

Circle & Square Films presents



THE LETTER

A documentary film by Maia Lekow and Christopher King
Kenia 2019, 84 Min.

PRESS NOTES

IDFA 2019
Frontlight
World premiere

www.the-letter.org

Trailer: <https://vimeo.com/371340884>

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SCREENING DATES IDFA

IDFA - Frontlight

Date	Time	Location
Saturday 23 November 2019	7:00 PM	Tuschinski 6 (world premiere)
Monday 25 November 2019	6:30 PM	Brakke Grond Rode Zaal
Wednesday 27 November 2019	3:00 PM	De Balie - Grote Zaal
Friday 29 November 2019	12:15 PM	Tuschinski 6
Saturday 30 November 2019	9:45 PM	Munt 10

CONTACTS

Press

NOISE Film PR

Mirjam Wiekenkamp

T +49.176.28771839

mirjam@noisefilmpr.com

noisefilmpr.com

Production & Sales

Circle & Square Films

Maia Lekow & Christopher King

T +254 726 759 262

T +254 721 348 650

circleandsquare@gmail.com

<http://www.circleandsquare.tv>



SYNOPSIS

Filmed with a gentle pace and incredible closeness, *The Letter* is an intimate family portrait that ascends into a dramatic climax of shakespearean proportions.

Karisa's city-life is interrupted when his Grandma back home is called a witch. Returning to his rural village to investigate, he finds a frenzied mixture of consumerism and Christianity is turning hundreds of families against their elders, branding them as witches as a means to steal their ancestral land.

As Karisa delicately navigates between his disputing aunties and uncles, the love for his Grandmother and her fearless spirit must overcome the imminent danger of the accusations against her.

The inevitable universal theme of how land is divided when an elder dies, is entangled by the chaotic mixture of traditions of the past with the newly imposed influence of western values and religion. The understated power of women, alongside the resilience of family and community shines above all else, despite the growing threat of greed and inter-generational alienation.

SOUNDTRACK

Maia Lekow is not only the director of '*The Letter*', but also a prominent Kenyan musician (performing with her band [Maia & The Big Sky](#)), and she has composed an original score featuring her hypnotising vocals woven into the rhythms and everyday sounds of the tropical landscape. [Click here](#) to listen to *The Letter*'s Official Soundtrack composed by Maia Lekow & Ken Myhr.

CREDITS

Directors/Producers:	Maia Lekow & Christopher King
Writer/Editor:	Ricardo Acosta C.C.E.
Original Score:	Maia Lekow & Ken Myhr
Cinematography:	Christopher King
Executive Producers:	Judy Kibinge, Cynthia Kane, Peter Mudamba
Story Consultant:	likka Vehkalahti
Production Company/Sales:	Circle & Square Films

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DOCUBOX East African Documentary Fund
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Viktoria Studios - Berlin
Women Make Movies
Visions sud Est
Denver Film Society - MOFFOM



DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

As a husband & wife team, making The Letter over six years has been a transformational journey for both of us.

Born and raised in Nairobi, Maia is a well-known musician with her band [Maia & The Big Sky](#), and her roots stem from the Kenyan coast, her father's homeland, where our film is set. Having met Christopher in Melbourne, where we were studying in our 20's, we settled back in Nairobi in 2007 to set up a film & music production company, collaboratively creating a stream of albums, video-art, music videos and performance tours.

As Maia was interested to spend more time at the coast, Christopher was equally keen to explore the region, connect with Maia's relatives and improve his Swahili. In 2013, we set out to research the story of the female freedom-fighter Mekatilili, an elderly priestess from the coast who led an armed uprising against the British in 1913. Fighting the confiscation of traditionally-owned land by the colonialists, Mekatilili was eventually imprisoned and persecuted as a witch.

As we spoke with many elders about this oral history, we were saddened to hear of violence happening now against the elderly in the area, due to an outbreak of witchcraft accusations. With local press reporting more than 10 murders every month, these accusations were said to be used as a cover-up for hundreds of family disputes over land, inheritance and religion. Many elders have been displaced, others killed, but many more threatened with anonymous letters.

