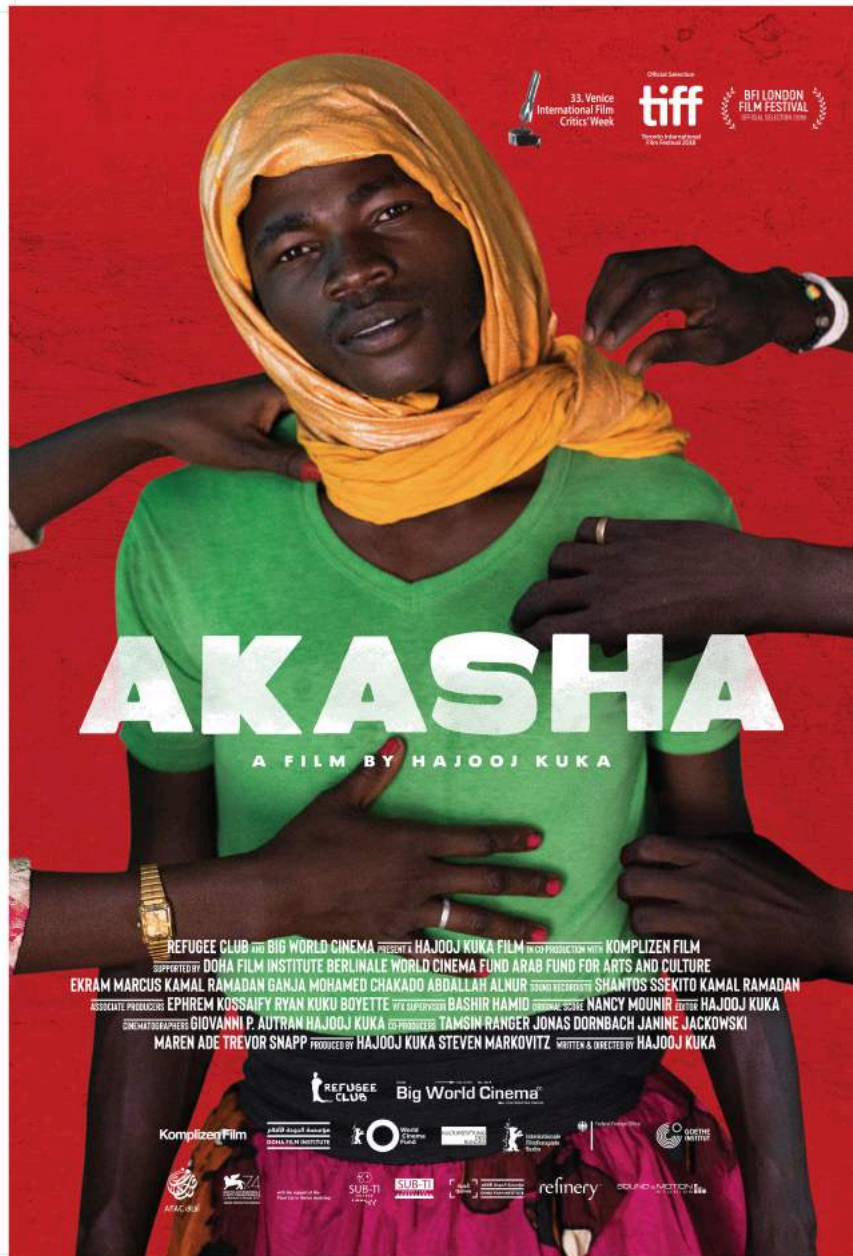


REFUGEE CLUB AND BIG WORLD CINEMA PRESENT A HAJOOJ KUKA FILM IN CO-PRODUCTION WITH KOMPLIZEN FILM SUPPORTED BY DOHA FILM INSTITUTE BERLINALE WORLD CINEMA FUND ARAB FUND FOR ARTS AND CULTURE EKRAM MARCUS KAMAL RAMADAN GANJA MOHAMED CHAKADO ABDALLAH ALNUR SOUND RECORDISTS SHANTOS SSEKITO KAMAL RAMADAN ASSOCIATE PRODUCERS EPHREM KOSSAIFY RYAN KUKU BOYETTE VFX SUPERVISOR BASHIR HAMID ORIGINAL SCORE NANCY MOUNIR EDITOR HAJOOJ KUKA CINEMATOGRAPHERS GIOVANNI P. AUTRAN HAJOOJ KUKA CO-PRODUCERS TAMSIN RANGER JONAS DORNBACH JANINE JACKOWSKI MAREN ADE TREVOR SNAPP PRODUCED BY HAJOOJ KUKA STEVEN MARKOVITZ WRITTEN & DIRECTED BY HAJOOJ KUKA



