

# Participatory Video Production in Tanzania: An Ideal or wishful thinking?

**Dr Martin Mhando**  
Murdoch University, Australia

**About the author:** Dr. Martin Mhando is a Senior Lecturer at Murdoch University in Western Australia. His areas of expertise include Media production and theory, African and Indigenous cinema studies. He is also a filmmaker with feature and documentary film credits.

**Abstract:** Documentary is a mode of communication that most people are familiar with and have strong held perceptions about. However recent attempts at adapting to conditions of story telling in diverse societies have triggered the use of novel approaches. Needless to say this is based on the assumed capability and capacity of documentaries to evoke truth and accurate representation of reality. Compared to fiction films, audiences, for whatever reason, watch documentaries with an anticipation of truthful representation. On the other hand documentaries also exist as forms of archiving of material belonging to another time suggesting a sense of history. This reality has more to do with the accurate representation of the location, social relations and views of the participants and not necessarily the “realities” of filmmaking. Indeed it is necessary that the production crew be aware of the possible disempowering situation that the asymmetrical knowledge, skills and experience conditions could present in a community production environment.

Under such a method, the subject communities have a certain level of control in the film production process and are able to have some input into the production such that they are able to influence some representations in the documentary. According to Johansson et al. (1999, 2000), in participatory video it is the group of actors or film participants that create the narrative unlike in conventional documentary production methods where there is an emphasis and need to create an individual artist filmmaker’s narrative about some people or a topic. This method is indeed different from the five modes of documentary production acknowledged by Nichols since in participatory video, the power and control of the film has considerably shifted from the filmmaker to the participants (Nichols, 1994). Indeed Okahashi (2000) notes that participatory video helps people share stories as well as increase self-esteem and community connection. The process of participatory video itself is enriching, participants may feel that they have control over what is reported about them and as well as have some form of power to influence and harness the benefits of media. It is therefore important that we describe these processes and encourage others to reveal the processes by which they get to make documentaries so that the exchange of ideas and experiences might lead to the creation of new knowledge.

## Introduction

This paper aims at discussing some complexities arising in the production of documentaries emphasizing on issues of authorship and representation. We wish to discuss documentary production methods to reveal the need for greater accuracy in representing “reality”, and with it the need to explore modes of documentary production that allow for closer introspection by filmmakers around who they are representing as well as giving some power to those who are being represented. The success of the participatory documentary production methods is considerably different to what mainstream television or documentary viewers might think and wish. The purposes of this methodology of production include:

- testing the boundaries of representation;
- assessing the possibility of closer and more accurate representation;
- revealing the advantages and difficulties of this mode of communication; and
- reflecting on the challenges of this mode of documentary production.

The nature of storytelling and the filmmaker’s desire to make an entertaining film has greatly influenced the documentary. Indeed though regarded as “creative treatment of actuality” documentary films are often more “imitative” than creative (Plantinga, 1997) There is an attempt at hiding the representational aspects of documentary. We believe that the history of documentary has shown how filmmakers have continued to reveal their creativity, enhance their authorship and indeed support stronger representation of ideas. On the other hand in participatory video production it is not the final product that matters but the process through which we get to the final product. By enhancing these processes we believe the nature and purpose of documentary is enhanced and given stronger local importance. Participatory video is an old innovative idea but it has its share of advocates, success stories as well as skeptics. It has been used in Africa and South America with promising results.

In Tanzania, participatory video production has been experimented on as community practice of democracy since the early 70s intending to create a viable environment for Tanzanians to

practice their democratic right of generating ideas and initiating discussion from the grassroots (Hussein, 1972).

In Zanzibar, Tanzania, Maneno Mengi, a small organization that used digital media production technology to create practices that offer authorship to people whose voices are otherwise not heard (Johansson et al., 1999, 2000). Here, video is used extensively to communicate messages from the rural communities to the rest of Tanzania and amongst the communities as well. Indeed video as a medium brings many possibilities. As Okahashi (2000) argues “When the printed word is less accessible, video promises a different literacy – a way to send a message without writing and to get a message without reading”.

