

# An Informal Image in Different Voices

Abie Troen '14



## Voice (noun)

*Expression; utterance, a medium or agency of expression, the right or opportunity to express a choice or opinion. (E.g., The film made for KENASVIT gave voice to the dreams, designs and realities of the street vendor union of Kenya)*

## Voice (noun)<sup>1</sup>

*The distinctive style or manner of expression of an author or of a character in a book or film. (E.g., The KENASVIT film's narrative voice changed constantly: between the voices of the characters and the voice of the filmmaker, each also an author)*

In the city of Nairobi, in an industrial building, in a noisy, crowded room with cardboard walls, Samuel Mburu writes down and then files away the stories of thousands of street vendors who sell fruits and vegetables, secondhand shoes and clothes in the Kenyan capital. In the sewers of Nakuru, Charles Mwangi and the members of the Manyani Football team are picking plastics to sell in bulk in order to earn a living and empower themselves. In the heart of Kisumu, Tony Kwatchet carefully notes the sales of the different traders in a chart in his big black notebook.

The activities I will be writing about have happened, are happening and will continue to happen long after this is written; the experiences, impressions and reflections I am writing about concern a limited period between June and August 2013, while I was filming in Kenya. But my story too continues to evolve.

During my two-month internship with the Kenyan Alliance of Street Vendors and Informal Traders, KENASVIT, I observed the world of Kenyan street vendors, listened carefully to their words, and from those words I tried to distill a story. I tried to figure out how to document life in a coherent way and to make compelling video clips that they could use to promote their cause.

As a film student who studies the art of storytelling, I learned a lot from KENASVIT's work and their process of creating a narrative. KENASVIT's main goal is advocacy – taking the lives, challenges and struggles of street vendors, organizing them into one collective narrative, centered upon one conflict, in order to promote their causes in one voice. The union leaders who met and befriended me led me through the chaotic streets, pointing out what they saw as important and what they wanted me to see. A mound of waste, decorated by colorful plastic bags and rotting vegetables; the city county jail surrounded by a high fence and barbed wire; the small halls where members would meet – fragments of life that together create the narrative arc of KENASVIT, the narrative arc of my film. In KENASVIT's work as in my work, some images are in sharp focus, while others remain outside the frame.

KENASVIT's story is a powerful one.

It is the union of the informal sector, which includes roughly 10 percent of Kenya's population. Although the union has only a few thousand active members, these members represent three to four million informal traders. They are the voice that speaks with the authorities to insist that the vendors be recognized and their rights protected by the government.<sup>2</sup>



The union was created in 1999 in the aftermath of serious clashes between street vendors and the city councils. The city councils were intent on changing the image of Kenya's cities. They needed clean streets, tall buildings and prosperous corporate businesses to project an image of progress and development. They were determined to rid the cities of the thousands of street vendors who congregated in makeshift markets. Selling fruits and vegetables, secondhand shoes and clothing and blocking the sidewalks where they hawked their wares, they were held responsible for creating congestion and filth, and viewed as a major impediment to progress. As a result, the city councils tried to outlaw street vending, and used brutal violence against anyone who broke the law, although they did not hesitate to accept bribes from those who could afford to pay rather than be arrested for vending. This situation was the status quo, with millions of Kenyans working on the streets in fear of losing their livelihood, and desperate to evade the local authorities.

Throughout this period, the vendors were also quietly taking action. In Kenya's major cities, including Nairobi, Nakuru and Kisumu, traders formed small grassroots organizations to assist one another. These groups operated on a small scale. Members helped each other evade the authorities and raise the money to pay fines and bribes or replace confiscated merchandise. But they still lacked the ability to negotiate with the authorities.

