

# FILM REVIEW

**Maia Lekow and Christopher King, directors.** *The Letter*. 2019. 81 min. English and Swahili, with English subtitles. Filmed and produced in Kenya. BFI Player. No Price Reported.

Wife and husband duo Maia Lekow and Christopher King present with their documentary *The Letter* an intimate, carefully crafted, and accomplished directorial debut that deals with a horrific human rights abuse filtered through an empathetic and compassionate lens. Originally researching the oral history of a Kenyan independence activist who led her people against the British colonial administration, the couple stumbled upon the phenomenon of witchcraft accusations against the elderly, a fairly widespread occurrence in Kenya and other African countries. At the center of this disturbing narrative is 94-year-old Mama Margaret Kamango, who owns and lives on a rural homestead, and her beloved grandson Karisa, who was traveling from Mombasa when he came across a threatening Facebook message accusing Mama Kamango of killing children. Throughout the documentary, we follow King's observational handheld camera as the events unfold primarily through the eyes of Karisa. What we discover is a heady and dangerous mix of Christian evangelism, colonial and traditional patriarchy, superstitious beliefs, intergenerational conflicts, and modern capitalism and consumerism.

A belief in witchcraft exists wherever traditional spiritual belief systems are found; such belief has its roots in histories of oppression and times of uncertainty. The contemporary manifestations of witchcraft accusations in Africa could likewise be linked to societal instability and insecurity in times of war, economic decline, disastrous environmental changes, and other phenomena. NGOs have identified poverty, urban migration, and the collapse of traditional communities as root causes of witch hunts, while superstitious societal fears are further exploited by unscrupulous Christian preachers. Children as well as elderly men and women are accused of witchcraft and ostracized by their communities, and this topic has been addressed in a number of other African films, including Yaba Badoe's *The Witches of Gambaga* (Ghana, 2010), Rungano Nyoni's *I Am Not a Witch* (Zambia, 2017), and going

even further back, in the celebrated late Burkinabe director Idrissa Ouedraogo's *Yaaba* (Burkina Faso, 1989).

Witchcraft accusations against the elderly also often have a more cynical motive, as such charges offer families a convenient way to get rid of elderly relatives who have become a financial burden, or as a way for the family to take possession of valuable ancestral land. Often the victims are forced via persecution and torture to confess to being witches or wizards, with Pentecostal preachers performing exorcisms and deliverance ceremonies, at a hefty price extorted from the families of the accused.

This broader context of the accusations against Mama Kamango is not fully explicated in *The Letter*, as Lekow and King's film is a personal and long-form character portrait rather than an investigative, didactic crusade. Mama Kamango is a fearless and dignified aging matriarch who carries the wisdom of her age in her eyes and expressions. She remains calm and stoic in the face of the accusations, even when she discovers that the threatening letter of the film's title was sent by a male family member who lives on her homestead. Karisa is likewise poised and coolheaded, as we observe many conversations he has with his grandmother and other family and community members, carefully balancing his respect for tradition and the elders against the accusations and death threats his grandmother faces. For the most part, King's lens focuses on these gentle and intimate conversations, while also showing us close-up glimpses of everyday life in rural Kenya, punctuated by an evocative score composed by Lekow, who is a well-known Kenyan musician, performing with her band *Maia & the Big Sky*.

The narrative reaches its apex when the uncles, heading the prosecution, organize an evangelical preacher and his entourage, complete with screeching microphones and loudspeakers, to perform a cleansing ceremony on Mama Kamango. On the other side of the familial divide, Mama Kamango's daughters, Tatu and Zawadi, stand firmly by her side. There is a clear division between the Pentecostal frenzy of the uncles and the preacher and the quiet Anglican faith of Mama Kamango and her daughters. A gender divide also becomes apparent, as the film is as much about the phenomenon of witchcraft accusations against the elderly as it is about female strength and resilience. King and Lekow have spoken in interviews about the difficulty of filming this frenzied ceremony that could have descended into violence, bringing to the fore one of the age-old ethical dilemmas of documentary filmmaking: when to observe and when to intervene, how to be present and yet at the same time invisible.

Fortunately, the ceremony simply peters out, the accusations against Mama Kamango are not substantiated, and our final encounter with the two main protagonists is another gentle conversation between Mama Kamango and her grandson, in which she confirms her deep Christian faith and her gratitude for the life she has led. A final montage of newspaper headlines places the narrative within its broader societal context, but *The Letter* does not provide answers to the many complex historical, cultural, and

traditional questions that it raises. Instead, in its understated style, it allows us to bear witness, a strategy of instilling empathy that is much more effective than the familiar victim narratives from Africa we so often encounter in the Western world.

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