In Buey Arriba, Cuba, Television Serranna (TVS) has helped to give marginalized communities a voice throughout the country by using basic camera and editing equipment to publicize the living conditions of the residents. (International Telecommunications Union, 2003). These residents are mainly very poor and through this broadcast, many people in Cuba became aware of the living conditions of these marginalized communities who normally consist of peasants and action could thus be taken. TVS has also helped to spawn a new generation of Cuban film makers (International Telecommunications Union, 2003).

### Baraza Television: The Participatory Video Production Experience

Raising awareness of a community over a specific issue is often an uncontested premise of many media related projects. This is often based on the didactic capacity that media has, and television continues to play an important role in society precisely because it is considered to perform that duty very well. The aim of these projects is to enhance active participation in making a difference to the economic and social environment of a community.

This requires a combination of community mobilisation and access to information about the locations as well as current issues concerning their development.<sup>1</sup> At the core is the realisation that no transformation of society can take place without transformations of culture. Hence the importance of the arts and cultural products as expressions through which people give meaning to their humanity. For this process to take place the position of media arts is at the forefront. Indeed the arts and cultural production invariably point to Africa’s capacity as a producer of knowledge.

Over the past two years we have piloted the use of film and follow-up community discussions to enhance local development efforts in Stone Town, Zanzibar, the newest Tanzanian

<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this paper we shall only describe the activities involved in the production of the *Baraza TV* in Zanzibar though we are aware of the wide differences in the experiences of producing participatory videos in the two communities. The experiences of *Sauti ya Mnyonge* will be for another opportunity.

nomination into the UNESCO World Heritage listing<sup>2</sup>. The Stone Town Conservation Authority and the Aga Khan Cultural Services, both of Zanzibar, had instigated the initiative the Baraza TV Project. In 1997, the project supported the consciousness-raising activity through Television programs and the training of new storytellers through video who would come from amongst the residents of the Stone Town. The aim here was to encourage a local view of what was happening to the habitat and the lives of the inhabitants. However emphasis was laid on developing and making programs in collaboration with the communities as well as making TV program of entertainment value.

The results of this pilot project showed that local communities can be mobilised to help amongst other things to:

- (i) facilitate active participation in conservation
- (ii) ensure individual and community access to information
- (iii) provide appropriate skills training for sustainable social development
- (iv) promote critical media literacy
- (v) encourage entrepreneurship

### Objectives of the Baraza TV 2003

The original proposal to produce a further 5 episodes of the Stonetown Baraza Television programme needs to be seen from a wider perspective. While the central purpose is to enable engagement of the community in the efforts of the Stonetown Community-based Rehabilitation Programme through Television transmissions, it needs also to be seen as an opportunity to develop the media and ecological synergies amongst the youth in Zanzibar.

Issues of community access to Television have not been raised to a great extent in Tanzania in general principally due to the lack of production facilities. But now with the falling cost of production facilities, with the digital revolution and the youth’s embrace of technology, we can see possibilities of developing local production groups to continue local programming of community interest. Finally, Zanzibar Television is probably the most community-oriented Television Station in the continent. It has a very positive ratio of local to international programming and most of it is in Kiswahili.

The Baraza is therefore not only an opportunity for the community to talk to itself, as the term “baraza” means, it is also an opportunity to develop a media structure by which more Television programs will be made by the people on issues of interest to them on a regular basis: This is the birth of community television in Tanzania and Africa in general.

Therefore it is the objective of the Stonetown Baraza to set up modalities for producing locally suitable programmes of a continuous nature through the training of local community producers as well as groups that will continue to produce better

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.worldheritagesite.org/sites/zanzibar.html>. Accessed on 9/9/2004

and better programmes dealing with local issues of political, dramatic, social and economic interest.

