

Preserving East African Knowledge through Swahili Movies: An Interview with Josiah Kibira

Katrina Daly Thompson

In an interview with Katrina Daly Thompson, filmmaker Josiah Kibira discusses his influences, aspirations, experiences as a Tanzanian immigrant to the United States, and the challenges and pleasures of making Swahili films in both the U.S. and at home.

I first came to know Josiah Kibira when I was working at UW-Madison, developing Swahili teaching materials based on clips from his first two feature films, *Bongoland* (2003) and *Tusamehe* (2005), which both depict East African immigrants living in Minneapolis (like Kibira himself); the latter focuses on the impact of HIV and AIDS on Africans at home and abroad. When I came to UCLA in the Fall of 2005, I contacted Kibira about purchasing his films for the UCLA library media collection so that I might use the films in my courses. In our first phone conversation, he asked how we could collaborate further and develop real linkages between academia and filmmaking. That conversation led not only to a valuable friendship but also to the development of UCLA's Summer Travel Study Program in Tanzania, launched in summer 2007. Twenty-one students accompanied me to study Swahili language and cultural studies and six of them interned on the set of Kibira's third feature film, *Bongoland II*, which premiered in Minneapolis in April 2008. *Bongoland II* follows Juma, the main character in the first film, as he returns to Tanzania. More information on Kibira's films is available at <http://www.kibirafilms.com>. The following interview was conducted by email in October 2007.

KDT: Tell me [...] about your background growing up in Tanzania. When were you born? What was going on politically and socially at the time? What was your educational experience?

JK: I was born a long time ago – more than forty years ago. No need to be too accurate but it is a long time ago. I was a lucky kid since my father was a well-known

person – a bishop for the Lutheran Church. He was the first African bishop for that diocese. He took the post when he was very young and he stayed on for over forty years. So, when people think of a Lutheran church in Tanzania, they recognize him easily. So, we did not suffer as such. I walked to school, played soccer, and was a good student.

I was a good soccer player and I often made it to the elite school team, which increased my popularity. When I tell this story to my kids, they often think I making it up. But life was good. I had a big family and like I said we were popular. Another thing that made us stand out was the fact that we were the only kids in the neighborhood who owned a real soccer ball. This meant that we controlled when soccer games could be played, who could play, where the games would be played [and] for how long. Often, if our team was losing, we would end the game. We were not bullies but we played a lot of soccer sometimes into the night. My mom would then take the ball for a week to ground us. When school was out, we would go to the village; my dad always insisted on this. We had a grandmother who would tell us stories, some of which I am planning to tell with the right medium [animation, discussed below] for kids. My uncle would show us all the ‘ways’ of doing things in the village. When my dad would join us, he would tell us stories of when he grew up.

That was in Bukoba. Then I went to Dar [es Salaam] for high school, [and] then 1 year of national service – military training – which was also in Dar – a camp called Ruvu. Then went to work for the Bank of Tanzania for about seven months before I came [to the United States].

KDT: What brought you to the United States and when? How has your own experience in the United States compared to that of Juma and other Tanzanian characters in Bongoland?

JK: I came [to] the U.S. in 1983. I came [to Kansas] for college. Since my dad worked for the Lutheran Church, he found a Lutheran college that I could attend. This was on my asking him to do that because he had done the same for my two older brothers.

Generally speaking, school was very easy for me. I majored in Business Administration. Maybe it was because everything was new. I learned a lot from the different students but also I was very disappointed on how little people knew about where I came from. I knew about Kansas from secondary school geography class. I knew the capital; I knew the crops and some major highways. But people would ask me if Tanzania was the same as Tasmania; or even worse, they would want a confirmation to this question: "Tanzania is in Africa, right?" The first few times I thought it was a joke, but soon I realized these people don't know... for real. College life was also lonely at times. I mean where do you go for Thanksgiving when the college closes? Someone had to invite the six international students, usually an old retired pastor who served in Africa during World War II.

Then, as a new person, slowly you notice how much boundaries are imbedded in the society with invisible lines. You see black movies and white movies, you see black clubs and white clubs, [and] you hear black radio stations and white radio stations. On Sunday you see black churches and white churches. Even the cafeteria in a small college of eight hundred students will have white kids' tables and black tables. Then the reality of

America starts to set in and gradually you are molded to this unpleasant voluntary invisible pecking order.

