

FILM REVIEW

Oluseyi Asurf, director. *Hakkunde*. 2017. 92 minutes. English, Hausa, Yoruba. Nigeria. Genesis Deluxe Cinema. Streaming on Netflix. No price reported.

Hakkunde was directed and produced by Oluseyi Asurf, whose *A Date with Death* won the 2016 Africa Movie Academy Award for best short film. *Hakkunde*, his first feature film, won best screenplay at the 2018 AMAAs, along with several other awards and nominations at various film festivals at home and abroad.

The film brings together an excellent cross-cultural cast. Toyin Abraham Aimakhu (from the Yoruba film industry, who successfully crossed over to the mainstream) brings to the film her characteristic sense of humor. Actors from Kannywood (the Hausa film industry) include Rahama Sadau, Maryam Booth, Ali Nuhu, Ibrahim Daddy, and Issa Bello, along with a few others. Sadau brilliantly interprets the female lead character, Aisha. Kunle Idowu (also known as Frank Donga in his social media skits) plays the male lead character, Akande, an unemployed youth studying Agricultural Science. Interestingly, Idowu's character in his skits on social media is an unemployed youth; ironically, in real life he is a graduate of Olabisi Onabanjo University (OOU) and has a master's degree in animal genetics from University of Ibadan. *Hakkunde* describes the journey of the unemployed Nigerian graduate Akande and all the hurdles he must overcome to attain success in life.

Asurf has stated that his casting of Kunle Idowu was no coincidence. He wanted a character whose struggles the audience could relate to; given Frank Donga's established skit character as a struggling unemployed youth, the connection was easily established. The opening credits include in parentheses the pseudonym Frank Donga; this is an obvious marketing strategy to create an interest in the film among Frank Donga's online fans. *Hakkunde* is Idowu's first lead role, and it is through his character that the audience experiences the agony of an unemployed youth. However, he spares his audience from too much anguish, as he remains witty through the ordeal of his unemployment. Donga plays this character so well that the audience can readily identify with his travails and eventually feel relieved and happy when he is at last successful.

The film title “Hakkunde” is a bastardized version of the Yoruba name Akande; specifically, “Hakkunde” is what Ibrahim, a man from the northern Kaduna state, calls Akande. Since Ibrahim is not from the south, he presumably has a hard time pronouncing the southern name of Akande properly. Beginning with a casual encounter on the streets of Lagos, Ibrahim eventually becomes Akande’s best friend. He takes Akande to Kaduna and introduces him to his family and community. There, Akande soon discovers a new world and rediscovers his own purpose.

The film opens in Lagos with the usual city scenery, characterized by hustle and bustle and by scenes of an enormous population in constant motion and commotion. The voiceover helps to underscore the pictures on the screen, as the camera rolls over a wide-angle shot of congested mid-downtown Lagos, the Balogun market, and Broad Street (one of Lagos’s commercial hubs and iconic spaces). The narration states, “It’s a typical busy day in Lagos and this is my normal life, I observe the many people that get up to chase their living, despite all this stress. There is a lot of stress in this city, you have to beat traffic, you have to jump buses and listen to your boss.” After establishing the familiar Nollywood image of Lagos, the film gradually moves to Northern Nigeria, inviting us to appreciate the potentials in this area which is rarely visited by mainstream Nollywood filmmakers.

In the past, the North has been presented in Nollywood films as a space of violence, religious bigotry, underage marriage, limited education, and other negative stereotypes. The film also dallies with the idealized image of Lagos as a success spot that transforms lives, as in this story it is presented as just the opposite. In the popular city genre of Nollywood films, described by film scholars such as Onookome Okome and Jonathan Haynes, the city, especially Lagos, possesses great magic as a land of possibilities. Characters from various rural areas struggle to get to Lagos and often become successful. But by juxtaposing Lagos and Kaduna, the film draws the viewer to the differences between the two lifestyles, and to the surprising advantages of rural over city life. For example, in Lagos, the working class leave their houses very early, sometimes as early as 4:00 a.m., to beat the traffic, whereas in Kaduna people get adequate sleep before starting their day. Humorously, as Akande gets to Kaduna, he wakes up early in his usual Lagos job-hunting style. When Binta, Ibrahim’s sister, asks him why he had to get up so early, he replies “I am from Lagos, my city never sleeps.” Binta simply laughs at him.


On the surface, the film is a simple story told profoundly. Akande, a restless and jobless graduate, travels to Kaduna in search of a farmer’s grant. He does not get the grant, but he discovers his potential and establishes a business for himself and others. However, at a subtextual and metaphysical level, the film offers multiple layers of meanings. It is a story about finding oneself, rediscovery, owning a voice, and making a difference regardless of one’s circumstances and environment.

Similarities can be drawn between *Hakkunde* and the award-winning Nollywood film *Up North* (2018), directed by Tope Oshin. It appears that there is an unconscious campaign to rebrand Northern Nigeria, which has

been tagged as unsafe. As part of its redemptive imagery, *Hakkunde* portrays the North's beautiful and peaceful scenery, in contrast to the turbulent and smoky images regularly presented in both traditional and social media. *Hakkunde* shows Nigerians and the rest of the world that beyond the killings, religious riots, banditry, and terrorism that are reported daily in Northern Nigeria, there are also rich cultural values and economic opportunities. The film occupies a significant place in Nollywood history, as it is one of several examples of a wave of cross-production between the different factions of the Nigerian film industry, which have for years remained independent of each other.

The film was partly shot in a transient camp of nomadic cattle breeders. Given the constant clashes between herdsmen and farmers in Nigeria (and especially Northern Nigeria), the reception given to the film crew by the herdsmen surprised Asurf. This hospitality was reflected in the film, as the herdsmen were very welcoming of Akande. The portrayal of the herdsmen by the filmmaker runs counter to the popular images of violence that are associated with herdsmen on the news. Asurf said that his own perceptions of the North changed in the course of the ten days he spent shooting scenes in the land of the Fulani herdsmen (who are usually stereotyped as dangerous terrorists).

Like most Nollywood films, *Hakkunde* is filled with strong elements of morality, as Akande's life trajectory teaches the audience, especially university graduates, in an innovative way the values of applying oneself and exercising self-discipline. In view of Nigeria's hardships and the continuing decline of white-collar jobs, the film offers a profound message, and even some advice. Asurf is passionate about seeking to inspire youth; in an interview with Channels Television, he stated that he is a polytechnic dropout who was able to make a difference without getting a traditional white-collar job. His lead character, Akande, has a similar experience; his success came after he quit seeking a white-collar job, though (unlike the filmmaker) Akande did earn his university degree. Asurf is not encouraging youth to become drop-outs, but rather to consider alternative ways of thinking about productivity. It is heavily message-driven, with the characters sermonizing at every opportunity, so the film often feels like more "tell" than "show." However, the actors offer engaging performances, and *Hakkunde* is a motivational movie to which youths all over the globe can relate.

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