## Making the Programmes

A number of conditions had been laid out for the making of the programmes:

### 1. Create conditions for discussing and capturing the realities of Stonetown.

One needs to create a working team or teams to discuss and choose subjects to be tackled for the programs. The team should include people who live in Stonetown, the Production team and AKSC-Z coordinating group. These teams would discuss the subjects that could be covered in the productions. These subjects need to take into account controversial and socially involving issues around Stonetown conservation. We could cover issues like:

- (i) Awareness of the inhabitants about the importance of conservation.
- (ii) The powerful influence of history, tradition and education.
- (iii) How each person and the community perceives conservation.
- (iv) What are the incentives for changing old ways?
- (v) The identification and recording of individual and social anxieties that change creates.

### 2. Develop a truly participatory system for producing the programmes

This means identifying (a) groups within the community (communities) that would be given the onus of developing the material together and producing the programmes together. These groups need to be able to also compete in the sense of developing better and better programmes. Therefore it is imperative that the training of the producers be given a very high priority in the project.

### 3. Develop a distribution system

This of course meant the setting up of a Media Resource Centre. The basic concept behind development of the Stonetown Baraza TV production teams and a distribution process was towards *making and getting films and videos directly to audiences who want to see them*. We believe that video can be used efficiently and effectively at convenient times for both illiterate and multilingual audiences. It can also be used to bridge the information gap between the people, decision/policy makers and the media producer.

### Specific lessons learned from our work that could be usefully shared with others

- (i) **Media excellence.** African communities have indeed developed very complex communication processes based on oral culture. Communication amongst people living within short distances have been well served by oral

communication tools including the song, poem, dance, the town crier, the griot and many such indigenous tools that reflect an epistemic base. It is imperative that knowledge of the existing tools of communication within a community be recognised and used closely in order to tap into the age-long experience of communicating within a community. Our co-producing team was cognizant of the fact that communicating development issues could be hampered if local taste was not valued.

However we are also aware that many African communities are now more than the extended village. They include many different peoples, speaking different languages and exhibiting varied ways of relating. The urban environment is indeed a defining feature of African communities. To treat the local communities as if they have not moved with time is tantamount to an insult. We therefore recognized the changes that have happened in society and brought into play the creative and innovative application of media communication tools.

- (ii) **Improvement on earlier quality.** Another premise of this phase's Baraza was the need to improve on the quality of the earlier Baraza TV series (1998, 1999). It had been noted that while the earlier Barazas had concentrated on creating a participatory approach to the production process the final program lacked a creative and dramatic structure. Concentration on issues and content concerns had undermined formal and structural interests. This is not unexpected since the participatory approach must indeed depend heavily on process at the expense of structure. It is a rare final participatory product that would also be well structured since discussions in a participatory process as to formal structures are hard to undertake and indeed begin to interfere with the participatory process especially when the director of a program attempts to inscribe their creative stamp on a program.

In this phase we endeavored to "enhance" the participatory approach in order to afford a more dramatic structure and improve on the creative input of the central producers of the program, including the trainees. All the students had been picked from Stone Town, giving us the advantage of having a veritable source of knowledge within the production team while also knowing that these are creative people who would also be able to learn through creating interesting structures.

Another improvement that we went to carry out was to reduce the dependence of the programs on vox pops and long talking heads. While talking heads is a viable tool for documentary production, when it is over-used it can become extremely boring. Unless one was able to get very good speakers who would hold their audiences with the brilliance of their speech or what they were saying it is best to avoid them. And while one could have edited the interviews and end up with interesting interviews we did not have the luxury of editing time. At the same time editing speech patterns invariably affects the material, especially the more

interest ones. Swahili is indeed a very colourful language and editing speech patterns would have affected meaning as well as enjoyment of the language. Most of the time we recorded stories and not comments and that meant people gave us anecdotes that reflected the speaker's speech patterns as well as the colour of the story.

