

MAKERERE UNIVERSITY



SYMBOLISM IN UGANDAN FILMS

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Abstract

This study, investigates the use of symbolism in Ugandan films. It explores the nature and use of symbolism in the creation of meaning in three Ugandan films namely: Phil Mullaly's *The Martyrs of Uganda*, Ashraf Simwogerere's *The Passion of the Uganda Martyrs*; Dominic Dipio's *Crafting the Bamasaba*, following the field of semiotics advanced by Umberto Eco. Eco blended Saussure's and Peirce's ideas into a concise theory of semiosis. Semiosis is the process of meaning making of a sign by the interpreter. Eco's theory of semiology advances the idea that something is a sign only because it is interpreted as a sign of something by some interpreter, much as the sign has validity to exist independent of the person interpreting it.

In answering the study's objectives of investigating the various categories of symbols in selected Ugandan films; analysing their effectiveness as vehicles of meaning in the selected films, the research followed a qualitative design in which an analytical approach was adapted. The selected films were analysed as primary texts and the symbols therein identified. Library research on ethnographic and historical literature about the Uganda Martyrs and the Bagisu of Eastern Uganda was carried out so as to deepen the understanding of the cultural context and the temporal setting of the films.

Mullaly's *The Martyrs of Uganda* was selected on the basis that it is a foreign directed film that is rich in symbolism, and captures a Ugandan political, cultural, and religious conflict that led to the death of the Ugandan martyrs. Simwogerere's *The Passion of the Uganda Martyrs*, renders the same experience through the lenses of a Ugandan director, and Dipio's documentary, *Crafting the Bamasaba*, was not only been considered for its richness in ritual symbolism, but also for being directed by a female Ugandan filmmaker.

In this research, I employed a cultural, contextual and personal interpretation of the meaning of symbols in the selected films. The study enunciated their effectiveness in terms of thematic and ideological concerns; it was discovered that Mullaly, Simwogerere and Dipio have employed both archetypal cultural and religious symbols to depict the themes of martyrdom, the impact of foreign religion on Buganda, the strength and weaknesses of African traditional leaders that have been metonymically symbolised by Mwanga, and the general analysis of the practice of *Imbalu* among the Bagisu of eastern Uganda.

The study concluded that in the selected films, meaning does not exist prior to the symbol. The process of creating meaning is a negotiated one – between the symbolist or filmmaker and the viewer. This observation is in line with Umberto Eco's view that meaning is perceived through a synthesis of proposed ideas in the context of viewers/readers' past experiences.

Therefore, my interpretation of the symbolism in the film texts was relative given the notion that the symbols' significations are dynamic. They change according to the context of placement and action. This study attempted to bring out the hidden quality and the multiple layers of meaning that emerge from the reading of the film. For example, in *The Martyrs of Uganda*, blood may stand for many meanings: from brotherhood among the converts, martyrdom, and sacrifice, to such far possible secular interpretations as the ferocity of the despotic king Mwanga. The study further concludes that understanding the symbolic message in these texts/films leads to understanding of the entire films meaning.