

# THE GENERAL'S SON

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## Abstract

*The General's Son* is a 20-minute narrative drama that explores the raw, emotional complexity of General Cuba Wusalanga's struggle with guilt, loss, and his longing for redemption. Set against a backdrop of allegorical African cultural elements, the film uses intimate cinematography, opulent aesthetics contrasted with isolating vastness, and symbolic imagery to represent underlying themes. The narrative underscores the tension and subsequent resignation of the General, as he grapples with the revelation of his monstrous nature. The vision intends for the audience to empathize with the General's predicament, inciting introspection and dialogue about societal cycles of corruption, and the potential to break free from them.



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## Introduction

No father-son relationship is free from the inevitable struggle for power. These dynamics evolve over time, with phases and transitions shaped by personality types and early established rules of engagement. Because one (the father) predates the other (the son), the power dynamics are naturally skewed in the father's favor. When sibling rivalry is introduced, the relationship takes on a new dimension, creating dynamics distinct from those of a father and son alone. I compare the main character, General Cuba Wusalanga, in this allegorical story, to the Biblical first man Adam; his first son, Aida, to Cain; and his second son, Ruda, to Abel. This analogy highlights the extreme tensions within their relationships. While this murderous example is not a true reflection of every father-son archetype, it helps guide us into the complex world of the *General* and his sons.

The relationship between a father and son, in the Nigerian cultural context, has traditionally and primarily been based on the father's authority over his son; especially within the patrilineally-anchored Hausa culture predominant in Northern Nigeria.<sup>1</sup> Fathers are seen as the primary authority figures in the family, responsible for providing for their families and ensuring that their sons are prepared for their roles as future leaders. Sons are expected to follow in their fathers' footsteps and carry on the family name and legacy.<sup>2</sup> This relationship, which was based on strict patriarchal social and cultural norms, is now undergoing a radical shift, in a still unfolding disruption precipitated by the rapidly evolving dynamism, scale, and impact of social media and related influences in the metamodern era.

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<sup>1</sup> Ouzgane, Lahoucine, and Robert Morrell, eds. *African Masculinities: Men in Africa from the Late Nineteenth Century to the Present* (New York: Springer, 2005), 77.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 78

Notwithstanding these transformations that are underway vis-a-vis cultural norms and traditional expectations, The General's decision to redeem Aida is not completely out of character for fathers who see the value in the continuation of a family legacy through their sons. The General worries that Aida is his last chance to save his legacy in his lifetime; and so, against the counsel of his longtime and most trusted aide, Sanyo, he hatches a twisted ominous plan that he believes would solve the problem (as he sees it), but which could potentially backfire and make things worse. He gives Aida the choice of giving his life or the life of his newborn son to pay for Ruda's death, in the hope that Aida would selflessly make the ultimate sacrifice as a father, by offering his own life to save his newborn. The General does not plan to take either life; he is just desperate to lean in on his fearsome reputation in confirming that there is still a sliver of humanity left in Aida.

### *Origin*

I grew up in Nigeria during the 1980s and 1990s, living through one military dictatorship after another; an environment soaked in fear, uncertainty, oppression, and a constant sense of surveillance. I might have been spared from the intrusive awareness of the harsh realities of Nigerian life had I not been raised by an authoritarian, overbearing, and controlling policeman. In many ways, our home environment recreated and reflected—on a much smaller, but more visceral scale—the situational environment of Nigeria. We regularly heard rumours of journalists getting killed by letter bombs, activists and dissidents getting violently raided, tortured, jailed, or executed without trial; and people disappearing or exiled without notice. People learned to survive and stay safe in different ways, mindful of faceless informants and the dictators' feared junta. While at home, we also imbibed a similar survivalist mindset, as we learned to distinguish my father's car engine sound from our neighbors', to give us enough time to scatter from the

living room and hide in our bedrooms; praying not to get caught idling, seen playing, or summoned to an inquisitory slippery slope.

Under this dual influence of military rule and my father's overbearing control, I learned early on to navigate a world where autonomy was limited, and questioning authority came with consequences. This experience led me to retreat into a mental sanctuary; one rife with the ebb and flow of the currents driving my journey of self-awareness and healing, my love for and study of history, and my unbridled creative imagination. These formative elements were distilled from my lived reality; and just like cascading tributaries, converged to connect me to the great story ether or vortex. An ether to which I believe I am eternally fused, like all creatives, and from which possibly relatable, yet inevitably convoluted, composite characters and stories emerge. Just as Joseph Campbell discusses the process of "creativity" drawing from, and being integral to, human expression and humanity's cumulative cultural heritage descending from a cross-cultural thematic kaleidoscope, these characters and stories emerge as spawns from my portion of the mythic dimension, the homeland of inspiration.<sup>3</sup> Exhilaratingly becoming tangible archetypal manifestations that can easily be confronted, and engaged with, on a deeply personal level. They are born from my past (a lineal thread of my cumulative matrilineal and patrilineal descent, alongside my own self-determined narratives that weave into the complex tapestry of genealogical legacy) but not quite.

Drawing from this background and context, *The General's Son* is a short story derived from an original feature-length script, *General & Sons*. The resulting short is about a military dictator, who is also a terrible father that has inadvertently created an unthinkable dysfunctional

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<sup>3</sup> Campbell, Joseph. "Creativity." In *The Mythic Dimension: Selected Essays 1959–1987*, edited by Antony Van Couvering, 2nd ed. (Joseph Campbell Foundation, 2018), 151–154; Campbell, Joseph. "The Historical Development of Mythology." In *The Mythic Dimension: Selected Essays 1959–1987*, edited by Antony Van Couvering, 2nd ed., (Joseph Campbell Foundation, 2018), 10–11.

family situation; one rank with fear, shifting alliances, lack of trust, lust, familial coup d'etat, revenge, ambition, and so on. Telling the story of The General and his family, in many ways, allows me to revisit certain aspects of my childhood in isolation; without confronting the entire “herd” of memories.



## Imagining The General's Son

### *Background*

Nigeria's descent into years of military rule shortly after independence saw the rise of a coterie of dictators, all determined to maintain power in the most tyrannical ways over a sequence of despotic regimes, culminating in the return of democracy in 1999.<sup>4</sup> The lead character, The General, is a composite semi-fictional persona that embodies the characters and personalities observed and distilled from the different despotic military rulers of Nigeria. The story revolves around three impactful yet not necessarily harmonized themes. The first two obvious themes are: the fractious father-son relationship, and the resulting sibling rivalry stemming from the individual failures of a specific father type. As well as one predominantly subliminal theme: the enduring connection between European/Western imperialism cum-colonization, and the fertile nourishment of neocolonial blowback they have spawned, which has evolved into a recurring legacy of decades-long authoritarian regimes and ruthless dictators in Africa.<sup>5</sup>

Within this context, the relationship between Aida and his father is, on the surface, the classic situation between a son and his father who are just about to find out how much of the same person they are. Invariably, and beneath the surface, there is something much more dysfunctionally sinister about their relationship given who exactly The General is, his past and reputation. The film burnishes an evolving understanding of the impact of parental attention,

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<sup>4</sup> T. O. Falola, Reuben Kenrick Udo, J. F. Ade Ajayi, and Anthony Hamilton Millard Kirk-Greene, "Nigeria," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed December 15, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Nigeria/Independent-Nigeria>; T. O. Falola, Reuben Kenrick Udo, J. F. Ade Ajayi, and Anthony Hamilton Millard Kirk-Greene, "Nigeria," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed December 15, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Nigeria/Military-regimes-1983-99>.

