

# 4 The Spirit of Kanju: *Young Africans amplifying leadership through documentary film work*

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## Overview

This chapter explores the transformative impact of a film-creating process on a group of 19 first-time filmmakers, all of them university graduates and alumni of the Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program. Following training, filmmakers embarked on a year-long mission to find out what it means and what it takes to be a leader on the African continent, and selected elders, artists, religious leaders, educators, community leaders, business leaders, politicians, and activists of their choosing to interview. The outcome is revealed in the feature-length, collaborative documentary film *The Spirit of Kanju: Leaders Transforming Africa*. This chapter uses film analysis to ask whether film-creating processes have the capacity to grow transformative leadership behind and beyond the lens. We describe an inclusive, participatory, and experimental process of ‘imperfect’ cinema creating, and reflect on these learnings as they relate to broader understandings of transformative and transformational leadership in African contexts.

## The power of cinema

Colonialism and slavery unleashed immeasurable violence on the bodies and minds of Africans, distorting, disfiguring, and destroying their past (Fanon, 1961). The legacy of these untold scars etched on the psyches of Black people persist to this day (Gerima, 1993; Gerima & Woolford, 1994). This spiritual violence is perpetuated by the ‘plantation school of cinema’ (Gerima & Woolford, 1994, p. 92) in which enslaved people are depicted as happy and devoted subjects, without ‘human dimensions, desires,’ and where stories of reality, ‘resistance, and rebellion’ are excluded. Yet despite its complicity in the colonial project, film has the power to heal, to restore, and to work out this ‘curse’ in a very ‘spiritual and cultural way’ (Gerima & Woolford, 1994, p. 102). This restorative capacity of cinema is evident in the film work *The Spirit of Kanju: Leaders Transforming Africa*.<sup>1</sup> Beyond showcasing and sharing the story of transformative leadership in Africa, this digital media film work also helps to raise larger questions about

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<sup>1</sup> *The Spirit of Kanju: Leaders Transforming Africa* can be watched at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zd\\_ALzuFvXM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zd_ALzuFvXM).

‘the formulation of revolutionary demands in the politics of art’ (Benjamin, 2008, p. 20). Because the history of colonialism, dictatorship, poverty, and inequality have left Africa riddled with problems, ‘sharing hidden triumphs’ can be a productive way ‘to respond to depressing top-level narratives that have held the region back’ (Olopade, 2015, p. 7). Frequently, chronicles about Africa provided from the perspectives of global institutions like the UN, or by macroeconomists, philanthropists, and others, tend to focus solely on Africa’s formal organisations and formal institutions. They also focus on transformational measures that, for example, quantify maternal health outcomes or the number of houses governments build, rather than on the transformative informal arrangements that sometimes achieve more, better, or faster results (Olopade, 2015). This short-sightedness is articulated by Hero, one of the filmmakers of *The Spirit of Kanju*, from Ghana, who quips:

[W]hen our government wants to measure success in education they will tell you, ‘hey, thousands of students had A’s, two thousand had B’s’ ... so it’s a matter of the grades that people are getting when they are moving from junior school to high school and the next level of education. (Hero, filmmaker, Ghana, 2022)<sup>2</sup>

He goes on to explain that this can be a missed opportunity to ask questions like ‘How many of these people are creating jobs?’ and ‘How many of these people are really changing their own character and their own attitude?’ The leader that he chooses to interview, Freda Yawson, is someone whom he describes as embodying transformative leadership because, instead of a narrow focus on measurable outcomes, she uses her resources to train young people ‘in useful skills like robotics’ and ‘to do something meaningful with their lives.’ That, for him, is leadership: ‘people who serve without any inducement’ (Hero, filmmaker, Ghana, 2022).