- (iii) **Target audiences.** Theoretically our principle audience and focus remains residents of Stone Town and people who are concerned with issues of rehabilitation and improvement of the Stone Town. At its other extreme our audience included general television viewers for whom we were competing against other station programs. We did not set out to do a demographic assessment of the audience and therefore we cannot comment on that. However we were aware that the slots that we had been able to get on TVZ were not the best.

During the time slot of Monday 7:30PM we were competing with the soap opera *Isidingo* on ITV, the usual music videos on Star TV and the soap *Generations* on TVT.<sup>3</sup> Our earlier request to have the program at 8.30pm on Mondays had been declined. Our choice of the 8:30 slot was because the Zanzibar mature audience is very news conscious and therefore a program that comes immediately before the news is often well watched. The repeat program on Sunday evening (9:30PM) was not the best choice since it is rather late. However we were surprised to find that most of the people we interviewed said they had watched the Sunday repeat program rather than the Monday one. This it was noted could have been because of the competition we have at 7:30PM on Monday as well as Sunday being a relaxing day and adults are able to watch Television in their homes as family units. In any case in our own assessment of the audience we came to the conclusion that word of mouth was working very well in Stone Town. Indeed the architecture of city itself and the culture of Stone Town make word of mouth a natural communication tool.

- (iv) **Action Research.** As noted earlier, there were specific processes through which we were able to get the materials for the programs. These included:
- Having developed treatments and evolving story development process.* These stories were developed with the help of the student trainees enabling us to get stories on an ongoing basis and creatively editing them into the storyline.
  - Consulting with the Stakeholders and Focus groups. The stakeholder Group was formed by members of the representatives from institutions that have major interests on the Stone Town conservation activities.

These included The Stone Town Conservation Development Authority (STCDA), The Aga Khan Cultural Services (AKCSZ), Television Zanzibar (TVZ). The Focus Group was made up of members from STCDA, AKCS, TVZ as well as two representatives from the community. The last two were not to be permanent members and could be changed to get the best representation possible for each different episode. The principle duty of the Focus Group was to be part of the process by which the community would be consulted to vouch for its "voice".

- c. *Developing and increasing access to people and places.* Indeed one of the features of the community video production process is intended to increase access to people and places during documentary production. Having access to people and places for production purposes is usually the difference between having a good documentary and a bad one.

## Documented Processes: The Episodes

**Production: Episode 1.** Episode one was intended to remind the residents of the Stone Town of the revival of the program Baraza Ya Mji Mkongwe. To do that not only did we show a short excerpt of the last program of Baraza TV 1999, but also recouped on some of the salient points discussed in the last Barazas.

Indeed the program picked-up on the last Baraza issues through interviews with residents of the city especially residents of the newly established Urban Villages. Urban Villages refer to the concept of the newly renovated blocks of building where many residents live closely together forming a sort of a village in which they all share in the cleaning and maintenance of their building.

The interviews allowed for comparison between housing conditions in the last Baraza and current housing environments. Participants were asked to reflect on the changes, both positive and negative. Many residents highlighted the positive aspects of the changes as well as some of the problems still prevalent in the city. One such negative issue was to do with the provision of water. A resident had commented during an interview that there had been better water supplies that there was currently. At the Focus group meeting a member argued that the criticism was not fair, as it seemed to suggest that nothing had changed since the last Baraza. The member suggested that the statement be deleted. Many members rejected this proposal. Other members argued that the criticism was directed at the size of the tanks, which was possibly valid. Indeed it was also suggested that it might be a good idea to have a response from an officer from the Urban Water Department in the next episode.

**Production: Episode 2.** In this episode the concentration was to be a deep look at residents and places in Stone Town that give the place its resilient character. The purpose was to bring out the colour of the town through characters revealing the resonance of the conservation efforts and needs of the town. Originally it had

<sup>3</sup> ITV is the first commercial TV channel in Tanzania mainland and commands good viewer demographics. The program *Isidingo* is a soap opera produced by MNET in South African and remains one of the most popular evening programs on Tanzania Television. *Generations* is equally a crowd puller soap opera.

been planned that we would interview 3 characters and also discuss 3 locations of importance to the town. During pre-production we were able to identify 3 personalities (Bi Ratiba Khamis, Maalim Idrissa and the owner of the Capital At Studio in Stone Town). Unfortunately the photographer was not available when we needed him so we decide to opt him out. It was fortunate that we had made the decision.

