

Sam Healey

Professor Jude Akudinobi

BL ST 170: Africa In Film

March 21, 2024

Who Killed Captain Alex? The Cultural Space of the African Video-Movie

Throughout the body of scholarship on African films, the video-movie has tended to go overlooked both as a cultural phenomenon, and as a product to be critically analyzed. Its lack of emphasis in critical conversations is especially stark in comparison with the scholastic output regarding more conventional African films, as de Villiers describes:

In the new edition of the standard textbook *Africa*, for example, there is a whole chapter devoted to “African Cinema” but less than one paragraph about Nollywood and the video phenomenon, and those few sentences are almost entirely devoted to how the video films do not meet the standards and aspirations set by [Ousmane] Sembène and Abderrahmane Sissako. (53)

Yet Nollywood is regularly cited as the second or third-largest film industry in the world in terms of output (Haynes; Jeblowski), producing over 2,500 films per year—the vast majority for home video. Meanwhile, while Nollywood is the most famous example of the home video industry in Africa, it is far from the only nation with such a market. Côte d’Ivoire, Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Uganda, among others, are thriving home video production centers, with considerable development in the last two decades. One such example of the video-movie is the 2010 Ugandan film *Who Killed Captain Alex?*, directed by Isaac Godfrey Geoffrey Nabwana, known also as Nabwana IGG. Nabwana is the founder of Wakaliwood studios, notable for being “a production

company based in the slum of Wakaliga, in Kampala.... Wakaliwood could be said to demonstrate the extreme of how far one can go with the liberating possibilities of the video technology. This company produces action films with budgets of \$200” (Obiaya 7). As Obiaya states, *Who Killed Captain Alex* was shot with a minute budget. It is one of dozens of Wakaliwood films, but unlike the rest of their movies and the great majority of video-movies across Africa, *Who Killed Captain Alex* has received considerable attention on YouTube, where it has reached 9.2 million views as of March 2024. Thus, it has become an interesting intersection of locality and globality, initially made for the community of Wakaliga, yet now entertaining a global audience. This paper will analyze *Who Killed Captain Alex* with the argument that it is uniquely positioned to deliver insights on a number of phenomena in African cinema: the emergence of the video-film industry; the influence of Nollywood on other neighboring African states; the difference in content between conventional celluloid films and video-movies; and the perceptions of the West regarding films made in Africa.

Who Killed Captain Alex is one of thousands of “video-movies”—the terms “video-movie”, “video-film,” and “home video” are interchangeable—that have emerged from Africa. While it was released in 2010, the video-film industry was at least two decades old by that point, originating in the early 90s. Commonly, the archetype of the video-film is thought to have come from Nigeria with Nollywood, but around the same time, Ghana and Cote d’Ivoire were developing their industries. Nevertheless, the growth of Nollywood is the quintessential example of the growth of the video-film industry and thus it serves as a suitable representation of the growth process throughout Africa. The advent of the video-film was made possible by the proliferation of cheap digital video technology. Previously, the African film industry, like Hollywood and industries all over the world, utilized celluloid film, which made, and still makes

for, high aesthetic value, but consequently was very expensive. As a result, many movies made prior to digital were often funded by foreign countries, such as France. This source of funding was unreliable, particularly when a film's subject matter became objectionable to the sponsor: for example, Sembene found it difficult to fund his 1988 film *Camp de Thiaroye* and was only able to make it after finding an alternative backer, Burkinabe leader Thomas Sankura (Denton). Yet the onset of digital technology sidestepped such risks, and afforded a much greater portion of the population the chance to participate in the industry. This ease of access led to an explosion of production, which, importantly, catered to a larger base of viewers, as Obiaya writes:

This is why Green-Simms (2012, p. 61) attributes to the Nigerian video films the uniqueness of being “produced from below – which is to say that the class affiliations of the producers are often those of the mass consumers.” It is therefore quite understandable that the producers can claim to know and satisfy the needs of the consumers. (Obiaya 5)

Who Killed Captain Alex embodies the production model of the video film, operating on a shoestring budget (most of which was spent on cow blood). Moreover, Nabwana IGG emerged from the slum of Wakaliga and sought to incorporate as many extras from his neighborhood as he could into the film, demonstrating Obiaya's notion of the producers of video-film reflecting the community.

