUSION

The bongo movie industry in Tanzania has been a male domain since its inception. The industry, like many of the lucrative sectors, has been organised to conform to patriarchal structures. From pre-independence to date, women have been engaging in a constant struggle to create a transformed society, and yet less of their contribution is acknowledged, rewarded or honoured in the political sphere as it is in the film realm. This unequal relations of male and female producers is clearly exposed by transformative feminism which identifies patriarchy, imperialism and capitalism as key sources of inequality in many societies. The low number of women involved in bongo movie production can be

attributed to a number of factors, including not only the frequently mentioned socio-cultural and religious factors, but also the ‘modern’ labour market, education systems and mass communication systems.

Bongo movies, as a dominant part of the Kiswahili video film industry in Tanzania, represent the multi-layered maze of women’s struggles in Tanzania when it comes to accessing the means of production as well as benefiting from such production. Although film continues to play a major role in gender transformation, the role of film producers is undebatably key and vital. Thus, the contention that there are no female producers in the bongo movie industry is based on a male-biased definition of who a ‘producer’ is and what power is vested in that position. There is a need for further research into women’s involvement and struggles of survival in various film industries to compare and contrast their strategies.

NOTES

1. Ndepanya has produced seven films: *Nifute Machozi* (“Weep my Tears”, 2010), *Utamu Wangu* (“My Sweetness”, 2012), *Hakunaga* (“No One”, 2013), *Tambara Bovu* (“Torn Old Cloth”, 2014), *Mapenzi Yamerogwa* (“Love has been Cursed”, 2015), *Kivuruge* (“Disturbance”, 2016) and *Kobe la Mchana* (“Daytime Tortoise”, 2016).
2. For more information about the antics of bongo movie distributors, see Shule (2014a) and Shule (2014b).

REFERENCES

- Aje-Ori, A. 2010. The portrayal of mothers-in-law in Nigerian movies: The good, the bad and oh, so wicked! *African Literature Today* 28: 84-105.
- Bryce, J. 2011. The anxious phallus: The iconography of importance in *Quartier Mozart and Clando*. In *Men in African film and fiction*, ed. L. Ouzgane, 11-27. New York: James Currey.
- Geiger, S. 2005. *Wanawake wa TANU: Jinsia na Utamaduni katika Kujenga Uzalendo Tanganyika: 1955-1965*. Dar es Salaam: E&D Publishers.
- Kakuru, J. S. 2017. Interviewed by V. Shule. Life as a female film producer in Tanzania. Dar es Salaam, September 10.
- Kitunga, D. and M. Mbilinyi. 2009. Transformative feminist struggles in Tanzania at grassroots. *Review of African Political Economy* 36 (121): 433-441. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03056240903211158>
- Mbilinyi, M. 2015. Transformative feminism in Tanzania: Animation and grassroots women’s struggles for land and livelihoods. In *The Oxford handbook of transnational feminists movements*, eds. R. Baksh and W. Harcourt, 507-527. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mbilinyi, M. and G. Shechambo. 2009. Struggles over land reform in Tanzania: Experiences of Tanzania gender networking programme and feminist activist coalition. *Feminist Africa* 12: 95-103.
- Meena, R. 2003. A conversation with Bibi Titi: A political veteran. In *Activist voices: Feminist struggles for an alternative world*, eds. M. Mbilinyi, M. Rusimbi, C. S. L Chachage and D. Kitunga, 140-154. Dar es Salaam: E&D Publishers.
- Mtambalike, S. 2013. Interviewed by V. Shule. Bongo movie industry. Dar es Salaam, July 5.
- Ndepanya, N. 2017. Interviewed by V. Shule. Life as a female film producer in Tanzania. Dar es

Salaam, September 8.

Nye, J. S. 2017. Get smart: Combining hard and soft power.

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2009-07-01/get-smart?page=1> (accessed June 15, 2017).

Okunna, C. S. 1996. Portrayal of women in Nigerian home video films: Empowerment or subjugation? *Africa Media Review* 10(3): 21-36.

Otiso, K. M. 2013. *Culture and customs of Tanzania*. California: Greenwood.

Ouzgane, L. ed. 2011. *Men in African film and fiction*. London: James Currey.

Sanga, I. 2011. Music and the regulatory regimes of gender and sexuality in Tanzania. *Popular Music and Society* 34(3): 351-368. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2010.522816> (accessed June 15, 2017).

Shule, V. 2014a. Video-film production and distribution in Tanzania: Copyright infringement and piracy. *The African Review* 41(2): 185-199.

Shule, V. 2014b. Filamu za Kiswahili nchini Tanzania: Athari za 'Kauli' za Wasambazaji-Wauzaji kwa Wasanii na Jamii. *Kioo cha Lugha* 12: 58-72.

Shule, V. 2017. Gender, urban dynamics and the film industry in Tanzania: The case of Steven Kanumba. *CACH Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies* 2: 1-28.

Steven, J. 2013. Interviewed by V. Shule. Bongo movie industry. Dar es Salaam, July 5.

White, P. 1998. Feminism and film. In *The Oxford guide to film studies*, eds. J. Hill and P. Church, 117-134. Oxford: Oxford University Press.