But as international students we were ignorant of these things so on a Friday night we would crash frat parties regardless of who was throwing it. Who can resist a free keg of beer? In a way this made life a little easier to take. The white students would take us in because we did not care if we are the only two African guys with non-matching outfits listening or dancing to rock n roll. All we cared was to have some free beer and look at some girls. The next weekend we would crash a black frat party and it would be the same story here: the same two guys with non-matching outfits, doing the same thing. The music was familiar here but paradoxically once people heard the accent and saw our dancing, then even there we would find ourselves out looking in. This is something I am pursuing in a documentary yet to be made ... the relationship between African Americans and Africans. There is a very big gap between us. I would dare to say bigger than the gap between the whites and Africans. I'm not sure why and hence the documentary. So, that was my college experience in a big nutshell.

There are many similarities to my personal life in *Bongoland* – my years as a college student and my years as worker after college. Like Juma, I have been denied jobs, passed on promotions and stuck in one job grade for a long time. The whole intention of *Bongoland* was to show the people back home that life is not as easy as we all grew up thinking. I came with the same expectations that I finally made it by just being here; but in a way it is all relative and in fact not easy. The sin or mistake that is done by most of us here, is portraying a false 'state of affairs' to the people we left behind: that life is good. This is despite the fact that we drive cabs, work in nursing

homes, work three jobs, etc. I always ask myself [what if someone had] sat me down and asked or gave a lecture like this: "Okay, you are ready to go to this place, and this is what you are signing up for: You will not see your family for a very long time – at least one year. You will not eat your type of food. Most people are white; few of you are black. You will not have access [to] the music from your home and most people will be fearful of you because you are different. They may fear that you will steal from them. It is very cold most of the year. Now are you ready to go?"

I am not sure if one put it that way, many of us could have been here. Or if we did agree, our minds could have been prepared. Instead, we force, and cling on, the perception of America as the land of milk and honey, and we do not want to give it up.

Juma saw it like it is and tried to actually live it – by going back home. My telling it in *Bongoland*: I am doing the same thing as Juma did in a way. In real life, I go back home every two years. I have a house and a big *shamba* [farm] of bananas, cassava, beans and potatoes. So, you see my journey to go back has already started.

KDT: What was your experience with film growing up in Tanzania?

JK: Not much. I grew up in a small town – very small – in the North West part of Tanzania called Bukoba. There was only one theater owned by an Asian-Tanzanian called Nulite. Most of the movies shown there were from India and every once in a while they would show a western movie.

I did not see a movie until I was in secondary school. This is about fifteen or sixteen years old. The

secondary school I went to had some days where they would organize for most kids who [could] afford the charge, to go and watch a movie as part of the school activity. We would watch movies like *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, Bruce Lee movies and some Indian movies. It was strange sometimes because we would sit through an Indian movie without understanding a word, but we could somehow follow the story.

I moved to the city of Dar es Salaam to attend high school and this is where I watched more movies because there were many theaters in the city. I remember watching *Endless Love* with Brooke Shields and movies like that.

I should point out that my going to the movies was so infrequent and this is why it stands out in my memory. It was not cheap and most of the time I could not afford to go. This was the case for most of the kids of my age.

KDT: How has the media environment, especially with regard to film, changed since you were a kid?

JK: There are many changes since I was a kid. I grew up in an era in Tanzania when media was not very open. The government was more or less a non-democratic in many aspects. There was only one radio station owned by the state as well as one or two state owned newspapers. There was no TV at least in my area. I knew no one in the whole town or village that owned a TV set. Most movies that were shown were all from India or USA nothing local at all.

It is quite different now. The government has liberalized most of its policies and now people have TVs, videos and DVD players and can watch whatever they wish in their own homes. This is quite a change because I did not watch TV until I was about twenty-three years

old. Now there are more than five TV stations in Tanzania and there is satellite TV and people can see everything that is going on all over the world.

My seventy-five year old mother has a TV in her house and when I talk to her on the phone, she often asks about things that she saw in CNN and I would say, "I don't know." Because I don't have cable here, by choice, so I can't watch CNN. What an irony.

KDT: When and why did you decide to become a filmmaker?

