

## Kenya's Riverwood film industry: A theoretical postulation

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### Introduction

This paper gives a brief background to film and cinema in both colonial and postcolonial Kenya, and introduces Kenya's Riverwood film industry, briefly expounding the theoretical postulates that explain its inception and existence. It is a study is about the history of the Kenyan film story as produced by Riverwood-the Kenya's film industry domiciled mainly along the vibrant River Road business hub in Nairobi (<https://www.google.com/maps/@-1.282,36.827,19z?hl=en>).

The name Riverwood is today synonymous with Kenya's popular cinema (McNamara, 2010, Vourlias, 2011). It is derived from River Road, the name of the street that stretches from Tom Mboya Street all the way to Ronald Ngala Street in Nairobi's downtown. The locale of River Road also serves as the nexus of the upcountry's transport infrastructure, the network that Riverwood, just like its local music industry has appropriated as its main cog in film distribution (Nyutho, 2015), (Muigai, 2008), (Overberg, 2014).

Since the nineteen-fifties, River Road has earned the bland of a sizzling, underworld of crime, prostitution, dingy bars and bustling night life. And none could have artistically captured this sleazy, never sleeping vibrant backstreet world better than Meja Mwangi in his classics, *Going*

*Down River Road* (1976), *The Cockroach Dance* (1979) and *Kill Me Quick* (1973). Despite the moniker, during the day, River Road is a different world all together. It becomes a vibrant haven of hustling small and medium scale businessmen and women engaged in a rat race to eke out a living.

### **Background to the study.**

River Road has over the last seventy years served as the creative and distribution nerve center of Kenya's music (Muigai, 2008), (Njoroge, 2014), (Karanja, *The Riverwood industry*, 2017). It houses audio recording studios, music stores, and an elaborate distribution network that depends on River Road nexus as a major terminus for the upcountry road transport grid. Little wonder then this stretch of road has also trail-blazed the development of an indigenous film industry, riding on the crest of the wave of the indigenous music infrastructure (Karanja, *The Riverwood industry*, 2017).

The film industry domiciled along River Road hereafter referred to as Riverwood, owes its birth to the late 1980s and early 1990s diffusion of the digital revolution (Diawara, 2010), and has mirrored itself after River Road's music industry in terms of business model, production dynamics, and distribution channels (Karanja, *The Riverwood industry*, 2017), (Njoroge, 2014). During its short lifespan, Riverwood has developed a local version of a vertically integrated film industry, and its production hub has grown to encompass River Road surroundings that include

Luthuli Avenue, Tom Mboya Street, and Accra Road in down town Nairobi (Njoroge, 2014). It has also branched out to other towns in the country <https://goo.gl/maps/6LS9TYHZqyDR5ent7>

By independence, Kenya's colonial film and media industry had already established itself as most developed in the region (Banfield, 1964). During this illustrious growth spurt, Kenya remained mainly a great exotic film location for western audiences. This is the period that produced such acclaimed films as *TR in Africa (1909)*, *Africa Speaks (1930)*, *Trader Horn (1931)*, *The Macomber Affair (1947)*, *King Solomon Mines (1950)*, *The Snows of Mt Kilinjaru (1952)* *Men Against the Sun (1953)*, *Mogambo (1953)* and the plethora of documentary/factual films that were produced by the Colonial Film Unit (CFU) , the Crown Film Unit, and a host of private companies. Despite this impressive growth of both dramatic and factual film genres, indigenous Kenyans were largely been locked out of the industry (Ndeti, 1975).

On the other hand, the television industry that the colonial and the independence government had established from the early 1960s had by 1970s become fairly successful. Over the period, local television stars and comedians had grown to become extremely popular, earning their place in the hearts of their audiences with such popular shows as *Njia Panda*, *Jamii ya Mzee pembe*, *Mama Tofi*, *Vioja mahakamani*, *Kivunja Mbavu*, amongst others. But just like in the film industry, television production technology and programming was out of the reach of local broadcast enthusiasts. The government was in full control in terms of production, programming and editorial (Ambala, 2014).