Demonstrated through Hero’s example, *The Spirit of Kanju* bridges this gap between institutional transformation and transformative leadership, which is primarily committed to unearthing, problematising, and dismantling those structures of power and privilege that act against equity, justice, and freedom (Swartz, Chapter 1, this volume). *The Spirit of Kanju* is a film about ‘the bold opportunism’ that makes African leadership diverse and exhilarating (Olopade, 2015, p. 7). Rather than focusing solely on transformational leadership, the film spotlights the stories of change-making transformative leaders. Where political freedom, state-driven social welfare, and economic opportunities have failed to materialise, ordinary people – everyday leaders – take ownership of their fate.

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<sup>2</sup> All filmmaker quotes from 2022 are taken from a reflection session about *The Spirit of Kanju* filmmakers’ experience of the process and the film, recorded in March 2022 in Zanzibar, Tanzania, at a launch of the documentary. The filmmakers’ country of origin is placed after their names.

This chapter also explores the transformative impact of the film-creating process on first-time filmmakers, all of them university graduates and alumni<sup>3</sup> of the Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program. Making use of film analysis (Bordwel & Thompson, 1990) and drawing on the work of Haile Gerima (Gerima & Woolford, 1994), Glauber Rocha (1965), and Augusto Boal (1979), we ask whether film-creating processes have the capacity to grow transformative leadership behind and beyond the lens.<sup>4</sup> Rather than the high-quality, expensive, and exclusionary practices that typify traditional filmmaking, we wanted to find out what it would take to foster a process that is more inclusive and participative, and lends itself to more ‘imperfect’ forms of cinema creation.

Nineteen alumni of the Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program, from six regions, equipped with high-end mobile phones, ring lights, and microphones, were trained and then set out to spend time with elders, peers, religious leaders, academics, community leaders, business leaders, politicians, and activists who reflect various styles and contributions to leadership in their different contexts. The project, called ‘Alumni Behind the Lens,’ invited novice filmmakers to embark on a mission to ask what it means and what it takes to be a leader on the African continent, including thinking about the kinds of leaders Africa needs. The mission they were on is revealed in the feature-length collaborative documentary film *The Spirit of Kanju: Leaders Transforming Africa*, the culmination of a year of collecting footage. The young filmmakers interviewed 47 leaders (though only 15 are featured in the final film) across Ghana, Uganda, Rwanda, Ethiopia, South Africa, and Kenya. Alongside unearthing the core of African leadership, these young filmmakers were themselves negotiating their own embodiment of leadership as people who were given the opportunity to be educated in universities across the world and chose to plough back into their communities in various ways. Consequently, six of the filmmakers came from behind the lens to feature in the film.

The film is essentially Olopade’s *The Bright Continent* (2015) in action. Where Olopade shares anecdotes of *kanju* across Africa, *The Spirit of Kanju* depicts vignettes of *kanju* in action, grounded in transformative leadership. *Kanju* is ‘the specific creativity born from African difficulty’ (Olopade, 2015, p. 20). In Yoruba, it ‘literally means to “rush or make haste”; in English, we might say it is to “hustle”, “strive”, “know how” or “make do”’ (Olopade, 2015, p. 21). Olopade (2015, p. 23) posits that ‘*kanju* solutions determine: “What do I have? What do

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<sup>3</sup> The terms filmmaker and alumni are used interchangeably to describe the trainee filmmakers, who are also university graduates and alumni of the Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program.

<sup>4</sup> The authors are the director and producer of *The Spirit of Kanju: Leaders Transforming Africa*, and therefore write from the position of insiders in the process. Both are Africans who are committed to the development of young people.

I need? What can I do? Who can I do it with?” *Kanju* operates differently from resilience, which is ‘inherently conservative – focused on bouncing back to a prior status quo[;] *kanju*, by contrast is generative, it is about catapulting ahead’ (Olopade, 2015, p. 27). The filmmakers epitomise the spirit of *kanju*, as the whole filmmaking process took place in the context of the global Covid-19 pandemic.