JK: I think I decided to become a filmmaker sometime in 1998. This was after I had written a movie script called "Tapeli" (a con artist). At that point I decided I needed to do something with this script. This was the time when my family and I had just returned from Tanzania where we stayed for one year (97-98). When I came back, I missed the radio and anything entertaining from home and started thinking why not take the script to the next level and make a movie. Then I started preparing for it and the rest is history. I mean this is what I recall. I did not sit down and say, "Starting tomorrow I will become a filmmaker." But some of the influence goes back to when I was about 14 or 15. I passed my standard seven national standardized examination and for a gift my dad gave me a book. This was a Shakespeare play – *Julius Caesar*. This play was in Swahili and was translated into Swahili by Tanzania's first president – Julius Nyerere [as *Julius Caezar*]. I often like to think maybe this is where the seed was planted. I am not really sure.

KDT: What was the process of making *Bongoland* like? What were the challenges and pleasures involved?

JK: The process of making *Bongoland* was very exciting because we never knew what we were against since we were doing this for the first time. We did not know what were our limits. Maybe this was also a big plus because I had no fear of failing. All I knew is that I will do whatever it takes to complete the movie. So, I found some people to act, I rented places for locations, I got the crew and off we went.

There were many challenges, of course. Most people I had on the set had very little experience, including me with no experience at all. But I was straight with my crew and told them of my deficiencies and they were very accommodating. One advantage I had is that I wrote the script so I knew everything that needed to happen.

The biggest pleasure was that I could look at the movie and see the person I created come to life. Juma could stand, talk, [and] laugh, as I wanted him to from the script. I felt some sort of 'power' and I thought I now have an idea of how God must feel like when he or she looks at us. I am not comparing myself with God but it is like looking at your own child. Sometimes you can know what they are going to say before they open their mouth – as if you wrote their script.

It is very rewarding also because it boosted my confidence. I remained focused and true to my goals of making a movie. I stuck with it until the finish line. That is very satisfying.

KDT: What was the reaction to *Bongoland* like in the States? In Tanzania?

JK: *Bongoland* reaction in the States was very good. We did get some complaints about the fact that we washed our laundry in public by speaking about 'our' problems.

We being the people from *Bongo* [Tanzania]. But that was the intention of the movie since it was talking about universal experiences through a Tanzanian eye. I showed the same movie to people from India and Pakistan and they were affected just the same. Most people who saw this movie could relate in one way or another. Most knew someone who has gone through one or two experiences that Juma went through. Some people, like me, actually experienced the same like Juma.

In Tanzania, people had one request: "We need this to be seen by most of the kids here in Tanzania. It spoke the truth about life in America."

This was a good surprise for me because I was expecting [them to comment on] some technical challenges like bad lighting, not focused, and things like that. Those [comments] were very few. I think people cut us some slack because we were doing this for the first time.

KDT: What was the process of making *Tusamehe* like? What were the challenges and pleasures involved?

JK: *Tusamehe* of course was our second movie. We had attitude now. We pretended like we knew more: we had an experience and so we were set to make the best movie ever. Or at least better than the first. We could see where we went wrong in the first movie and we were not going to let that happen.

The first step was to have cast calls. In the first movie, we pretty much took people we knew and asked them to be in the movie. Most of them had no faith in us. So we had to bribe a lot of people with beer and make it okay to drink on the set as long as you will stay until the end of the shoot. Some of this showed in the movie but

I cannot say where.

So we wanted people who can act for real. We went out and got what we thought were good actors. This proved to be the best thing ever. Because this time we had actors who were a bit dedicated. We also had a very good crew. The gentleman who shot *Bongoland* also shot *Tusamehe* and he improved tremendously. In fact between *Bongoland* and *Tusamehe*, he shot one other movie. So this time he was a pro in our eyes.

The pleasures were the same. I was developing more confidence, as I know what to tell people and how to move the project along and make people enjoy the process.

Finance was always a challenge but I was not going to let be an issue by developing creative ways of doing things: cooking the meals at home for the set; borrowing things; having deferred contracts etc.

KDT: What was the reaction to *Tusamehe* like in the States? In Tanzania?

JK: The reaction in the States was very positive. People were emotionally engaged, which was our number one goal. We could see people cry [because of] the weight of the message. This proved to us that the message was well presented and received.