But due to government control, television programming was just unavailable to local audience in any other format other than what the government broadcaster the Voice of Kenya (VOK) beamed. The government also owned the rights to all television programs the VOK produced. Besides, even if copyright had not been an issue then, the technology to access such programming was way out of reach of all Kenyans. To make matters worse, apart from skit performances in popular entertainment joints, popular local stars and comedians had no other forum to access their audience. This meant that the only other form of popular entertainment for majority of indigenous audience was the corporate sponsored mobile cinema that exhibited Western feature films, and at times development documentaries. The other were the government-disseminated development documentaries through the mobile cinema medium (Reynolds, 2015). The situation left a gaping yearning for relevant local visual medium entertainment.

In a nutshell just like its sister industries in Anglophone Africa; the Nollywood, Bongowood, and the Ghallywood, three realities conspired to set the stage for the birth of Riverwood. The first factor was the devastating effects of the British colonial policy of direct rule. The policy ended up subjugating Kenya's cultural and social development by curtailing intercultural, intracultural and social interaction amongst different communities in the country. By design, the policy led to the strangulation of indigenous people's freedom to culturally self-express (Bjorkman, 1989), (Thiong'o, 1986) (Thiong'o, 2009).

Secondly, although Britain during the colonial period made half-hearted attempts to develop an indigenous film industry in Anglophone Africa, at independence they denied the struggling film industries of the newly independent nations (whether indigenous or foreign) financial, technological and cultural support, leading to their total collapse as film production technology was too expensive for the struggling African economies (Smyth, 2009), (Smyth, 2006), (Smyth, 2013), (Thackaway, 2003).

The third reality is what Ezeonu (2013) calls, the disastrous experimentation of the reckless and fundamentalist neoliberal market economics of the Bretton woods institutions of the 1980 and 1990s; the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs). These programs decimated African economies and rendered most of the population destitute to the point that film production development was a luxury African governments could ill-afford. (Heidhues & Obore, 2011), (Shah, 2013), (Kawewe & Dible, 2000) (Kangara, 2000).

The three realities fomented a curative environment that led to the new wave of film-making in Africa and the birth of Riverwood and its sister industries in the continent. The realities can be explained by three theoretical constructs. They include the disruptive technological roll over, especially broadcast and film of the late 1980s and early 1990s that moved the world from analog to digital. The transition from the linear, elitist, very expensive and fixed analog technological system to the easily accessible, affordable and socially liberalizing digital framework disrupted the

technological status quo in the film industry, leading to what Walter Benjamin calls “the death of the aura in the work of art” (During, 2007).

### **Disruptive technology and the birth of Riverwood.**

The theory of disruptive innovations/technology was advanced by the Harvard Business School Professor Clayton Christensen to explain how new technologies of lower cost and performance by traditional criteria, but with a higher ancillary performance, enter the market and destabilize the status quo (Christensen, 1997). A disruptive innovation introduces a different set of features and performance standards contrary to existing mainstream technologies, and are usually first offered at discounted prices. These characteristics at the onset of their release render disruptive innovations unattractive to mainstream clients (Adner, 2002), (Govindarajan & Kopalle, 2006). Conversely, peripheral clients discern the innovations’ utility and price value, and move in and adopt them immediately (Christensen & Raynor, 2003. ). Disruptive technologies at their onset therefore only attract peripheral markets who cannot afford mainstream technologies.

Over time though, disruptive technologies mature in their performance to rival the mainstream ones, and in the process expand their emerging markets niches. In the long run, these technologies attack and displace established products from their traditional markets (Charitou & Markides, 2003). Christensen asserts that the true power of disruptive technologies lies not in their ability to disrupt and replace mainstream technologies, but in their capability to enlarge and broaden markets, and provide new functionality (Christensen, 1997).

Christensen's construct describes the technological panacea that heralded the birth of the Riverwood film industry. The celluloid's analog format was a preserve of a few Western film production companies that sought to shoot in the country. The format was way too expensive for the government, let alone the ordinary indigenous film maker. In a nutshell, all aspect of the film process was a preserve of the West. All production technology (equipment, camera film stock, film processors and chemicals to be used to process the film) had to be imported from either the United States or Europe at very exorbitant costs. This applied to both 16mm and the super 16mm semi-professional film stock formats that the government film processor, located at the Kenya Institute of Mass communication and the then Voice of Kenya (VOK) could handle (Munyi, 2017).

