

SOFTIE

A film by Sam Soko. 96 MIN. KENYA. 2020. HD

Sundance Film Festival: World Cinema Documentary Competition 2020

www.softiethefilm.com. Twitter and instagram - @softiethefilm



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SHORT SYNOPSIS:

Boniface Mwangi is daring and audacious, and recognized as Kenya's most provocative photojournalist. But as a father of three young children, these qualities create tremendous turmoil between him and his wife Njeri. When he wants to run for political office, he is forced to choose: country or family?

LONGER SYNOPSIS:

Boniface "Softie" Mwangi has long fought injustices in his country as a political activist. Now he's taking the next step by running for office in a regional Kenyan election. From the moment Boniface decides to run, telling his wife, Njeri, in passing with a hesitant laugh, he responds to each challenge with optimism. But running a clean campaign against corrupt opponents becomes increasingly harder to combat with idealism alone. And Boniface soon finds that challenging strong political dynasties is putting his family at risk. Should country really come before family, as he's always believed?

ABOUT THE FILM:

Softie is director and producer Sam Soko's first feature documentary filmed over the course of five years. After meeting the character Boniface Mwangi, nicknamed 'Softie' by his close friends and family in 2013, Soko, who had directed several short music videos and films by that time, decided to try his hand at directing a documentary. What started out as a short video, that he had planned to take a year filming, evolved into a story about politics, family and what it means to be Kenyan. Four years into Soko filming chaos filled street protests against corruption, police brutality, extra judicial killings, Softie decided to run for a political seat in his old neighbourhood Starehe. Soko knew he had a possible ending for a film, and pushed to do one more year of filming as his political campaign would give a much needed insight into the political and voting process in Kenya. But the material he filmed went far beyond that and gave insight into a young family, in a young democracy that was struggling to balance their love for their country with the needs of their family, a universal story that Soko felt that audiences across the world could be able to connect to a visceral level.

MEET THE MWANGIS

BONIFACE MWANGI “SOFTIE”

Boniface Mwangi born on July 10, 1983 is a Kenyan photojournalist, politician and activist involved in social-political activism. He is known for his images of the post-election violence that hit Kenya in 2007–2008 and his work as one of Kenya’s most prominent activists. Boniface grew up in an impoverished single parent home in Starehe county, with his six siblings. Mwangi dropped in and out of school during this period and helped his mother sell books on Nairobi’s streets. When his mother died in 2000, Mwangi, then 17, decided he had to change if he was to survive. He joined a Bible School with the intention of becoming a pastor, and secured a diploma in Bible Studies. Whilst at school he became interested in photography.

Despite not having a high school education, Mwangi managed to gain a place at a private journalism school. To fund his studies he had to continue selling books on the street, but soon began to gain experience as a photojournalist. He published photographs in a national newspaper and in 2005 won his first photography prizes. He was awarded the 2008 and 2010 CNN Africa Photojournalist of the Year Award for the photos that he took, documenting the widespread post election violence of 2007-2008. He suffered from PTSD because of all the violence that he witnessed and quit his job as a photographer to work on social justice in Kenya, mainly using street graffiti, art and street protests to call attention to human rights violations and political corruption in the country. He has been recognized as a global TED fellow for his activism work. One of his longest lasting initiatives to date is Pawa 254, a hub and space for artists and activists to work together towards social change in Kenya.

NJERI MWANGI - BONIFACE’S WIFE

Njeri Mwangi finished college in 2005 and knew she had to work in social impact but didn’t know where. Her upbringing guides her belief in God and family first. A chance encounter at an ice cream shop with Boniface in 2006 changed her life forever. Over the years as her husband gained more prominence in public, she has remained in the shadows, raising their 3 children Nate, Naila and Jabu and Co-Founding PAWA 254 one of Nairobi’s first creative social enterprises. In 2016 her husband announced that he was running for political office. This decision made her do something she had worked hard to never do - step out of the shadows and share her private life with the world.



Boniface and Njeri have three kids - the eldest is Nate, the middle child is Naila and the last born is called Jabali. Boniface and Njeri purposely chose non Kenyan tribal names for their children's first names, so that they could have unique non tribal identities.