Even many comments afterwards were all good: that it was a fair message and very timely.

This was the same reaction at home. Many people insisted that we make sure that the young people see the true realities of HIV. The embassy of the U.S. in Tanzania was the one that made the effort to spread our message. The movie was screened to the Tanzania media. Later it was broadcasted on the national TV on the World's AIDS

day – December 1st 2006.

KDT: Why did you decide to make a sequel to *Bongoland*?

JK: I decided to make a sequel when I wrote the first *Bongoland*. You see the story in my mind is not complete if we ended with Juma just giving up. So I decided to find out. Part of this was to answer my own questions in my mind: “Will I end up living in the USA for good or will I ever go back?” In writing this movie, I thought I would find some answers. I have not found them. I know what I want; that is to eventually go back but it is [more] easily said than done.

KDT: How did your experience making *Bongoland II* in Tanzania compare to your experience making films in the United States?

JK: Making a movie in the United States has its conveniences that are not in Tanzania: access to equipment, good roads, people with their own transportation, enforcement of contracts and reliability. In Tanzania, people mean well but they are up against a lot. All cast members depended on public transport and so it was very difficult to have people be at the location in time. This in turn frustrated the crew who screamed at me for not being too organized. The morale became very low for the crew until one day they even went on strike demanding that the situation improve.

[The] situation did not improve but I think I gained a better method of delivering the ‘state of affairs’ and mak[ing] them look at the same situation differently. I concentrated on the positive with minor additional incentives plus a compromise in terms of the scheduling.

In the end it all worked out. Africa is not for sissies; it will eat you alive. You have to have a tough skin to be able to work through heat [and] rough conditions. Most of my crew endured this but some did not and were ready to go back on the second day of the shoot. We made it though and the movie was made.

KDT: Are there any films or filmmakers who have influenced you?

JK: Woody Allen – for his humor and Spike Lee – who made about 20 movies before anyone knew who he was.

KDT: What kinds of films do you like to watch and why?

JK: I like dramas, because I can relate. I like to suspend my belief and immerse myself in someone else's story and feel the emotion. We all go through same things and looking at dramas remind me of something I have heard or seen, only told in yet another way.

KDT: Have you shown *Bongoland* or *Tusamehe* at festivals? What role do you think festivals play, or should play, in supporting African filmmaking or filmmaking in general?

JK: We showed *Bongoland* [at] two Twin Cities film festivals: the Central Standard Film Festival and the Twin Cities Black Film festivals. We showed *Tusamehe* [at] the Pan African Film Festival [in Los Angeles].

Festivals are crucial because I read it is the way to have the movie noticed for possible distribution deals.

They are an expense but sometimes a necessary expense. I did not participate in many festivals because in my view we are still very young. Our movies were not quite Oscar material. [But] we are getting better and we will participate in more festivals.

Film festivals are like clubs, and this disappointed me. We sent a lot of festivals our applications, especially for *Tusamehe*, but we were not selected. But as I looked more into it, I found an obvious pecking order that I missed before. Just as we have black radio stations, white radio stations, international radio stations, it is the same here. So I think we have a better shot at getting a panel to review our movie at the Pan African Film fest, than at Tribeca. That is just the way it is. I mean our expenses for the applications to festivals were more than \$600, but we were accepted in the Pan African Film Fest, and they were so welcoming they insisted that we would even waive the application fee. Makes you wonder if it is because the movie was good or because it is an African film.

To help us as filmmakers, festivals should not be too compartmentalized, I think. So ZIFF [Zanzibar International Film Festival] should look to attract beyond East Africa and South Africa, should look beyond that even in their selection process -- especially in the selection process.

KDT: How have you funded your film projects?

JK: The initial capital came from my own savings. I took a small amount, rented the equipment and bought some and made the movie. I sold some DVDs, charged fees to see the movie [and] got the initial capital back with a small profit. Then I used the same capital plus a little profit to invest in *Tusamehe* and did the same thing over and made

Bongoland II and the work for this is still in progress. We also had good Samaritans who gave us a grant – California Film Arts – and of course making a movie requires a lot of people and most were doing this pro bono. These are resources that need to be mentioned even though you are asking about funding in terms of money.

