

Animation in Kenya comes of age

By [Carole Kimutai](#)

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Animation is an industry which has been dominated by the West. In Africa, the concept is relatively new, but this year nine animation films from Kenya will be screened at the prestigious Africa in Motion (AiM) festival that will run 23 October - 2 November 2008 in Edinburgh, UK.

“Animation unfortunately has historically suffered from taking a back seat to film in the West and beyond. Nowadays, with the onset of digital technology and computer-generated animation, the proliferation of this form is becoming more apparent with a growing interest from audiences round the world. This perhaps has encouraged what seems to be a sudden growth, not only in Kenya but across Africa,” explains Paula Callus, senior lecturer in computer animation, NCCA, Bournemouth University and researcher in sub-Saharan African animation, and a guest speaker at Africa in Motion 2008.

A major factor that has also contributed to the growth of animation in Kenya is the UNESCO Africa Animated Projects that were hosted in Nairobi, Kenya between 2001 and 2004. These projects have encouraged local artists, graphic designers, and filmmakers to extend their professional practices into the field of animation.

Animation in Kenya is rapidly making an appearance with small but professional productions appearing on the scene. “Although currently there is no industry or commercial viability to sustain large feature length animated films, Kenyan animators are single-handedly producing work that excels in quality work,” says Callus.

Kenyan animation films

The films being screened from Kenya include a collection of shorts that were developed on the UNESCO Africa Animated Project. The content targets African children, presenting narratives and images that reflect those of the local audience. For example in "Toto's Journey," the film shows the trials and tribulations of a little boy's mission to get water back to his village, drawing also from imagery of the fertility doll native to Africa.

Another entry, "Shiku's Song" uses cut-out techniques on a batik background. It shows Shiku, who dreams of playing music, but who is confined to doing household chores - a problem faced by many young girls in rural and peri-urban Africa.

Callus believes the production value of Kenyan animation can be compared to any of its European or Western counterparts as well as other African countries: “This is illustrated not only in the use of complex 3D or 2D computer animation software, but in the professional execution of these films. Perhaps although not as prolific as for example the South African entries, which have a young industry and financial support to encourage the growth and development of this form, the examples of

work that are emerging are competitively competent.” Notwithstanding these obstacles, young Kenyan animators are applying cutting-edge techniques to their independent films whilst retaining a strong sense of their own cultural identity, through their aesthetic and narratives.

Areas of improvement

To encourage the emergence of animation not only in Kenya, but worldwide Callus says one needs to look at the available skill base and the surrounding economy: “In order for there to be a viable animation industry, one needs to have a sturdy and robust workforce to support it, and therefore more individuals would need to be trained in this field and collaboratively work together to be able to take on larger projects.”

She says the film boards/commissions, governments and local broadcasting stations need to play a major role in encouraging the growth of animation. In other countries incentives such as organising workshops and training in the field, encouraging collaborative funded projects, as well as tax incentives to encourage foreign producers to look outside of their country of origin, have proved to be very successful. “Local television stations should be attempting to actively promote local work to a local audience, the successes of the local product is evidenced in the expansion of Nollywood in Nigeria. Perhaps as animation tends to be associated with a children's audience, this is given less importance or priority, however I would emphasise as the political satire XYZ project shows there is a space for animation to be of entertainment value to adult audiences,” says Callus.

ABOUT CAROLE KIMUTAI

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