

OFFICIAL SELECTION

tiff

TORONTO INTERNATIONAL
FILM FESTIVAL 2024

THE LEGEND OF
THE VAGABOND QUEEN
OF LAGOS

written & directed by
THE AGBAJOWO COLLECTIVE

INTERNATIONAL SALES

RUSHLAKE MEDIA

PHILIPP HOFFMANN

+49 221 588 32180

sales@rushlake-media.com

<https://www.rushlake-media.com/>

PRESS CONTACT

TAKA PR

ANNE TAKAHASHI

+1 (917) 254-4340

anne@takapr.com

www.takapr.com



LOGLINE

Jawu, a young mother from a waterfront slum in Lagos, stumbles upon a horde of corrupt blood money marked for a real estate development that threatens her home. Overcoming isolation and temptation, she must stand as a unifying force in a community that stands to lose everything.

SYNOPSIS

Jawu lives in one of the floating slums pushed into the lagoon which gives the megacity Lagos its name – a young mother scraping by in an indifferent city. However, the spirit of the great warrior king Egbaezen has marked her for a terrible responsibility and ordeal. Danger now threatens his people, as corrupt officials conspire to evict thousands from their ancestral homes. Egbaezen's spirit takes the form of an African Grey parrot, and sets in motion a chain of events that will change Jawu and her entire community forever.





A NOTE FROM THE COLLECTIVE

Our story emerged from the ashes of the forced eviction of Otodo Gbame in 2017 – a Lagos waterfront community of 30,000 swept into the lagoon, its residents left homeless, its homes demolished. Over the years that have followed, the debris has been covered over with sand dredged up from the sea floor. Another name on a long list of communities lost – consumed by the concrete in Africa's largest city.

We came together to tell this story because it had to be told. Because right now – today, and yesterday, and every day since 2017 – Otodo Gbame residents remain displaced, as with tens of thousands more from other communities across Lagos. Many more remain under the threat of forced eviction in Lagos, and in ever-growing megacities across the world.

We are a director's collective of young storytellers from informal settlements across Lagos, and film professionals who lived in Lagos for the years of the film's story development and production. Beyond this group stand the many who made this film possible – through offering their stories, their guidance, their energy, and wisdom – giving our film a collective ethos that runs much deeper than a small group of directors.

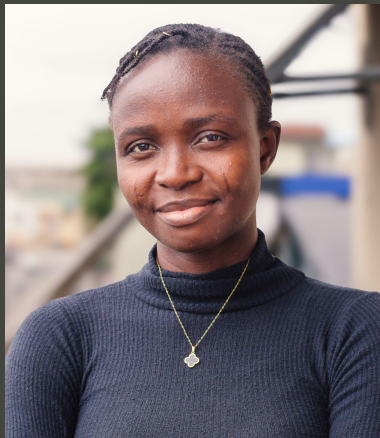
In our finale, a line of community women link arms to stand against a band of policemen, hired thugs, and contracted machinery to protect the only place they'd ever called home. We shot that scene in four 10-minute takes, and our human-shield needed no direction. Our actors had been there before – in April 2017 – the same group of women, linking arms to defend Otodo Gbame in the real-life showdown on which the scene was based.

Our film is an outpouring. A hymn. A battle cry. A hope, that a story can make a change. A song, from a community, still waiting.



THE AGBAJOWO COLLECTIVE – DIRECTOR BIOGRAPHIES

We are a group of filmmakers from across the world and young storytellers from slums across Lagos. We call ourselves **The Agbajowo Collective**.



Akinmuyiwa Bisola grew up in Itun Agan community – an informal settlement nestled alongside the port of Lagos. She is a founding member of the Nigerian Slum / Informal Settlement Federation media team, and focuses her storytelling around shining a light on human rights abuses in Lagos' informal settlements. On our film, Bisola also served as a Producer and First Assistant Director. Aside from her film work, she is a trained community paralegal, rendering legal support to those in her home community.



