

## **Crux of the *Bongo Movie* from a Digital Disruption Lens**

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### **Abstract**

This paper reports the findings of a study that had explored digital disruption as an analytical lens developed based on the constructs of two theories: the digital disruption theory and the disruptive innovation theory. The study had employed unstructured in-depth interviews, direct observation and virtual ethnographic to consult media experts, pioneer filmmakers, *Bongo Movie*' producers, movies library's keepers, movie retailers, movie translators (deejays) and social network sites (SNS) to collect data. Based on the study findings, the paper argues that the shift in technological paradigm, specifically from the use of expensive and inaccessible technologies used in filmmaking engendered the development and sustainability of the *Bongo Movie* genre in Tanzania. This technological paradigm shifts were twofold. To begin with, there was a transition from the use of celluloid film and analogue video cameras to digital video cameras in film production. Second, there was a shift from the use of optical prints and Vertical Helican Scan (VHS) tapes to optical discs such as Digital Versatile Discs (DVD) in the distribution of films. These changes in the technologies used in production and distribution of films provided entrants into the local film industry with necessary tools to produce low-budget films and service the low-end market of the country, which augured well with the country's resource-poor context. Moreover, these *Bongo Movies* "disrupted" the erstwhile traditional, established, and stringent patterns of consumption of both locally-produced and foreign-imported films in local film markets. Overall, the *Bongo Movie* genre evolution appears to be a model of how digitally-motivated disruptions can occur in a local film market in a developing nation's video-film industries and become a staple particularly among the low-end clientele.

### **Keywords:**

Bongo Movie, Digital disruption, Tanzania film industry

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## Introduction

Since the 1980s digital technology has disrupted the dynamics and development trajectories of film industries across nations (Schulz et al. 2021; Salvador et al. 2019; Hopkins 2018; Fulton et al. 2015, Ljetopis 2012). This disruption has occurred as new opportunities to engage with filmmaking emerged due to the impact of digitalisation on how films are produced, edited, packaged, distributed, and consumed (Umira 2020; Orlando 2017; Ebelebe 2017; Bisschoff & Overbergh 2012). In the Tanzania filmmaking scenes, as in many other film industries in Africa such as Nigeria, digital video cameras started replacing the expensive and inaccessible celluloid film camera in production of films from beginning of 2000s onwards. Indeed, the computer-based NLE systems have made obsolete the film laboratories and cut-to-cut linear editing systems used to edit films. The early optical prints and later vertical helican scan (VHS) tapes were replaced by digital versatile discs (DVDs). These technological dynamics led to a commercially-oriented video-based filmmaking popularly known as *Bongo Movie* (Shule 2011; Mwakalinga 2013).

The term '*Bongo Movie*' emerged from the intricacies of the boom of the commercial video film production in Tanzania (Kang'anga 2006; Kasiga 2013; Krings 2014; Mwakalinga 2016). Since then, stakeholders of Tanzania's film industry have debated on the use of the term '*Bongo Movie*' to denote commercially motivated video films particularly those produced within the country. Specifically, a *Bongo Movie* refers to a popular and mainstream genre of commercial video-film making run by filmmakers and distributors-duplicators whose activities are informed by the interest in producing, exhibiting, and distributing films for profit albeit with lack formal training in filmmaking. *Bongo Movies* became popular and mainstream genre beginning 2000s with the release of the film *Girlfriend* (2002, George Tyson), an important breakthrough, has emerged to be an iconic film in commercial filmmaking in Tanzania (Kang'anga 2006; Athumani 2011, Mwakalinga 2013; Kasiga 2013). Following its success, the production and release of commercially motivated video-films among local producers who had the wedding video and television drama production background and their cohorts' distributors-duplicators commenced (Kang'anga 2006, Shule 2011, Kasiga 2013). In the subsequent 15 years (2002 – 2017) *Bongo Movie* became a staple of the Tanzania movie

entertainment industry (Mohammed 2009; Athumani 2011; Krings 2013; Boehme 2014; Attiah 2014).

As *Bongo Movie* became part of the mainstream film genre in Tanzania's film industry, media experts, analysts, critics, and film audiences alike raised various concerns over its efficacy and impact on the development trajectory of the country's film industry (Kang'anga 2006; Mohammed 2008; Shule 2011; Kasiga 2013; Nyoni 2015; Gumbo 2018). Some scholars have been concerned about the technical and aesthetic quality of films produced and the distribution mechanism set as well as its reception (Shule 2011; Kasiga 2013; Nyoni 2015; Gumbo 2018). Other scholars have appreciated its contribution towards realising a functional film industry in Tanzania and its transnationalism tendencies (Bakari 2009; Cuff & Omalla 2013; Mwakalinga 2011, 2013, 2016). However, what influenced its entry and popularity in Tanzania has attracted little attention. Similarly, there has been less commentary and even quasi-examination of how the genre emerged and the predispositions or factors that influenced the producers of its movies. Overall, there has been insufficient discussion and knowledge on how to frame the impact the new digital technologies on the entry and popularity of the *Bongo Movie*.