On the professional side, even the government had to think twice before planning any production using the 35mm film format due to the cost of the film stock, the cameras to expend it, and the postproduction cost abroad as film processing laboratory services for the format were available only in Egypt, South Africa or the West. The same reality repeated itself in the television and video formats where the analog U-matic (first developed by Sony in 1969) and the Betacam (again developed by Sony in 1982) professional video and television production formats were way too expensive for the African broadcaster, let alone poor peripheral amateur video producers (Shapiro, 2014).

On the other hand, even though amateur video production technology had been in use since 1967 when Sony introduced the portable black and white DV-2400 Video Rover for the first time, the technology was just as heavy and cumbersome as the film and professional video, for it recorded sound and picture separately. Moreover, the equipment retailing at US \$30,000 (Ksh. 3.06 million), was again way too expensive for the average video enthusiast anywhere (Harlow, 2018).

But the decades of the seventies and the eighties saw a leap in amateur and professional video technology development, with technological race coming to a head in 1992 when Sony and JVC unveiled the Video Home System (VHS) Camcorder, a camera that could record sound and picture simultaneously. During the same period, other technological features advancing included the development of the video time code that made time tracking and video stability possible, the development of chip-based camcorder (Sony's Video 8 in 1985), the JVC-S superior VHS format (1992), the unveiling of Sharp's color LCD in 1992 to replace the viewfinder, Sony and Panasonic Matsushita's unveiling of digital video technology in 1995 and amateur editing systems and software.

By 1995, amateur video technology had coalesced to become small, light-weight and compact, able to produce high quality digital video resolution. The same was happening in editing technology development in both analog and digital. But while this technology was too base for a western audience, it was the boon on which creative and independent filmmakers in Africa and other developing regions rode on to tell their audience stories. Hence the arrival of the armature

analog VHS and semi-professional S-VHS camcorder was the game changer for the Anglophone film industry (especially in Nigeria that recorded its first Nollywood film-*Living in Bondage*- in 1992) and led to the renaissance of the creative Africa (Ezeonu, 2013), (Akudinobi, (2015), (Correy, 2008), (Akinola, Spring 2013).

In Kenya, the film technological stranglehold persisted until the late 1980s when home video technology (VHS) made inroads into the River Road music industry and local popular musicians the likes of Joseph Kamaru, Peter Kigia, and Queen Jane (Jane Nyambura) quickly adopted the medium to help them increase their sales (Karanja, *The Riverwood industry*, 2017). It can therefore be argued that the decade between 1990 and 2000 was a seminal moment for the River Road entertainment industry. During this period amateur video technology was fast evolving from the analog VHS format to the digital video. River Road musicians who pride themselves first as businessmen saw this technological evolution as a means to increase their financial gains. This in turn led to the birth of Riverwood film industry. The VCD (Video Compact Disc), first developed by Sony, Philips, Matsushita and JVC in 1993 and introduced in the local scene soon after made business sense for music producers and distributors. The medium's technology helped quicken the production process, as it was light weight, could hold more content, and had the capacity to record both audio and video.

By the year 2000, the flooding of the local entertainment market with cheap Chinese-pirated popular Western, Chinese and Indian films, series and serials in the DVD (Digital versatile Disc)

format opened another opportunity for River Road entertainment industry; the capacity to author more into River Road music DVDs as the format had bigger storage capacity and better audio and video quality than the VCD format.

The pirated DVDs also gave birth to the Video DJ phenomenon, where Kiswahili or mother-tongue sound track commentary would be dubbed onto the pirated films for exhibition in local commercial video halls. In some instances, live video Disc Jockeys commentated these films for local audiences (Bisschoff & Overbergh, 2012, p. 116). The phenomenon had begun earlier when local manufacturers would hire companies with mobile cinema vans to advertise their products during exhibition of popular action Western films to rural audiences. In order to help local audience appreciate these foreign productions better, the mobile cinema crew started an entertaining flare that involved complementing the original sound track with own live or recorded voice over in Kiswahili or local languages, a phenomenon came to be referred to as video DJ. Video DJ enabled Kenyans to appreciate these foreign productions on their own terms as they didn't have to understand the original language of the movie to get entertained.