A significant breakthrough occurred with a 1999 research project conducted by Professor Winnie Mitullah of Nairobi University. Professor Mitullah set out to study the challenges vendors faced, and to search for possible solutions to their conflicts with the local authorities. She concluded that their situation was



exacerbated by the fact that the street traders were not organized and lacked representation. Mitullah believed that if the traders united in an organization that would speak for them and negotiate their rights with the city councils, they might resolve the conflict and improve their conditions. She began by connecting the different grassroots groups she encountered in each city, and then connected the vendors from the different cities. She tried to implement the structure of trade unions to unite vendors from the grassroots to the urban to the national level.<sup>3</sup>

Sixteen years later, agreements have been signed between KENASVIT and local authorities in Nakuru, and formal markets have been set up for the street vendors in Kisumu. Due to KENASVIT's lobbying, the national government has even passed a bill recognizing these small businesses as part of the economic system, protecting them and giving them rights. But there is still much work to be done; the agreements are fragile and are not yet fully implemented. In Nairobi, no agreement has been reached and the city council is relentless. City *askaris* (soldiers), in plainclothes are out in force on the streets, fining, arresting, demanding bribes and otherwise harassing

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Balancing each of these realities – what I saw with my eyes, what I was shown, and what I knew I was supposed to see – was not always easy, especially as a privileged outsider, deep in a foreign country for the first time.

the street vendors more brutally than anywhere else in an effort to protect the image of progress in Kenya's capital.

In order to advocate for street vendors and informal traders KENASVIT needed a clear story, with a main challenge, proposed resolution, and message. KENASVIT's story was repeated to me countless times by dozens of members in the different cities, who expressed the desire again and again to speak with "one voice." When I began asking, "*What are the things that voice wishes to say?*" the story became complicated.

In the small office in Nairobi where he collects the vendors' stories, Samuel Mburu hopes KENASVIT will bring about better relations with the urban authorities. Charles Mwangi, chairman of the Manyani Football Club in Nakuru, is determined to empower the youth of his neighborhood. In Kisumu's fish markets, on the shores of Lake Victoria, union leader Tony Kwachet dreams of making KENASVIT the largest trade union in Kenya. KENASVIT is comprised of thousands of individuals, each one carrying a different perspective and personal narrative. So, paradoxically, while KENASVIT strives to speak as one voice, at the same time it is speaking with thousands of different voices.

Of these thousands of voices, I decided to film seven, belonging to unique individuals who told stories that were very distinct and personal, but at the same time shed light on the broader picture. As I filmed each member I was made aware of a different perspective, the different ways to tell personal stories, my role in telling those stories through film, and underlying it all, my own story. I had to balance and frame through the camera three different kinds of realities. The first reality is the visual record created the moment I aimed the camera to capture life in the congested streets of the Kenyan cities. The second reality is that which each individual wished to show or tell about, as they directed me to notice and focus on their personal stories. And the third reality is the one that if I framed it correctly, would serve the best interests of the Union. Balancing each of these realities – what I saw with my eyes, what I was shown, and what I knew I was supposed to see – was not always easy, especially as a privileged outsider, deep in a foreign country for the first time.

Three encounters with three of the KENASVIT members I filmed in Kenya left significant impressions on me, helped develop my understanding of the nature of my project, and raised serious questions about the process of filmmaking. As I recorded the voices of Samuel Mburu in Nairobi, Charles Mwangi in Nakuru and Tony Kwachet in Kisumu, I learned about the process by which stories are told, both behind and in front of the camera.

### **Mid-June. First Week in Kenya Nairobi Informal Sector Confederation, Nairobi**

The Nairobi Informal Sector Confederation (NISCOF) has a small windowless office situated in the working class section of Nairobi's Central Business District. The cardboard wall lets in sound from all the other offices in the building. The room is lit

by a single flickering florescent light. This confined private space is the proud center and the gathering point of the leaders of Nairobi's informal traders, and it is decorated with dozens of stickers, posters, photos, leaflets and calendars celebrating the informal sector's struggle.