The assumptions that justified the examination of *Bongo Movie* using digital disruption lens in this paper stem from two realities. First, the shift from expensive and inaccessible celluloid and analogue video to relatively cheaper digital video technologies that ushered in a new technological paradigm in the Tanzania film industry. The paradigm provided a leeway for the *Bongo Movie*, which subsequently emerged predominantly as a commercial oriented filmmaking genre (Kang'anga 2006; Mohammed 2008; Shule 2011; Mwakalinga 2011, 2013; Kasiga 2013). In other words, the *Bongo Movie* resulted from a changing dynamic in technological dimensions used in the production and distribution of films in the country. Albeit inadequately, Shule (2013) and Mwakalinga (2011) associated the changing technological dimension in the loci of the Tanzania film industry and what they both call a "transformation of Tanzania film industry." The basic assumption on supposed the transformation of the Tanzania film industry are the changing aspects intrinsically exhibited during the entry and the eventual popularisation of

the *Bongo Movie* that lasted for almost two decades. Arguably, '*Bongo Movie* is a commercial video-film making genre that does not only capitalise on advances in new filmmaking technology' but also occasions a transformation of the Tanzania film industry.

Second, previous research has contended that *Bongo Movie* is a commercial video-film making genre that was brought about by largely untrained-cum-novice video and television producers (Kang'anga 2006; Mohammed 2008; Shule 2011; Mwakalinga 2016; Ally 2014,) who serviced the low-end market settings also known in Swahili culture as *Uswazi* or *Uswahilini* (Shule 2011, Kamin 2011; Athumani 2011; Mwandelile & Mwakapina 2018). In fact, their target audiences were largely those forming the low brow of the Tanzania community. All these annotations show that the reception of the entry and, consequently, popularity of *Bongo Movies* among its key industry stakeholders generated mixed feelings. Whereas some have suggested that they have transformed the Tanzania film industry (Shule 2011; Mwakalinga 2013), some have treated this phenomenon as a short-lived trend introduced by novice video makers who profited from the shifts in technology to support the still nascent filmmaking (Boehme 2013; Attiah 2014; Fair 2010). Against this backdrop and duality of reception, this paper seeks to advance and broaden such analysis to examine how digitalisation influenced *Bongo Movies* from a digital disruption lens. Thus, its aim is to shed more light on the genre with a focus on what influenced its entry and popularity from a digital disruption lens. In other words, the paper attempts to contribute to knowledge on how one can look at *Bongo Movie* or similar events that have occurred across national film industries particularly in the developing world context in response to the impact of digitalisation.

### **Technological advances, Bongo Movie and Tanzania's film industry**

During in-depth interviews with key informants responded to a question, "Would you say the Tanzania Film Industry has transformed?" and a follow-up, "How would you describe the transformation of the Tanzania film industry in relation to digitalisation?" It emerged that there is a limitation in applying the concept of transformation to the analysis of the impact of the technological advancement and *Bongo Movie* on Tanzania's film industry.

One of the respondents asserted that one could not call that a transformation if what transpired ignored or did let the context-wide and conventional way of filmmaking cease and remain stagnant to pave way to the new way of making films regardless of the interests of the filmmakers. In other words, what fits the definition of 'transformation of a film industry' should embrace both what is new and conventional-established ways of producing and distributing films in a specific context. Implicitly, based on the respondents' reasoning, the new way should be an elevation of the already established practices and should occur in an organic manner.

Moreover, the respondents contended that a clear conceptualisation of the concept 'transformation of film industry' applicable to the context of Tanzania's film industry should be developed first. In this regard, the respondents deduced that if the causal factor is technological advancement, then there should be clarity on 'the how' and specific aspects of the functioning of the transformed industry that also needs elaboration without which the analysis applying such framework would be incorrect. Other respondents partially agreed with the implication of the concept of the transformation of the Tanzania film industry to denote the outcome of the interplay between the advances in the technology applied used in film production and distribution and the entry and, subsequent, popularity of the *Bongo Movie* genre. One of the respondents clarified that analysing transformation required look at what had changed among the filmmakers and audiences alike in two ways: First, the filmmakers who at the technical level acquired new skills and learned how to tell stories in a different way; and second the film audiences who were lagging behind, for instance, in the use of movie streaming technologies. Whereas in other parts of the world it is the technology of yesterday, in Tanzania the low internet preference remains an obstacle to the diffusion of local and worldwide movie streaming platforms such as Netflix.

One other respondent charged that because of new digital technologies, filmmaker's views about limitations to filmmaking have changed significantly. As a result, many Tom, Dick and Harry started believing that they *could* make films. In the past, filmmaking was a completely

different process, difficult to attempt by untried hands, and even more difficult when one considers the prohibitive costs and inherent difficulties to get to grips with the technology. In fact, even filmmakers were afraid to make films. Then there was the question of publicising filmmaking as an activity. Presently, on the other hand, the respondents reported that filmmaking had become a popular activity among youths ever since the change in the technology in use to facilitate filmmaking. Initially, filmmaking in Tanzania was for the few professionally-trained and the elites (Mponguliana 1982; Lever 1984). On the other hand, the new digital video technology has transformed filming activity into something everyone *can* do regardless of their background (Athumani 2011; Shule 2011; Kasiga 2013; Kabyemela 2017; Gumbo 2018). This change also enabled them to become self-employed and, at some point, became one of the most staggering money-making creative and cultural art form in Tanzania (Bakari 2009; Cuff & Omalla 2009; Nyariki et al. 2013).

Additionally, another respondent said that, even though the transformation of the Tanzania film industry can be considered to have occurred due to *Bongo Movie*, one should not ignore how the *Bongo Movie* originated from and benefited a small group of people in a rather larger community of filmmakers. Another respondent countered and highlighted the inadequacy of such analysis, asking “When the outcomes of the diffusion of new technologies in an industry are identified as ‘not desirable’ by the majority of the industry’s stakeholders, how can the concept of transformation be used to frame such reality?” The implication of this question is twofold. To begin with, it is limiting to speak of an interplay between technological advancement, the *Bongo Movie*, and the transformation of Tanzania film industry, particularly in the absence of specific analysis of the aspects of such transformation. Second, what demonstrates the technological advancement is the shift from using celluloid film and analogue video to digital video technologies in both the production and distribution of films. In this line of argument, even though the shift influenced the entry and popularisation of the *Bongo Movie*, it did not necessarily lead to the transformation of the Tanzania film industry.