What transpired with regard to the other two characters was that they were such excellent and ebullient personalities that 3-minute profiles would not have told their stories. Similarly the locations we had nominated (The Old Fort, Beit Al Ajaib and Forodhani) were so interesting that we were only able to seriously cover one of the locations-the Old Fort. We ended cutting a 12-minute story of Bi Ratiba, and 8 minutes about Maalim Idrissa and a 4 minutes profile of The Old Fort for the episode.

Being the second one in the series, this episode seemed to have been watched by large audiences considering the feedback we received on the program. The vox pops we undertook for use in the third episode revealed growing interest in the programme and people were comfortable with being interviewed. The best part came when we received a request from a family that wanted to tell their story about their eviction from a WAKF building which we later used in Episode 3.

**Production: Episode 3.** For episode three it was proposed that we try to move the production style away from the typical or classical documentary style towards creating a more dramatic story-telling method. It was suggested that doing a docu-drama was only a one step away from documentary style, as it was based on the dramatic representation of events that had happened earlier. The reason for this was to create more interest amongst our audiences. We are conscious of the fact that the lack of local drama stories makes drama programs very attractive to audiences in Zanzibar as well as on the Mainland. Therefore we decided to divide the program into 3 sections. The first section would be the vox pops showing comments from the streets about the previous program. The second section would be the family's story noted above. This story was directly related to the issues that had been raised in the past 2 episodes and the human story coming of it was seen to be an emotive way of holding an audience. We agreed to interview the mother in the family without showing her face because she requested us not to do so.

The drama story was based on comments from a tenants' meeting contained in the Baraza 1999 Report. We used a lot of poetic license in order to tell interesting stories. We opted for a soap opera style for a variety of reasons. The soap drama is very family oriented, melodramatic and can string on a number of stories for a long time. We wanted to introduce stories coming out of the Stone Town and we were hoping to show how these many stories could be told through the soap opera structure. We decided to use the Mila na Sanaa group for actors. In the end a mixture of semi-professional actors from a number of different theatre groups were used. The actors were paid favourably.

Needless to say the production values of the drama are not the highest but it would rival any drama productions produced in

Zanzibar and Tanzania Mainland! The reason for shooting fast and using minimal production facilities was to emulate the local production conditions. It is always disconcerting to see locals being trained in the use of high-grade and up-market facilities overseas and then being asked to make do with poor local facilities. We were conscious of this experience (being locals ourselves) and tried as much as possible to simulate the local production conditions.

**Production: Episode 4.** Episode four was probably the easiest to develop and prepare for since it was a live presentation. The preparation included shooting a vox pops section that would be inserted as part of the live programme. The purpose of the insert was intended to show our interactivity with the residents of the Stone Town and allow them to air their views about the program. We were encouraged to see in the possibility of having a vox pops of the Shehas. The Shehia is a locality (suburb) in the Zanzibar municipality essentially there for administrative purposes. The Shehas are the link between the government and the people and have been involved with the all the Baraza TV productions. It was therefore agreed that we should interview all the Shehas as a group so they can talk about the Baraza TV programme as well as about issues of concern as leaders in Stone Town. This turned out to be coup de grace since the Shehas were overjoyed over this proposal and the programme got further publicity through the word of mouth enhanced through the position of the Sheha.

**Production: Episode 5.** For the fifth episode we had planned for it to be the introduction of the new storytellers of the Baraza TV. The students had started working on their projects 4 weeks earlier developing them into treatments and shooting scripts and then the last week was intended for editing. Therefore this episode showcased the work of the new filmmakers who would continue to tell stories of Stone Town from the residents' perspectives.