Atinkpo Segun Elijah is from Otodo Gbame, the community on whose story our film is based. When his home was demolished in the forced eviction of his community in 2017, he began pursuing film & storytelling as a means for spotlighting the story of his community and creating change. On LVQ, given his close connection to the community, he was a key contributor to story development and performance direction, and has also created numerous other projects focused on issues of forced eviction and urban displacement.



Edukpo Tina, like Elijah, was born and raised in Otodo Gbame community, the community on which our film is based. She is a mother and advocate, and was deeply involved in the 2017 resistance to the forced eviction on Otodo Gbame, and the protests, storytelling efforts, and advocacy campaigns that followed. Among her many contributions to the film, Tina channeled her own experiences with Egun folklore to give shape to the film's magical realism, and led the mobilization efforts of cast within the communities we worked in.



James Tayler is an award-winning filmmaker who has made three fiction feature films. Previously a core member of the Yes! That's Us collective, and an alumnus of the Rotterdam Lab, Berlinale Talent Campus and Project Market, Produire au Sud Nantes, and África Produce, James directs and edits social justice films dealing with the issues of displacement and new urban realities, and has helped establish grassroots media teams in South Africa, Uganda, Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

DIRECTOR BIOGRAPHIES – CONTINUED



Mathew Cerf is an award-winning narrative & documentary filmmaker, photographer, and writer specializing in co-creative, grassroots storytelling. Born and raised in the Pacific Northwest of the United States, Mat spent three years in Lagos, Nigeria teaching film and working on projects aimed towards amplifying the narrative perspective of urban poor communities. Among others, Mat draws inspiration from Kat Cizek's co-creation manifesto, the Third Cinema movement of Latin America, and the work of Mary Ellen Mark.



Okechukwu Samuel grew up in Lagos, Nigeria, but his mother is Ghanaian, and he spent several adolescent years living in the Volta region of Ghana. Sam is a gifted artist, writer, and cinematographer. He was the Director of Photography on *IF WALLS COULD TALK* (AFRIFF – 2023). Along with being a writer & director on our project, he was also the camera operator for the film, and a leading voice in sculpting the film's visual language. Sam continues to create films & photography focused around themes of urban inequality in Lagos.



Ogungbamila Temitope is a filmmaker from Isale Akoka community in Lagos. Alongside dreams of becoming a lawyer to help women in her community confront gender-based violence & discrimination, Temi is a filmmaker and photographer focused on shifting the narrative of informal settlements in Lagos. She also organizes workshops in her community to teach photography and digital storytelling to young people, as a means of creating skills for economic advancement and reframing of community narratives.



DIRECTOR Q & A

- **The film is inspired by the forced evictions and destruction of the fishing community of Otodo Gbame in 2017. Can you speak about your connection to this event and how it inspired you to make this film?**

Two members of our collective are from Otodo Gbame, and lost their homes in that eviction. The aftermath of that eviction – the mass-displacement, the judicial injunctions that were ignored, the court cases that didn't go anywhere, the destruction of families, livelihoods, community – is what gave birth to this film. The journalists stopped writing about it, and we knew that if not us, nobody would tell our story, and the world would forget about Otodo Gbame. But our film is bigger than this story, and Otodo Gbame's story is bigger than its 30,000 displaced. It represents a continuation of a cycle – a decades-long pattern of forced eviction and criminalization of urban poor livelihoods in Lagos that continues to this day. These are the voices that we sought to channel in the making of the film.

- **What challenges did you face as young and first-time filmmakers, many of whom were from informal settlements?**

When we began this project, we knew we had a unique opportunity to create something special before we had written a page. We lived within communities overflowing with a beauty that we had never seen reflected on a screen, and knew that if we could capture our environment in an authentic way, we would create something the world had never seen. But translating that into a feature film, in all of its creative and technical demands, required years of learning, and a team of creative partners throughout the production process who brought technical & creative skill sets that allowed our ideas to flourish. Everything was new. So every phase took time – to learn the established tools, techniques, principles, then to revise them to fit our team, environment, and unique production methods.

