

# Sunrise in the East

## NEW BEGINNINGS FOR DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKERS IN EAST AFRICA

Interview by Barbara Off, Head of DOK.network Africa

When Kenyan filmmaker Judy Kibinge decided to create the first East African, not to say the first independent African fund for documentary films, DOCUBOX, in 2013, everything happened fast: The first projects are now completed and are already winning prizes and recognition. One of them – NEW MOON by Philippa Ndisi-Herrmann – will be shown at this year's Africa Day.

We met Judy Kibinge and her partner in crime Peter Mudamba for a breakfast interview in Berlin to tell us a bit more about the origins, work and visions of DOCUBOX.

### **How did you come up with this idea to create an East African Film Fund?**

Judy Kibinge: An independent filmmaker myself, I started thinking about creating a film fund six years ago. In Kenya we are confronted with a system without funding, a system that has no experience in filmmaking. After some research, I realized: We do not only need to create an independent financing structure for filmmaking, but a conducive environment for creative documentary films. You cannot grant film funding without offering training and workshop opportunities. And you need to build a community who watches the new films! All these elements must be taken into account.

### **So DOCUBOX is much more than a funding institution?**

Peter Mudamba: We came up with a mini film hub called 'The Box'. This platform gives upcoming and established filmmakers the opportunity to share their experiences and ideas. Training and mentorship also play a big role in what

we do. With the support of German film schools and funders we bring different film experts and mentors to Nairobi. Last but not least we organise free screenings on a regular basis to build up our audiences. Our 'Shorts, Shorts and Shots' nights are legendary!

### **Is training not something which film schools or film universities should provide?**

Peter Mudamba: There are universities, but they offer mostly theoretical training. When these students hold a camera in their own hands for the first time, they are confused. Professionalising the industry means practical mentorship. A camera person needs to be mentored by a camera person, a sound person by a sound person. At DOCUBOX we rely heavily on this hands-on approach.

### **How would you describe the documentary filmmaking scene in Kenya?**

Judy Kibinge: Many filmmakers in Kenya, maybe all over East Africa, end up doing films for companies or non-governmental organisations to pay their bills. People think that these image films are documentaries. But in fact, they are only marketing or fundraising tools for the contracting organisations.

### **Why do you want to strengthen documentary film?**

Judy Kibinge: I think in East Africa we can gain a lot from documentary film. In countries like Kenya, where archives are lost, where broadcasters evade the responsibility of showing films which reflect our identity and let TV stations be flooded with foreign content with little historical or social value, there is hardly space for programming that helps a

country and its citizens to understand who they are and where they come from. Setting up DOCUBOX happened at a time when we needed to reflect on ourselves. From the very beginning, even before our first call for entries we already knew what kind of films we were going to support: films by local talents with authentic voices who would reflect back the realities we live in. All other documentary films, dealing with these topics, are usually made by foreigners. There were just not enough films that simply said: "This is us, guys. What do you think? Let's talk about it."

### **How do you select your projects?**

Judy Kibinge: In the first selection round in 2013, we called for projects and selected the twelve strongest submissions. Participants received USD 2,500 for the production of trailers. The next step is for the twelve filmmakers to re-submit their projects, from which a small group of experts selects the six best. This was very difficult because all these first projects were very convincing. The finalists were granted another production fund of USD 20,000 each. To date, we have supported 40 East African film projects, including short and feature-length films.

### **What kind of stories were funded by DOCUBOX so far?**

Judy Kibinge: The first project DOCUBOX ever chose was NEW MOON by Philippa Ndisi-Herrmann. Now the finished film will be screened at DOK.fest München's Africa Day. Philippa's film started with the idea of telling the story of a port being built in Lamu, an ancient Islamic city on the coast of Kenya, which is a protected UNESCO world heritage

site. And suddenly the government is planning to build this enormous port on this spot, which will change this age-old culture. While she was shooting she realised that was not really the film she wanted to make. Step by step she found herself drawn to Islam and ended up making a film about her own transition. As filmmakers we happily supported that development because we understand how difficult it is to make a film. If your story changes in the middle then it was meant to change. This is just one example of a story our TV broadcasters are not interested in but which make up the fabric of who we are.

### **How would you describe the Kenyan film industry compared to Nollywood in Nigeria, the biggest film industry on the African continent?**

Judy Kibinge: Nigerian businessmen have driven Nollywood from day one. They have built allegiances, audiences and numbers. Thanks to this enormous reach they have been able to attract big investments from corporations like Netflix. In comparison Kenyan films are still fighting for audience figures and revenue. Yet a lot of high quality films are coming out of here. But is that what we need right now? I think we have to talk about how we can make a vibrant professional film industry possible. Co-production treaties would be one important step. Our National Film Commission must push things forward so filmmakers can make a living from their work. The workforce is already here: great writers, really good cinematographers!

### **So are you lobbying as DOCUBOX political entities like the National Film Commission to bring about change?**



The DOCUBOX Family: W. Gathee, J. Mwamunga, J. Kibinge, J. Imali, R. Owen, S. Mbogo, N. Kimani, A. Gichuki, P. Mudamba and A. Njonjo (from the left), photo credit: Phtech Photography

Peter Mudamba: Policymaking is important for us. At the top of our agenda is the fight against censorship and for free expression. Therefore we lobby for the repeal of a law called CAP 222 which controls the making and screening of films, a very prohibitive and outdated regulation we inherited from our colonial past. As the leading East African Documentary Film Fund we are part of the Kenyan Creative Economy Working Group. This organ brings together industry players from the visual arts, film, dance and theatre in one space. The representatives lobby the government and advocate for changes in the arts sector. We want to influence the public perception of the film industry and show that it can employ, support and contribute to the GDP of our country.

### **How do you see the future?**

Judy Kibinge: Suddenly documentary film seems to be working, also due to our efforts. It shows that the whole industry can be transformed if you put in the work for five or six years. I know without a doubt that many of the films that are produced now and that will be released in the next few years would not exist without DOCUBOX. That is really exciting!

Peter Mudamba: To bring about change is hard work. But this is one of the reasons why we are here. It has been an exciting journey so far. We are looking forward to the future and will hopefully soon celebrate some of the best documentaries coming out of East Africa because DOCUBOX exists.

### **JUDY KIBINGE**

is an award-winning Kenyan filmmaker, writer and producer who established the first independent African film fund for documentary films DOCUBOX in 2013.

### **PETER M. MUDAMBA**

DOCUBOX programme director Peter M. Mudamba is responsible for project sighting, supporting filmmakers, their collaborations in film production and impact screening of films.

[www.mydocubox.org](http://www.mydocubox.org)