



# I Am Samuel

By Toni Kamau



KAMAU

“I may not agree with what you say, but I’ll defend to the death your right to say it.”

We first got introduced to independent documentary filmmaking in 2013, at a gathering of Kenyan filmmakers in a small office of the nascent DocuBox film fund. Pete Murimi, director of *I am Samuel*, and I, producer, had no idea that it was possible to tell stories independent of a broadcaster or funder. As a service producer, I was used to receiving agency or broadcaster briefs and working according to spec. Pete, as a filmmaker at the UN, was familiar with that style of telling stories.

This intimate gathering of filmmakers (which included directors of *The Letter*, Kenya’s submission to the Oscars in 2020, and the director of *New Moon*, winner of Oscar-qualifying 2018 DIFF Best Documentary award) did not know that it was about to embark on an arduous multiple-year journey to tell their stories, and self-release at global festivals. But we all somehow made it through the strength of community and the determination to have complete agency over the stories we felt were important to tell. Pete and I were committed to telling stories of outsiders, people who did not accept the way things were, just because.

Voltaire’s quote above is our fallback when asked about freedom of expression, the freedom we committed to when we decided we wanted to tell these stories. We are a diverse country, with complicated, layered realities. Allowing storytellers to tell these stories, no matter whether you agree with them or not, is a move towards greater inclusivity, democracy, and tolerance.

Shot over five years, *I Am Samuel* tells the story of a queer man navigating the tension between his life in Nairobi and his rural childhood home. He and his partner Alex want to build a life together, but his father and mother want him to get married, have kids, and live the exact kind of life they have.

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This was not an easy documentary to make. Samuel had to give up a lot of his privacy, and trust Pete and I, who were first-time independent filmmakers, balancing making this film with our day jobs. But Samuel allowed us into his life, without restriction. And that was a privilege that we could not afford to take lightly. Alfred Hitchcock once said, "In fiction films, the director is God; in documentary, God is the director." We believe this to be true; life as it happens, with all its messiness and unpredictability, is what makes character-driven *verité* styles so difficult to do, but ultimately so rewarding.

*I am Samuel* was released at Hot Docs 2020, an international film festival that showcases stories from across the globe. It then toured the Human Rights Watch Film Festivals the world over and showed in South America, the Netherlands, and the UK. But our eventual goal was always to bring it back home. Because we felt this was a Kenyan story, we knew it would connect with audiences back home; mostly because Samuel's lived reality as a queer, religious, traditional man is not unique. We applied for classification in Kenya to be able to screen it locally, and waited weeks for a response. We were asked to attend a meeting at the KFCB offices on Thursday 23rd September, but we were unable to make it in person. We then heard about the press conference, the ban, and the press release later that Thursday.

We are yet to receive a letter in writing or a certificate that shows our Kenyan rating.

We were deeply disturbed by the discriminatory language used in explaining the ban: they described it as "blasphemous" and "unacceptable, and an affront to our culture and identity." The restricted classification of the film contained a number of inaccuracies. It referenced a "marriage" that never happened and said we were "promoting a homosexual lifestyle". The board noted a "clear and deliberate attempt by the producer to promote same-sex marriage as an acceptable way of life. This attempt is evident through the repeated confessions of the gay couple that what they feel for each other is normal and should be embraced as a way of life, as well as the characters' body language, including scenes of kissing of two male lovers."

We were simply filming people's lived experiences.

By banning the film, KFCB is silencing a real Kenyan community and trampling on our rights as filmmakers to tell Samuel's story. Every story is important. And we are all equal in the eyes of the law and before God, in line with the religion the film board is invoking in this ruling. The arts - from filmmakers and novelists to painters and comedians - hold a mirror up to society and show us some of the difficult realities from which we often try to shy away.

The Kenya Film Classification Board is trying to censor a part of Kenya that has always existed, is a lived reality for millions and will always be a part of us. Several high-profile Kenyans are queer, including government politicians and public figures, but the intolerant atmosphere created by discriminatory statements like those of the KFCB make it impossible for them to live openly - and allow other Kenyans to continue to discriminate, wrongfully so, against LGBTQ+ Kenyans. As *I Am Samuel* shows, prejudice forces LGBTQ+ Kenyans to live in the shadows, fearful of being beaten up,

fired from their jobs, or evicted from their homes. Stigma puts pressure on their families, who fear that if their neighbours find out they have a gay child, they will be ostracised.

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In their press statement, the KFCB appealed for content that “promotes Kenya’s moral values and national aspirations”. What are these values? The KFCB is assuming that the values of all Kenyans are the same - conservative and Christian. But Kenya is a diverse country and it is the responsibility of our government to represent and serve everybody. Our differences should be acknowledged as a strength, and shown through our filmmaking. Kenya is Africa’s third biggest film producer, after Nigeria and Ghana, making 500 films a year. African filmmakers are attracting international acclaim. *Softie* won an award at the prestigious Sundance Film Festival last year. The United Nations recently said that the African film and audio-visual industry generates US\$5 billion a year and has the potential to create 20 million jobs. *I Am Samuel* is the third LGBTQ+ film to be banned by the KFCB, following *Stories of Our Lives* (2014) and *Rafiki* (2018). Among other movies that have been banned by KFCB are *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2014) and *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2015).

Our film is a true record of Samuel’s lived experience Samuel. Gay African men, gay African people, should be recognised and have their rights respected. This includes the right to freedom of expression, freedom of association and freedom from discrimination. Samuel himself is a strong Christian, and Kenya has several LGBTQ+-friendly churches that provide a place for queer Kenyans to worship together. Banning of films is a blow to Kenyan filmmakers as our audience is inherently local, and we need to have a wide distribution to reach audiences, to go regional, to go global, for so many reasons: telling our own narratives, correcting the misguided ones, creating jobs, and widening our own imaginations, exponentially, of what is possible for us as Kenyans. The Lupita Nyong’os and Edi Gathegis of this world should not only exist in a rare and unexplored vacuum.

It is time for the government to accept and support our creative industries, and allow every Kenyan’s voice to be heard - because the banning also leaves us with questions about whether everyone’s point of view truly is listened to. The documentary has been released across Africa on the AfriDocs website, and we hope that African audiences will still get a chance to watch a film that is not accepted in its home country. . . yet.

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