<sup>5</sup> Imrana Alhaji Buba, "Aid, Intervention, and Neocolonial 'Development' in Africa," *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 13, no. 1 (2018): 132, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2018.1470136>.

unconscious comparisons, role inheritance, and differential treatment on the development of sibling relationships. By creatively representing these dynamics, the film aims to generate a social impact, fostering discussions on the implications of sibling rivalry within an autocratic family. Subliminally, the film merely suggests, without direct mention, the connection between the General and the Western nation where he fled to and sought refuge, following his ouster in a coup after nearly half a century in power in the fictional African country of *Aigharo*.

## Relationship Dynamics

### *Father-son*

Dr. D. Charles Williams, a psychologist and marriage and family therapist in Atlanta, Georgia, and author of “The Life Cycle Of Father-Son Relationships” sums up this cycle and its different stages or phases into an acronym—IDEAL—Idolize, Discord, Evolving, Acceptance and Legacy.<sup>6</sup> He explains that:

*“As children, sons **idolize** their dads and think they can do anything. This identification is most often demonstrated by a son’s imitation of his father’s behavior by walking like him, talking like him or wearing his clothes or shoes.”<sup>7</sup>*

*As teens, sons experience a period of **discord** in which conflict is the central theme they share. They often reject the expectations, values and directions their fathers have embraced and take on more non-traditional philosophies, placing them regularly at odds with one another.”<sup>8</sup>*

*As young adults, the father-son relationship enters into a period of **evolving**. Distance may still exist emotionally, and they may even ignore each other. The conscious attempts at being different than one’s father so characteristic in the discord stage begin to appear more like competition.”<sup>9</sup>*

*As adults in their 30s and 40s, sons begin to move into the stage of **acceptance** toward their fathers. They have begun to forgive, recognize strengths and even*

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<sup>6</sup> D. Charles Williams, “The Life Cycle of Father-Son Relationships,” Atlanta Psychologist Network for Individual and Family Therapy (Dunwood Psychologists website), accessed December 14, 2024, <https://dunwoodpsychologists.com/Articles/dads.htm>, para. 1.

<sup>7</sup> D. Charles Williams, “The Life Cycle of Father-Son Relationships,” Atlanta Psychologist Network for Individual and Family Therapy (Dunwood Psychologists website), accessed December 14, 2024, <https://dunwoodpsychologists.com/Articles/dads.htm>, para. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Williams, “The Life Cycle of Father-Son Relationships,” para. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Williams, “The Life Cycle of Father-Son Relationships,” para. 4.

*admire the qualities that once seemed so out of step with their previous “know-it-all” manner of thinking.<sup>10</sup>*

*In their 50s, older adult sons become a **legacy** of their father’s influence for better and worse.”<sup>11</sup>*

In *The General’s Son*, the two men are propelled into the final phase of this cycle by the murder of Ruda (the favorite son) by Aida. The General’s decision to test Aida in a bid to redeem him is far more self-driven than the selfless fatherly act it appears to be on the surface.

In *The Psychology Behind Strained Father-Son Relationships* Dr. Deryl Goldenberg explains that,

*“The German novelist Franz Kafka reveals . . . that the hostility his father expressed against him as a child, he now turns against himself. ‘My father’s method of upbringing had saddled me with a general load of fear, weakness and self-contempt’.<sup>12</sup>*

*These descriptions are representative of how men recall their fathers relating to them. But even more striking than the obvious damage and wounds, is the repressed longing. Many men are love-starved for their fathers (and fathers for their sons) and deny it. To let this “out of the bag” is to face a great deal of anger, rejection, and sadness.”<sup>13</sup>*

The General’s desire to redeem Aida speaks to a deep-seated love-starvation he is too afraid to admit to; perhaps because of the style of masculinity prevalent culturally in Nigeria, and the many

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<sup>10</sup> Williams, “The Life Cycle of Father-Son Relationships,” para. 5.

<sup>11</sup> Williams, “The Life Cycle of Father-Son Relationships,” para. 6.

<sup>12</sup> Deryl Goldenberg, “The Psychology Behind Strained Father-Son Relationships,” *PsychAlive* (blog), February 29, 2016, accessed December 14, 2024, <https://www.psychalive.org/psychology-behind-strained-father-son-relationships/>, para. 3.

<sup>13</sup> Goldenberg, “The Psychology Behind Strained Father-Son Relationships,” para. 5.

years of moral erosion that have occurred from his oversized ambition during his time in the army and as a dictator.

### *Sibling Rivalry*

In biblical canon, the story of Cain and Abel is an evocative example illustrating the supreme dynamic of deadly sibling rivalry, juxtaposed against the favoritism of a powerful father figure, albeit a supernatural one (i.e. God).<sup>14</sup> It chronicles the undulating trajectory and devastating outcome of paternal (nay divine) preferential treatment, as (mis)interpreted by a lesser loved son; which may have exacerbated said rivalry and led to the ultimate “denouement” of fratricide. Indeed, recent scholarship further explores and extrapolates this tortuous dynamic, fundamentally positing that “*God's respect towards Abel's offering, and the lack thereof towards Cain's, may have exacerbated Cain's sense of rejection and envy*”.<sup>15</sup>

This is instructive because in the biblical tradition, Christian Nigerian children are introduced to the Judeo-Christian version of the story as a core element of their moral code and programming, given their early foundational moral instruction in Sunday school.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, in the qur'anic tradition, Muslim Nigerian children are also introduced to the story in Madrasah as part of their underlying moral instruction. As Esther Ojone Joseph posits in her pertinent research article (which explores the dynamics of moral education in Igalaland—itsself a microcosm of the universal multireligious Nigerian experience), the “*Qur'an and Hadith are the major sources of Islamic divine moral code that spell out the significance, nature, and scope of Islamic education*”.<sup>17</sup> More

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<sup>14</sup> *The Holy Bible*, English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001), Gen. 4:1–16.

<sup>15</sup> Haezer Lisantias, Christopher J. Luthy, Hanny Frederik, and Yunus D. A. Laukapitang, "Favoritism of God? תַּעֲרָב in Genesis 4:1–16 and its Implications for Cain's Status and Offerings," *Jurnal Jaffray* 21, no. 1 (April 2023): 60, <https://doi.org/10.25278/jj.v21i1.835>.