## **Distribution: The Media Resource Center**

Unfortunately Baraza TV 2003 discussions with TVZ were fraught with communication problems leading to the TV station charging the programme an untenable amount for its transmission. What is worse we could not even get the time-slot that we had agreed on, and finally we had no control as to the quality of the transmission.

Twice the programme was interfered by announcements that lasted between 3-5 minutes and no effort was made to explain why that was necessary. This type of relationship needs to be looked into seriously and contractual agreements entered into to ensure that the station is not given opportunity to make decisions with impunity.

The idea for the Media Resource Center (MRC) was contained in the bid document issued by the project seeing in it a possibility of doing two important developments for the Baraza TV. First it would enable the formation of a local resource center for the production and distribution of local and other videos within the Stone town area. Secondly, the proposal was seen as

viable development base for the training of new filmmakers in Zanzibar who would also be able to use the facilities that would be left behind after the training.

The Media Resource Centre is therefore seen to support a number of things:

- (i) Providing entry-level to early-career media producers with access to production equipment, subsidy programs and advice on all aspects of professional and project development, production and marketing.
- (ii) Delivering a unique screening program to Zanzibar audiences and providing local practitioners with the opportunity to screen their works.
- (iii) Support a network of organisations that support the development of a strong, innovative and diverse screen culture in Zanzibar.

It is necessary that the MRC be conceived from a number of perspectives. First it certainly must provide a service to the community. What type of service and to what extent the people would like to have it and be able to maintain it is to be decided by the social environment. Secondly it must be sustainable in the sense that it will be financially provided for as well as able for run itself after an initial 3 years of community and donor support. The experience of many MRC's in developing countries (Brazil, South Africa and India), show that the first 3-5 years are crucial to an MRC's development. Finally we see the MRC providing a much-needed service to a number of civic organizations that can and need to use the media as a tool in the provision of their services. We therefore have to tackle the problem with imagination. A one-day workshop was held with the students to discuss at length the concept of the media resource center. Below is an account of the discussion and the highlighted factors around the media Resource centre.

- The MRC is a capacity building organ and structure enabling the community to slowly build its own communication hub through active participation of members of the community.
- It is not a video store but can function like one.
- It concentrates on stocking local productions mostly.
- It needs to have a regular local distribution network developed and used.
- It must develop and encourage democratic forms of communication in community.

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## Conclusion

The participatory approach is a creative ideological intervention, challenging everybody involved including the filmmakers. Initially the process gives great credibility to the researchers and film producers, but later the process should enable the communities to take control of their communication medium and imbue it with their own "ideologies", as it were.

However it must be noted that participatory video production is essentially process rather than product oriented. The product, while being important in relaying communication can only be useful if the process by which the content was created was truly participatory. The various inclusive processes agreed to during pre-production, production through to post-production make the participatory video a unique social activity enhancing the circularity of communication. Attention as to how decisions are reached, how each member of the production team is prepared technically and ideologically, as well as the input that the participating subjects have in the final product characterises the participatory video. In essence the participatory video becomes a community action for communicating ideas from bottom upward as well as seeing the video as an artistic product that creates empathy.

If we were to leave reality out of the equation, documentary is essentially a representation; a representation through the filmmaker's eyes of how he/she views actual events, situations and people and this is conveyed to the audience through the processes of film production. This then concurs with the definition that documentary "is the *creative*, not the *imitative*, treatment of actuality." (Plantinga, 1997).

Ultimately, it is the director-author who dictates how a film is produced and the meanings it generates. Indeed it is the author who has the authority to decide the style and pace of the film, what the camera captures, the camera angles, the various sounds to be added or left as well as editing. This power can easily lead to abuse of power. Many cases of that abuse have been documented. Now, if any filmmakers' viewpoints are shaped by the cultural and sociological background which they come, there may be even more complications to do with representations. What participatory video production proposes is the sharing of that power thus ensuring, hopefully, a more balanced representation of the community being projected. Indeed one of the reasons for using this method becomes to improve representation in documentary.

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