The peripheral vicarious experience local artists were giving their audience through the Video DJ phenomenon, was symptomatic of a deep desire to create a relevant, local and original entertainment. Unfortunately, this was an unattainable feat due to the tyranny of the linear celluloid format. The affordable digital technological revolution making inroads into the River Road music industry was the break these artists had been waiting for, and as they were testing the

waters with it, the Nollywood film phenomenon arrived. It can therefore be argued that Riverwood is the product of the entrepreneurial spirit of indigenous music industry (Kamencu, 2017), the availability of affordable production technology, and content producers' desire to reach a wider audience. Riverwood hit the international arena in 2005 with Kibaara Kaugi's internationally acclaimed film *Enough is enough* (Kaugi K. , 2005). The film *Enough is Enough* was soon followed by Mburu Kimani's *Dawa ya Deni* (2005), *The Race* (2007), *Pieces for Peace* (2008). By 2016, the Kenya Film Classification Board had estimated the local film industry to be worth over seven billion Kenyan shillings (Xinhua, 2017), with Riverwood contributing a sizable amount of the income.

### **Cultural proximity and Riverwood.**

Cultural proximity is the second construct that helps to explain the birth of Riverwood the phenomenon. The theory is rooted in classical Marxism (Ritzer, 2008), (Lemert, 2013), but draws its communication links from Critical theory (During, 2007), (Martin-Barbero, 1987). Cultural proximity theory was propositioned by Straubhaar (2003) as a repudiation to the theoretical postulations that sought to explain the then existing structural dependency and dominance between developed and developing nations (Boyd-Barrett, in Thussu (2010), (Schiller, 1992), (Mattelart, 1979), (Tunstall, 1977). Johan Galtung, the proponent of structural imperialism theory opined that, "two of the most glaring facts about this world: the tremendous inequality, within and between nations, in almost all aspects of human living conditions, including the power to decide

over those living conditions; and the resistance of this inequality to change”, (Galtung, 1971, p. 81).

Dependency and economic theories held sway in 1960s and the 70s, and included cultural imperialism and economic theories (Wildman & Siwek, 1988), (Waterman, 2005) . The theories attributed the linear one-way cultural and information flow between the West and poor countries to the West’s advanced, efficient and vertically integrated economic and cultural production systems (Ksiazek & Webster, 2008) . The logic of the theories was that, there existed very little chance for poor nations to ever redress information and cultural imbalance, based on economic and industrial might of the west. Despite the gloomy and hopeless scenario that was being painted by dependency theorists, a phenomenon that seemed to defy existing theoretical constructs was emerging in the peripheral regions (Latin America, East and Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Europe, South Asia, India, and Malaysia, and in a limited manner in Africa). These regions were emerging as creative cultural and information production centers in their own right to produce relevant and appropriate content for their audience.

Straubhaar’s cultural proximity theory therefore helped to explain this new phenomenon’s theoretical lacuna (Straubhaar, 1991). Drawing from an idea first advanced by De Sola Pool (1977), Straubhaar proposed that, the audience tends to prefer media products from their own culture or the next most similar possible culture. He argued that, for content to best resonate with cultural disposition of the viewers, such content and the viewer must exist in the same “cultural linguistic” (Straubhaar, 2003) or “geolinguistic” space (Cunningham, Jacka, & Sinclair, 1998).

Language therefore is a key variable in determining audience's product mix and choices. De Sola Pool (1977, p. 143) had argued that, "people would rather see a film made in their own idiom than one with subtitles or even one that is dubbed" (1977, p. 143). Other variables in the cultural proximity theory include works topics, characters portrayal, styles employed, dress, ethnic types, gestures, body language, definitions of humor, ideas about story pacing, music traditions, religious elements.

Cultural proximity draws some of its inspiration from the Weberian consumption model. The model contributed to the shift of focus from the Frankfurt school's production and class model to status. Max Weber argued that by focusing on status rather than on production and class, the researcher is able to concentrate on a group's stratification on account of the consumption principles represented by the group's special lifestyles; what he calls *Lebensstil* (Parker, 2011, pp. 188-189). Weber sees *lebensstil* as less of the 'lifestyle of the rich and famous' their conscious choices (*lebensführung*) than the forms and markers that set off one status (style) from another (*ibid*).