FILMMAKER'S STATEMENT:

My name is Sam Soko and I love my country Kenya, however I am afraid of its corrupt and tribal establishment. A few years ago, I had the idea to develop an activism manual for Africa. It was meant to be a collection of short videos documenting the work of activists around the continent. I was inspired by the Arab spring, and wondered if a similar wave of protests against despotic African leaders was in the offing. That is how I met Boniface Mwangi, Kenya's most infamous activist. Four years later what was to be a manual has turned into an intimate visual portrait and story documenting the thrills, fears and sacrifices of being an activist. One important question I had four years ago and still do, is what are the implications of living such a life – to the wider community and to one's own family? In this case what comes first, family or country?

The story is set against a backdrop of historical injustices, which have been used by post independent Kenyan governments to fester hate between people who generally share similar cultures. It is ironic that our current leaders use the same tactics that our former colonizers did – divide and rule through creation of "fear of the other". This is done to sustain an even greater obstacle of progress. One which Kenya's Chief Justice explained by saying, "Most countries have a mafia; in Kenya the mafia have a country."

This is in reference to how corruption and bad governance had entrenched itself in my country's day to day life. Kenyan leaders have found a way to divide people using tribal affiliation and voter bribery. Our country has grappled with 'Fake News' for over 50 years. Kenyan politicians have spent decades perfecting the dark art of spreading deep falsehoods amongst people, to make sure they despise one another. The outcome is that every 5-year election cycle is characterized by violence. The worst instance of post-election violence was in 2007 when over 1400 people were killed and hundreds of thousands of Kenyans were displaced within the country. Incidentally, it is this violence that brought the main subject of this story, Boniface Mwangi, into the national and international spotlight. As a young

photographer he documented this violence, winning several global and local awards for his bravery, covering the stories of survivors. Boniface's life was forever changed from then on, turning to activism as a means to push for positive transformation of Kenyan leadership. This is how I met him.

I came to realize that the life of an activist conceals many things. As they are up against a society, whose mindsets are difficult to change, they also have to deal with their own families. Boniface's wife, Njeri, has emerged as a critical element of this narrative. As a witness to what lies beyond the activist and politician that is Boniface, she has provided a rare and remarkable view into the sacrifices that families of activists have to make in their quest for social change.

Boniface and Njeri are Kikuyu. The Kikuyu are the largest, out of the country's 42 tribes. This is the one thing they have in common with the ruling class, led by our current president, Uhuru Kenyatta, who is the son of Kenya's first president, Jomo Kenyatta. Boniface's beliefs mean he is viewed as a traitor by his tribesmen and some of his family. From dynamic protests, death threats, family fights and life changing decisions, this film tells the story of their unparalleled journey. In a world where sowing seeds of division continues to be encouraged, I believe telling this story will inspire audiences across the world to fight for justice and a more equal and inclusive society, in their own way.

I have been filming over four years, capturing Boniface and Njeri's story in an intimate, observational style. At points the characters are aware of the camera and interact with it. This approach creates a very personal and close understanding of both of them. I have also interviewed them separately which allows for their different perspectives to be reflected in the film directly. Most of the principal filming is done and we are looking for the right creative partners and financing to make sure the story fulfils its amazing potential.



Boniface and Njeri at a political rally in Starehe county, Nairobi, Kenya, circa mid 2017.

MAKING OF THE FILM:

After meeting the character "Softie" in 2013 at a protest rally, Sam Soko was initially inspired to develop an activist's manual. The initial goal was to produce a simple quick, short 20 minute film in less than six months and distribute the short video manuals on youtube, and go back to directing music videos and

fiction films through his company Lbx Africa, which he co-founded with his long time friend Bramwel Iro . But, like all great stories, it wasn't that simple at all. Soko grew to know Softie well, and saw that underneath Softie's tough man exterior, was a complex, vulnerable and deeply passionate person who got into activism for very personal reasons. Softie got his nickname as a child for being seemingly harmless and weak. As a child, Softie was bullied for being dirt poor and the child of a single mother. This difficult upbringing spurred him on as an adult, as he was literally consumed with ensuring that no one else experienced his childhood poverty. And Softie went even further, embracing the cruel childhood nickname as an adult, which is now used as his nickname by close friends and family. He was not going to let the bullies win. That's the kind of guy Softie is.