Meanwhile, the development of the video-film industry could not have happened without its unique patterns of distribution. Nollywood was marked by a decentralized mode of distributing its videos. Many video-films went straight to DVD, which were then sold in stores, at market stalls, and pirated (Jedlowski 294). Additionally, there was a greater emphasis on small, local halls in which films could be exhibited to a surrounding community. *Who Killed Captain Alex* followed a similar growth pattern. First, Nabwana made the trailer and showed it to

as many people as he could in order to build expectations. Then, he had crew members walking up and down the open markets of Wakaliga and general Kampala selling DVDs. Finally, he would give free copies to store owners, telling them to watch the first five minutes and if they liked it, to stock it and sell it (Clark). However, money was largely an afterthought in the making of *Who Killed Captain Alex*, which is evident, because Wakaliwood has posted it for free viewing on YouTube. Clearly, the main motive is passion for filmmaking and community—representative once again of the video-film industry as a whole.

This paper has focused quite extensively on Nollywood, due to its dominance of the video-film sphere, as well as the scholarship regarding said sphere. But the video-film industry emerged in other nations as well. Concurrently with Nollywood came production in Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire. In the early 2000s, the phenomenon spread to Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Uganda; the delay was due to societal barriers to filmmaking. Obiaya writes that “In Uganda, the hostility of various governments, poverty and the lack of infrastructure all undermined the start of indigenous filmmaking” (7). Thus, the first film indigenous to Uganda, Ashraf Ssemwogerere’s *Feelings Struggle*, was made in 2005. Ugawood—Uganda’s film industry, not to be confused with Wakaliwood, Nabwana’s studio within Ugawood—can be, from one perspective, understood as another incarnation of Nollywood, and *Who Killed Captain Alex* corroborates that belief. Bakari, regarding Uganda, states that “From this society has come what is arguably the most notable Nollywood-inspired film of the twenty-first century to date, *Who Killed Captain Alex?*” (18), emphasizing the direct link of the film to Nollywood. Yet hesitation should be employed when reducing Ugawood, and with the same line of reasoning, other African nations’ film industries, into mere “Nollywood clones.” Rather, each industry brings new innovations to the proverbial table. *Who Killed Captain Alex* features VJ Emmie, a “video joker” who

comments over the film. The video joker is a film element unique to Uganda, in which local movie halls will feature somebody on the mic who cracks jokes and narrates while the movie plays. Nabwana tells Clark in his interview that VJ Emmie, one of the most well-known VJs in Kampala, was instrumental in *Who Killed Captain Alex* becoming as popular as it did. If the presence of VJ Emmie isn't proof enough that countries like Uganda took the Nollywood model in a new direction, as opposed to rehashing Nigerian cinematic motifs, consider the quip VJ Emmie offers when Richard tortures his wife in *Who Killed Captain Alex*: "She was watching Nigerian film. In Uganda we watch Wakaliwood!" Such a line suggests that Nabwana resents being simply lumped into the same basket as Nollywood. While the heritage in Nigerian cinematic trends is undeniable, it is also undeniable that Wakaliwood, Ugawood, and other nations' film industries take pride in their distinct local cinematic techniques.

Much has been made of Ousmane Sembene's belief that African film should be a "night school for the masses." *Who Killed Captain Alex*, and many video-films like it, present an alternative approach to filmmaking content. On the surface, the film offers little if one is searching for critical insights into African ideologies, or societal conflicts, or even intimate character studies. Instead, it brazenly offers sheer, undiluted entertainment: gunfights, helicopter chases, explosions, kung-fu, and endless jokes from both the characters and VJ Emmie. In this regard, it mirrors many other African video-films, especially Nollywood ones. As Tsika describes, this method of filmmaking is not without its criticism:

For if Old Nollywood is "not good enough" for Netflix, at least according to its detractors, that is due to a number of factors: Its association with "low" cultural production, with "trashy" melodramas (and crime dramas, village comedies, 419 thrillers,

and so on); its “low” production values, which are inseparable from the distortions and degradations of such “dingy,” corruptible formats as VHS and VCD... (275)

Indeed, the space that video-films occupy within African cinema can be thought of as analogous to the Hollywood B-movie. Yet such a comparison does not take into account the importance of the video-film in African cinema. Furthermore, there is distinct artistic value in the methods of the video-film, as de Villiers describes:

Underexposure, overexposure, intrusion of equipment or crew into the frame, “bad” editing, “bad” framing, “bad” acting, “unusable” sound, dead time – all of those “mistakes” and elements most filmmakers habitually try to expel surge to the fore in non-cinema and gain validity, becoming a central aesthetic tenet. (53)