Samuel Mburu, NISCOF's secretary, sat across from me, behind a small desk. He was my first friend in Kenya. He welcomed me to Nairobi, took me in, made me feel comfortable, and provided me with my first insights into the way the Union operated. I directed one of my two cameras at Samuel and turned it on. The Nikon reflex was less obtrusive than most video cameras, and allowed people to act relatively freely and openly even with it turned on. I hoped that having the camera present and recording from this initial stage in our relationship would allow Samuel to begin to feel comfortable being filmed. As it turned out, the camera did not make Samuel uncomfortable. In fact, it had the opposite effect.

Samuel straightened his back, placed his hands on the table, smiled broadly and looked directly into the lens:

"Fifteen years from now, I am so eager to be an international journalist, because I can see that I am interested, to finding and digging deeper to the root cause of every story. So I hope and pray to my God that my dream will come true..."

Samuel is 34 years old. He sells women's clothes in a tiny room off a street in central Nairobi. Despite the fact that he earns a meager living, he volunteers long hours as the secretary of NISCOF. His role involves making his way through the crowded streets, meeting with union members, notifying them of messages handed down from the national union, and inviting them to educational workshops and rallies. He is responsible for writing



everything down, everything from meetings to casual conversations with the traders on the city streets. Samuel records their dreams, hopes, complaints and designs in his notebook, and later files them in cabinets in the office. And, as he said, Samuel dreams of being a journalist.

“... Today, we shall undergo an interview with the members of NISCOF in their working sites. Among the questions we shall ask is the following – how long has he or she been working as a street vendor? What is the relationship with the local government? If there are challenges they are going through – we shall capture them in the interview... Each interview should take between 10 to 15 minutes depending on the different issues the different traders deal with... Clothes vendors, shoe shiners, service providers, vegetable vendors, booksellers – we will interview them all – and conclude by asking them where they want to be... 15 year[s] from now.”

He straightened up like a news anchor. “Once more, I am Samuel Mburu. Thank you, God bless.”

Marching through the streets, with my small and large cameras, we drew a great deal of attention. But as soon as the onlookers realized that Samuel and I were engrossed in our own conversation, that he and I were working together – a student and a street vendor acting as journalists – they left us alone.

Filming with Samuel allowed me to observe how this grassroots NGO operates, and how it tries to do something nearly impossible – unite informal traders. Samuel knew members’ spots and corners throughout the city:

“Here’s Grace’s spot” – selling locks on a cement step near a bus stop.

“Here’s David’s corner” – selling corn on the sidewalk with his granddaughter.

Patently he questioned and listened to dozens of street vendors that day. I was one step back, filming the interviewees, both of us behind the camera.

At one point, after several hours of filming interviews, Samuel beckoned. “Come here.” A mound of waste, decorated by colorful plastic bags and rotting vegetables. Rising above it, ironically, was a huge pink sign advertising laundry detergent. “Just look at it! Filth everywhere! We pay the city council taxes, 50 shillings – and for what?”

While I set up the tripod to capture the image, Samuel paused and made a request.

“Can you take my picture?”

I was surprised. “Here?”

“Yes! Me holding the camera. Like a journalist.”

As I looked through my reflex camera at Samuel holding the large camera, the filth underneath and the giant poster above, I realized that I had made a serious mistake in the way I was filming that day. Samuel shouldn’t be with me behind the camera. He should be in front of it. Not only should he be framing the story, he *should be the story*. He should be framing his own story.

“Hold on! I want one picture with you!” I said, pressed the timer and ran to be in the frame myself.

That night I returned to edit. Although I had slept very little over the previous days, I kept myself awake and began the long process of reviewing the moments shot hours earlier. I was filled with admiration for Samuel’s work, and

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imagined the film I had come to Kenya to produce would feature him as the main protagonist of the story, leading viewers into the world of Nairobi’s street vendors. The film would focus on him empowering street vendors and, through the union, transforming the lives of members of the informal sector. I was inspired by the fact that he volunteered to do this work, that he was not paid to be a leader, and actually sacrificed his earnings for the time he spent organizing. Seeing him at work gave me strength to put in extremely long hours and sleep little with the hope that I’d make the best film possible. If he was putting in such great efforts to make a difference in the community, who was I to let go? NISCOF and KENASVIT’s cause was so worthy, their determination so great – my efforts were small in comparison to their trials and tribulations. As passionate as he was about creating a civic voice, to give street vendors a clear and powerful say over their destiny, so was I determined to find my own cinematic voice that would powerfully tell the Union’s story. His endless ambition fueled my endless ambition.