After four years of filming, becoming friends off camera and getting to know his wife and family well, Soko knew he had more than a straightforward activism manual in his hands. And that he needed a bigger team to help turn this into a film. The team soon found Soko one by one. Doc Society joined the team in 2017 with Sandra Whiphram and Jess Search serving as Executive producer, and this was through a fortuitous meeting at a filmmaker gathering in Nairobi. Toni Kamau, joined the team as producer in early 2018 and Mila Aung Thwin, who had mentored Soko as a Hotdocs grantee in 2018 joined as Editor and Executive Producer along with Bob Moore. The team achieved early success by winning audience award for best pitch at Hotdocs Forum in 2018, and a co-production with POV for US public broadcast. And since then it's been two years of late night skypes, midnight edits and festival get togethers as the team, spread out across the UK, New York, Canada and Nairobi joined forces to turn 800 hours of footage into a 96 minute feature documentary. The story of how Softie got to be made into a film is a testament to the power of belief, the importance of human connection and above all else the power of collaboration. Softie is produced by Lbx Africa in collaboration with We are not the machine Ltd and Eyesteelfilm.



Team Softie pitching at Hot Docs Forum 2018. It's been a wild ride since then!

ABOUT LBx AFRICA

Founded in 2012, LBx Africa is a Nairobi based production company run by Creative Producer Bramwel Iro and Director/Producer Sam Soko. Their strong belief in collaboration has seen their company partner

with both local and international filmmakers on numerous projects. One such collaboration led to the production of the 2018 Oscar nominated short film “*Watu Wote_All of us* (2017)”. Over the years the company has produced short form content in film and music, with heavy socio-political themes. This ultimately set it on the path of creation of its first feature documentary “*Softie*” which is set to premiere at Sundance 2020. LBx Africa aims to bring uniquely African perspectives to global audiences, almost always having fun while at it.

ABOUT WE ARE NOT THE MACHINE

We are not the machine was started in 2016 by producer Toni Kamau to produce her first feature documentary, directed by a close friend in the Kenyan film industry. But Toni, who had her start in the industry as a producer of a human rights TV talk show, soon found her calling in producing character creative documentaries for talented and passionate directors, including Sundance premiering Sam Soko, Rory Peck award winner Pete Murimi and 2016 Oscar nominee Daphne Matziaraki. We are not the machine is keen on collaborations and is proud to be working with LBx Africa on their first feature documentary *Softie*.

ABOUT EYESTEELFILM

Daniel Cross spent six years making his first film, ***THE STREET*** (1997). The arduous production process alternated between filming on Montreal’s gritty streets with the local homeless population, and trying to ‘find’ precious 16mm film (i.e., he had to beg, borrow and **steal**). As a result, ‘**EyeSteelFilm**’ was chosen as a company name by founders Daniel and Mila Aung-Thwin, during the making of ***S.P.I.T. Squeegee Punks in Traffic*** in 1998. The production of that film involved sharing a camera with homeless Squeegee Punk/co-director Eric “Roach” Denis, setting the tone for the company’s interactive, inclusive direct filmmaking ethos. As EyeSteelFilm began expanding, Bob Moore joined as a partner with a deft focus on international co-producing. Today, EyeSteelFilm looks to work with engaged, like-minded filmmakers from around the world who seek to engage with reality using the language of documentary cinema.

ABOUT DOC SOCIETY

Doc Society is a non-profit founded in 2005 committed to enabling great documentary films and connecting them to audiences globally. Based in London and New York we work with filmmakers and partners all over the world. We bring people together to unleash the transformational power of documentary film. We stand in solidarity with filmmakers and work to unite them with new friends and allies, building new models globally.

KEY CREATIVE PERSONNEL BIOS:

Director/Producer – Sam Soko:

Sam Soko is a film director and producer based in Nairobi who seeks out stories that enable him to engage in socio-political spaces. His work on civic literacy projects in music, non-fiction and fiction has allowed him to connect with artists around the world. He is co-founder of LBx Africa, a Kenyan production company that service produced the 2018 Oscar nominated short fiction film “*Watu Wote*”.

Soko's first feature documentary film, *Softie*, premiered at the Sundance Festival in 2020.

Producer –Toni Kamau:

Toni is a factual producer and founder of "We are not the machine Ltd", a Kenyan based production company. Her past credits include half hour documentaries for Al Jazeera, MTV Europe, BBC and CCTV Africa. For the last six years, her career as a creative producer has focused on telling the stories of outsiders, rebels and change makers on the African continent. Toni is currently producing three feature documentaries, that have received support from Sundance, Hotdocs, IDFA Bertha Fund and Docubox.