<sup>16</sup> Esther Ojone Joseph, “The Impact of Sunday School and Madrasah to Religious and Moral Education in Igalaland,” *Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Science* 1, no. 1 (January 6, 2024): 8, <https://doi.org/10.69739/jahss.v1i1.4>.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 11

specifically, however, the story is found in Surah Al-Ma'idah (The Table Spread).<sup>18</sup> Indeed, Muham Taqra describes the Islamic perspective on the story of Cain and Abel as follows:

*“Cain and Abel (Arabic: , قاييل, هابيل Qabil and Habil) are believed by Muslims to have been the first two sons of Adam and Eve, although they are not mentioned by their names in the Quran. The story in the Qur'an is virtually the same as the Hebrew Bible narrative, saying that both the brothers were asked to offer up individual sacrifices to God. God accepted Abel's sacrifice because of Abel's righteousness and Cain, out of jealousy, slew Abel. This was the first ever sin committed upon Earth but Abel was chronicled in history as one of the first believers and as the first ever martyr.”*<sup>19</sup>

Thus, given the overlapping fostering of biblical and qur'anic moral instruction (vis-à-vis lessons and curricula in Sunday schools and Madaris), the historical allyship of religious (particularly Christian and Islamic) education in achieving pervasive education for all in Nigeria, and the concomitant fusing of religious and moral education within Nigeria's formal primary and secondary educational curriculum, this story has become embedded as a fundamental component of Nigeria's religious pedagogy, culture, and society.<sup>20</sup> Even though the concept as it relates to the morality and norms of religious doctrine is presented with a familiar action-and-consequence trope, ignoring seeming epistemological contradictions and—assuming that Cain's actions were unjustified—unwittingly unearths a thorny contradiction or story flaw in the eventual punishment-by-banishment outcome. This is especially highlighted in the argument by Karolien Vermeulen about gaps and

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<sup>18</sup> *The Holy Quran*, 5:27–31, translated by Abdullah Yusuf Ali (Elmhurst, NY: Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an, 2001).

<sup>19</sup> Muham Taqra, *The Story of Qabil & Habil (Cain & Abel) Son of Adam in Islam Religion* (OverDrive, 2015), accessed December 30, 2024, <https://www.overdrive.com/media/2456339/the-story-of-qabil-habil-cain-abel-son-of-adam-in-islam-religion>.

<sup>20</sup> Esther Ojone Joseph, “The Impact of Sunday School and Madrasah to Religious and Moral Education in Igalaland,” *Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Science* 1, no. 1 (January 6, 2024): 8, <https://doi.org/10.69739/jahss.v1i1.4>.

ambiguity in the story of Cain and Abel; which can be extrapolated to permit and even justify the first recorded act of fratricide in the Judeo-Christian tradition.<sup>21</sup>

In this sense, it could be argued that an all-powerful father (God) accepted a nominal compromise in the search for a subsisting “acceptable” and preservable legacy embodied in a son (Cain) and his descendants. Perhaps, as Vermeulen propounds (in Cain) God recognizes a mirroring of an element of his vengeful personality; and in his declaration of a punishment to fit his crime, still asserts paternal protectionism.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, Cain’s likely defense could be premised on the fact that his fratricide was in response to an action (precipitated) by a powerful “father” he sought to please and emulate; that is if we ascribe to Williams’s IDEAL framework.<sup>23</sup> And furthermore, since Cain would nominally be described as occupying the “idolize” phase of their relationship, this could be a plausible cum logical explanation (even if not defense) for his actions.

In the Qur’anic tradition, however, though culminating in jealously fueled fratricide, the story ends in a different way. According to Dutch philosopher Marlies ter Borg, “*the killer shows remorse. A raven teaches him how to pay his brother his last respects. This is followed by a quote, in the Quran . . . Killing one is killing all, saving one is saving all.*”<sup>24</sup> Ultimately, this guided remorse-driven redemptive trope is more direct in underscoring the story’s pedagogical nuance; which arguably abridges William’s IDEAL framework in seeking a desired “*pax familiarum*” resolution. In this way, Qabil (Cain), without much prodding, rapidly traverses the ***Evolve*** and ***Acceptance*** phases, and lands squarely in an instructive ***Legacy*** phase. This legacy not only abjures his wanton crime, but it also ushers in the foundational Qur’anic admonishment to eschew murder;

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<sup>21</sup> Karolien Vermeulen, “Mind the Gap: Ambiguity in the Story of Cain and Abel,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 133, no. 1 (April 2014): 31, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jbl.2014.0010>.

<sup>22</sup> Vermeulen, “Mind the Gap,” 29.

<sup>23</sup> Lisantias et al., “Favoritism of God?” 62.

<sup>24</sup> Marlies ter Borg, “Fratricide,” *Quran and Bible Side by Side*, accessed December 30, 2024, <https://www.quranandbiblesidebyside.com/fratricide/>.

wherein it declares that killing one person is the same as killing all people, and saving one life is the same as saving all lives.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> *The Holy Quran*, 5:32, translated by Abdullah Yusuf Ali (Elmhurst, NY: Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an, 2001).



## Writing

### *The Query*

The derived short story was initially set in Northern Nigeria with predominantly Muslim characters. As a Southeastern Nigerian, my affiliation to the characters I was writing about and the fabricated world they exist in, is deeply rooted in my experience growing up under multiple military dictatorships in Nigeria. To understand the geopolitical considerations of my creative license, it is imperative to note that Nigeria's colonial heritage is deeply rooted in a manipulative divide-and-rule strategy which has persisted over nearly a century. Amid a multitude of over 200 ethnic nationalities with hundreds of distinct languages, each with its own culture, language, and history; the British perpetrated a seemingly benign yet overwhelmingly devastating and discriminatory ethno-religious system of indirect rule that echoes till today.<sup>26</sup> As such, "Nigeria", as fabricated by Britain, came predisposed to fractious cultural and ethnic tensions woven so intricately along religious lines that it is almost impossible to separate them.<sup>27</sup> These deep lines of division have, over the years of destructive misrule and plunder by successive military (and more recently quasi-democratic) governments, metastasized and worsened.

An instructive part of my writing process was a query raised by my supervisory committee about the consideration of how African men, and Muslim men in general, are typically portrayed in Western cinema. It was not something I had considered before this query, as I did not fall into either category. However, it gave me room to reflect on my unconscious yet perceived right to tell this story as an Igbo woman from Southeast Nigeria. I had two separate

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<sup>26</sup> T. O. Falola, Reuben Kenrick Udo, J. F. Ade Ajayi, and Anthony Hamilton Millard Kirk-Greene, "Nigeria," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed December 15, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Nigeria/Nigeria-as-a-colony>; Ouzgane, Lahoucine, and Robert Morrell, eds. *African Masculinities: Men in Africa from the Late Nineteenth Century to the Present* (New York: Springer, 2005), 3.

