

Telling Relatable Film Stories: A Dialogue with Peter Sedufia

by

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Gaamangwe Joy Mogami is a writer, Motswana poet, playwright, screenwriter, filmmaker and the founding editor of *Africa in Dialogue*, an online interview magazine that archives creative and critical insights with Africa's leading storytellers. The cultural hub that connects African writers, interviewers, critics, readers and storytellers through in-depth, free-flowing and organic, long-form interviews, thus the magazine explores various contemporary, historic, philosophical and social discourses that affects African people everywhere, with the ultimate aim of fostering intercontinental engagement, critiques, education and documentation of Africa's thoughts, ideals, realities, philosophies and culture. She has a B.A. in Psychology from the University of Botswana. Her works has been published in *Africa in Words*, *The Review*, *Praxis Magazine*, *Brittle Paper*, *Expound Magazine* and *Mosaic Magazine*. She is the co-convenor for Arts Managers and Literary Activists Network.

Peter Sedufia is a graduate of the National Film and Television Institute, Ghana with BFA degree in film directing. He has directed several short films and won varied awards, including FESPACO to his credit. He directed "Master and 3 Maids" comedy series, with "KETEKE" 2017 being his debut feature length film. He is the CEO of Old Film Productions and founder of "The Director's Call" workshops for filmmakers. The dialogue here happened between a green bedroom in the sweetspot of Gaborone, Botswana and a film set in Accra, Ghana via Skype (presented here via the permission of Gaamangwe Joy Mogami).

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Gaamangwe: Peter, let me start by congratulating you on your feature film, *Keteke*. Such a fun and interesting film! Tell me the story of how the project came about – from the idea to the production stage?

Peter: Thank you. Well, the concept for *Keteke*, which means 'train' in most of the local languages in Ghana, started in 2015 during a film exchange program. I did three months in South Africa, then three months in Finland. The beginning of the idea came to me when I was in Finland. I noticed and was impressed by their efficient railways systems. One minute there was a train, and the next train in the next minute and so on. It got me thinking about the opposite case that exists in my country. First, I can count the number of trains we have here in Ghana. Two or three in Accra, and another one in another region, so, naturally the system is not effective.

299

So, I wondered, what if someone's means of transport is a train? And the next round they can access it is after five hours or the next day? What happens when the person misses it, what will be their situation? That's where I started. It started as a short film but I realized I was going to use the same number of casts, team and costs of production will be the same, so I expanded the script into a feature length film.

Gaamangwe: That is interesting. Take me through the creation of the world.

Peter: Since I wanted to explore the inconvenience of a train system I knew I had to situate my fictional world in the past because right now the system is significantly better. So, I decided to do it in the 80s because by then there was only one train. Some of the incidents related to trains happened around that era.

My writing process usually starts with questions: what is the premise? And in this case, the premise was around the train, how scarce it is and how it can be an inconvenience for people. Next, I ask myself how I want the story to end. Once that's done, I look at how the events unfold in the middle. I considered the struggles, what challenges they have if they are embarking on a journey. The whole story is centered around that.



When I got the idea, I had to do some research because you can't tell an 80s story in the 2010s and then have some elements of this era in there. It won't work. I had to email people to confirm the world of the 80's from them. A lot of the issues they had then are still relevant to this Ghana. I always didn't want it to look like I am hitting too hard at the government or whoever is responsible for improving the situation. So, I tried to be subtle so people can come to the cinema and watch a film that makes them laugh, but also get the message that I was trying to convey.

Because this is a real issue that needs attention but it needs a lot of people to come and see before people can get it to the right authority. I wanted it to be relatable and fun. These are some of the things that I came up with after my research on the Railway authority in Ghana and my online community. So, that's how the comedy came in.

Gaamangwe: So, what are some of these issues and elements that you discovered in your research and how was the process of expressing them in satire?

Peter: Let me start with my own brief history. I grew up in the village in the mid 80s and during those time we saw a car once a week. The only day we will see that car is when the car came to pick the ladies to go to the market in the morning and in the evening to bring them back. So, if you miss the car today, it means that you will have to go to the market next week because it will only come back then.