These young graduates became film artists, who used their cellular phone cameras to go in search of examples of Africa’s transformative leaders. What better way than through the film frame to introduce the world to the dynamic people leading change on the continent? As Gerima reminds us, ‘If we want to tell the trillion untold stories of our people, our film approach has to be as creative as the stories themselves’ (Gerima & Woolford, 1994, p. 90). Gerima argued that Black filmmakers needed to grow creative production and distribution environments where they are free to express their visions completely independently of oppressive cultures (Safford & Triplett, 1983). This idea of innovating independent film ecosystems dovetails with the views of transformative leadership as leadership geared toward systemic and not cosmetic or assimilatory change (Swartz, Chapter 1, this volume).

This call for culturally independent film systems is also in line with the action-based, hustle-based, ‘working with what you have’ approach of *kanju* (Olopade, 2015). *The Spirit of Kanju* is saturated with examples of this kind of approach to transformative leadership, not only in the stories happening inside the frame, but also in the processes that created the frame. *The Spirit of Kanju* attempts the impossible: to showcase the work and diverse voices of 19 film creators in a single narrative journey. The film becomes a collage holding multiple lenses to tell a story through a symphony of African leadership enterprises, in front of and behind the camera. We watch as collaborative film making unfolds inside the frame. The section that follows describes the process through which this product came to be realised.

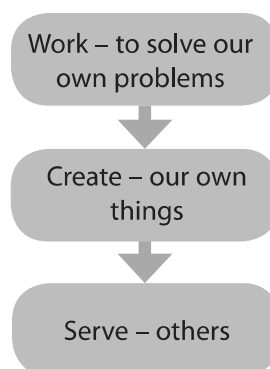
## **The film making process**

A question that arose in the making of *The Spirit of Kanju*, as the young filmmakers planned their shoots, travelled to the leaders they wanted to interview, and filmed these stories, was whether the filmmakers themselves displayed the kind of independent, innovative leadership Gerima speaks of (Safford & Triplett, 1983). Did they perpetuate the leadership style prescribed by ‘oppressive cultures’, or were they able to lead their projects independently of this kind of film-creating culture? Did they innovate ‘other’ systems for and methods of film-creating culture? Did they employ the ethical and people-centred processes that exemplify transformative leadership (Swartz, Chapter 1, this volume), since creating authentic transformative film work requires the artist to engage in collaborative transformative leadership?

To answer these questions, let us start at the beginning of the process. In selecting which alumni would participate in the exercise, we asked potential filmmakers what they thought characterised African leadership, to draw together their understanding and practice of leadership. Responses varied, but a recurring theme from the more inspired answers was that leaders in Africa should have influence and vision, motivate others, be committed to service, and be concerned with the greater good of their people. They talked about a leadership based on ethics; founded on trust, respect, friendship, responsibility, accountability, and democracy; and fostering belonging, awareness, participation, and collaboration. The alumni we eventually selected felt that African leaders should sacrifice, come up with sustainable solutions to problems, be ethical, change mindsets, redefine expectations, commit to thinking differently, break boundaries, and undertake challenging tasks. When it came to how they would choose leaders to interview, alumni felt that ultimately these should be individuals whom they considered to be transformative agents of change. Charles, one of the filmmakers, reflects that he was purposeful in his selection, and that a motivating factor was the kind of multiplier effect the leader had on their broader community. He wanted to select someone who had a major impact on the lives of others and so, for him, Reverend Canon Gideon Byamugisha, who was the first religious leader in the region to state publicly that he was living with HIV, represented just that, because ‘there are very many people who are what they are because of Reverend Canon Gideon’ (Charles, filmmaker, Uganda, 2022). Other alumni responses aligned with the understanding that transformative leaders are agents of change who can pursue a vision of a more just and democratic society. They may be ethical leaders or servant leaders, but they always have a view towards a higher purpose (Swartz, Chapter 1, this volume).

In the process of creating the film, the filmmakers described a triad (Figure 4.1) that they felt defined the ethos of African leadership. The three connected elements are that African leaders *work* to solve their own problems, that they *create* their own things, and that they *serve* others.