World Premiere at Venice Critics' Week, 2018
 North American Premiere at Toronto International Film Festival, 2018
 La Biennale Prize, Venice Final Cut, 2017

AKASHA

| 78 minutes | Arabic |
| Sudan, South Africa, Qatar, Germany | 2018

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An offbeat Sudanese love story set in a time of civil war.

Synopsis

Adnan is a Sudanese revolutionary who is considered a war hero. His love for his AK47 rifle is equalled only by his feelings for Lina, his long-suffering sweetheart. When Adnan is late to return to his military unit after his leave, army commander Blues launches a *kasha*: the rounding up and arresting of truant soldiers. Adnan is caught-off guard and makes a run for it with pacifist Absi. The two unlikely friends plot ways to reunite Adnan with his gun – and with Lina – while avoiding their fellow soldiers. Through a series of wry and humorous incidents over 24 hours, we explore life and ideology in rebel-held areas of Sudan.

Credits:

Writer & Director:	hajooj kuka
Producers:	hajooj kuka & Steven Markovitz
Co-Producers:	Tamsin Ranger, Jonas Dornbach, Janine Jackowski, Maren Ade, Trevor Snapp
Cinematographers:	Giovanni P.Autran & hajooj kuka
Editor:	hajooj kuka
Original Score	Nancy Mounir
VFX Supervisor	Bashir Hamid
Associate Producers	Ephrem Kossaify, Ryan Kuku Boyette
Sound Recordists	Shantos Ssekito, Kamal Ramadan

Lead Cast:

Lina	Ekram Marcus
Adnan	Kamal Ramadan
Absi	Ganja Mohamed Chakado
Kuku Blues	Abdallah Alnur
Christina	Najla Kamal

This film is supported by

Doha Film Institute Berlinale World Cinema Fund Arab Fund for Arts and Culture
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Director's Note

A Kasha is a universal offbeat and humourous love story set in a time of war - but the war is in Sudan and it's happening right now.

Sudan has been in conflict for 7 years, since the secession of South Sudan. During this time there has been a near-constant state of fighting and huge displacement of people. In the Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile regions of Sudan, our lives are saturated with the rhetoric and ideology of war and revolution. But people here are also trying to live their normal lives – there is music and gatherings, romance and laughter. I find the juxtaposition of big philosophical ideas around revolution with the peoples' simple lives very compelling; it's *this* contrast that I see daily.

I want to make a film that is engaging and enjoyable to watch but still questions the state we (as a country) are in. I want to explore the world we live in through a lighter, fictional story – using fiction to looker more closely at our decisions and ambitions.

The overarching questions I pose in my film are big, universal ideas for any society in flux: What are we fighting for? What kind of society are we trying to build? What does freedom look like? Will my life be better because I'm fighting? In the Nuba Mountains these questions take on a very real meaning: people are joining the rebels and going off to fight, they're training to become soldiers and many of them never come home.

It seems easier to take up a weapon and fight *against* something than to know what you're fighting *for*. The rhetoric of revolution surrounds us but we've never sat down to plot the future, or decide what we really want. After 7 years, there's fatigue amongst the people and they want to get on with their lives; there's a disconnect between the fighting going on "out there" and people living a lighter, less serious life. I want this film to explore these two worlds colliding.

A "kasha" is the event where the military rounds up any soldiers who have not returned after their leave. It is an intense moment where everybody's deeply unsettled and a bit scared – the outside world of revolution has entered a world where things are "normal", lighter.

Interview with hajooj kuka

Why did you want to make this film?

One of the main ideas behind this film was the “black is beautiful” movement. A lot of us believed or were brainwashed into believing that the standards of beauty are thin, blonde, and blue eyed – a lot of this was because of films. One of the powers of the film is to change people's perspectives so with aKasha we're trying to claim that some of that lost pride. We want to create stories where we see ourselves, and we see ourselves in ways that make us excited. It was important to create characters that are beautiful, people with attitude, people loving life and living life; I wanted that to be the backdrop. The other motivation was to create stories that relate closer to our truth of how we see life, as opposed to just assuming that the situation in Sudan is really hard. People there are truly living and enjoying life despite these really hard circumstances. So we have these crazy, weird circumstances and people are just alive, fully alive.