“Where do you see yourself in 15 years?” I heard Samuel’s voice emanating from the editing software. The responses varied only slightly. One after another, the traders answered that they’d like to open





a small grocery shop. A trouser shop. A shoe shining shop. And they spoke about opening such shops as something far away, almost unattainable.

Maybe it was the late hour, and maybe the repetition, again and again and again – the same tones of voice, mannerisms, gestures that I saw when the vendors spoke with hope about opening a small business – but when I got to viewing Samuel I broke down and could not watch any more of the footage.

“I am so eager to be an international journalist....”

Watching Samuel made me feel how complicated the relationship was – I was behind the camera, while he was in front of it. I suddenly felt the difference between his ability as an insider “to dig deeper” inside his community to produce a story, while I would always be an outsider. At the same time, I would remain the man behind the camera, telling his story. The odd presence of the camera in this world just hit me in the stomach and I felt it very powerfully.

Of that day spent with Samuel, there are two still images that stand out the most. They both express Samuel’s role and mine. In the first image, (see page 41), Samuel is standing on top of a heap of garbage in Nairobi. In the second image, (see below), Samuel is interviewing a shoeshiner in the market. In the first picture I am in the frame, holding the camera, responsible for telling Samuel’s story, while in the second picture I am unseen, and it is Samuel who is conducting an interview to be captured on film. Samuel is using my camera and it has become a marker of his status. He has gained a voice through *my* camera and through *my* voice.

This difference between the first and second picture remained with me that night, and the questions in voice and storyteller followed me into the next city I worked in, Nakuru. Who is telling the story? Can I really tell someone else’s story for them?

### Mid-July. Fourth Week in Kenya Kingdom Seekers Evangelical Church Studio, Nakuru

Charles Mwangi was nervous. So was I. But while I hid my apprehension behind a

mask of professionalism, Charles shared his feelings. I tried to make him feel comfortable, to give him a sense of safety in front of my camera and asked him, as he sat hunched on the interviewee chair, to speak his mind.

“This is hard.... The camera at your face – so you think ‘What’s behind the camera? What’s the reaction?’... At the beginning I had an idea of what I can say but when I started talking I went flat... Am I straight to the point? Or am I just uttering words?”

Charles was far from just uttering words. He was speaking eloquently and with great passion. But the story he was trying to tell was complex, and he was anxious, as was I, that he would get it right. This unique recording session was taking place in the Kingdom Seekers Evangelical Church of Nakuru’s studio, a professional studio we had found, which up until that day had been reserved for filming evangelical ministers preaching the word of the Lord. Today marked the end of a long and strenuous process of filming, the final step in my attempt to make a promotional video for KENASVIT that focused on Charles’ youth football club, the Manyani Football Club.

I had met Charles three weeks earlier, right after leaving Samuel Mburu, NISCOF and Nairobi. I had been in Nakuru barely 24 hours, and was being given a speedy tour of all of KENASVIT’s work in the city. That same morning I was introduced to a group of widows who hawk goods at the bus station, a collective of disabled street vendors who sell cigarettes in the city’s parks, and an organization of single mothers who knit woolen sweaters they sell together on Nakuru’s streets. Each of these groups wanted me to film them as part of my work promoting the Union, and each of them had a “good” story. But when I met Charles, the charismatic 30 year old team chairman of the Manyani Football



Samuel Mburu conducting an interview, Muthurwa Market, Nairobi, June 2013.

Club team, I knew I had found *the* story. A story Charles was very eager to share with the camera and me; a story I was ambitious enough to try to capture on film and tell.