Figure 4.1. *The trifecta of African leadership according to the filmmakers*



Source: Authors

This trifold resonates throughout the film as the chosen leaders, across a range of disciplines and contexts, embody this spirit. These are everyday people creating organisations, building communities of practice, developing ideas, and holding events that drive significant change that encompasses creativity and innovation in being a leader, and even in thinking about leadership. There is an urgency about dissociating from Western influence and intervention to turn instead towards working for African solutions to African problems – a move away from ‘oppressive’ and towards ‘independent’ cultures.

Supplying high-end cellular phones and camera equipment to the 19 alumni (all of them relatively inexperienced first-time filmmakers), and entrusting them with telling a story of transformative leadership on the continent, assumed an inherently participative and collaborative process. The complete training programme and fieldwork with alumni took place over 13 months from February 2021 to March 2022, and occurred in five phases. Phase 1 involved training workshops where the trainee filmmakers began to learn the language of cinema and the art of storytelling. *The Spirit of Kanju*, from its conception, was intended to be a composite and collaborative project. The training pedagogy therefore had to draw on radical and participative cultural praxis. Here we turned to the work of Brazilian writer and cultural practitioner, Augusto Boal (1979). Boal believes that theatre and culture are weapons, and that it is the people who needed to use them. Boal’s participative ‘Action Theatre’ methods mapped out how the means of cultural production should be transferred to the people. He asserts that the first step in this handing-over process is to teach the people the language of culture (Boal, 1979). In the case of *The Spirit of Kanju*, after handing the means of film production to the alumni, our training workshops and seminars sought to deconstruct the language of cinema.

Phase 2 was about choosing the transformative leaders to interview. This part also involved translating the story idea into a script informed by Gerima’s call to ‘tell the trillion untold stories of our people ... as creative[ly] as the stories themselves’ (Gerima and Woolford, 1994, p. 90). How would we go about amplifying the innate and original voice, rather than directing that voice or imposing on it? For Gerima, filmmakers have to draw from and cultivate their unique and indigenous accents or voices, even though it may not make sense to other societies (Safford & Triplett, 1983). The learning phase had emphasised that ‘we are all story’, and the alumni filmmakers were encouraged to speak in their own tongues as they chose stories or leaders, searched and researched their worlds, and mapped their stories into script structures. In answering the questions ‘What is the story?’ and ‘What is the story not?’, alumni were encouraged to draw on their own cultural context, their interests, and their unique relationship with their characters.

In Phase 3, the young filmmakers entered the worlds of their leaders and set out to frame their stories. The filmmakers learned how access was negotiated, how

filming arrangements were made, how to enter and move through the world of their selected leader characters, and how to frame and film them. Alumni were encouraged to see themselves as part of and not spectating in the worlds they were filming (Vertov, 1929; 1984). They were also encouraged to film, create, and problem solve together with their characters and the communities with which they worked (Campbell & Cortés, 1979). This respectful, appreciative, and servant-oriented filming approach, as exemplified by Jorge Sanjinés and the Ukamau film Group of Bolivia, guided much of the field work of the Alumni Behind the Lens process (Campbell & Cortés, 1979). Sanjinés' work on reciprocity with the community was relevant as filmmakers set off to film authentic stories of leadership.

To augment the film work created by the alumni, a more experienced film crew travelled to Kenya, Uganda, Ghana, South Africa, and Rwanda for Phase 4. Even here, great care was taken to defer to the leadership of the alumni in the field, allowing them to collaborate closely with the supporting director and technical crew. Time was taken to continue the film-learning process in the field and the alumni were given the opportunity to direct the slightly higher-end support camera and sound equipment to augment their cellular-phone-created materials. Finally, Phase 5 was about choosing the authentic cinema versus perfect cinema – in other words, the kind of film that accommodates a myriad of new and experimental frames and voices versus a conventional cinema. Drawing on Rocha's aesthetics of hunger, this phase was concerned with the assembly of materials that would eventually form the cohesive product that is *The Spirit of Kanju*. In the next section, we provide a brief synopsis of the documentary, including a description of the range of leaders featured.