With most press reports going largely unnoticed in the 24-hour news-cycle, we felt an urgency to share this story with the world, through a character-led, feature documentary, to help instigate some very important conversations. While a range of grassroots projects, and government initiatives are supporting displaced elders, we felt the need for a better psycho-spiritual understanding of what was causing these families to turn on themselves.

We saw the killings as a modern manifestation of the violent colonial past in the area, worsened over time by a disconnected post-independent government, rising evangelism and cut-throat capitalism. In family structures across the world, land is usually owned by the elder, the most respected member of the family, and we knew this story must be told intimately, through the interpersonal lens of a single family.

In 2015, we met Karisa Kamango who had recently read a Facebook post by his cousins saying "There's an elder in our family who is killing our children". Travelling together to his rural home, we were met warmly by Karisa's Grandmother, Margaret Kamango, and straight-away fed cassava and coconut harvested from her fields. Born in 1925, almost a century ago, we were enamoured by Grandma's fearless spirit, despite the hurt and disbelief of the dangerous accusations against her, made by children she helped to raise.

Grandma, a respected member of her Anglican Church, would nevertheless walk down the hill every day to prepare her land for the next harvest. Her field being the place she knew best, the place where she could escape gossip and judgement and do what she has always done best. Harvest and provide for her family.

Over the past four years of filming, what also made Grandma Kamango's story important to us, was the presence of her strong-willed, independent daughters and wider church community, who would come to Grandma's rescue in a highly volatile environment.

Each person in the film faces extreme personal risk by openly discussing the taboos around witchcraft, and it is our hope that the bravery of the Kamango family can help break the silent cycle of violence that continues to wreak havoc amongst families across the region.

As a musician, it was a struggle to compose music for this film. Maia had an intense creative panic and didn't see her voice playing a role in the film. But after much experimenting with Christopher and writer/editor Ricardo Acosta, Maia struck a nerve in the fables and lullabies of the region, with her voice taking the form of a spiritual guardian for Grandma and the other elders in danger. When finally submitting to this, the songs and melodies came from a place she couldn't control. Writing each song with guitar and vocals, Maia then teamed up with renowned Toronto-based composer Ken Myhr who helped Maia navigate to build an intensely orchestral sonic landscape.

As filmmakers, we can't offer solutions, but we have tools to create a powerful forum for conversation. No matter if you are accused of witchcraft or not, we have a responsibility, beyond the colonial past, to take our future in our own hands. Nothing can justify the killing of another person! How do we move the conversation beyond the question of witchcraft, and ask instead, "What we are doing to protect our elders, and honour the traditions that we come from?"

We feel inspired by what we've learnt in making our first film, *The Letter*, and find ourselves in development on another important film, [How to Build A Library](#), about the story of a dilapidated colonial library in downtown Nairobi, and the two inspiring women who are reinventing the space to make it relevant to Kenyans today.

ABOUT THE DIRECTORS



MAIA LEKOW

Director / Producer / Composer / Sound Recordist

Maia is a Kenyan musician and filmmaker, known prominently as the front-woman of the explosive band Maia & The Big Sky. *The Letter* is her feature debut, co-directed and produced with husband Christopher King. Maia was named a goodwill ambassador for UNHCR in 2013 and received an African Movie Academy Award for her song 'Uko Wapi' in 2009. Currently performing across international stages with her band, Maia has also composed a hauntingly beautiful original score for *The Letter*.



CHRISTOPHER KING

Director / Producer / Cinematographer / Editor

Christopher King is an award-winning filmmaker. Australian by birth, he has worked in Kenya for 13 years, having founded Circle & Square Productions with his wife Maia in Nairobi, 2009. He was awarded that same year an African Movie Academy Award for editing, and has worked within the East African film industry as a freelance cinematographer, editor and director.