We have tried to ask the big guns of grants and helping artists and the answers are always the same: “You missed the cut off,” “You did not follow the instructions,” and the favorite, “After reviewing your application, the panel have decided not to fund your project at this time. Please be sure to apply in the next cycle, in six or twelve months.”

I have trained myself never to rely on this process at all. It is helpful but it is tedious, cumbersome, and disappointing. As we produce better movies and know our way around the grant application maze, we will look for the money. In the meantime, we will employ other competitively priced alternatives to try achieving the same goals.

KDT: In watching *Bongoland* and *Tusamehe*, one gets the sense that there is a vibrant Swahili-speaking community in the United States. How would you describe the East African Diaspora of which you are a part? What role does Swahili media, such as your films, play in the lives of East Africans abroad?

JK: It is true there is a vibrant East African community in the United States. It is very hard to describe, first of all it is because it is segmented by region. The Tanzanians are different from the Ugandans and the Kenyans. One would think you can think of them as one group but we are not. So I can address the question with great knowledge about

the Tanzanians since I am part of this group.

The Tanzanians are all over the U.S. Most of them are very young and transient in nature. The majority are students – maybe 70% – and even the ones who are working as full time employees are engaged in some schooling. This is good, but bad for [screening] movies because people are always worried about work especially when shows are planned for the weekend.

Our films are crucial to these people, whether you are talking about Kenyans or Ugandans. Imagine this: before I made *Bongoland* there was [no place] here in the States where a Tanzanian can get a Swahili movie. Now they can. I get emails of people showing their fellow Americans about their movies with great pride.

It is true, these days you can get movies from East Africa that are in Swahili, but the quality of those movies is very bad, very bad. So our movies and all movies from there are an escape to reconnect and be entertained by a fellow East African in a way that “you get” the whole joke and no one has to translate for you to see where is the humor.

This is also a great tool for parents of Tanzanian-American kids [who were] born here but don’t speak [Swahili]. And I know how hard it is to teach kids a [...] language when they are surrounded by people using a different language. These movies do provide a window or an opportunity where kids can at least hear what the language sounds like and learn it – by default. I know my kids have done that. When we watch my movies they would comment on things that give me a ‘teaching’ moment for Swahili.

KDT: You called your first film *Bongoland*, a title that refers to Tanzania’s nickname, *Bongo*, a reference to the

ingenuity need to survive there. Why did you choose this title for a movie set in the United States?

JK: The title was a way to include as many people as possible. It started as being called "Bongo," and was later changed because we did not want to exclude others. Thus we went with *Bongoland* – thinking no one can then say it is 'Wabongo' movie [a movie just for Tanzanians]. The strategy was not good nevertheless...

But the name also intended to show the resilience of the character. The story of Juma really evolved as I was writing it. I started out thinking of this guy being some sort of a smart dude who could talk his way out of anything: like he could easily get a job despite the fact that he had no papers, like a comedy thing. But the more I stayed with the story the more it changed from being a funny story to being a very serious movie, somewhat – serious by the tone of the message and the shocking truth about life in America: the expose of Africans in essence.

KDT: Both *Bongoland* and *Tusamehe* end pessimistically. Does this reflect your vision of life for African immigrants in the United States?

JK: Not for *Tusamehe*. But it is the case for *Bongoland*. To really enjoy life here in the United States one has to almost deny the realities of the place. For example, I have to convince myself of many things that are wrong, that are in fact good. Something very hard to do. For example, I have to say I like the weather where I live – while I hate it. I like my job – while I could be helping a fellow African back home with something. Or there is no racism here – while I don't have a white person that I can really call a friend. Or I really feel at home here – while I am going

out of my way to find things that remind me of my home. Or my family back home is okay – while I know how poor the wages, hospitals, [and] roads are.

It is a very pessimistic look and *Bongoland* tries to show the true nature of that. For most Africans here, if you asked them what is the number one thing they would like to do or get – if money was not an issue – most would unequivocally say, “Home.” And conversely, most of the Africans in Africa would like to come here. With *Bongoland*, having experienced both worlds, yes, the conclusion is very gloomy. We live fueling that lie, pretending that all is well, very well. Look at my clothes, my cars, my house and look at me; this goes on and on. Few would admit, “I have a lot of debt, I work three jobs and I hate what I do.” That is the reason *Bongoland* is the way it is.