<sup>27</sup> T. O. Falola, Reuben Kenrick Udo, J. F. Ade Ajayi, and Anthony Hamilton Millard Kirk-Greene, "Nigeria," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed December 15, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Nigeria/Nigeria-as-a-colony>.

reactions to this query. I immediately felt concerned about how my story could unwittingly become a generalized portrayal of African-Muslim men; given Hollywood's decades-long pejorative Muslim stereotypes.<sup>28</sup> I also projected this concern into every story I have conceived and plan to develop subsequently. The "West" has never needed a valid reason to cast a negative light on Black people or Muslims, let alone Black Muslims in film; and so, I introspectively re-interrogated my personal and creative intent. Why was I telling this story? Why was this story important to *me*? Why did I think it needed to be told *now*? What is my cause as an African storyteller? How far was I willing to push *narrative fiction* on the spectrum of believability? And how much was I expecting or demanding from my audience? Could I be accused of contributing to the pervasive stereotyping of racialized people in western-dominated cinema?

In evaluating this context, did I have the right to tell this story in the same way that Cyprian Ekwensi—a Southeastern Igbo man—took creative license when he wrote the highly acclaimed novel, *The Passport of Mallam Ilia*? Or was it as removed as Hugo Blick, a White British man, writing about the victims and perpetrators of the Rwandan genocide in his Netflix TV series *Black Earth Rising*; or the unending conflict between Palestine and Israel in Blick's critically acclaimed BBC and SundanceTV series *The Honourable Woman*? Cinema and literature are resplendent with such examples of the tensions underlying the rights of "outsiders" (or latitude permitted them) to exercise creative license in fictional and other narratives, and so I felt reassured.

However, in reflecting on the impact of my expressions, I began to wonder if there were other ways to tell the story without losing the substance and attraction of the original idea.

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<sup>28</sup> Harsha Senanayake, "Hollywood and Wicked Other: The Identity Formation of 'Western Us' Versus 'Muslim Others,'" *De Gruyter Open Political Science* 4 (2021): 65, <https://doi.org/10.1515/openps-2021-0007>.

I decided to pause, take in all these questions, and proceed only when I felt comfortable and convinced in my responses to myself. I wondered why this matter had never crossed my mind; and why it took my supervisory committee's query to prompt me to consider it. Perhaps, I felt a sense of unconscious and unintentional entitlement as a Black woman telling a Black story, or as a Nigerian woman telling a Nigerian story. But it was not as simple as that. The ethnic composition of Nigeria's military dictators has historically been predominantly from Northern Nigeria, with many of these Northern Nigerian generals identifying as Muslims. This cultural and religious background played a significant role in shaping their leadership styles and decision-making processes. Drawing from this historical context, the story of an African General was crafted with an allegorical design, deeply influenced by these lived experiences and the unique dynamics of power, ethnicity, and religion within Nigeria's military history.

### **Who Has the Right to Tell a Story?**

In answering this question, it is pertinent to dwell on a crucial insight shared by Darius Lacey in summing up a LinkedIn post, in which he examined the need for balancing empathy and accuracy in authentically telling the stories of others as follows: *"The best thing we can do in order to faithfully tell the stories we want to bring attention to is to use all the data we have available to us, while consulting those with expertise on the topics at hand and approaching each project with the same consideration we would want our own stories to be told with".*<sup>29</sup>

The spiral (instigated by said query from my supervisory committee), albeit valid and deeply important for my growth and process as a writer, led me to my second reaction. I decided to seek confirmation and validation that my story did not cast undue or unfair aspersions on Northern Nigerians, Nigerian Muslims, or Muslims in general.

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<sup>29</sup> Darius Lacey, "Who Has the Right to Tell a Story?" *LinkedIn*, November 30, 2023, accessed December 16, 2024, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/who-has-right-tell-story-darius-lacey-kt2we>, para 10.

## *The Main Characters*

Cinematic storytelling is the art of creating visual collages from conscious and unconscious lived, shared, learned, and passed-down experiences. It mirrors the essence of human existence in its full depth and capacity, encompassing both the great and the terrible, darkness and light, and good and evil. Leaning into allegory, I drew inspiration from the rich visual language and thematic depths of cinema, which provided me with tools to creatively alter the specificity of my characters (with conjured-up names and ambiguous ethnicity) and locations, allowing them to become powerful socio-political and historical statements in and of themselves.

Time and space are very limited in the world of short stories and in many ways create rules around making impactful short films. This was the objective I was forced to learn to embrace in taking my feature-length script for *“General & Sons”*, which has very complex characters with wide timespan and multiple interconnected story arcs, complete with an even more sophisticated compound world, and adapting it into a short film; especially focusing on one character’s interaction with the other central characters. As such, choosing a single perspective from a long-form story to adapt into a short form was instrumental in changing how I now view long-form stories—a collection of singular perspectives told in multilateral layers of centrality. In whittling down the feature, I built a system of creating individual-focus stories of every character, and ranking them in order of how close, or far they are from the center. This was especially life-changing to me because my concepts require this style of diligence to take advantage of every character’s role in the larger framework within which it is being expressed.

### *General Cuba Wusalanga*

My first encounter with the concept and understanding of ruthless dictatorship was as a little girl who watched the 1981 biographical feature film, *Rise and Fall of Idi Amin* by Kenyan filmmaker Sharad Patel on our VHS machine. At such a tender age, I had no business watching that movie because it resulted in a lot of nightmares and left an indelible mark on my psyche. Over the years, I believed my perception of the film was influenced by my limited understanding due to my age at the time. I wondered why the filmmaker(s) made the film. It felt like it served more to satisfy the curiosity and wild imagination of an Amin-obsessed audience. The film was shot a year after he was toppled in 1979, a time when interest in any Amin-related film work was at its peak. It did not quite follow a story arc, even for its main character and the inadvertent ‘star’ of the show. Instead, it felt like a collection of impressively well-reenacted action-oriented stories that had been haphazardly collected at a *beer parlor* in a rural Ugandan village, where rumors of Amin’s unimaginable brutality straddled a thin line between truth and propaganda. In the Netflix docuseries *How to Become a Tyrant*, (2021), specifically Episode 3 (*Reign Through Terror*), interviewee Professor Alicia C. Decker provides insights into General Idi Amin's reign, as she explains how Idi Amin, just like many other dictators, was judicious in cultivating rumors in a way that would keep people afraid. The resultant effect was one in which widespread fear and distrust was rampant amongst ordinary citizens, such that they were unable to mount opposition against the state.<sup>30</sup> This mirrored accounts from Nigeria by a cross-section of local and international the media, especially in the aftermath of Nigeria’s despotic Sani Abacha regime, in which an iron-fisted rule by fear—and its attendant culture of demoralized

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<sup>30</sup> Alicia C. Decker, verbal account about General Idi Amin, episode 3, “Reign Through Terror,” *How to Become a Tyrant*, directed by J. Smith (Netflix, 2021), accessed December 15, 2024, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80989772>.

mistrust—was amplified through overlapping accounts of real human rights violations.<sup>31</sup> These accounts were juxtaposed against speculated depravity of occultic rituals, amidst hitherto unmatched barbarity in the canonical tradition of Nigeria’s decades-long military rule.<sup>32</sup>

Nevertheless, the film about Idi Amin is so much more than a core childhood memory; it became a magnetic center, continuously drawing from the bits and pieces of my life and everything happening to and around me. It laid the foundation for what would eventually become the original story. A dictator seeking to put his house in order; without making any plans to acknowledge or take accountability for the havoc he has wreaked on the lives of the citizens he ruled over for almost half a century.