Part of filmmaking for me is creating film that brings a community together, brings people together where they can watch, enjoy themselves and be a reason to hang out and talk about things. So this is the type of film I wanted to create, it's a community film where people get together and have a good time, while still being truthful to our reality.



Why did you choose these genres – a comedy and a love story?

It is not your usual kind of comedy and love story because when you are living in a war zone, your sense of humour is different and your love for life is different. Being in those places makes people more open; they want to be surprised. I feel like the film we are creating is offbeat, funny in its own way, with characters who are excited about life. The whole film takes place within 24 hours - everything is super urgent, where your life could be taken away at any moment, and when that doesn't happen, the consequences of the crazy things you've done are not what you'd expect.

The film has one layer of “a day in the life” in this crazy war zone with a complicated love story and youth who keep messing up and trying to figure things out; and on another layer there is questioning what it means to be in a state of revolution for so long, for wanting to have a social revolution because you want to have rights, because you want to create a better future for everybody. So I created all these characters to represent a different idea of what a revolution is, from love to social to the role of elders, the role of women, the role of youth, the role of the leaders.

In Sudan we have a state of revolution that lasted way too long - we're 6 years into this civil war - and we have some of the very strong ideological ideas, yet people are not thinking about the reasons anymore. The revolution has just become “words.” At the same time that is why the people living in this constant state of

longing - for this revolution - to actually become the truth. So it's like what happens to revolutionaries when they have been living in the state of revolution for too long. For example, Adnan says, "I was born into this revolution, so I am the revolution" but he also lacks the ability to analyze that.

What's been happening in that part of Sudan?

We are living in a war zone and there was a massive campaign by the Sudanese government that was an attack on seven fronts that was meant to defeat the rebel army. That attack was really well orchestrated, a lot of money was put into it, but the rebels managed to push back on almost all fronts. During that period there was a lot of bombing of civilians to the extent that hospitals were bombed, schools were bombed, villages and markets were bombed. This was the last major documentation project that we did, where we documented day after day after day, people dying - from children dying to a school being bombed - and thankfully by having that visual documentation and putting them online, the Sudanese government was put under international pressure to stop these bombings. Since then (July 2016) the Sudanese government has actually stopped bombing. And that cease-fire allowed us to concentrate on the film and the set up.



How did you approach the filmmaking, with the resources you had?

The film was shot in two distinctive parts. At the start we said we would make this film no matter what – even though we had a very simple camera, no crew and no money. We started the first shoot, shot two scenes and then heard that we had received funding. So we stopped and restarted by shooting with a different, slightly scaled up approach. The whole idea of the film was that it's going to be shot in the war zone - everybody in the film is going to be very close, living there, and we cast actors from people in the area so we were very close to their characters in the film.

The war in Sudan stops every year because of the mud; it's too rainy, too muddy, so the tanks and cars can't move. And when the war stopped, my regular work also stopped - covering the war and documenting the controversies. Instead, I worked with a local group of elders and youth to build a theatre – it was one of only two buildings going up in the war zone. I worked with the youth through the rainy season and we created a drama group, putting on foreign theatre pieces and making short films. We even created a union so the community owns the theatre and runs it.

During this time I was writing *aKasha* and incorporating a lot of things that I saw happening and put them together in these characters. I created this fictional story that reflects the life around us. Initially I thought that the production would be more improvised than scripted – more like a documentary approach – but shooting in a war zone has a lot of challenges and issues, with things falling apart, so we just stuck to the script. By the time we were shooting, I didn't have the time or energy to think about anything else. So I was like “we have the script and we can stick to it.” And it is surprising how close the finish product is to the script.

How did the film team come together, how was the production run on the ground?