In fact, de Villiers references multiple writers and filmmakers who have reclaimed these aspects of the video-film as instead being an artistic statement termed “non-cinema.” With this approach, conventionally “bad” aspects of technical production become strengths. However, both the detractors of the video-film and those proponents who rebrand it as “non-cinema” neglect the basic status of budget and other constraints. Nabwana’s team constructed all of the prop guns with pipes and other junk lying around Wakaliga, opting for free production over pure realistic recreation (though the guns in *Who Killed Captain Alex*) look fairly lifelike. Moreover, when filming the scenes with the guns, the crew was often arrested by Ugandan police, reflecting the difficult circumstances under which the film was made (Clark).

Additionally, there are many technical achievements in *Who Killed Captain Alex*. For one, the breadth and depth of the foley work—when sound is created in post-production with original created recordings—is remarkable, encompassing guns, snapping twigs, helicopter noises, and more. The stunts are also excellent; Nabwana’s brother is a self-taught kung-fu

master who helped choreograph and train all of the stunt performers in the movie, which has resulted in a high level of hand-to-hand combat. Furthermore, much of the acting, particularly Sserunya Ernest's portrayal of Richard, is great. The writing is admittedly ridiculous, not taking after Sembene (who was a novelist) and his ideal of a film with a message. Yet *Who Killed Captain Alex* does not strive to share any sort of message with its viewers. Instead, it guarantees a good time, and in order to achieve this promise, the film does not take itself too seriously. From jokes like "Ugandan kiss" when punching an enemy, to the slapstick of the two soldiers not seeing each other during the middle of the combat, to the line "I have a dozen wives, but only one brother," *Who Killed Captain Alex* represents well-executed comedic writing. It also flirts with social commentary, with the satirical line at the end: "Ugandans enjoy martial law." One valid criticism of the film, though, is its treatment of women. Generally, female characters occupy the position of wives or seducers. A notable exception is the performance of Natasha at the restaurant in the beginning of the film, a moment which doubles as a snapshot into local Ugandan music. Another usage of music for social commentary is the credits song, overlaying Nabwana's dedication to his grandmother, which discusses social hardship in Uganda. Finally, an interesting element of the film that contrasts to the conventional celluloid films is its disregard for copyrighting. As Tsika describes, the decentralized nature of the African video-films "afford[s] them the opportunity to engage with a diversity of cultural practices, away from the copyright driven constraints that characterize the circulation and consumption of 'big media'" (285), which is embodied by *Who Killed Captain Alex's* humorous use of Seal's instrumental from "Kiss From A Rose." Throughout *Who Killed Captain Alex*, the differences in content and technique compared to more conventional cinema is clear, emblematic of the contrast between home videos and celluloid film.

Finally, *Who Killed Captain Alex* offers a unique chance to analyze the Western cultural response to African film. Notably, *Who Killed Captain Alex?* went viral on YouTube, initially popularized by some memes (“do you know the way”, the helicopter, etc), which morphed into a general awareness of the film within the online Western community. Much of the discourse around the film has revolved around its shoestring budget and its clearly-fake special effects, with commenters often stating sentiments along the lines of “despite these factors, it’s really good.” The comments can steer towards being patronizing; consider the top one on the video: “Budget 0/10 Trying 11/10.” Though intent is masked behind the anonymity of the Internet, such praise can reflect preconceived notions of Africa as a continent. Yet many comments praise factors like the comedy of the movie, quoting lines without referencing the budget at all. Meanwhile, to consider the context behind *Who Killed Captain Alex*, the low budget, the civil unrest, the lack of available technology—as the film states, Nabwana deleted it from his laptop so that he could begin his next film—is not necessarily a bad thing. Its existence is a remarkable occurrence, and recognizing that is important. Of course, some commenters let that get in the way of honest opinions on the film itself. Interestingly, the success of *Who Killed Captain Alex* “gained Nabwana another partner, Alan Hofmanis, a former New York film festival director, who moved to Uganda to be part of the Wakaliwood operation” (Bakari 18). Hofmanis, a White American, helped provide funding and equipment for the next batch of Wakaliwood films, even featuring in one of them, *Bad Black*, which raises interesting questions about foreign involvement in domestic markets. Moreover, some Americans who have not watched an African film might see *Who Killed Captain Alex*, with its low budget and gratuitous violence, and mischaracterize African cinema as a whole. Incidentally, in an interview posted to Letterboxd, Hofmanis addresses some of these concerns:

And people were horrified, friends of mine and colleagues, were horrified that I'm trying to promote *Captain Alex*, and disgusted with me and repulsed by me. And I'm like, what are you talking about? And they say, well, because I am promoting the idea of violence in Africa. And so Alan, why are you here promoting Africans killing each other? And you know, when you put it that way, it sounds pretty bad. But then, you know, you go to Isaac [Nabwana], and Isaac is fucking furious, because he's like, "I'm in Africa? Who the fuck am I supposed to kill, a bunch of Polish people? I'll happily kill them, or Italians, or I don't care. But I am in Africa. So I kill Africans." (2)

Importantly, Nabwana has lived through violence; Uganda underwent a civil war during his childhood. However, the violence in his films do not reflect that civil war, nor do they seek to depict Africa as a violent place. Instead, they are simply action films set in his hometown, which is in Africa. Though Hofmanis's involvement could be purported as a Western individual contributing to the perpetuation of Afro-pessimistic narratives, it is ultimately an example of beneficial globalism, of elevating a creative voice in a global industry that does not traditionally elevate the voices of grassroots African filmmakers.

Who Killed Captain Alex, as this paper has argued, offers insights into many dynamics: the African video-film medium; the relationship between Nollywood and other African nations's film industries; the contrast between celluloid and digital African film; and the relationship between contemporary African films and the West. At its most basic essence, though, it offers wildly entertaining action and hilarious comedy, and demonstrates, however cliché though it may be, the power of the medium of film.

WORKS CITED:

1. Bakari, Imruh. "African Film in the 21st Century: Some Notes to a Provocation." *Communication Cultures in Africa*, vol. 1, no. 1, 7 Dec. 2018, <https://doi.org/10.21039/cca.8>. Accessed 23 Mar. 2024.
2. Clark, Ryan . "Ugandan Director Isaac Nabwana Talks Impact of His Viral No-Budget 2010 Film "Who Killed Captain Alex?"" *The Daily Beacon*, 1 Mar. 2023, www.utdailybeacon.com/arts_and_culture/entertainment/ugandan-director-isaac-nabwana-talks-impact-of-his-viral-no-budget-2010-film-who-killed/article_dcc7ef00-b8a5-11ed-b33f-e3b6b7630b5f.html. Accessed 23 Mar. 2024.
3. de Villiers, Jacuques. "Approaching the Uncertain Turn in African Video-Movies Subalternity, Superfluity, and (Non-)Cinematic Time." *A Companion to African Cinema, First Edition.*, edited by Kenneth Harrow and Carmela Garritano, John Wiley & Sons Inc, 2019, search.library.ucsb.edu/permalink/01UCSB_INST/1ask38v/alma9914842652406531. Accessed 22 Mar. 2024.
4. Denton, Nadia. "Fespaco: Past Present and Future." *BFI*, 23 Dec. 2023, www.bfi.org.uk/sight-and-sound/fespaco-past-present-future. Accessed 23 Mar. 2024.
5. Jedlowski, Alessandro. "African Videoscapes Southern Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Côte d'Ivoire in Comparative Perspective." *A Companion to African Cinema, First Edition.*, edited by Kenneth Harrow and Carmela Garritano, John Wiley & Sons Inc, 2019, search.library.ucsb.edu/permalink/01UCSB_INST/1ask38v/alma9914842652406531. Accessed 22 Mar. 2024.

6. Nabwana IGG, Official Wakaliwood. "Who Killed Captain Alex: Uganda's First Action Movie (English Subtitles & Video Joker) - Wakaliwood." *YouTube*, 1 Mar. 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=KEoGrbKAyKE.
7. Obiaya, Ikechukwu. *African Cinema in the Throes of Commercialism and Populism* . 2019.
8. Tsika, Noah. "Nollywood Chronicles Migrant Archives, Media Archeology, and the Itineraries of Taste." *A Companion to African Cinema, First Edition.*, edited by Kenneth Harrow and Carmela Garritano, John Wiley & Sons Inc, 2019, search.library.ucsb.edu/permalink/01UCSB_INST/1ask38v/alma9914842652406531. Accessed 22 Mar. 2024.
9. Williams, Blake. "Wakaliwood Forever: A Conversation with Alan Hofmanis." *Letterboxd.com*, 30 Nov. 2022, letterboxd.com/hrfc/story/wakaliwood-forever-a-conversation-with-alan/. Accessed 23 Mar. 2024.