Charles Mwangi lives in the Manyani neighborhood, one of the poorest sections of Nakuru. Historically many of its youth have been involved in drug dealing and crime. When a wave of violence spread through Kenya following the 2007 presidential elections Manyani was a hot spot, and the community suffered many casualties, especially among its youth. In a desire to heal the wounds and to organize, educate and empower the youth, the community leaders created a football club. After the community contributed and collected small donations they hired a coach and built a small shack where the club could meet. But the funds they collected didn't cover expenses, Charles explained, so in order to sustain themselves the players began waste picking. Working with the youth twice a week, members of the community went to the local dump and sewage area to collect plastics and metals, which they sorted, stored and later sold in bulk. KENASVIT provided sessions to teach club members about the hazards of waste picking and how to protect themselves in the city's dumps. The Union's support was not financial but rather educational. So, while the club received professional training that helped them with waste picking, they were in desperate need of a sponsor who would support them.

The opportunity to film Charles and his team was a "win-win" situation: for me, representing KENASVIT, and for Charles, representing the team. I would film the club's story and create a video KENASVIT could use to showcase its work with youth. The team could use the film to publicize its work and connect with potential donors.



Charles Mwangi, Kingdom Seekers Evangelical Church Recording Studio, Nakuru, July 2013.

But this superficially simple "win-win" entailed a complex dynamic. In order for either party to "win" I had to capture not only images of empowerment, but also images of poverty and lack. Both Charles and I were aware of this. He mentioned more than once that the youth playing football did not have shoes. And so the camera followed, tilting and panning in search of the muddy, shoeless feet that were chasing the ball. He took me to film where the club stored the piles of waste the members had picked, and emphasized their desire to find other means of sustaining the team, stating directly that if only they had donors, they could do so much more. I filmed the tall heaps of plastic collected from the dump and tried to make them look as aesthetically filthy as possible.

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After two weeks of filming I left Nakuru and returned to Nairobi, where I shut myself in and began editing the footage I had accumulated. Looking at the clips on the editing timeline I felt excited. A narrative arc was developing, beginning with poverty, trials and tribulations, and concluding with empowerment and hopes for a better future for the youth and the

community. The joint effort and days of filming that Charles and I had invested would surely produce successful results. At that point I let Charles understand that the filming was over and he should wait for me to finalize the editing. I did not yet know we would have a crucial final encounter at the Evangelical Church Studio.

When I began writing and then testing a third person voiceover for the clip I realized my American outsider voice could not, and probably should not, narrate the Manyani

team’s story. Words like “poverty” and “empowerment” sounded hollow, even patronizing; they fundamentally lacked the meaning they had when it was Charles saying them. Who was I to be the narrator? It struck me that while I had had up till now, and would have in the future, control of the visuals – from the first day of filming till the last day of the editing – I could have Charles take charge of the sound. In Nairobi I had nearly missed providing Samuel with the center stage in front of the camera. Now I wanted to give Charles Mwangi the recording microphone and let him narrate his story.



**Members of the Manyani Football Club waste picking in the sewage trenches in the neighborhood, Nakuru, 2013.**

I called Charles from Nairobi and told him I wanted him to narrate. Prepared with a text I had written and with a short demo clip, I returned to Nakuru. Viewing the clip, Charles saw different flaws in the story I had written and edited and pointed out which parts he thought needed to be better emphasized and which parts needed to be cut down. But viewing the demo clip Charles also saw that he was the protagonist of the video, and that in his voice he would shape and narrate his own story.



**Members of the Manyani Football Club on the playing field with Charles on the right, Nakuru, July 2013.**

Back at the Evangelical Church studio I watched Charles sitting nervously, lights shining on his face. I was conscious of trying to edit myself out and put Charles center stage.

“It’s... the impact. Am I talking words only or is there a point?...” He looked me in the eyes and said, “I was reading your face... And then – your reaction – your movement...”

Could I really edit myself out of the story? Even if I could edit out the privileged voice of a narrator, could I edit out the privileged audience? Or was the privileged audience precisely who we were both targeting? Were they the real people behind the camera?