General Cuba Wuslanga is a larger-than-life, stern, power-obsessed, and calculating man. The character was developed to maintain verisimilitude by converging the traits and lifestyles of multiple real-life dictators into a cohesive personality with a unified backstory. A quiet and steely figure who, perhaps as a young man on his way to becoming an autocratic leader, follows the examples set by the most feared dictators he had read about, watched on television, and deeply admired. General Wuslanga is my summative assessment of all African dictators, perhaps even of dictators the world over.

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<sup>31</sup> Nigerian Democratic Movement (NDM) and National Democratic Coalition (NADECO), “Nigeria: Statements on Assassination,” press release, signed by the Executive Council of the Nigerian Democratic Movement (NDM), Prof. A. Bolaji Akinyemi, Gov. John EK Oyeogun, and Air Cdre Dan Suleiman (Rtd), University of Pennsylvania – African Studies Center, June 4, 1996, accessed December 15, 2024, [https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Urgent\\_Action/dc\\_6596.html](https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Urgent_Action/dc_6596.html).

<sup>32</sup> Michael T. Kaufman, “New Chapter in Nigeria: The Obituary; Sani Abacha, 54, a Beacon of Brutality in an Era When Brutality Was Standard,” *New York Times*, June 9, 1998, accessed December 15, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/06/09/world/new-chapter-nigeria-obituary-sani-abacha-54-beacon-brutality-era-when-brutality.html>; Harvard Divinity School, “Sani Abacha,” *Religion and Public Life Glossary*, accessed December 15, 2024, <https://rpl.hds.harvard.edu/faq/sani-abacha>, para 3.

Finding a balance as a writer-director, in writing this character, particularly in my use of exposition—in a way that addressed the purpose, objectives, and personal history of the General—proved to be one of the most difficult parts of the writing process. It was important to leave as many clues as possible so that the actor could enter the role seamlessly without relying too much on his own instincts. I was still interested in acting when I began my writing journey. As such, I would randomly include action sequences along with the dialogue as I imagined how each scene would play out. However, while I got carried away by my imagination, I was unknowingly introducing rigidity and, at times, confusion because I unconsciously incorporated my own interpretation of the character, as an actor, into the script. This left little room for story enhancement through the seamless understanding, assumption, and total possession of the character by the actor.

Once I realized this, I learned to write as a writer-director, leaving room for interpretation and collaboration with my actors, a valuable lesson I learned in Prof. Djigo's *Directing Actors* class. When writing a character like the General, I did not intend to provide answers that only an equipped actor should discover. Instead, I provided enough clues to help the actor ask the right questions and arrive at their own answers as a skilled performer. Eventually, over multiple iterations and drafts of the script under the persistent query and careful advice of my Supervisory Committee, and through many late-night conversations with my long-time writing mentor, Oliver "Tambo" Aleogena, who had previously given me invaluable feedback while I workshopped the story in Prof. Wiseman's *Screenwriting* class, this allegorical story took shape.

### *Sanyo*

Sanyo is a crucial character in the story's intricate web and exists outside the familial connections. He serves as the General's long-standing and highly trusted aide-de-camp,

overseeing not only the General's personal security force but also his covert hit squad and junta. However, Sanyo views himself as the General's rightful successor, as it is evident that his son, Aida, cannot be trusted with any responsibility.

When I decided to switch to allegory, the character of Sanyo (previously Mallam Ali in the story's original conception) in its fullness became the only one of many *darlings* I had to *kill*, and to which I was most attached. In the earlier version of the story, Mallam Ali is the only character whose personality was in many ways centered around his religion. General's relationship with Mallam Ali is without a doubt his most evolved and transparent one, so he, by the implicit trust the General had in him, was designed to be the more powerful figure between the two men. Serving as the subjectively incorruptible spiritual advisor and the trusted indispensable aide, he was an enigma because he served as a check on the General's excesses, his religious conscience, and the ruthless enforcer all in one, always all three.

Mallam Ali was inspired by (and is a composite of) two real people. The first person is Major Hamza Al-Mustapha, the former Chief Security Officer of the late Nigerian dictator, General Sani Abacha. Al-Mustapha was the dreaded (overt and covert) chief enforcer of Abacha's wishes; and the lethality of their relationship can be surmised from this harrowing excerpt in which John Iliffe describes the climate within Abacha's regime as one of perpetual paranoia and intrigue; painting a vivid picture of the power dynamics during Abacha's regime thus:

*“Abacha's headquarters at Aso Rock in the new capital at Abuja seethed with intrigue, suspicion, and rumour. The head of state himself was rarely seen, seldom attended meetings, frequently neglected official business, and did not attempt to tour the country. A man of few words and no intellectual pretensions, he hated reading but was a good*



*listener, an astute schemer, and a ruthless executor, greedy for wealth, obsessed by security, and uninhibited in resort to violence. His sinister Chief Security Officer, Major Hamza al-Mustapha, controlled an Israeli- and Korean-trained Strike Force with its own detention camps, interrogation centres, and assassination unit. The obsession with security was not merely paranoid.”*<sup>33</sup>

The second person who inspired the character is an ordinary person who—for the purpose of this paper—will be referred to as Mr. X. I met Mr. X in the first property firm I worked for as a recent graduate of Real Estate Management in Nigeria. This was my most impactful personal encounter with a Northern Muslim; and at that time, I had no awareness of the differences between the Northern and Southern Muslim religious leanings in Nigeria. He seemed to me like every other Muslim I had ever known up until that point in my life. However, I came to learn that he was strict about physical contact, formal greetings, and reference to his title of “Mallam”; which he explained to me meant “Teacher” and a lifelong student of the Qur’an. According to the Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, the term “mallam” refers to a learned person or teacher in Islamic contexts. I now understand that the meaning is tied to West Africa in its use as follows:

*“a Muslim religious teacher; sometimes used as a title of respect for anybody who is seen as wise or highly educated, for example, a university teacher”.*<sup>34</sup>

And correctly attributing the word’s origin to the predominant Hausa language spoken in Northern Nigeria, the Collins English Dictionary offers up a definition as follows:

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<sup>33</sup> John Iliffe, “The Prisoner,” in *Obasanjo, Nigeria and the World*, Part III - Private Citizen (1979–99), 152–163 (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell & Brewer, 2011), accessed December 16, 2024, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/obasanjo-nigeria-and-the-world/prisoner/A578133D18E7D0CEE4D0C298F17BDD8E>.

<sup>34</sup> “Mallam Noun - Definition, Pictures, Pronunciation and Usage Notes,” *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, accessed December 15, 2024, <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/us/definition/english/mallam?q=Mallam>.