### **Digital Disruption Lens**

The crux of *Bongo Movie* in this paper from a digital disruption lens is based on a synthesis of the constructs of two theories: Digital disruption, and Disruptive innovation. These two theories account for the four steps in the dynamics of the entry and popularisation of *Bongo Movie*: Pre-digitisation, digitisation, deceptive growth, and disruption. Before I synthesise the two theories, I elaborate on the assumptions of each theory beginning with digital disruption. Digital disruption is “a type of digital technology induced environmental turbulence capable of producing industry level upheaval” (Skog et al. 2018, para 9). The world has witnessed patterns of digital-influenced disruption of modern and traditional industries such as banking, media, music, retailing, health care, travel, and agriculture. Basically, this theory assumes that whenever there is an adoption and use of digital technologies in the case of the focus of this paper regarding the application of digital video cameras in different sectors and industries, with a disruption likely to follow.

In fact, technology has “greatly impacted [on] and will continue to influence the participants within the creative and cultural industries. As technology changes, so must the players” (Fulton et al. 2015, p. 9). The actors or participants causing such digital technology-induced instability are called ‘digital disruptors’: “Digital disruptors are organizations that have taken advantage of digital capabilities in one form or another to create and drive fundamental shifts – intentionally or otherwise, in their market and perhaps others either by design or as a secondary effect” (Hill 2017, p.6). Skog et al. (2018) proffers that what occurs is “a proliferation of certain digital processes or artifacts that lead to change in established industry structures, and the established forms face severe pressure to respond” (para 4). Implicitly, the constructs of the digital disruption theory suppose that disruptors tend to use digital technologies to disrupt potentially established industries. The specific digital technologies that this paper highlights are digital video cameras, computer-based NLE systems, and DVDs.

The proponents of the digital disruption theory borrowed constructs of theories of creative destruction and disruptive innovation. As such, digital disruption is often conflated with disruptive innovation theory. Joseph

Schumpeter devised creative destruction in 1942 and Clayton Christensen further developed it into the disruptive innovation theory in 1997. Other founding figures of disruptive innovation theory include Michael E Raynor and Rory MC Donald. Christensen et al. (2015) maintain:

The theory of disruptive innovation predicts that when an entrant tackles incumbent competitors head on, offering better products or services, the incumbents will accelerate their innovations to defend their businesses. Either they will beat back the entrant by offering even better services or product at comparable prices or one of them will acquire the entrant (Para 4).

The constructs this paper has adopted in its analysis include the concept of incumbents particularly for framing the early established-professionally trained filmmakers. Moreover, it has adopted the concept of entrants to frame the new video-based filmmakers graduating from producing for television drama and wedding videos to the movie industry proper. According to Christensen et al. (2015), entrants may emerge from a low-end disruption because of businesses evolving in at the bottom of the market and serve customers in a way that is 'good enough'.

The concept of digital disruption is often framed as a type of environmental turbulence induced by digital innovation that leads to the erosion of boundaries and approaches that hitherto served as foundations for organising the production and capture of value (Skog et al. 2018, para 8). In other words, it is not only the invention of the technology but also innovation is crucial for any disruption to occur. Even though the technology backed innovation can be disruptive, the what, how and when this disruptive innovation occurs needs a framework for it to be contextualised and understood. According to Christensen et al. (2015), a disruption is complete when "mainstream customers start adopting what the new entrants are offering" (para 5).

Ultimately, this paper synthesizes the constructs of the two theories to guide its analysis. In the context where filmmaking as an art form and the industry established and its operations are dominated by incumbents who, in terms of their service, have ignored the low-end market demands, the occurrence of disruption is inevitable. However, the disruption can



only occur when the infrastructure (read “technology” in this paper) available supports or influences attempts to service the otherwise marginalised or overlooked market. Since its genesis occurs at the low-end of the market, the disruption cycle becomes complete when the innovation catches on with the interests of audiences of those in the upscale market.

The implication of this synthesised framework can be understood in two ways. First, previous scholars have identified untrained video-makers and television drama producers as key players who catalysed the emergence of *Bongo Movies* with an appeal to ordinary Tanzanians (Kang’anga 2006; Mohammed 2008; Shule 2011; Kasiga 2013). As such, the shift from expensive and inaccessible celluloid film technology to relatively cheap digital video technology was significant in supporting this disruption. Moreover, the key question pertaining to any disruptive innovation does not only involve the how but also when it occurs or when it becomes complete. This disruption against an established practices can only happen when new entrants onto the scene manage to offer quality services or products mainstream customers can also embrace. In other words, disruptive innovation does not catch on with mainstream customers until quality catches up with their standards.

Two, the *Bongo Movie* has attracted criticism for largely appealing to the low-end market, with the trend projected to last only for a brief period, as Shule (2011, 2013), Kasiga (2013), and Nyoni (2015) have argued. In essence, the genre was popular between 2000s and 2015 as they had predicted. What remained unclear was how its entry occurred, particularly what influenced it and how to frame it to explain its impact on the development the trajectory of the Tanzania film industry. In this regard, what is evident is that the digital video cameras used in the production of films and Digital Versatile Discs (DVD) applied in their distribution disrupted the development trajectory of the Tanzania film industry.