He continued. “I do public speaking – and in public speaking what you tell the audience matters a lot so this – there are a lot of questions you ask yourself. First you avoid repetition. Second of all – you want to gather all the points to the people who are listening to you.

“You ask yourself” – he paused – “am I conveying the point to the audience? So – in this case the audience is – a camera.”

### Late July. Fifth Week in Kenya Central Business District, Kisumu

We were sitting in a small park in Kisumu, Kenya’s third largest city, where 30 street vendors had gathered. These were men and women, informal traders from the central business district who sold their wares on the streets. For roughly an hour each of them, in turn, had gotten up, addressed the group, spoken loudly, and stated their case. Some of the traders’ faces expressed discomfort, anger, disappointment; others excitement. They were discussing a new market being built in the city through KENASVIT’s advocacy and funded by donations from the European Union. The market was meant to be a catalyst for progress and a blessing for the community, providing a stable indoor workplace with facilities for the traders. Yet many saw it as a curse. The new market had space for only a few hundred traders, and could not accommodate the thousands of street vendors working in the central business district. Once the construction was completed all traders would be relocated by the city council. Those transferred to the new market would benefit from an immediate improvement in quality of life; thousands of others would be pushed to the outskirts of the city, a move that while allowing the formal businesses to grow as part of Kisumu’s new urban development plan, would diminish severely the livelihoods of the excluded vendors.

Directly across from me in the circle sat the man who held the key to this complex situation, and who had great power over the destiny of the traders at the meeting. Tony Kwatche, chairman of Kisumu Informal Trader Economic Support (KITES), the local urban alliance affiliated to the national union, KENASVIT, was tall and broad, with a grave expression.

A month before the dramatic Kisumu meeting, when I was filming Samuel in Nairobi, I was shown the struggles of union members and led to understand why they crucially needed “a voice” that would address urban authorities. Samuel had gone out to the streets with me and asked the vendors what their needs were. He was there to represent them; their hopes and aspirations became his. Samuel was there to help bring change, and saw himself as a tool for implementing that change.

Tony seemed to be a different kind of leader and was dealing with a very different situation. In Kisumu, the government had already recognized the informal sector and was building them a market. Here the traders *had* a voice. Only, it seemed to me, this voice was Tony’s.

More than once Tony would point to his fellow street vendors and say: “I am a source of inspiration to them,” or “I am like a mother and father to them,” smiling proudly, beaming at his union members. At first I was put off by his paternalistic attitude, and found it arrogant, even disturbing. After a while I began to get used to it, taking a less judgmental and more observational stance.

Watching Tony interacting with the street vendors revealed an intriguing attribute of his leadership. His desire to lead did not stem solely from a passion to make a difference; it seemed to arise from a love of leadership for the sake of leadership.

This became evident during the filming process. Where on the first day out in Kisumu, he portrayed my internship to the street vendors as filming a documentary about the national union, by the second day I was making a documentary about KITES, and by the third day Tony was telling the street vendors that I was making a film about *him*.

Until I arrived in Kisumu, I was passionately filming stories about lack of facilities and poor work sites, and then documenting educational training sessions, grassroots community work and union rallies that KENASVIT leaders provided. I had been documenting the story the union wanted to voice to the world. It was a simple story, with a clear beginning, middle and end, about good guys and their government antagonists. But filming in Kisumu, and meeting Tony, provided my first glimpse of the complex realities created by union leadership. I followed him as he argued with street vendors about the new market, filmed him reviewing the work done at the construction site, and documented him at his own work site, where he sold bags in the central part of the city.

There were two concepts he would use, both with me and with the street vendors. The first was “one voice” – a phrase used repeatedly by KENASVIT members I had met in Nairobi and in Nakuru. Hearing this phrase in his voice, I sensed the irony that indeed Kisumu was speaking with one voice, but the voice seemed to be *Tony’s*. The second concept was one I had not heard before. Tony spoke of dreaming, and voiced his dream to make KITES and KENASVIT the strongest union in Kenya.