Tusamehe is different. The intention was to scream, “DANGER! DANGER! – If we keep ignoring AIDS.” There is nothing good about this pandemic whether you are looking at Africans in Brazil, Africa or the United States. I could have made the movie with the happy ending but I just could not find it. As you probably know, I lost two siblings, [both] younger than me. One of them, my sister, died in my arms – literally. In the [part of the] U.S. where I live [Minneapolis], even though the black population is less than 1%, [it] comprises 50% of all AIDS cases in the state. There wasn’t, and isn’t, a good story in me to tell about it. By this I don’t mean there is no progress in the fight, but at the time – I just had to tell it like it is: it will wipe us all if we will not take personal responsibility and change. I also wanted to talk about the imbalance in global resources. You can get in a plane and in few hours be in a place where you fail to understand why people live like that. Then fly back and see people

engrossed in big decisions like what color to paint the house, or how many socks to get just because they are on sale. Then go to church on Sunday and pray for humanity. In fact originally I wanted to say more about this but then I scaled it back. There is too much waste here and it can be redistributed to the have-nots very easily but that is not a popular proposal. This is why the message to my people was: "We need to do it on our own because our brothers and sisters in the developed world are not interested in helping you. We will get crumbs from the tables while we could get the whole [loaf of] bread. Why should 1% of people in the world consume resources as much as the poorest 57%? And we are all fine with this?" I am not a communist or anything but the intention was to recycle that whole north versus south discussion because it is always on my mind as I fly back and forth between the two hemispheres.

KDT: What sort of research did you do for your three films?

JK: In *Bongoland* the research was more technical than the script itself. I wanted to know what I needed, how to use it, and for how much. The script I had in my mind for a long time. In fact, I can write another version of *Bongoland* in few hours, but that is in the future.

For *Tusamehe* I did a lot of research to be able to have statistical assertions in the movie. There are many stats about AIDS out there I had to scale back and find different ways of interpreting those stats in the actions of the movie. But I used the Internet, books – many books – and so forth.

Same thing for *Bongoland II* – where I started with the premises that Africa and Africans ought to take

personal responsibility for their destiny and avoid the ills of being poor, which in my view is a "state of mind." Things like not having houses with doors, or desks while the school stands in the middle of the forest. I read a very good book from the University of Dar [es Salaam]— by a Tanzanian author and the name escapes me: "Why is Tanzania still poor even after 40 years of independence?" [It is a] very eye opening account of all these ills of poverty but then also showing that the salvation will not only come from the Bill Gates or Clinton's foundations, but we have a lot to do with what our future holds. You know, the whole "teach a man to fish" analogy.

KDT: You joked about having to bribe people with beer to get *Bongoland* made, and of course bribery is a huge part of society in Tanzania. How has the expectation of *rushwa* [bribes] affected your work?

JK: I was prepared. Sad, but I was. This is the only way. But luckily we never got bothered by it that much. Once we were stopped by a fake police [officer] asking for permits but we managed to discover that he was a fake before we paid him. *Bongoland II* had a scene planned to comment on this. This is was now Juma's reality living in *Bongoland*, but due to time constraints, we never shot that scene. It is part of life and the point of the scene was to use Juma's new reality to complain about it. I mean why do we all willingly do it? Why can't we collectively fight it? It is sad but real.

KDT: You mentioned a number of impediments that made shooting *Bongoland II* in Tanzania difficult. Do you think such impediments will prevent Tanzania from developing a film industry? Or are they surmountable?

JK: Most of these issues were surmountable and sometimes very trivial. The serious issue that I saw which would affect the film industry in Tanzania is what I am calling the "Nigerian speed to market approach." So a lot of time is invested in coming up with the weirdest story line, shooting it quickly, spending a lot of time promoting it and producing the DVDs right away. No time is taken for assuring quality. As much as I understand the reasoning behind this approach – income – I think it is the biggest threat to the developing film industry in Tanzania. The second problem that I see is that we are lacking quality instructions. Movie direction is a discipline by itself and one has to care very much about the final product. If quality is compromised by rushing then actors will not learn what is wrong. Many people have been repeating the same mistakes in many videos there and the public seems okay with it, in a way. Nevertheless, these are also surmountable because ultimately there will be a comparison [between] the movies done right and those not done right.