The turn from class to status therefore allows for the appreciation of all forms of artistic expression and creation, from all groups of people. The archaeological and inductive approach shifts focus from the production process to audience appreciation, and enables the scholar to look at overlapping group materials (cultural assemblages), in order to explain what they tell us about the culture of the people who use them as symbolic encounters.

The approach operates from the premise that people construct meaning according to what they deem important in their lives. It embraces the cultural turn's definition of culture with its focus on the importance of meaning, and forms Walter Benjamin's genius point of departure from the Critical theory's focus of reality as fixed to reality as a discontinuous one, held together by histories of interconnectedness with revolutions, stories and myths told by grandmothers (Martin-Barbero, 1993, p. 46). This new perspective impels Benjamin to call for the disintegration of the center (the enlightened rationality) with its focus on the work itself to allow more focus on the margins of society. Such a departure, Benjamin argues, is the only way towards understanding, appreciating and embracing what ruptures into history when the masses and technology appear (ibid.).

To Benjamin therefore, listening to the masses is of paramount importance if we are to understand their experiences. And this can only happen if the source of the masses' entertainment (minor arts, legends and photography) is given premium attention. Benjamin's line of thinking breaks into a new purview of mediation; a mediation that enables us to understand the historical relationship between the conditions of production, and the changes in the area of culture (Martin-Barbero, 1987, pp. 46-47).

In Africa, Karin Barber defines the masses as "the people",

"a heterogeneous and fluctuating field, consisting of different ethnic, religious, occupational, linguistic, and class groups. As a target audience of popular culture, they are primarily (but not exclusively) an urban crowd. Despite clear differences in power

and wealth between the vast majority and a small elite group, among “the people” there seems to exist no strict distinctions in terms of social classes, but rather a complex network of kinships and patronage”.

Barber description of “the people” is a reflection of the Riverwood audience, a rather fluid entity that defies linguistic, religion, occupation, class, rural-urban distinction, and status description. It is an audience that consumes cultural products from the plethora of its production sons and daughters. Barber share the same logic with Walter Benjamin and Strabhaar (2003) in her argument, that it is difficult to draw a distinct line between the “popular arts,” “popular culture,” and “the people” for they form a *mélange* that is in a state of permanently evolving fields, rather than discrete categories (Barber, 1987). To her, popular art is usually,

“emanating from, or pertaining to, the people”, it is made and produced by “the people,” targeted at “the people” by addressing topics that are of interest to “the people,” easily accessible to “the people,” and it is enjoyed, consumed, and discussed by them (Bisschoff & Overbergh, 2012).

Again just like Strabhaar and De Sol, she maintains that, that which is both produced and consumed by the people is regarded more “more” popular than that which is produced by but not targeted at or consumed by the people, or vice versa. Barber appreciates that African audiences begins to turn away from foreign films towards their own content in the 1980s once the continent initiates its production process.

Since the Kenyan government decreed that local broadcasters have a four year window to increase their local content from thirty six to sixty percent (Murero, 2015), film and television

industry has grown tremendously with more local and foreign businesspeople and artists investing or collaborating to cash in on the growing local audience's demands. This demand for local production is also driven by the desire of local audience to see stories that reflect and resonate with their social realities (WIPO, 2006); (Vourlias, 2011).

To date, the quality of local productions straddles the whole of production aesthetics spectrum, from the lowest to the highest standards. This is attested to by the variability of local content available in such digital subscription video-on-demand platforms as Viusasa (Viusasa, 2019), Showmax, the Youtube, digital pay television stations (DSTV, amongst others), and the ever expanding broadband television broadcast channels; not to mention local cinema theaters that have decided to dedicate time and space every month for local screenings. It can therefore be argued that in Kenya's local television and film industries to date, despite the audience's social, economic, language, rural or urban disparities, there is something (content) for everyone (Barber, 2018, p. 14). This reality is a confluence of Strabhaar's cultural proximity (Straubhaar, 2003) and Bourdieu's cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1988).

The third construct that helps explain the birth of Riverwood film industry is neoliberalism. The theory, regarded as the replacement of the modernization theory in economic development, refers to the set of economic policies that were adopted by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in the 1980s as the best path for the world economic development (Shah, 2013). The policies that would earn the moniker the Washington Consensus, sought increased

privatization of public enterprise, economic deregulation and lowering (of) taxation (Ezeonu, 2013), (Kawewe & Dibie, 2000).