It is against the background of such knowledge that this paper applies the constructs of theories of digital disruption and disruptive innovation to examine the dynamics of the entry by the video-makers and television drama producers into the established industry and, consequently, popularising *Bongo Movie*. This examination approach is collectively

known as digital disruption lens. Applying the digital disruption lens reveals four key steps in the entry and popularisation of *Bongo Movie* that qualify it as a disruption in the local film market. The subsequent discussion refers, and as mentioned earlier, to the pioneering professionally-trained filmmakers and their cohort distributors-duplicators as 'incumbents'; and, on the other hand, the debutant-untrained filmmakers transiting from producing wedding videos and television drama as 'new entrants.'

### *The first step: Pre-digitisation*

The respondents opined that, incumbents such as Martin Mhando, Ngalimecha Ngahyoma, Charles Irigo, the late Issa Mtuwa, and the distributors-duplicators such as FM Productions and GMC *Wasanii* Promoters produced, distributed, and exhibited films that appeal to a stringently narrow upmarket. This finding is consistent with Shule (2014) and M. Ally (2014). The incumbents ignored the need for a larger and diverse group of people forming the down-market. Before 1990, a few propaganda films had been produced to disseminate government tailored-to-promote-development messages and ideologies of those in power (Mwakalinga 2011; Athumani 2011). Respondents contended that most of these films had one clear motive of "educat[ing]" or "rais[ing] awareness". As a result, they were limited in terms of diversity, representation and proximity to evolving cultures in Tanzania. Moreover, distribution of films in Vertical Helican Scan (VHS) tapes was influenced highly by the global cinema experiences and patterns that have been a one-way traffic since the early experimentation of cinema entertainment in the then Tanganyika (Mponguliana 1982; Lever 1984; Athumani 2011; Mwakalinga 2011). One way traffic refers to how the early films distributed and exhibited in Tanganyika were from foreign countries such as the United States, India, Japan, and China and none went the opposite way.

From 1990, the government continued to exert maximum control on cultural productions through censorship policies and organs such as the Tanzania Film Censorship Board (TFCB), now the Tanzania Film Board (TFB) (Brennan 2005; Mwakalinga 2011). Apart from controlling the means

of production and censoring all the films in distribution, the government also employed only those who were qualified to engage in film production and distribution. One of the respondents observed that back then there was a system of controlling filmmaking activities because the government had a stranglehold on the most important technologies used in industry such as film laboratories. As such, no one could dare just pop up and become a filmmaker. The system had to censor the credentials of each filmmaker first. Inevitably, by then there were only a few people engaging in filmmaking such as, and as mentioned above, Ngalimecha Ngahyoma and Martin Mhando who were trained abroad on how to make a film. There were also some who were trained in the country using government-controlled facilities, for example, Hammie Rajab, one of the most prominent scriptwriters and high-profile director of that time, was trained in Tanzania. Arguably, government control was so widespread that it discouraged new entrants to engage in activities related the film industry.

The government control of the means of film production was abetted by the inaccessibility of celluloid film camera and editing technologies. However, the 1980s government adoption of the trade liberalisation policy under the World Bank (WB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF) induced structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) ushered in a dramatic shift. Consequently, the shift from the use of celluloid to analogue video technology in filmmaking facilitated the emergence of both local and foreign trained filmmakers in the local private filmmaking scene of Tanzania. These trained filmmakers enjoyed the benefits of using analogue video cameras and linear video editing systems. They also had the privileges and accreditations to access film grants from local and international Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) and Community Based Organisations (CBOs). Films produced under such schemes include *Arusi ya Mariam* (1984, Ron Mulvihil & Nangayoma Ng'oge) and *Mama Tumaini* (1986, Martin Mhando & Sigve Endresen). The reception of these films, according to the respondents, revealed that they were watched by a narrow or small group of audiences in Tanzania. Customarily, audiences for these films are those found in specific target communities such as secondary schools and universities. This trend did not end with the 1990s but continued in the 2000s to 2010s with films such as *Zawadi* (2001), *Rama*

(2001), *Fimbo ya Baba* (2007), *Chukua Pipi* (2010), *Chumo* (2012), *Bahasha* (2018) and *Tunu* (2019).

As a result, for more than three decades, there existed what I call a 'stringent consumption patterns of film as cultural product'. This type of consumption lacked diversity and was inflexible. It was dominated mostly by the distribution and exhibition of imported foreign films with only a few locally produced propaganda and advocacy-focused films tenable. Whereas the foreign films targeted the mass audience with stories told in foreign languages such as English or Hindi/Gujarat, those produced by Tanzania filmmakers targeted local KiSwahili speaking audiences. In reality, the distribution of locally produced films was dwarfed by that of foreign films that dominated cinema screens in Tanzania targeting the high-end market. Henceforth, most of the KiSwahili speaking film audiences, those who belong to the down market with interests in KiSwahili language-based films, found no films of the same calibre as foreign versions in the local film markets. Implicitly, the incumbents had ignored people who belong to what the disruptive innovation theory calls the "down market."

### ***Second step: Digitization***

The functioning of the Tanzania film industry that benefitted early from digitisation is that of editing of films during productions. In this regard, there was a shift from the use of analogue linear video editing to the computer-based nonlinear editing (NLE) film editing. The integration of computer in the film editing process implied the increasing accessibility of technology to more people other than the few that could afford to invest in it. The shift in technological attributes of the editing system also afforded the private video-makers an opportunity to engage in making wedding videos. Subsequently, the establishment of private television in Tanzania in the 1990s allowed local actors and video producers to partner television programmers to produce local content for TV. However, the shift to computer-based NLE system meant that television drama producers could free themselves from the domains of private TV station's studios where they had access to cut-to-cut or linear editing post-production facilities for specific television dramas.