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could be or could later become a serious shortcoming in the work he was engaged in. But at the same time they could be precisely the force that enabled him to reach for a dream on such a large scale.

I invited myself to sleep over at Tony's home so I could document a full "day in the life." It was an effort to push my own limits and, by crossing the threshold of his home, to penetrate Tony's mind and represent his dream to the fullest extent.

We were sitting at the table in our pajamas having a late night meal, preparing and planning for the following day's busy filming.

"You know, Abie," he confided, "my dream for KENASVIT, my beloved national alliance, is to see into it, and work into it, to make one of the biggest unions for the people of the informal economy in our beloved Kenyan country... That is my dream...."

Suddenly Tony's pajama shirt came into sharp focus. It was imprinted with two immediately recognizable faces.

"I'm sorry – I just have to bring the camera. I just noticed something."

"What have you noticed?"

"Your shirt!"

"My shirt?"

"Oh yes!"

"This is my hero."


"I can see! I can see!" I got up, brought over the camera and focused it on his chest.

"This T-shirt. You can see here Martin Luther King, Jr. and Barack Obama. The readings, here, you can see it?"

Tony stood up and stretched his shirt so that the words printed under the faces were in the camera's focus.

"*'He had a dream'*" he read, and explained, "that is Martin Luther King – and '*now his dream came true.*' So, in the United States, Martin Luther dreamed that one day the people of America will recognize and appreciate and maybe even vote for an African-American like him, or from any other minority." He continued proudly "And so, when Barack Obama was voted as the 44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States of America that dream became true. And to someone like me, Barack Obama is our son and Kisumu is his home city." He smiled. "So it signifies the bonding of our dreams...."

The determination of the leaders in Nairobi and Nakuru to advocate for the traders and be their voice inspired me to find my cinematic voice and at the same time to question my role behind the camera. But it was Tony's personal dream that made me reflect on my own dreams as a filmmaker. As my relationship with Tony developed, I gradually became aware that I too was working from a dream, and like Tony, I wasn't only trying to make a difference, I was also hoping to leave a personal imprint. I was discovering my own dreams by filming theirs.



Early November.  
Three Months Since Kenya  
Media Lab, Brandeis University

*“...Am I conveying the point to the audience? So – in this case the audience is – a camera.”*

The difficult, even painful part about editing film is also the most gratifying part. I relive moments, minutes, even hours captured by the camera, viewing them again and again and again until I have rethought them and can distill from them a story.

*“...it signifies the bonding of our dreams....”*

Editing is about making decisions: what to cut out, and what to leave in. I have to decide what the story will be. I determine who the audience will think is telling the story, and how the story will be heard.

*“...I am so eager to be an international journalist...”*

Since leaving Kenya and returning to Brandeis, I have been going through two separate processes. I have been editing the footage from Kenya to create the promotional videos for KENASVIT: Samuel, Tony and Charles each tells his own story in a manner that I hope will interest viewers and potential donors. Viewers are not meant to feel my presence in any of the films or hear my voice speaking.

*“...We need to speak with one voice...”*

It is their voices that speak. But alongside this process of editing, I have been writing this Sorensen essay. Here, I relive in detail the experiences from behind the scenes, and my voice – and with it the artifice of film, and the complexities of creating a sense of reality and truth – are foregrounded.

*“... We must have one voice!...”*

My experience in Kenya was transformative. Viewing the footage now, as I edit the KENASVIT clips and write the Sorensen essays, is a very different experience than filming and recording in Kenya. I weigh the enormous potential and limitations of the camera with me behind it. Editing through their recorded voices and images, I realize how much I have yet to learn about achieving the delicate balance required to tell other people’s stories, necessarily touched but uncontaminated by my own.

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## Notes

1. Free Online Dictionary. Last modified November 2013, <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/voice>
2. Interview with Professor Winnie Mitullah, Institute of Development Studies, University of Nairobi, July 29, 2013
3. Ibid.