Neoliberalism is premised on the assumption that the big government prevents economic and social development. Its main argument is that, governments have the propensity to stifle the freedom and dynamism of creative people, who are usually the main drivers of the economy. The theory therefore proposes deregulation, privatization and the lowering of taxation to be the main stimulants to economic growth. Furthermore, neoliberal proponents also oppose international development aid, arguing that such funds disenfranchised the poor as they ended up in the pockets of corrupt government leaders..

In light of the above, neoliberals argued that economic liberalization was the only way out of the economic stagnation developing countries were facing. Consequently, these countries were required to reduce government spending through staff rationalization and removal of all barriers to free market economy in order to unlock capital necessary for economic growth and national wealth generation. Among other demands, governments were required to incentivize the private sector through reduced corporate taxation on profits, reduced red tape on corporates in their business endeavors, and the reduction of work environment protection. To meet these demands, governments had to do away with employee minimum wages and permanent contracts.

Neoliberal policies also sought to give corporates the leeway to tailor-design employment contracts to their interests. The policies also demanded government divesture from business, and

in areas where such governments had invested in, they were required to offload all corporate interests to the private sector.

The adoption of neoliberal policies by developing countries led to unprecedented economic, social and political meltdown. In almost all African countries where SAPs were introduced, there was increased poverty as the capacity of the country to develop a diversified economy decreased (Kawewe & Dible, 2000). Government downsizing led to massive layoffs, while the salaries of those remaining stagnated. Moreover, deregulation led to an increase in worker exploitation by the private sector (Shah, 2013), (Kingston, Irikana, Dienye, & Gogo, 2011), (Heidhues, 2011). The fact that SAPs disfavored government's role in social support meant an increase in poverty and social insecurity as there was very little government social support system (Ezeonu, 2013).

In Kenya for example SAPs resulted in low funding for the education sector that in turn led to increased school dropout, low enrolment, underdevelopment of the education sector and social inequality. In the health sector, cost sharing had a high impact on the quality of life of the citizens. Deteriorating medical quality especially among the poor led to reduced life expectancy. The agriculture sector suffered the same fate (Kangara, 2000). Decontrolled price and market liberalization led the near collapse of the sector as farmers could hardly compete with subsidized and cheaper imported products, and neither could they access government support (Mbithe, Mwabu, & Awiti, 2017), (Rono, 2002).

Consequently, across Africa, economic hardship led to a serious social security problem with increased crime rate that affected night life, more so the culture of cinema attendance. Mass retrenchment as a result of SAPs experiment led to a pool of surplus labor, especially in broadcasting, of experienced film and television personnel cheaply available for use by early investors in the film industry (Ezeonu, 2013).

In Kenya, SAPs led to high inflation and job losses (Heidhues & Obore, 2011). But the crisis was a gain for film and television practitioners for to survive the crisis, they had to become innovative. As such, television stars of such programs as Tausi, Vitimbi, Vioja Mahakamani, Family Affairs, Njia Panda and Tahamaki had to, in order to survive the hard times, fiercely compete with each other for gigs in the limited city popular entertainment joints (Karanja, The Riverwood industry, 2017). The more the competition intensified, the more innovative the artists became, with artists and popular comedians operating from River Road, the likes of Kihenjo and Machagi, adopting the River Road's innovative music distribution model to tap into a wider audience base. These artists would record their comedies on the video format and then distribute it through the River Road music distribution network that dispersed the work to every corner of the republic (Vourlias, 2011). Although the video recordings were of very poor technical and aesthetic (Kaugi, 2017; Kimani, 2017; Karanja, 2020) quality, they were a hit with the audience who were more interested in seeing their stories on the screen than anything else. And thus the humble Riverwood film industry was born.

It is important to appreciate that these Riverwood artists had never gone to any media school to learn film or television production. Rather it was their survival instincts, interest and entrepreneurial spirit that egged them on into the field of film and television production. It is therefore the confluence of the reality represented by these three constructs that led to the emergence of Riverwood and other similar nascent film industries of Anglophone Africa.

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