Executive Producer/Editor – Mila Aung Thwin:

Mila is a co-founder of the Montreal production company EyeSteelFilm, which produces and distributes documentaries from around the world. He has produced more than 30 feature documentaries, including Up the Yangtze (Golden Horse winner), Last Train Home (winner of 2 Emmy Awards), Rip: A Remix Manifesto (IDFA audience choice prize winner) and Forest of the Dancing Spirits (IDFA First Appearance Prize). Most recently, he directed Let There Be Light, a film about mankind's quest for fusion energy.

Executive Producer – Sandra Whipham:

Sandra, who joined Doc Society as its fourth Director in January 2012, exec produces films across the slate and leads on the Bertha Doc Society Connect Fund. She also oversees Doc Academy. Previously, Sandra was a producer through her own company where she produced and executive produced a range of documentary film and television including Dirty wars (dir. Rick Rowley) and the multi award-winning Enemies of the People (dir. Thet Sambath/Rob Lemkin).

Executive Producer – Bob Moore:

Bob is co-president of EYESTEELFILM, specializing in the creation of cinematic documentaries such as Last Train Home, China Heavyweight, I Am the Blues, and Forest of the Dancing Spirits. With partners Daniel Cross and Mila Aung-Thwin, Bob has produced films that have been recognized by international awards including the Emmys and Golden Horse, as well as numerous festival grand jury awards. Bob also oversees EYESTEELFILM's theatrical distribution company and its new Creative Reality Lab, which focuses on meaningful interactive and immersive storytelling.

Executive Producer - Bramwel Iro:

Bramwel Iro is a narrative film and documentary producer based in Nairobi, Kenya. He is Co-founder of LBx Africa, a production company that produces high quality fiction and non-fiction content for the international market. He was a service producer on the Oscar nominated short film "Watu Wote_All of Us" (2017). His work is a reflection of the world he participates in and he is drawn to stories that highlight social, environmental and political issues.

Executive Producer - Jess Search:

Jess is the Chief Executive of Doc Society. Before that, she was a Commissioning Editor at Channel 4 and

a founder of Shooting People, the online filmmakers network. She is also a board member of the UK think tank IPPR and has an MBA from Cass Business School. Jess likes to moderate for IDFA, the Skoll World Forum, the Trust Women conference and Doc Society's Good Pitch.

Executive Producer - Daniel Cross:

made his mark with films concerning the issues of homelessness in Canada. His feature length films, [*THE STREET: a film with the homeless*](#) and [*S.P.I.T: Squeegee Punks in Traffic*](#) received theatrical distribution and critical acclaim. They are reflective of his artistic philosophy that film is a medium for affecting social and political change. Daniel also has experience in TV broadcast, having directed and produced the Gemini nominated *Too Colourful for the League* and *George, From Athens to Beijing* currently in production with CTV, BBC Storyville and TV2 Denmark. In addition to making films, Daniel is active in the film community, serving as an executive on national boards, including the CMPA and DOC . He also teaches film production at Concordia University and has taught at the University of Regina.

Executive Producer - Marjon Javadi:

Marjon Javadi, currently with Disney+, was the former film and partnerships Executive at Doc Society. Based in New York she worked across all international film funds, supporting feature stories, including *Softie*. Her experience is development, production, and acquisitions for both fiction and non-fiction.

Impact Producer - Miriam Ayoo:

Miriam is the Impact Producer and Strategist for *Softie* the film. She has over 7 years of experience designing, developing, and implementing programs and outreach initiatives within a range of social impact areas, including women empowerment, youth development, and arts for activism. As a researcher, writer and arts enthusiast, Miriam is committed to the work of social change by contributing to projects that highlight the importance of equity, dignity, and empowerment of people, communities, and cultures globally.

CREDITS:

Director & D.OP: Sam Soko

Producers: Toni Kamau, Sam Soko

Editors: Mila Aung- Thwin, Sam Soko, Ryan Mullins

D.O.Ps: Joel "Ingo" Ngui, Chris Rhys Howarth, Sam Soko

Composers: Olivier Alary, Johannes Malfatti

Sound design: Cory Rizos

Colorists: Hamed Aleali, Sam Neboschizkij

Line Producers: Valerie Shamash, Ruth Munyiri

Associate producer: Katie McKay

Production managers: Lola Karisa, Matrid Nyagah

Head of Distribution at Eyesteelfilm: Damien Detcheberry

Festivals at Eyesteelfilm: Camille Jacques

Executive Producers: Bob Moore, Mila Aung- Thwin, Sandra Whiphram, Marjon Javadi, Jess Search, Daniel Cross, Bramwel Iro, Justine Nagan, Chris White, Mandy Chang

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