In the beginning, we started shooting thinking we were not going to have any crew, that it would just be me shooting with the cast with a small camera, and then we managed to secure enough money to get a cinematographer and a sound recordist to come in. We were super excited about that and we were waited for them – but it's a whole other story getting foreigners to a war zone. It was supposed to be a 5 week shoot but it took the crew 3 weeks just to get to Nuba. So by the time the production team managed to get the foreign crew there with their equipment, we had built up and trained a local crew: we had caterers, production assistants, people to do slate, grips. So it became a bigger production than anticipated. We started shooting but after a few days we had some issues locally and the production fell apart. We were asked to stop shooting by the Secretary of Information in the region – he was someone who, at one point, was close to me, but I think he was really envious once he saw our crew and set-up; we had two foreign crew and there was a buzz around us. He had a personal problem with me and used it to stop the production. He gave me such a hard time that I stopped shooting in our main locations and moved the whole production somewhere far from him. I got a lot of support from folks who knew me, from folks in the army and the rebel government who knew about all my work and so I was allowed to finish shooting with their protection, far from the main regional capital, Kauda where the Secretary could reach me.



Once we moved the production, we didn't want to have a full crew – we wanted to keep it at a minimum – so we ended up with the two main actors also working as crew. At night we would set up everything and decide where the next scene would be shot, and I would send them to fetch the actors or go collect a prop or run errands. So at night everyone would have a mission and in the morning we would do the art design, wardrobe – the three of us became the main production crew. We also had community members working as field producers who helped a lot with finding actors, locations and delegating. So it became a smaller crew working on the top of a mountain, like being isolated in a war zone, but the cool thing was that a lot of people in the town became involved and to me that is going to be the most exciting thing when they view the film - they were part of it.

You had to move location in the middle of the shoot? What problems did that create?

The shoot had collapsed and I had this conversation with my co-producer, telling him that we are not going to have the film, it's not going to happen. Morale was really low. After we managed to move the shoot further way, we had to deal with other problems like re-casting roles and new location searches. One of our field producers said I was torturing myself and we should go and do something else, but I spent two days going through the script to see how the film could be made there. Luckily we only lost one scene because of the move.



What happened to the actors when the film was shut down?

In addition to stopping our shoot, the Secretary of Information also arrested my two main actors. But his arrest wasn't direct, he actually went to the military and told them that he has two guys who work for him who need to be disciplined and that they should be enlisted into the army. So the army went and enlisted them. When the army found out a few days later that they had been misled, they were embarrassed and one of the colonels became very friendly towards the actors and more sympathetic to us. For the three days the actors were arrested and put in the army (for what was supposed to be a 45 day recruitment), they were really depressed.

What happened to you over this period and how did you resolve the issues?

I was investigated too and by the time I found out the actors had been arrested, three days had already passed. Word reached a General and he realised that he had been duped and felt really bad, and that is when he released them.

This Secretary of Information tried to say that I was creating a film that has a lot of moral and politically incorrect issues. Normally the ministry would do an investigation of peers – get a group of peers to come in and investigate you and ask you questions to see if this is true or not. So when they came to investigate me, I was able to challenge them. That postponed the investigation into me until after the film wrapped. A lot of them thought that the complaint was based on envy – that is what they told me - and they were going to pass on the report but I haven't heard back from them. It's never been resolved.

Are you going to take the film back to Sudan?

Sudan is in a state of war, things are unstable, but that is the aim. I'm not 100% positive it is going to happen but it's definitely the intention. We are going to find ways to bring the film back there, officially or underground.

Biographies



hajooj kuka - Director | Writer | Editor | Producer

hajooj is a filmmaker from Sudan. hajooj's 2014 feature documentary, *Beats of the Antonov*, premiered at Toronto International Film Festival and won the People's Choice Documentary award. The film has broadcast on POV and has screened at over 60 festivals and won 7 international awards. hajooj also trains and works with young filmmakers across Sudan.



Steven Markovitz – Producer

Steven Markovitz has been producing and distributing documentaries and fiction for over 20 years. In fiction, he produced *aKasha* (Venice Critic's Week, TIFF), *Rafiki* by Wanuri Kahiu (Cannes – Un Certain Regard 2018, TIFF), *High Fantasy* by Jenna Bass (TIFF 2017, Berlinale 2018) and *Love The One You Love* (*Busan, Goteborg 2014*) by Jenna Bass. He executive-produced *Stories of our Lives* (TIFF 2014, Berlinale 2015), by Jim Chuchu, which won the Teddy Jury Prize and co-produced *Viva Riva!* (TIFF 2010, Berlinale 2011) by Djo Munga, which has been released in USA, UK, Australia/NZ, Canada, Belgium, France, Germany and 20 African countries. He is a member of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.