*“(in N Nigeria) a title and form of address for a learned or educated man”*.<sup>35</sup>

As the only man in the upper management core—and one of a handful of men in the entire female-dominated company; to me, Mr. X was the kindest, most patient, and most trusted person in the organization. Apart from his finance-related job, he served as the CEO’s spiritual advisor, counsellor, teacher, and company policy enforcer. However, despite the wide latitude he possessed, he uncharacteristically wielded his obvious power with a lot of humility and quietness; which most people found unnerving. He was immovable when it came to upholding the company’s bylaws and meting out punishment for company policy breaches and violations. He kept a close eye on the daily goings-on in the company and always offered warnings to staff when he sensed trouble in their work process. So, his conviction on the ruthless execution of judgement was firm.

For the first time in my life, Mr. X made me question where the line between mercy and accountability, or responsibility, lay for me. The general and non-specific Nigerian culture is a paradoxical conundrum when it comes to matters such as punishment, mercy, morals, accountability, corruption, ethics, and the continuous clash between Western values, multi-ethnic Nigerian/African cultural values, and the “accepted way of doing things in Nigeria.” Meanings, interpretations, expressions, practices, knowledge, and understanding of these matters tend to be arbitrary and heavily influenced (yet not entirely reflective) of any religious, cultural, judicial, or customary systems; especially when implied and, in some cases, even when clearly stated. My appreciation for the impact of my encounter would not come into full realization until after I moved to Abuja as a married woman a few years later; when the experience of the stark difference between Southern and Northern Muslims became my everyday reality.

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<sup>35</sup> “Mallam Noun - Definition,” *Collins English Dictionary*, accessed December 15, 2024, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/mallam>.

As such, Mallam Ali was developed as an artful, silent, and persistent force who had built up the gumption and audacity to do whatever was necessary to serve and please the General. He had proven his worth and had now risen to a place of such power and prominence. This character was unflinchingly loyal but seemingly morally driven. He wielded an outsized “spiritual” impact, and even moderating influence, on the General. And yet, sometimes contradictingly, his resolved dedication to the General, and his lethality in executing tasks to protect his expressed and inferred “interests”, proved his ruthless indispensability beyond all doubt.

Switching the persona of Mallam Ali to Sanyo felt like erasing the character in its entirety because I had no idea who this new character, Sanyo, was without his religious conviction and influence over the General. He was reduced to just being the General’s aide; one without the power to expect or demand a conversation, much less sway the General. I did not like this evolution of Mallam Ali into Sanyo because it was almost impossible to re-equip him with the initial power he formidably wielded as Mallam Ali; without conjuring up a new religion that would not offend any sensibilities. Which in turn would need to be explained or referenced in a way that did not portray the African characters as members of an insidious cult—or suggest that it is “an African thing”. With Mallam Ali, it was easier to show—without telling—that even though his persona revolved around his religious gumptions; in reality, his actions reflected his proclivities and were not symptomatic of the religion.

Creating a new character out of the ashes of Mallam Ali was hard to do, because letting go of the story that came to me virtually fully formed from the ether would seemingly lose a cornerstone of its mythical grounding. This resulted in considerable rumination and took me time to digest; as my evolved preferences and original inspiration battled it out in my imagination, causing me significant consternation. Eventually, I was able to accept Sanyo and draw on my

commitment to a key element of the story not becoming a distraction from the core story arc, in making my peace with Mallam Ali's progression into a much more "contained" character than I originally envisioned. I ultimately realized that Sanyo was probably, in the end, more suited for the derivative short which, in fact, served its purpose in introducing the characters enough to tell the singular perspective narrative.

### *Aida*

As noted earlier, the story of Cain and Abel from the Bible is, in part, a foundational inspiration for this character.<sup>36</sup> Aida, the first son of the General, was meant to be his natural heir. However, much like Cain in the Bible, Aida fell short of the General's esteem, who, in turn, favored his younger brother, Ruda. The devastating evolution of Aida from jealous elder brother to fratricidal murderer is grounded within the context of his visceral umbrage at being overlooked or passed over by General. Fueled by his glaringly comparative failings (when appositely evaluated beside Ruda), Aida's shortsighted assessment of his prospects with respect to his father's withdrawn (and diverted) esteem, is compounded by a smoldering rage that ignores the implicit complicity of his contributory actions to his de facto "demotion". Notwithstanding his incessant infantile misjudgments, refusal to take responsibility, and the spiralling penchant for "recidivism" he exhibits in response, Aida holds Ruda responsible for General's intolerance for his many failures, and the cumulative disdain the latter had for him.

Aida is also partly inspired by one of Vito Corleone's sons in *The Godfather* trilogy, most notably, Santino *Sonny* Corleone. However, I want to clarify that the connection between Aida and Sonny is not rooted in the capacity for fratricide; as I do not believe Sonny had it in him to kill his own brother as unflinchingly as Michael did. Instead, the parallel is drawn from (and

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<sup>36</sup> ESV, Gen. 4:1–16.

alludes to) the inferred disappointment that the Godfather, Vito Corleone, ruefully expressed at Sonny succeeding him and his corresponding leadership performance; when (in seeking to assuage the feelings of Tom Hagen after his removal as Consigliere) he went as far as saying that he “*thought Santino was a bad don*”.<sup>37</sup>

Nevertheless, unlike Sonny, Aida is never given the chance to lead or participate in decision-making within the family organization. Early on, he establishes himself as the less capable of the two brothers, prompting the General to invest his time in training Ruda to walk in his footsteps. Yet, the very trait that made Sonny unsuited to become the man his father was—or the man Michael later ruthlessly became—is the same trait that aligns him with Aida. Sonny is impulsive, rarely pausing to act strategically; a crucial character flaw that mirrors Aida’s debilitating shortcomings which ends up turning off the General.

I believe Sonny would have self-destructed long before his eventual demise; had it not been for the loving intervention, guidance, and restraint provided by Vito Corleone and the family Consigliere. In contrast, Aida’s extreme actions against his brother expose the absence of such corrective guidance (and paternal restraint) in his life. For Aida, like Cain’s murderous escalation, fairly competing with Ruda to earn his father’s trust and respect was never an option. In his mind, eliminating Ruda completely was the only solution. Aida believed that leaving his father no choice but to rely on him was the most logical way to address his feelings of exclusion and rejection. And unlike, Qabil in the Qur’an, whose remorseful and self-reflective redemptive arc is activated, once prompted by Allah’s raven, this sustains Aida’s chosen pathway (even after

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<sup>37</sup> Mario Puzo and Francis Ford Coppola, screenwriters, *The Godfather*, directed by Francis Ford Coppola (Paramount Pictures, 1972), based on the novel by Mario Puzo.

being confronted and asked to make amends) and reveals just how predisposed he is to his father's selfishly ruthless streak.<sup>38</sup>

### *The Priestess*

The denigration, misconstruction, and trepidation surrounding African spirituality were visceral hallmarks of British colonization. Traditional African religious practices could not be entirely eradicated or replaced. Despite the invasive British-imposed indoctrination on (and occupation of) the Nigerian consciousness, they remain integral to African cultural and ethnic identity, especially because the local ceremonies and corresponding rituals surrounding festivals, marriage, birth, and death are descended from precolonial African religious practices. Over time, these general and routine cultural examples have come to represent the tolerance threshold for African spiritual practices in the average Nigerian's modern-day life. To this end, any African cultural practice that seemingly falls outside of the pervasively adopted Christian and Islamic religious practice and performance is often met with misunderstanding, fear, and rejection.