### **Layers of leadership in front of the lens**

The opening shot of Fasiledes Castle in the Amhara Region of Gondar, Ethiopia, is captured by an unsteady camera, clearly hand-held, seemingly in search of something as we imagine the world behind the walls of the ancient castle. The frame drifts through a gateway of this more-than-390-year-old castle, while in the next frame, another hand-held camera bobs up and down in a car seat, showing through the windscreen the rural landscape of Nanyuki in Kenya. The car stops and the frame travels out of the car door, across a dirt road, into the bushveld, and finally comes to rest on a rock with the name 'Daraja, School for Girls' painted on it, a beacon of light set in the middle of the wilderness. Yet another moving picture drifts into view, this time searching the crowded streets and back alleys of the Kibera informal settlement in Nairobi, Kenya. The camera comes to rest in a lush garden surrounded by shacks, crumbling walls, and old clay-brick homes. Interspersed within these brief snapshots, we see a montage of scenes that set the tone for a bright film that celebrates humanity in leadership,

sociality, love, and the dignity of creative labour. The montage takes in a close-up of skilled hands doing artisanal weaving work, a traditional coffee-roasting ceremony, a makeshift carwash, children playing, alumni in action setting up their equipment, a community garden, a barbershop, a cityscape, and snapshots of featured transformative leaders in frame. These prompt the questions ‘Who are these people in front of the cameras?’ and ‘What is it about leadership that they hope to share with us?’

This cinematic journey discovering African transformative leadership unfolds in six chapters that go both behind the scenes and along a journey of what ordinary Africans are doing to help themselves, their families, and communities broadly. In the first chapter, we are introduced to our leaders in a broad array of fields. Joseph Male is a change-maker in agriculture. He is a transformative farmer in Uganda who has set up a model farm making agriculture attractive to the youth. On environmental issues, Ann Tasamba, a lecturer in environmental energy in Uganda, is joined by Kenyan Malassen Hamida, the co-founder of Mazingira Women Initiative and the lead at Kibera Green Movement, organisations that carry out projects on solid waste management, tree planting, and public education on environmental conservation. In education, we meet two leaders at opposite ends of their leadership journeys: Professor Tawana Kupe, vice chancellor of the University of Pretoria in South Africa, and Cynthia Ablordey, a 17-year-old high school prefect in Ghana. Both Puleng Tsie, in Johannesburg, and Freda Yawson, in Accra, are leaders championing science and technology education. Francula Odhiambo, Sabella Kedir, and David Boanuh are featured as leaders in the cultural and creative industries.

Francula Odhiambo is the founder of Cheza Cheza, an organisation that uses dance and play to create safe spaces and enable youth in Nairobi slums to learn life skills. Sabella Kedir is a fashion designer and model in Ethiopia who lives with severe physical disability, which she does not allow to get in the way of her ambition. David Boanuh makes documentaries and travel films that ‘show off’ Ghana and Africa, through Beautiful Stories, a company he co-founded. Engaged in humanitarian work is Emmanuel Niringiyimana, a 25-year-old man who dug a 7 km road single-handedly to connect two villages in rural Rwanda, so that people from his village could get quicker access to medical care. Victoria Gichuhi is the principal at the sought-after Daraja School in Kenya and an advocate for the empowerment and education of girls. Also working in advocacy is Prince Adu-Appiah, CEO of 1Billion Africa, a non-profit organisation geared towards eradicating poverty. Representing religious affairs and activism is Reverend Canon Gideon Byamugisha, a protestant minister and the first religious leader in Africa to publicly declare his HIV status. Our final featured leader is Zumra Nuru, who works as the leader of the Awarambe community, helping to direct and guide all its various community enterprises. These are all individuals who



exemplify the hidden triumphs of African leadership not frequently touted on national or global stages.