Moreover, the establishment of private television stations in the country exposed Tanzanian audiences to experience television dramas produced and imported from Kenya (Kang'anga 2006; Mohammed 2008; Mwakalinga 2011; Athumani 2011; Kasiga 2013). In fact, the broadcasting of such television dramas also heavily influenced reception of local stories and characters among local audiences (Athumani 2011; Krings 2013). Such broadcasting of foreign television drama also inspired the locally produced television drama broadcasts in Tanzania from the mid-1990s onwards. Meanwhile, from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s, there was an entry of another type of video-based films that conquered the local film market. These films were from Nigeria's popular video-based filmmaking trend also known as "Nollywood". However, just like other foreign films imported to Tanzania, the reception of films from Nollywood was met with mixed feelings of agony and patronage (Athumani 2011; Krings 2013; Bohme' 2013; M. Ally 2014;).

The gap in the local film market had created a business opportunity. As such, it was a matter of time before the Tanzania film industry started to experience entrants into the production of films to fill the void. Consequently, video-makers and television drama producers transitioned from producing wedding videos and television drama to producing films for commercial purposes. These new entrants strategically targeted the under-serviced market segment of the KiSwahili speaking audiences and gained traction by offering what critics have evaluated as just "good enough" genre. One of the respondents said:

There was an opportunity. Commercial filmmakers saw an opportunity and to them it was a business opportunity. They didn't care much about their lack of knowledge of the art. They made a courageous start. It was an important step towards inevitable changes that were influenced by new digital technologies.

Indeed, as Bisschoff and Overbergh (2012) put it, "technology has been a catalysing factor in transforming filmmaking from an expensive activity of cultural and educated elites, to an activity attainable by 'the people'" (p. 114).

Generally, 1995 marked a watershed for *Bongo Movies* following the inception of commercial video filmmaking in Tanzania. *Shamba Kubwa* (1995) by Kassim El Siagi, which contested to be the first commercial video-film (Kasiga 2013; Shule 2014), was “filmed, released and screened across six regions in Tanzania” (Shule 2014, p. 3). With digital video technologies at their disposal, the new entrants onto the scene made a breakthrough into mass production of commercially motivated video-films<sup>1</sup>. This class of entrants, the majority of whom were amateur filmmakers, rivalled the incumbents with their unique approach to producing films (Gumbo 2018). This development connects to previous research findings about digitalisation to the effect that “alongside traditional actors, also emerges a class of new entrants – pure players who have managed precisely to build up original positions” (Benghozi & Paris 2016, p. 11).

### *Third step: Deceptive growth*

Hopkins (2018) contends that deceptive growth constitutes “the initial period of growth where [the] exponential trend doesn’t seem to grow very fast. The regular growth and improvements are incremental and therefore no-one realises the improvements being made (Para 2).” At the dawn of the 2000s, producers and directors such as the late George Tyson, Musa Banzi, and Sultan Tamba had graduated into commercial filmmaking. Films such as *Girlfriend* (2002), *Duara* (2002), *Nsyuka* (2003), *Dilemma* (2004), *Johari* (2006) were among the first popular feature films produced and distributed in analogue video format. The low budget production<sup>2</sup> of early commercial feature films triggered the fast emerging and growing local and regional audiences as well as international audiences for the films. Apparently, “the entry barrier to explore new digital technologies

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<sup>1</sup> “It is only in the late 90s, that attempts of producing local commercial video films were made. They started by compiling popular soap opera programs that had been shown on local TV Stations in VHS for sale to the public” (Kang’anga 2006, p. 33).

<sup>2</sup> “*Girlfriend* (George Otieno 2002) which is contested as the early commercially successful film was released. The film “was made for three million Tanzania shillings (US\$1,500) and grossed more than fifty (50) million Tanzania shillings. The massive profit generated by *Girlfriend* gave other individuals [an] incentive to join the industry” (Mwakalinga 2016, pp. 43 – 44).

for their disruptive potential is quite low” (Hill 2017, p.6). Indeed, digital video technologies helped to create production incentives and distribution possibilities in the emerging market for *Bongo Movies* in Tanzania and neighbouring countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). However, incumbents ignored to their peril what the entrants were attempting to accomplish.

Notably, the entrants were not ignorant about the situation of the film market in Tanzania either since “disruptive ideas are likely to stem from a deep understanding of industries and markets as well as actors and technologies that support the industry” (Skog et al., 2018, Para 6). The entrants were also aware of the gatekeeping process through policies and regulations enforced by government film bodies. Such control mechanisms notwithstanding, they managed to focus on producing for local audiences<sup>3</sup>. One of the respondents insisted reading closely the *Bongo Movie* also exposes some sense of resistance by its patrons. The audiences have for so long been subjected to not only foreign films but also a certain sense of socio-cultural discrimination in film entertainment. By the time the *Bongo Movie* was becoming popular there were already activities of remediating the foreign films by translating them into Kiswahili for an ordinary Tanzanians, who could not understand English. This tendency gave the producers of *Bongo Movies* spur to take a risk of producing films in KiSwahili language and the rest is history. This re-orientation is also an act of resisting the dominance of foreign films by replacing them with films in KiSwahili for both the audience and the producers, which disrupts the norm.