Dictators understand the importance of fear, not only in establishing the tone and projecting power of their regimes but also in maintaining, preserving, and prolonging them. One way they artfully instill fear in the people they rule is by engaging and retaining the services of mystical spiritualists. This has proven to be an effective device for controlling their people because, despite the apparent proliferation of colonial religious belief systems across Africa, the supernatural beliefs of many Africans are still often subliminally (even if not apparently) informed by or rooted in the calcified vestiges of pre-colonial spiritual traditions. Indeed, in Hausaland and specifically in Northern Nigeria, where Islam is now preeminent, both believers

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<sup>38</sup> The Holy Quran, 5:27–31.

of the pre-Islamic spirit-centered Hausa (Habe) religion and Muslims share some similar spiritual beliefs.<sup>39</sup> In particular, shared belief in spirits or the supernatural dimension is expressed thus:

*“Muslims and arna (pagans) believe in the same spirits, but Muslims claim that they do not need to perform rituals to these spirits. However, many do perform them, depending on the occasion, and many consult the bori doctor for aid”.*<sup>40</sup>

Similarly, within the Christian tradition inherited from the colonial foray into Africa, Adedokun argues that certain repetitive symbolic actions and performative dynamics in Nigeria’s preeminent Pentecostal liturgy and worship (diverse as they are) mirror traditional pre-colonial African syncretic elements in their elevation of dramatic elements *“in both profane and sacred settings”*<sup>41</sup> and *“the communication of meaning to both human and divine witnesses.”*<sup>42</sup>

It can be argued that the employment of spiritualists by dictators goes beyond any personal belief in the powers these spiritualists claim to wield. Dictators understand that the visibility of these spiritualists—rather than clandestine assignation—sends a double-edged message of irrationality, erraticism, and clairvoyant surveillance. A terrified populace, which is already predisposed to suppressed or palpable mystical cum spiritual beliefs, policed by a dictator who stays ten steps ahead of dissidents and enemies of the state through spiritual clairvoyance, is the intended message. Indeed, there is a longstanding alleged tradition of successive African rulers dabbling in the occult and using spiritual marabouts, diviners, and soothsayers. For instance, the late Nigerian dictator General Sani Abacha reportedly<sup>43</sup> retained

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<sup>39</sup> Ouzgane, Lahoucine, and Robert Morrell, eds. *African Masculinities: Men in Africa from the Late Nineteenth Century to the Present* (New York: Springer, 2005), 79.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 80

<sup>41</sup> Adedokun, Abimbola A. *Performing Power in Nigeria: Identity, Politics, and Pentecostalism. of African Identities: Past and Present*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 2.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 2

<sup>43</sup> Harvard Divinity School, “Sani Abacha,” *Religion and Public Life Glossary*, accessed December 15, 2024, <https://rpl.hds.harvard.edu/faq/sani-abacha>, para 3. “El-Rufai: So Who Is Not Consulting Marabouts?” *The Nation*.

Senegalese marabouts who were said to be visibly present at the palatial presidential residence, performing incantations to ensure his protection and prolonged rule.

Thus, the Priestess's role in this allegory replaces the original idea of a marabout; she ultimately emerges as a non-specific representation of the exiled General's limited ability to assert power. She serves as a nonverbal but primeval reminder—especially to Aida—of how far the General is willing to go to get what he wants, thus completing the impact of spiritual control.

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Hardball section. February 7, 2013. Accessed January 25, 2025. <https://thenationonline.net/el-rufai-so-who-is-not-consulting-marabouts/>, para 2.



### *Director's Vision*

As the director, my vision for this film was to bring the intensity of the characters' emotional struggle to the forefront, drawing the audience into the intimate complicatedness of the General's relationship with his son, Aida, amidst the circumstances surrounding the birth of his grandchild. I wanted to emphasize the pathos of the General's life, which, despite his outward power and status, was ultimately marked by guilt, loss, and despair. The narrative is infused with an ominous undercurrent; akin to a ticking clock portending a breathtaking denouement as the General's plan unfolds. The camera acts as a silent observer of the emotional journey of the characters, frequently employing close-ups and stark reaction shots to capture the nuances of their struggle.

To capture the essence of the General's character, a man torn between his desire for revenge and the future of his legacy, the *mise-en-scène* echoes this duality. His life of power is reflected in the opulent aesthetics of his surroundings, while his isolation and regret are emphasized by the cold and vast emptiness of his grand mansion in exile. I leaned into symbolism and visual metaphor to underline the themes of the film, such as using shadows to represent the darker sides of the characters, or the recurring motif of the newborn child symbolizing hope and potential salvation.

At the story's climax, when the General finally sees himself as the monster he has become, the tone shifts from tension to resignation. As he faces the raw reflection of his cumulative decades-long greed and egomania, mirrored in the depravity and hopelessly selfish actions of Aida, his last remaining son—being his only hope for generational redemption; the futility of his dashed plans comes full circle. Here, I use longer, slower shots, and pensive silence to convey the riveting weight of this devastating realization.

To reflect the cultural setting of Aigharo (even as an allegorical allusion of a real African country), attire and music played a crucial role in grounding the narrative within its context. The score drew from the rich heritage of Nigerian music, with its poignant rhythms and melodies paralleling the emotional contours of the narrative.

Overall, *The General's Son* is an intense exploration of regret, redemption, and self-awareness. I want the audience to leave with a sense of empathy for the General, despite his flaws and faults, and a lingering question—can we break the cycle of brutality, corruption, and abuse of power, or are we doomed to repeat the past? This film is a dark and startling mirror held up to society about the limits and futility of relentless ambition, which I hope will urge introspection, spark conversation, and fuel reconsiderations of the comparative implications of unintended consequences, no matter how justified we believe our actions are.

### *Casting & Direction*

The casting process for my thesis film was unconventional; not by design but also not in itself unique to me as a filmmaker, or the project based on its needs. I was mindful about reflecting both the unique demands of the narrative and the practical constraints of the production. And so even before I finalized my shooting script, I had begun scouting for my three main characters for *The General's Son*: General, Sanyo, and Aida.

### *The General*

The search for an actor who could personify the specific age, accent, and physical requirements of the central character—General—remained an ongoing process for about three months. And although the list of actors who fit the profile and were available and willing to take

on the project, barely grew beyond the earliest list I made; I was careful in making this selection given the balanced thematic import, creative heft, and visceral countenance required of the role. General, as I imagined him, is a cold-blooded dictator who appears on-the-surface to be charismatic, but who has a quietly intimidating voice and presence that sends a completely different message; an absolute psychopath—unassuming yet sinister.