Chapter 2 takes us on ‘A journey in search of transformative leadership’. Here we meet the filmmakers and their chosen leaders. We learn about the alumni’s backgrounds, including how their own perspectives on leadership are influenced by their family upbringing, obstacles they faced growing up, their education, gender roles, and the necessity of adopting a spirit of *kanju* to break through barriers of who and what a leader looks like in the context of these backgrounds. One of the filmmakers, Gadson, describes the impact of his own gendered experience of leadership (informed by his upbringing) as influenced by traditional African notions of leadership wherein the ‘male figure’ and especially the ‘firstborn’ is ‘supposed to provide a form of leadership to your siblings as a parent, as a father’. Gadson goes on to say that ‘it’s like being born a king, it’s a responsibility you cannot run away from’ (Gadson, filmmaker, Uganda, 2022). In this chapter, we also learn how the alumni’s own transformative backgrounds had been a catalyst for choosing the leaders they selected.

Chapter 3, ‘A journey discovering leadership to be about collaboration’, follows the filmmakers’ journeys with the chosen leaders, revealing a little more about who the leaders are, what influenced them, and what they do. The critical characteristics of being a good leader are explored and among the qualities listed are confidence, having influence, and a commitment to helping others. The central message is the belief that as Africans, we have a valuable contribution to make, and that people from elsewhere can learn from us. This view is reinforced by Emmanuel, one of the alumni behind the lens, who said, ‘[T]here are a lot of untold stories on leadership in Africa’ (Emmanuel, filmmaker, Ghana, 2022). Collaboration is identified as paramount as we learn about the importance of communities harnessing their power and working together at all levels to bring about change, since the government cannot solve all problems.

Chapter 4, ‘The journey discovering leadership to be about action’, shifts from reflecting on what it means to ‘be’ a leader to a greater understanding of what it means to ‘do’ leadership. Here real insight on leadership in action is gained as the chosen leaders take us through the work they do while also describing their interventions. What is learned is that what they have in common is identifying problems in their community and working (with others) to solve them. They exhibit a transformative leadership that is action-oriented and has at its core social justice and inclusion. The leaders demonstrate how a small action can be transformative, and how everyday small actions can be scalable with the view to solving even national problems.

Chapter 5, ‘A journey discovering leadership to be about innovation’, focuses on new ideas, creative thinking, new systems, new pedagogical methods, and

education as a catalyst for innovation. Leaders reflect on agential change through storytelling about film, robotics, science, and education beyond the classroom. The final chapter, 'A journey discovering leadership to be about love/ubuntu', is a call to action. In this section, leaders consider what it means to lead with love, humanity, and ubuntu, in this way 'giving the world a more human face', as Steve Biko described Africa's unique contribution to the world (1987, p. 47). An ubuntu-driven leadership recognises the humanity of people because, as featured leader Puleng Tsie prompts, 'What is leadership without people?' (Tsie, interviewee, South Africa, 45:52, 2021).<sup>5</sup> Here leaders remind the viewer of their own agency and capacity to be leaders with everyday intentions and actions, no matter how big or small. The film ends with Tsie's resounding call: 'The power is in their hands' (Tsie, interviewee, South Africa, 53:27, 2021).

### **Discoveries about leadership from behind the lens**

What can we say about what a year-long experimental documentary-making process did to illuminate ideas about leadership for the alumni behind the lens, and how do these learnings relate to broader understandings of transformative and transformational leadership? Upon reflection, the alumni reported several lessons, a resounding one being the 'multiplier effect' of leadership. This refers to the cumulative effects of transformative leadership or, as filmmaker Charles explains, 'if we are talking about transformative leaders ... then we are sure that those we impact will also impact others' (Charles, filmmaker, Uganda, 2022). For Stephanie, the key takeaway from the documentary is that it helped her 'unlearn, to rethink and relearn again the concept of transformative leadership'. This was largely due to the common belief she had that 'a leader had to be someone big somewhere, a big name that we know from a certain place, a head of department or a head of an organisation' (Stephanie, filmmaker, Rwanda, 2022). Hers was a reflection shared by many, but the process of workshopping stories and searching for leaders to interview revealed that transformative change can occur at any level with everyday game changers exemplifying this. For Stephanie, then, searching for leaders became about selecting 'members of the community that were actually working at the grassroots levels ... those that are doing work on the ground' (Stephanie, filmmaker, Rwanda, 2022).