So, you can imagine how that world was like if I could see a car once a week in my village. I thought if this is how bad the bus system is, then a train system must have been worse because it's more expensive buying a train than buying a bus, so if the buses were so scarce, that only one was available every week, then a train must have almost been non-existent.

This is how I tried to merge my personal experience with experiences from the trains around that time. And when I did my research, I found that yes; people could actually miss their train from the rural areas. It was not so bad in the urban areas because there are lots of social amenities like hospitals and good water.

Now, imagine someone from the rural area needs health service or health care. They would have to go into the city. And so if they miss the train or the bus, their only means of transport, it means they can't make it to the health centre. What happens then? They may die, or their sicknesses may intensify. And if you have women that are in their third trimester or around their delivery time or labour, and they happen to miss the train, they would have to give birth wherever they are. So, what happens? Not everyone has the knowledge or resource for child delivery. So, they end up losing their child in the process. This was one of the reasons for high rate of infant mortality in the villages. These were the things I was looking at, particularly the complexities of life for the inhabitants of villages or rural areas.

Gaamangwe: Those are really concerning issues and it is still prevalent in some parts of Africa. I am certain there are some villages right now in my country that do not have access to transport, which essentially means such issues might be happening right now.

Peter: I think for Ghana, it's better than the 80's because some rural areas are getting health facilities. I went to my village last year to premiere my film in one centre close to my village, and I realized the whole village is transforming. I couldn't easily locate our house. It's now easy to get a taxi or bus to get to the nearby city and get healthcare services. But of course, it's not in the best of shape compared to other places I've been. We also have a lot of traffic with car transport and sometimes the rail system is not functioning. Our roads are not the best and so if a pregnant woman is trying to access these healthcare centers and they're crossing and jumping the potholes here and there, there are chances for accidents. The railway we used for the film was not working, I had to recruit someone to weed the whole place because I needed the kind of place that will give me a railway scene. So, *Keteke* was to bring attention to how we can make all transport system convenient.

Gaamangwe: That's important. What other issues in your country are you interested in exploring as a filmmaker?

Peter: My country is very tense politically, religiously and socially. So, as a filmmaker, I am looking to highlight and bring this tension into the public view. I am however interested in doing that in ways that is not politically biased to a specific part or going against the ruling government.

My focus when I make a film is to tell stories that all people can watch and relate to. I am also interested in making people and the government think more deeply of how we can solve our issues. I always want to show two sides of the story because it's the only way we can truly solve issues without clashing and feeling attacked.

I was on BBC not too long ago and they wanted to find out why the world has such a negative view on Africa, and I made it clear that yes there are problems in Africa, in the same way that there are problems in every continent. It is only that the West makes it seem like we are the worst and suffering the most because they only show our negative stories. That is why I want to create stories like *Keteke* that highlight a problem but are also light-hearted and entertaining, because like most continents, we also survive and thrive in the worst situation.

Gaamangwe: I loved that about your work. I mean thank you for showing your characters as holistic, complex and whole human beings. We do have problems but we exist in those problems as human beings who also love and connect and laugh through our difficulties. How do you manage to always tap into the human aspects of your characters?

Peter: Well, for *Keteke* I was lucky because the actors in the lead – Adjetey Anang and Lydia Forson are very good actors in my country. I had them in mind when I was writing the script. I knew how they would react, move and speak from watching their movies. Even though I was creating new characters in a different film, I was still putting into consideration their mannerisms, so it was just so easy for them to fall in the script without trying too hard.

Gaamangwe: How easy or difficult was the whole process of shooting *Keteke*?



Peter Sedufia

Peter: *Keteke* is my first feature film to shoot actually. It was not easy because getting a train to film in, in Ghana is not easy. And for *Keteke* not only did I want the train for three days, I also wanted two trains. So, you can just imagine! It took a lot of talking and convincing but luckily my director from film school helped to convince the director of the railway. After some time we finally got the train.