KDT: What do you do when you're not making films?

JK: Many things. I have a family to look after, my daughter plays soccer and she is in the first year in high school. I have a five year old who thinks he is Superman. Also I participate in the Swahili choir where we sing in the Swahili service twice a week. I am one of the elders there. I also run; I am a long distance runner. In my life I have run over thirteen marathons, most of them in the Twin Cities but I have also run the Chicago Marathon once. It is something that keeps me in shape and also helps me to meditate and focus on different things that I want to do.

Other than that I am home just cleaning, cooking, reading and things like that.

KDT: What projects do you have in mind for the future?

JK: We have many projects and very little time. In the immediate future we will make a movie with the people of Kenya. Then I want to make a documentary about the relationship between Africans from the Diaspora and the African Americans. Then I want to make animated movies for kids in Swahili aimed at children. I understand this is not done by anyone. In fact, I am developing a link on my website which will outline what is in this production. I am still working on the details. If anything, what should be highlighted is the fact that we need to pay attention to the younger generation. I mean is it right that the kids in Dar have the exposure to Bongo Flava [popular music produced by young Tanzanians, such as hip hop, R&B, reggae, etc.] and nothing else? Someone [has] to balance things out.

Then I would like to make movies about famous people of Africa. How many movies have been made about JFK? Now why not other African great leaders like Julius Nyerere, [or] Kenyatta? Or even other figures like Tom Mboya from Kenya, Bishop Janan Luwum who was killed by Idi Amin? Ironically Hollywood has made [a] few movies [about] this mad man. I think it is up to us the Africans to balance it and tell our own version of the great people of Africa, not just the crazy ones.

KDT: Why do you want to make your next movie with Kenyans?

JK: This is because they are also Swahili speakers and in

fact generally speaking most Kenyans have been exposed to movies longer than the Tanzanians. But there are no good quality movies from Kenya either. I am not sure why since Kenya's policies on media were a bit looser than those of Tanzania.

If you think, there are close to 100 million people and I want to think of all those people as Swahili speakers who can enjoy our movies and forget the regions we are all from. It is true: even English movies are either American or British but they are all English movies and people in Europe enjoy *Borat* just as their American cousins. This should be the same case for the Swahili movies. A person in Lubumbashi can enjoy *Bongoland II* just the same as a person in Nairobi. So, we are including Kenyans as an extension of this philosophy; plus it will be good for our brand.

An extension of the answer to this is that we want to attempt to take it a step below. Underneath the Swahili language there are many vernaculars or dialects. There is no reason why we [can't] have DVDs played in as many languages as we want. Right now, an English movie, especially a popular one, can have more than 5 translations – English, Dutch, French, Chinese, Spanish, etc. Consequently, we are planning to have the same movie in different [languages] apart from Swahili. So for a true East African movie we can start with Swahili, then Kikuyu (Kenya), Kihaya (Tanzania), Kinyankole (Uganda), Kilingala (Congo), Kinyarwanda (Rwanda), etc.

In the end I know that someone said, "We can't all do great things but we can do small things in a great way." I am well aware that we are too small but we will give it our 110%.

KDT: You mentioned that when you were a kid you could watch an Indian movie and follow the story without understanding the language. Why is there a need for Swahili movies?

JK: The Indian movies are musical and long and in most cases this is why it was easy for us to follow. The man always ends up with a woman he was chasing over the fields and flowers across the Indian villages to end up in a big marriage in a big city.

Yes, even then there was a need for Swahili movies because think of what it could have done for us, for our imagination for our culture and for our understanding ourselves and for preserving the past. You see, in this country one can have a visual presentation of how it was like in the colonial era. This is from the American point of view. If we wanted to know this [in East Africa] we would not be successful. What we would find is another person's account of what they think of that era based on feedback from other observers but not us. Swahili movies, I am assuming, could have been made by Swahili people who would have a more accurate account of the event, just because they belong to that culture. This is not to mean that outsiders can't have an accurate account. But historically, our history has been talked about and documented by outsiders. So, yes, we needed Swahili to know ourselves, look at ourselves and have the ability to have that knowing preserved.