Still, the importance of encouraging processes that foster institutional and systemic change, which is admittedly harder to do, cannot be overstated. While working towards individual- and community-level change is critical for development, it is equally important that unjust and oppressive institutions

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<sup>5</sup> Quotes from 2021 are taken directly from the documentary *The Spirit of Kanju: Leaders Transforming Africa*. The filmmaker's or interviewee's country of origin and the time stamp in the documentary are given after the name.

and systems are transformed through ethical leadership. This observation is echoed by Maxwell, who shares an anecdote about which leader he might have interviewed in hindsight:

I think maybe the first head teacher when I was in primary school ... I grew up in the farming community, so we had to take care of cattle and then go to school. And until him, the promotion to different classes or to upper classes was mostly based on height and, you know, age and that kind of stuff. But he introduced, you know, an assessment-based promotion. He introduced other disciplinary measures and he completely transformed the school ... And I say I would have liked to talk to him because we heard yesterday that transformative leadership is more about systemic change but also, we need to talk about individuals who set up the policies to build these institutions that promote people. (Maxwell, filmmaker, Ghana, 2022)

Maxwell's anecdote illustrates the capacity individuals have to bring about transformative change.

Of course, the alumni also gained new insights regarding leadership through the documentary-making process itself, in part due to the time they spent with the leaders they chose to interview. The experience was synergistic, because not only did they succeed in sharing the voices, ideas, and stories of the leaders they interviewed, they also learned a great deal through journeying with them. In Sherifa's reflection about interviewing 17-year-old Cynthia, she is inspired because although Cynthia 'is from a poor family', she does not see this as a barrier to leadership, but rather something that anchors her in shared experience with 'other people who have got the same problems that she has got'. In so doing, Cynthia develops a consciousness that recognises the life-saving and life-giving nature of collaboration as 'someone who should try to pull her colleagues with her' and 'work together to make the world a better place' (Sherifa, filmmaker, Ghana, 2022).

In Rahab's case, her chosen leader, road builder Emmanuel, represents 'the small steps that we take each and every day that will make us become those transformative leaders'. A recognition that what eventually creates long-lasting, big change that is 'beyond us', is to do the 'small things that we are doing every day to be able to get there' (Rahab, filmmaker, Rwanda, 2022).

For Miriam, interviewing critically acclaimed photojournalist and activist Boniface Mwangi was edifying, because 'he's been very consistent in speaking for the truth, fighting for justice, fighting corruption and bringing light to young people that politics can be clean and fair' (Miriam, filmmaker, Kenya, 2022). Being in the presence of a leader who is guided by principals of social justice

made her realise the potential political ramifications and risks of trying to change systems – the fallout of transformative leadership that is not often talked about. In her own effort to make sense of this complicated position, she said:

This is someone who has not been afraid to shake up institutions that are not working, to lead protests in the country and to vouch for better policies in Kenya. So, it was inspiring speaking to him, but at the same time it got me to question ... who takes care of transformative leaders? And I want to look at it from a different perspective because my interviewee – we know him as an activist, as someone who is always fighting for us and for the dignity of the nation ... and we all saw the sacrifice that he went through. That was his family; that was his friends, in a bid to fight for Kenyans. And it got me thinking, to what point as a leader you get to a tipping point and say 'Look, I've done my part and I need to start looking after my own'. (Miriam, filmmaker, Kenya, 2022)

This point raised a question around what systems of care practices are available for transformative leaders and that one must take very seriously the potential risks of leadership, especially where the leader is using their voice and influence to disrupt oppressive institutions and change unjust systems.