In July 2019, during a workshop organised by Zanzibar International Film Festivals and titled *Bongo Movie Coming of Age*, Vicensia Shule<sup>4</sup> delivered a keynote address, noting that “*Bongo Movie* is a complex system of communication between people who know the society and the society as

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<sup>3</sup> Mwakalinga (2011) maintains that “despite the tight control, popular resistance emerged and bypassed the mechanisms put forth and created local films that spoke to the people and questioned government-sanctioned cultural identities and values” (pp. 189 - 190).

<sup>4</sup> Vicensia Shule is an instructor, researcher, and expert in film and theater studies in Tanzania

audiences that occurred as both responded to the influences of technological shifts and its opportunities." Such statements counter the argument for the dismissal of *Bongo Movie* as trash or lame productions. One of the respondents further expounded that one should attempt to understand the socio-cultural factors supporting the popularisation of the *Bongo Movie* genre. The coming of *Bongo Movie* was, perhaps, the long-awaited moment in the history of the development of film spectatorship in Tanzania. It had to be meaningful to prevent audiences from being blinded by its technical or aesthetic shortcomings.

The film spectatorship in Tanzania started even before the country's independence (Smith 1989; Fair 2010; Reinwald 2006). However, its popularity was narrow compared to the times following the entry and later popularity of *Bongo Movies*. The vacuum was created by lack of diversity and representation in the locally produced films as well as the foreign films distributed. In a similar vein, comments were provided by another respondent who posited that the *Bongo Movie* genre was an inevitable - trivial film market commodity emerging from a complex socio-cultural situation of its audiences and producers. In this regard, *Bongo Movie* were long overdue for many reasons because of the sheer absence of local movies in the local film markets overly dominated by imported foreign language films from China, Korea, India, and Nigeria. The *Bongo Movie* producers saw this yawning gap in the local film market and filled it.

Another respondent's opinion centred on young people seeking opportunities to make quick money out of the *Kariakoo*<sup>5</sup> film market popularly identified as "Deejays". The respondent argued that these Deejays had sniffed an opportunity in what satisfies or dissatisfied local film audiences and did something about it. These Deejays at *Kariakoo* have managed to translate or dub into Kiswahili the foreign imported films and

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<sup>5</sup> *Kariakoo* is the hub of markets for counterfeits of different types of goods and products. Films are one of its commodities. The distribution flow of films starts from *Kariakoo* towards the other retailers based in other regions in Tanzania and in neighbouring countries such as the DRC.



TV series to cater for the local interest and fill the gap in the market where the demand for KiSwahili language-based content had significantly increased. In the video libraries and long-distance passenger buses there are more of these kinds of films than any other. Similarly, Bisschoff and Overbergh (2012) had argued that the “*Bongo Movies* are popular because they are made by ‘the people’ targeted at ‘the people’ culturally proximate to them, and distributed through informal networks” (p. 15). They are a phenomenon that emerged out of the local people’s quest for cultural and creative entertainment that reflects and represents their socio-cultural realities. This video-film phenomenon in Tanzania was akin to the development of other film industries in Africa such as Nollywood.

Just like Nollywood, the *Bongo Movie* producers in Tanzania “found or created, a niche in a market which was searching for entertainment in a fast-paced style and which fed into, and fed on, a ubiquitous pall of socio concern and unchecked social change” (Harding 2007, p.17). Producers of *Bongo Movie*, as Orlando (2017) puts it, “in an effort to attract local and global viewers, have produced works that challenge and probe films’ former national paradigms by mixing recognizable social realist and documentary styles with more fluid, twenty-first century themes that speak to the younger audiences” (p.83). The changes that occurred at this step should be deceptive and not yet disruptive since the incumbents had ignored the entrants and continued to produce for an “upmarket”. The incumbents saw in the new medium (video) risks assumed to affect the canons of the art of filmmaking and their already established individual reputations as professional filmmakers. At the same time, the local film market was open to different genres of locally produced films by entrants as well as foreign films.

Respondents also reported that the local film audiences belonging to the upmarket have cinema and Video on Demand (VOD) or movie online streaming applications such as Netflix at their disposal. The upmarket film audience, trying to venture into locally produced and KiSwahili language-based films have expressed general dissatisfaction with *Bongo Movies*, for lacking what they call ‘technical quality’ (Athumani 2011; Kasiga 2013; Shule 2013; Nyoni 2015). This audience’s feedback on lack of the desired quality in *Bongo Movies* spurred incumbents to attempt to contribute high-

quality KiSwahili based films. They project that these locally produced films can cater for a high market in Tanzania as well. Yet, the high market continues to be highly saturated with imported foreign films, making it impregnable for *Bongo Movies*. Under such circumstances, the competitive advantage and bargaining power of the incumbents continued to be relatively low. This failure also suggests low market value of the films they produce and, ultimately, their bare or minimal investments that could not compete with foreign films.

In fact, the incumbents have produced films at a low frequency, for example, Seko Shamte released *Homecoming* in 2016 that some of the respondents in this study rated as one of the high-quality locally produced films. The film was released on cinema and later Television Pay-Per-View (TV PPV) but with no distribution of the film in DVD format. Thus far, Seko Shamte has produced only two films in six years: *Midnight* (2018) and *Binti* (2021). Even though there could be other factors to account for such tendency, there remains few locally-produced films available on local and diaspora film markets classified as high quality.

