

# FILM REVIEWS

## FEATURE FILMS

**Mbithi Masya. *Kati Kati*.** 2016. 75 minutes. English and Swahili (with English subtitles). Kenya/Germany. One Fine Day Films. No price reported.

Where are we? Who are we? Why are we here? These universal questions get a Kenyan treatment in the film *Kati Kati*, which had its world premiere as part of the Discovery programme at the 2016 Toronto International Film Festival. And this is perhaps the most fitting description of the film, as it feels like a discovery. First-time Kenyan filmmaker Mbithi Masya has an unassuming yet deep thinking style, and his film reflects this quiet, intense, and appealingly cerebral approach. *Kati Kati* went on to win the Discovery prize from the prestigious FIPRESCI (the international federation of film critics) jury at Toronto, recognizing Masya as an exciting new talent in the world of African cinema.

“You are here because you are dead.” A mysterious, nameless woman dressed in a hospital gown appears at the gates of “Kati Kati,” a barren resort seemingly in the middle of nowhere. She is greeted by a group of residents who attempt to ease her into her new reality: she is dead. But unlike the others, she has also lost any memory of her previous life or of the circumstances of her death. Thoma (Elsaphan Njora), the group’s self-appointed leader, helps new arrivals to reconcile themselves with both their new circumstances and the histories that have brought them there. Although he is haunted by his own dark past, Thoma organizes games, group therapy sessions, and parties for the residents of Kati Kati. From their early interactions, Thoma and the enigmatic Kaleche (played beautifully by Nyokabi Gethaiga) seem to share a mysterious kinship: when Thoma plays his piano, Kaleche begins to sing, not knowing how she knows the tune but feeling drawn to the music and to Thoma. The other residents all have their own stories and their own demons to face. For some, this means facing themselves, as their white-chalked mirror images stalk them through the landscape. For others, they will get the chance to “move on” from this vacation in purgatory, disappearing suddenly into the night. While they all struggle to remember, time and space seem to bend and blur in a never-ending dance of death.

Filmed entirely on location in a working safari lodge, *Kati Kati* imparts a mood that is at the same time expansive and claustrophobic, indeterminate

and urgent. *Kati Kati* is a poetic exploration of guilt, atonement, loss, and redemption. It is the fifth feature film to be produced in collaboration with One Fine Day Films, a mentoring program led by German auteur Tom Tykwer. The program aims to train (mostly) first-time filmmakers, injecting professional-level technical capabilities and expertise into Kenya's film industry. Previous collaborations include *Soul Boy* (dir. Hawa Essuman, 2010), *Nairobi Half Life* (dir. David 'Tosh' Gitonga, 2012), *Something Necessary* (dir. Judy Kibinge, 2013), and *Veve* (dir. Simon Mukali, 2014). While *Kati Kati* shares the incredibly high production values these collaborations have consistently produced, there is a distinct sense of urgency and improvisation throughout the film, perhaps made necessary by the restrictive conditions of its production but also reflecting the deeper philosophical questions at stake. Masya fills the frame with textured imagery and careful attention to detail, from Kaleche's necklace to the young Mickey's graduation cap. The haunting soundscape adds a level of depth and rich sense of interiority. He demonstrates a playful awareness of genre, from the recently growing fascination with Afrofuturism to twists on more classic tropes of fantasy, magical realism, and horror.

The film's arc is slow to reveal itself, but it is both unexpected and satisfying. As the film progresses, individual characters struggle to reconcile with their pasts, which are teased out in fragments through flashbacks, asides, and surreal visitations from those still living. This universal struggle parallels a more specific struggle over Kenya's tumultuous past, and in particular in the violence following the 2007 election that still haunts the Kenyan popular psyche. This history is most poignantly reflected in the story of King, a priest from Moro who is haunted by his former congregants who were killed during the post-election violence. Masya leaves many questions unanswered, but in the final frames reminds us that many of these lives too were unfinished.

In his review of previous One Fine Day collaboration *Nairobi Half Life* in this journal, James Hodapp queried how much of that film could indeed be attributed to its "Kenyan" contribution. *Kati Kati* produces no such ambiguity: the rich visual tapestry, the code-switching dialogue, the hypnotic soundscape—all feel distinctly Kenyan. And yet in other ways, the film is refreshingly unspecific. When questioned at a screening in Toronto about whether local African traditions informed the rituals or explorations of death and the afterlife in this film, Masya replied simply "no." Still, throughout the film, Masya reflects his commitment to and the influence of a much wider cultural community in Kenya. He is one third of the highly popular alternative music group Just A Band, which provides the original soundtrack to the film. Just A Band is well known for its musical fusion and nerdy intertextual references—fans of the group will recognize male lead actor Njora from the band's homage to Afrofuturism in the music video for their hit song "Huff+Puff"—and *Kati Kati* extends the band's reputation for aesthetic experimentation and innovative storytelling.

We are witnessing an exciting moment in Kenyan film culture. Masya joins a growing list of dynamic Kenyan filmmakers who are pushing the boundaries of genre, sound, and visual media that includes (among others)

Wanuri Kahiu, (fellow bandmate of Masya) Jim Chuchu, Ng'endo Mukii, and the other aforementioned One Fine Day alumni. This dynamic group also reflects a much wider trend across the continent over the past decade or so, a new wave of African filmmakers privileging interiority, poetics, and deeply personal explorations over the more didactic, overtly political, nation-building films of the past.

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**Daniel Emeke Oriahi. *Taxi Driver (Oko Ashewo)*.** 2015. 94 mins. In English, Pidgin English, and Yoruba, with English subtitles. FilmOne / House5. Available on iROKOTv.com.

Nigeria is in an economic recession, but you would never know it from speaking to Daniel Emeke Oriahi, whose workload remains steady following the release of *Taxi Driver (Oko Ashewo)* (2016). The director's break-out film has earned impressive box office returns, nominations at the 2016 Africa Movie Academy Awards, and a place at the venerable Toronto International Film Festival's "City to City" program. Nevertheless, Oriahi chooses to take the long view and focus more on what Nigerian filmmaking will be in future years. Just ten years ago, the industry was experiencing the growing pains of a distribution crisis that exposed certain limits of its informal organization and the impossibility of imposing formal distribution structures from above. That crisis prompted fundamental changes in the way Nollywood films move through space and time to find their audiences, and attracted an influx of capital to create and control these new modes of distribution. Of course, the mainstream of the industry continues to rely on informal financing, production, and distribution. But another segment of the industry has consolidated around a handful of companies, each with a controlling share in one branch of distribution: Filmhouse/FilmOne (cinema), iROKOTv/ROK Studios (online video on demand), as well as Multichoice and EbonyLife (satellite television). No longer content to merely distribute Nollywood, these companies have made the foray into production, and they choose cautiously which types of films to green light. Fortunately, *Taxi Driver* had time to incubate as an independent film under Oriahi's House5 Productions before FilmOne, the sister company to the Filmhouse Cinemas chain, signed on and lent additional resources as well as an in-house supervising producer, Don Omope, to the project.

Shot predominantly at night on the streets between Church Missionary Society and Obalende, *Taxi Driver* knows its way around Lagos. In the opening sequence, engines roar as two vehicles tear through downtown Lagos Island at full throttle. Tires squeal and bass emanates from the sound systems of the cars. The sequence delivers velocity and motion. The fast and furious car chase leads down Broad Street, making a hard right just before Freedom Park, formerly a