But what was a weakness, also was a strength. Our entire crew – from wardrobe, to continuity, to grip, to sound – were also from informal settlements across Lagos, learning film production for the first time. We were nimble, adaptable, and nobody took themselves too seriously. We could move through and shoot in environments that most productions would struggle with because they were our homes, and we knew how our characters would react to a situation, because we had lived it.

- **What was your experience working as a collective?**

There is a reason why most films are made through a single individual's creative lens. In many ways, it is the route of least resistance. Co-creation is messy. It is chaotic. It is non-linear. It takes time. It took us years, living together, moving together, observing together, to coalesce around a shared vision. Co-creation is slow, until it's not. When a collective of diverse creative perspectives synchronize around a shared narrative goal, the pages begin to write themselves, and are enriched by the variety of perspectives that must coalesce to create a single voice. While working as a collective required building new blueprints for creativity and film production, we drew inspiration from film movements of past and present that center around the collective, such as the *Third Cinema* movement from the 1960s in Latin America, and the ongoing work of MIT's Co-Creation Studio.

DIRECTOR Q & A – CONTINUED

- **You worked with multiple housing rights organizations to produce the film. How did it come together, and how did your communities help?**

The Legend of the Vagabond Queen of Lagos is not a stand-alone film. It is part of an ongoing, multi-pronged, decades long campaign by Justice & Empowerment Initiatives (JEI), Slum Dwellers International (SDI) and the Nigerian Slum / Informal Settlement Federation to end forced evictions of the urban poor and build inclusive and resilient cities, in partnership with organized urban poor communities across 36 countries. In Lagos, JEI and the Federation are connected with grassroots advocacy networks across dozens of communities, and these networks were the backbone of the film, from being the source material for building characters, to allowing our team to film in environments that would be off limits to other large-scale productions, to making up the majority of the film's cast & crew. Beyond being the bedrock of our film, the broader movement provided a wellspring of momentum & inspiration to draw on throughout the many uphill battles we faced over the years in bringing this film to life.

- **You write about the film as part of a larger strategy for housing rights and urban resilience in Lagos. This includes a grassroots distribution campaign in informal communities and targeted screenings for policymakers. Can you tell us more about how you will use the film as a tool for your activism?**

In LVQ, we wanted to make a film that would entertain, while showing the world the teeth behind anti-poor policies in Lagos. We also wanted to allow audiences to connect with the humanity of those who were victims of those policies, and offer a hope among urban poor communities that, when united, resistance is possible. These priorities frame our distribution strategy. We want the film to reach global audiences in order to draw the attention of policymakers & thought leaders, but more crucially, we aim to distribute the film throughout informal settlements in Lagos and megacities across the continent.

Beyond drawing attention to forced eviction and anti-poor policies, we want the film to inspire the next generation of filmmakers from informal settlements who want to create stories to reframe the narrative around their communities. The popular media often show these communities as dens of criminals, or health hazards, and these characterizations can serve as a pretext for forced eviction. There is a saying from Otodo Gbame that is repeated in our film: "*Pli pli toleton, miye kpo godo tolonayo*" – "unity is our strength". We want this message to reverberate across audiences, to and inspire future filmmakers from urban-poor communities to take their stories to the global stage.

DIRECTOR Q & A – CONTINUED

■ How did Nigerian storytelling and folklore influence how you wanted to tell this story of displacement and resistance?

In our story, we wanted to be authentic, and as inspiration, we drew from a vein of social realist films that found beauty and a deeper truth through the faithful recreation of reality – in all of its harshness, complexity, and vibrance. But in Lagos, especially in the stories we were telling, magical realism is social realism. To authentically reproduce lived experience, spirituality and folklore must be interwoven with the day-to-day. Our film also uses folklore to connect *Jawu*, our main character, to a broader history of resistance among her people. When presented alongside her relationship with her son, we wanted her encounter with the spirit of *Egbaezen* to remind her (and audiences) that her (their) struggle today is rooted in a broader struggle that connects the past, present, and future.