Moreover, these filmmakers have had to rely on applying for the seasonal and conditional film grants and funding from different funding schemes across the globe to invest in their film projects (Attiah, 2014). As a result, their films are rarely available on the Tanzania film market, both up and down market. The responses of the filmmakers and industry's stakeholders interviewed for revealed that films such as *Arusi ya Mariam* (1984), *Maangamizi: The Ancient One* (1998), and *Chukua Pipi* (2010) have been viewed by only a small group of local and Diaspora audiences so far. The distribution has been marginal even when advocacy-related efforts were made for films made to impact socio-cultural and behaviour change such as *Chumo* (2012) or *Hadithi za Kumekucha: Tunu* (2018). One of the respondents reported that the films were not distributed because there was no ready market for them; There are no film audiences asking for such films. There appears to be a weakness in the production-distribution scheme the incumbents used, which resulted in very few films produced between period of two and three years apart. Inevitably, a gap in the upmarket has remained for failure by the incumbents to make good on their attempt to create quality *Bongo Movies* for this market.

***Fourth step: Disruption***

Since “what follows early deceptive growth is disruption,” films that have been “shot on iPhones and Digital cameras are a norm” at this point (Hopkins 2018, para 3). Disruption occurs when mainstream film audiences, which had hitherto ignored the entrants, become potential audiences for the films they produced. Such an act necessitated a disruption (Christensen et al. 2015; Hill 2017; Stewarts et al. 2017; Ailisto et. al. 2018). In Tanzania’s film industry, as already indicated, the entrants entered the industry from the bottom (low end) of the market and consistently continued to service that market. Christensen et al. (2015, no page) maintain that “smart disrupters improve their products and drive upmarket”. At this point, the *Bongo Movie* capitalised on the digital driven disruption in Tanzania’s film market, especially to service the film market beyond its borders as well. This push materialised after the entrants realised that little efforts had been made to service the upmarket, particularly the Diaspora market.

Only foreign films from Hollywood (in the US) and Bollywood (in India) as well as Nollywood (in Nigeria) had attained this status. Entrants started strategizing on how to penetrate the Diaspora market as well. Indeed, the entry and subsequent popularity of *Bongo Movie* made the Tanzania film industry start experiencing the hitherto unheard-of transnationalism in both production and distribution of locally produced films (Mwakalinga 2016; Mohammed 2021). Strategically, by early 2010, the entrants had collaborated with foreign producers from other nations such as Nigeria to produce and distribute *Bongo Movie* targeting both film markets: Nigeria and Tanzania, as well as Diaspora. Such collaborative experiences are instituted in the films such as *Dar to Lagos* (2008) and *A Trip to America* (2009). Other films that exhibited transnationalism tendencies include *Maangamizi: The Ancient One* (2001) and *From China with Love* (2008). These films became popular in the Diaspora film markets such as in United States and England. In Tanzania, the films penetrated the upmarket via their physical distribution of DVD and later VOD movie streaming platforms such as Swahiliflix. The upmarket responded positively to locally produced films under the *Bongo Movie* genre.

Subsequently, the incumbents realised that they had lost their competitive advantage in the upmarket. The entrants took advantage of the situation by employing the potentials of digital video technologies at their disposal and penetrated the up market by offering what appealed to it. Henceforth, the disruption occurred. One of the respondents explained this disruption thusly: “*Bongo Movie* was a disruption in a rather ever-growing Diaspora and upscale film markets that had for years been subjected to the distribution of other foreign imported films.” It is almost as though the *Bongo Movie* is a cultural movement defining a solidarity that producers and their audiences advance.

One respondent further asserted that the *Bongo Movie* is an inevitable experience of every market in the digital era. Digital technologies tend to empower entrants not only to see the opportunities in the market but also seize them by making their entry into it. *Bongo Movie* is without a doubt a digital disruption. In fact, *Bongo Movies* exhibit elements of new-market digital based disruption. The opportunity created was for those who were already in the industry to innovate or adapt to ensure their survival. It was also an opportunity for entrants to tap into, innovate and succeed in the film market. Indeed, “the essence of digital disruption is that it is non-intuitive and intangible and requires significant acumen to wield its force successfully” (Stewarts et al. 2017, p.11). Tapping into the potentials of digital video technologies allowed the entrants to focus on the underserved segments of the audiences at both the local and Diaspora film markets. As a result, the films produced under the *Bongo Movie* eroded the market share of the foreign films including those from Nigeria and, at one point, disappeared altogether from the market (Kring 2010; Athumani 2011; Kasiga 2013). In this regard, Kring (2010) aptly observed, “while the consumption of Nigerian video films was still at its peak in Tanzania between 2003 and 2006 – a viable local video industry developed in Dar es Salaam” (p. 84)

Nevertheless, the adoption and use of digital video technology in filmmaking generated mixed feelings among the industry stakeholders in both private and public circles of Tanzania. However, with time, it became clear that its adoption and use was certain. *Bongo Movie*, with limited resources and know-how of its producers, had become the mainstream

commercial filmmaking genre in Tanzania and beyond its borders. Even with obvious limitations, *Bongo Movie* disrupted not just the fundamentals of the art of filmmaking but also the societal norms. It changed the perspectives of people about who can participate in and contribute to the local film industry. Thus, with little or no background training or capacity in filmmaking, more and more people seized the opportunity to participate in the different aspects of the Tanzania's film industry. *Bongo Movie* at one point became superior to other films in the local film market while following a different business path. The distributors-duplicators developed their own business model that works for their profit projections. Such a business model includes, for example, packaging DVDs for distribution into part 1 and 2.