Finally, Joy is a strong proponent of proximity when she reflects on her leader. A leader for her should be someone who had had a direct impact on her own life and trajectory. Her chosen leader, Ann Tasamba, is a university lecturer who is a personal inspiration to her, and who 'goes down to her community teaching them how to save, to get land'. More importantly, Joy chose Ann because she aligns with her personal understanding of leadership: a person who is 'that bridge that will cover the knowledge divide' (Joy, filmmaker, Uganda, 2022). In other words, people who are privileged enough to be exposed to various opportunities have a civic duty to share that knowledge, and in so doing spread the benefit of that knowledge. They also have a duty to create change in resource-scarce communities by taking 'information and shar[ing] it with our communities – teach them skills ... this will change everything because farmers or community leaders lack information that can actually improve them' (Joy, filmmaker, Uganda, 2022).

What can we say about how this film-creating experience changed the filmmakers, if at all? There were of course the material benefits accrued from receiving a high-end smartphone and the supplementary equipment. They also went through a year-long training programme where they acquired a range of skills, such as the language of cinema, the art of storytelling, writing a script, directing, framing camera angles, and interviewing skills. They met with inspiring leaders (some they already knew but others were new people to add

to their network). Most impactful has been what this film experience has done to shed light on leadership among both alumni and the leaders in the film, and how we can use storytelling to continue to dialogue about leadership in Africa. Clarity sums it up best:

My takeaway from the film, it's mostly just seeing how we each – everyone who was in the film, people that were being interviewed – we have different layers and unearthing those layers and just seeing this beautiful tapestry of what transformative leadership is within the mundane life that we think people are living. It just got me to think more about everybody that I get to meet, everyone that I see, how they have some form of transformative leadership traits within them. So, it gave me a different outlook on everyone ... I could get to understand their story because buried within our stories are how we become who we are today or in the near future. And that might help us have a roadmap in developing or encouraging and empowering the younger generation to become better leaders and transform our continent. (Clarity, filmmaker, Zimbabwe, 2022)

## Conclusion

*The Spirit of Kanju: Leaders Transforming Africa* is a film that celebrates leadership in Africa, today. In the film, we bear witness to leaders making individual change, community change, and even systemic change. What binds all the leaders is using a spirit of *kanju* to solve problems. The film practically and creatively contributes to the view of transformative leadership as ethical, participatory, empowering, and collaborative. Not only do the leaders speak eloquently about these characteristics of leadership practice, but viewers get to experience it through the actions and work being shared on screen. *The Spirit of Kanju* also tackles the issue of how cinema can contribute to the struggles of the underclasses (Benjamin, 2008).

Most importantly, the film sheds light on what transformative leadership behind the lens could look like. By taking up these 19 cameras, seeking out stories of game-changers, framing these exceptional people, with very little time and resources, the alumni filmmakers not only embody *The Spirit of Kanju* at a hustle level, but also begin to show us what would be needed to innovate culturally independent and authentic African film ecosystems as propagated by Haile Gerima (Safford & Triplett, 1983). Ultimately *The Spirit of Kanju* shows that leadership is complex. It is everyday and exceptional, human and extraordinary, innovative and responsive, and requires working together, but also starting alone. On the African continent, there are many rich and creative practices that respond to struggle and challenge. This is *kanju*: making something out of

nothing, doing leadership and not speaking leadership, and leading in such a way as to invite others along for the journey.

*#ThisIsKanju*

*The Spirit of Kanju film portrays leadership as collaboration, action, innovation, love, and ubuntu. Leadership is complex: everyday, exceptional, human, extraordinary, and responsive. It requires working together but starting alone.*

## Questions for discussion

1. What have you learned about leadership strategies in resource-scarce contexts that you can apply to your everyday life?
2. Transformative leadership should be focused on structural and systemic change in a particular direction: towards social justice. To what extent is this definition of transformative leadership portrayed in the film? How could some of the projects depicted become more transformative?
3. What do young people need in order to embark on leadership initiatives that bring about policy, systems, and structural change? How could they go about growing their sphere of influence?

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