■ Can you tell us about your casting process? Ami-Williams and Mr. Macaroni (Debo Adedayo) in particular are big stars in Nigeria, how did you approach them to be part of the film?

When approaching our casting for the film, we were inspired by the method used in *City of God (2002)*. They cast a small group of actors from established networks in Brazil, and the remainder of the film's cast came from the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, who they trained for screen acting through extensive workshops. We adopted a similar technique. Apart from a handful of actors, including Temi and Debo, we found our cast through dozens of auditions held across informal settlements in Lagos.

While this method made for many authentic performances and a deeper level of realism in many of our scenes, the film is carried to new heights by Temi Ami-Williams' performance as *Jawu*. The dedication she gave to the role, and the emotion she brought to her character were a privilege to watch unfold. Debo Adedayo as *Abisoro* also brings to his character a signature charisma, while breathing moments of nuance that creates windows to empathize with a character for whom empathy can be difficult to find. We were able to reach Temi and Debo through our co-producer and Nollywood veteran, Chioma Onyenwe. Beyond being compelled by the film's advocacy objectives, both were excited to be given roles that would challenge them in new ways.



CAST

JAWU	TEMI AMI-WILLIAMS
ABISORO	DEBO ADEDAYO
MITONGI	GERARD AVLESSI
DANIEL	KACHI OKECHUKWU
HAPPINESS	TENIOLA ADELESI
INDIANA	ADOSU SEGUN "ESKIM" SEGARA
ALAPA LEBE	AGUNTO NORAY

CREW

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY	THE AGBAJOWO COLLECTIVE
AGBAJOWO COLLECTIVE	AKINMUYIWA BISOLA
	ATINKPO SEGUN ELIJAH
	EDUKPO TINA
	JAMES TAYLER
	MATHEW CERF
	OKECHUKWU SAMUEL
	OGUNGBAMILA TEMITOPE
PRODUCERS	AKINMUYIWA BISOLA
	ANDREW MAKI
	JAMES TAYLER
	MATHEW CERF
	MEGAN CHAPMAN

PRODUCERS CON'T	MOHAMMED ZANNA MUSTAPHA EMMANUEL MICHAEL HENRICHS
CO-PRODUCER	CHIOMA ONYENWE
EXECUTIVE PRODUCER FOR SLUM DWELLERS INTL.	BETH CHITEKWE-BITI
LEAD PRODUCER	MATHEW CERF
TECHNICAL DIRECTOR	JAMES TAYLER
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY	LEO PURMAN
PRODUCTION DESIGN	BOLA BELO
SOUND	PIUS FATOKE SADIQ ADEBAYO
WARDROBE	YAHAYA MUYINAT VICTOR ENIOLA
HAIR & MAKEUP	BOGLO KEHINDE
EDIT	YIQING YU MATHEW CERF KHALID SHAMIS
SOUND DESIGN	PETER CORNELL
ORIGINAL SCORE	MICHAEL "TRUTH" OGUNLADE
VFX & MATTE ARTIST	JONAH WEST
ADDTL VFX, ONLINE, COLOR & CONFORM	LEFT POST PRODUCTIONS

PRODUCTION COMPANIES

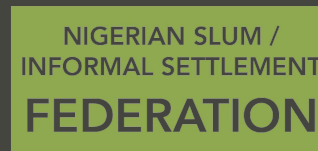
JUSTICE & EMPOWERMENT INITIATIVES

SLUM DWELLERS INTERNATIONAL

THE NIGERIAN SLUM / INFORMAL SETTLEMENT FEDERATION

DIE GESELLSCHAFT DGS

RACONTEUR PRODUCTIONS



SUPPORT FROM

THE SUNDANCE INSTITUTE

BERLINALE WORLD CINEMA FUND

THE DURBAN FILM MART