Meanwhile, the government, through its cultural agencies, faces challenges to control digitalisation occurrences on the Tanzania filmmaking scene. In this regard, the TFB has introduced several regulations aimed to control filmmaking in Tanzania, but there is an extent to which local filmmakers have bypassed these regulations. They have continued to produce and sell for profit the films at the grassroots level. In fact, they have capitalised on their narrow regional, district or ward based low-end markets whose film entertainment needs they understand. This inclination supports the assumption that "digital disruptions typically exist outside of the enterprise's normal range of vision" (Hill 2017, p. 6). Indeed, the *Bongo Movie* presents itself as an embodiment of the elements of a disruptive trajectory.

Implicitly, there is a significant influence of the novel and affordable technologies on *Bongo Movies*. As Krings (2014) observed, "cultural producers and their audiences have embraced new and affordable media technologies in a creative spirit and have used them to produce and consume new popular genres that are meaningful in their local context" (p. 9). Other studies have attempted to analyse *Bongo Movies* using different lenses. They include piracy (Ally 2011), reception (Athumani 2011), festivals (Mshindo 2014), technological advancements (Mwakalinga 2011, 2013; Shule 2011), transnationalism (Mwakalinga, 2016), employment (Kabyemela 2017), and approaches to costume design (Gumbo 2018). Yet one other way of looking at *Bongo Movie* as a genre is

to consider how it has demonstrated the influences of digitalisation, particularly disruption in the development trajectory of the Tanzania film industry. Digital disruption, creative destruction, or disruptive innovation theory “leaves open the question of whether the outcome will be socially beneficial or not rather the theories hint that some entities will benefit while others will suffer” (Ailisto et. al 2018, p. 275). Moreover, “some disruptive innovations succeed, some don’t. It’s not by the virtue of its success that it should be qualified as a disruption. It doesn’t as well emerge as evidence of the deficiency of disruption theory” (Christensen et. al, 2015, para 10). In other words, *Bongo Movie* is not only historical, popular and significant video-film genre to have occurred in the local film market but also exemplifies how digital disruption can occur in the developing world’s video film industries.

### **Bongo Movie Teetering on Brink of Collapse**

Presently, the *Bongo Movie* appears to be on the wane after scaling a gainful and commercial position for over two decades in the local film market. Nevertheless, the *Bongo Movie* remains an evolving genre. Despite its shortcomings, there is still room for its possible resurgence. After all, the decline of the *Bongo Movie* started in the post-2014 period. In this regard, the respondents reported that, the course towards collapsing was spearheaded by the major distributors such as Steps Entertainment and Pili Pili Entertainment, who ceased distributing *Bongo Movies*. As *Bongo Movies* collapsed, there emerged various speculations and debates about what had gone wrong. Apparently, the digitalisation contributed to posit some inherent limitations that the *Bongo Movie* has experienced in its attempt to negotiate the regional and global heights in commercial filmmaking. These hurdles include piracy (Ally 2014; Shule 2014a), less time dedicated to the development and preparation of films which led to compromised quality in films released into the markets and lack of investment power in technological capacity and transfer.

### **Revival of foreign and locally produced TV Drama**

Following the decline of the market value of *Bongo Movie* in the local film market, coincidentally, TV programmers have also turned to foreign drama generically Soap Operas and Telenovela from Latin America, Korea and Turkey and dubbed them into KiSwahili. Such TV drama series that

have gained popularity include *Sultan*, *Ertugrul*, *Kulfi*, *Bondita*, *Ottoman* originating from Turkey and India. They have become a staple of TV entertainment programming for more than six years (2018 - 2022). The respondents argued that dubbing foreign TV drama into KiSwahili referred to by Krings (2014) as “turning rice into pilau” originated from Movie Retailers and DeeJays at Kariakoo. After all, they had been doing the dubbing since 2014/2015 coincidentally when *Bongo Movie* started undergoing a decline from its mainstream position in the local film market. These DeeJays dubbed and added to logs of local distribution films from South Korea, China, India and the United States. The Chinese and Korean Kungfu, American action-thriller and Indian films are translated to remediate them for the local film fans (Athumani 2011; Bohme 2013; Krings 2014). These developments occurred thanks to the utilisation of computer-based technologies (both hardware and software,) DVDs, and DVD printers and, recently, flash disk drives with some uploading their movies on YouTube or tailoring them to suit VoD platforms. Evidently, digital disruption is a foreseeable consequence in the age of the adoption and use of digital-based technologies in the production and distribution of films.

### **Conclusion**

The influences of digitalisation on the entry and popularity of *Bongo Movie* genre in Tanzania’s film industry has far-reaching implications. To begin with, the producers of *Bongo Movie* leveraged the opportunities of new digital technologies particularly digital video cameras in production and DVD in distribution of locally produced films for more than 15 years (2000 - 2015). These *Bongo Movie* disrupted rather than transformed the development trajectory of the Tanzania film industry from the 2000s onwards. The study using four steps has illustrated how digitalisation enabled entrants – video makers and TV drama producers – to enter the film market from a low-end of the film market and disrupt the development trajectory of Tanzania film industry. The disruption effects of digital video technologies in the Tanzania film industry are evident in the way the *Bongo Movie* supplanted incumbents to elevate entrants. The so-called “video makers” were particularly significant as they captured the thrust of realities of the common man. Even though it was clear that

locally produced films under *Bongo Movie* are popular because of the cultural proximity to their target audiences, what remained unknown was the extent to which digital video technologies was an intervening variable. Thus, the application of the digital disruption lens to examine the entry and popularity of *Bongo Movie* has brought to the fore another layer of analysis that provides a more reliable and evidence-based analysis of what has transpired in the Tanzania film industry amidst digitalisations.

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