When I wrote the script I created a world of long stretches of bare land with no buildings in sight. Because I wanted the characters to feel stranded in the middle of nowhere, where there was no chance of help. The challenge came here because the railways we got were surrounded by buildings, park trees and human activity. We had to shoot in two locations. One with the barren land and in the railway by the city, so I had to develop a style of shooting that did not reveal the buildings behind the railways. If you watch the film you will see that most of the shots are never head on. My camera was a little lower with some skies in view. It ended up being my style although it was not a deliberate style. We had to do test shoots before the main shoot to ensure that we could minimize human activities and so on. It was an interesting process but in the end when you watch you would think it was one place.

Gaamangwe: That is interesting. Pre-production must have been long then and interesting. How long did it take to do pre-production?

Peter: I wrote the story in 2015 and shot it in 2016. Since this was meant to be a short film, along the way we had to adjust a few things for the feature film. So, pre-production took us three to four months but filming itself took us about three weeks, because we'd done a lot of work at pre-production so we knew what we were going to shoot. And you know here in Ghana, it's not Hollywood where you can spend two months on set, it's a low budget film, and funding for film in Ghana is not that easy, especially for an Indie filmmaker. They don't trust you, they don't know your track record and so it's not easy to get investors. So, it was very difficult. I had to fund the film myself with the help of a good friend. You have to also be economical with that small money. You have to ensure that you can cover the minimum costs of accommodation, feeding, transportation for the crew. You have to manage and film within the minimum time as possible. I had a fifteen crew members on board working with me. It could have been more if I had the budget but I tried to cut down the crew salary as much as possible but I didn't make it so small that they'd get tired working on the field of the production.

Gaamangwe: That's impressive for a well-produced first film. What are some of the successes your feature film *Keteke* has?

Peter: We submitted to FESTICAB in Burundi, where we won the award for Best Feature film. It was nominated for Best Comedy Film, Best Actress in a leading role and Best Costume Design at the Africa Movie Academy Awards (AMAA 2017). We didn't win anything, but it was such an honour to be part of that prestigious award scheme. I was in competition with very competent filmmakers and great films, so I was not surprised we didn't win anything. And then, we submitted to Golden Movie Africa Awards in my country – Ghana, and that's where we won Best Editing and Best Sound Design. We also submitted to AFRIFF2017 in Nigeria where we won Best Actress in a leading role. It was also in competition at Film Africa in London where I was present; so it had premiered in London. We later won the Special Jury Prize for long narrative film at the Luxor African Film Festival 2018 in Egypt. So far, we're on 9 international airlines: KLM, Emirates, Qatar Airways, Rwandan Airways, Kenyan Airways, Ethiopia Airlines, Tunis Air, Royal Air Maroc and Air Mauritius. The film was launched on 4th March of 2017, so it's been a little over a year now and we know that these are just things to begin with. We are now working on getting it across the world and not just Africa.

Gaamangwe: Congratulations, that's really impressive! Now, I am curious to know what has influenced and shaped your journey as a filmmaker?

Peter: I grew up in the village until I was eight years old when I relocated to Accra to live with my father. My father enrolled me in a good school and that's where I started acting even though I wasn't fluent in English. As I continued with school, I kept moving from acting for stage to directing the drama club, and even writing and directing a play I performed in at the national theater. I also started directing videos and people started complimenting me that they liked what I was doing. I got excited and enrolled in a film school, which is the National Television and Film Institute in Ghana, I graduated as a film director, and that's how my directing career started. Now, my full time job is to make films.

Gaamangwe: I love that. And onward, what stories do you hope to explore with your films in the future?

Peter: I am interested in making films that are socially relevant. I want to make films that draw people's attention to how we can make a better world. I want us to pay attention to things that are going on in society. I want to make films that are going to encourage us to love one another. Films that encourage us to coexist peacefully with each other. These are things that I want to focus on, not things that are going to bring misunderstanding and hate that is not what my focus is at all. I am drawn to the theme of love, no matter which angle I pick it from. If I make a film that is political I still want to touch on the theme of love, you know? Yes, it's all about love for me.

Gaamangwe: That's wonderful. I wish you all the best.