In the 2008 BBC Two TV Series, *House of Saddam*, I found that key elements of the actor who was cast to play the role of Saddam Hussein (particularly his voice), were at variance with those of the real-life dictator. Saddam Hussein, known for his uncompromising sadism, was uncharacteristically a soft-spoken, charming, and even attentively caring man; which was at variance with his public image.<sup>44</sup> His voice and mannerisms seldom matched his ruthlessly despicable actions; to the point that 1,200 hours of recordings of his regime’s cabinet meetings that were captured after he was toppled from power, revealed that he was often jovial, polite, and even apologetic when he—very rarely—interrupted others.<sup>45</sup>

Furthermore, and in a possible illustration of Lima Syndrome, which Jill Seladi-Schulman in *Healthline* explains is the psychological phenomenon in which captors develop sympathy for their hostages, one of his interrogators attested to his “human” side finding him to be charming, nice, funny, and polite.<sup>46</sup> The interrogator even went as far as to reportedly state a preference for spending time with Saddam rather than with George W. Bush!<sup>47</sup> Even though Saddam’s public comportment was entirely at variance with the nature of his atrocities, in my

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<sup>44</sup> Mark Thompson, “Inside Saddam Hussein and His Ba’th Party,” based on an interview with Joseph Sassoon about his book *Saddam Hussein’s Ba’th Party: Inside an Authoritarian Regime*, *Time* (Nation blog), February 15, 2012, accessed December 15, 2024, <https://nation.time.com/2012/02/15/inside-saddam-hussein-and-his-bath-party/>, para. 9.

<sup>45</sup> Thompson, “Inside Saddam Hussein and His Ba’th Party,” para. 10.

<sup>46</sup> Adam Eley and Katie Alston, “The Ex-CIA Agent Who Interrogated Saddam Hussein,” based on an interview on the BBC *Victoria Derbyshire* programme, *BBC.com*, January 4, 2017, accessed December 15, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-38497767>, paras. 11, 12.

<sup>47</sup> Eley and Alston, “The Ex-CIA Agent Who Interrogated Saddam Hussein,” para. 33.

opinion, this made him a perfect character inspiration for an imagined dictator—a Sphinx—let alone a real one. Yet, in *House of Saddam* series, he was portrayed as an imposing man with a deep voice and a steely reserve that instantly made it palpably predictable to the audience what he was capable of.

In the political drama, *House of Cards*, created by Beau Willimon, the character *Frank Underwood* proves to be the classic sociopath. Yet his understated seemingly affable demeanor hides a deadly conniving brutality that I feel best represents the archetypal dictator. He is a charismatic, dignified, and refined politician; one who is unbelievably draconian and unremorsefully ruthless in his pursuit of absolute power and control than anyone assumes he is.

### *Process*

A hybrid approach, combining open auditions for certain roles and pre-selection casting for others, allowed for a balance between discovering fresh talent and ensuring experienced actors filled key positions. This dual strategy was instrumental in achieving a nuanced and compelling ensemble that could bring the allegorical and emotionally layered narrative to life. The main cast consisted of two professional ACTRA (Alliance of Canadian Cinema, Television, and Radio Artists) performers, three amateur supporting cast, and two minor non-actors. The cast and I met primarily on Zoom, dedicating significant time to exploring, questioning, and discussing the characters and their awareness within the story's framework. Securing a talented cast seemed like a tangible way to ensure the project's success, given the film's reliance on strong character-driven performances. However, this decision inadvertently sidelined the equally important task of building a cohesive, skilled crew, leading to several challenges that rippled through production.

Additionally, I was compelled to power through a couple of key casting choices, for both Aida and Sanyo, which unexpectedly fell through at crucial junctures causing me to scramble for replacements. These caused delays and further stressors, as I had to be resourceful in managing these setbacks and ultimately recasting suitable actors to step in on cue.

## Pre-Production Prep

### *Location Scouting*

The decision to pursue a location shoot rather than constructing a set at York University's MMS Cinespace studio was a pivotal one, informed by considerations of cost, practicality, and creative vision. While studio environments offer unparalleled control over variables—such as lighting, sound, and design; the financial and logistical demands of creating an elaborate set proved to be prohibitive for the project. Building a set to match the scale and detail required by the project's vision presented significant financial challenges. The envisioned set was far from minimal; it needed to convey a sense of authenticity and atmosphere integral to the narrative. Constructing such a set would not only involve securing a wide range of materials but also hiring skilled professionals to design, build, and decorate the space to meet artistic specifications. In contrast, scouting for an existing location that was already furnished and aligned with the aesthetic and thematic needs of the story significantly reduced these costs.

Time was a critical factor for *The General's Son* because I had a tight production schedule. The time required to design, construct, and decorate (and eventually tear down) a set from scratch would have added considerable delays to the production timeline. Contrarily, a location shoot offered the advantage of immediacy, once a suitable location was secured, minimal adjustments were required before filming could commence.

The complexity of assembling all the elements required for the film demanded more time than I had initially allowed for. Reflecting on the experience, I realize that my inflexibility with scheduling was a significant limitation. This self-imposed pressure reduced my flexibility and openness to exploring alternative creative directions the film could have taken. The decision to delay filming from the summer of 2023, due to an unavoidable life-threatening medical

procedure, added to the strain. As a result, I felt immense pressure to proceed with the shoot, driven by the limited availability of film equipment and the prioritization of access for undergraduate students to the equipment room in the fall term. In hindsight, a more adaptive approach would have not only eased the logistical challenges but also allowed the project to evolve more organically.

From a creative standpoint, finding a close-as-can-be real-world location that embodied the story's aesthetic offered an authenticity (even if not as envisioned) that could be challenging to replicate in a constructed set. In essence, it was easier to accept and try to enhance a space that did its preexisting best to accommodate my vision, than to create my proposed vision on the budget and time constraints I was working within. The textures, imperfections, and lived-in quality of a pre-existing space provided an organic richness which aligned with the project's narrative and thematic goals.

The arduous search for the perfect location took me on a journey spanning several regions, from Toronto to the Waterloo Region where I currently reside, to Ingersoll, and ultimately back to Toronto. This process became emblematic of the tension between the grand ambition of my vision for the project and the logistical realities of its execution. Balancing these aspirations with the practical demands of filmmaking proved to be an elusive challenge, as the projected scope of the project often diverged from its actual limitations. Along the way, I was eventually forced to confront a fundamental issue rooted in my inexperience: the ambitious—yet naive desire to create a student film that ventured beyond the typical boundaries of such projects. This aspiration unintentionally blurred the lines between a traditional student film and an independent production, revealing the unexpected complexities of undertaking a venture that far exceeded the conventional framework of student filmmaking.

### *Wardrobe & Costume Design*

There was the imagined style vision for each character, and then there was the reality of the constraint of my budget. The fundamental pieces of African men clothing like the Agbada (sometimes referred to as the Boubou), Niger Delta suit, and the Kaftan, among other things, have stayed the same. The variety and experimentation in fabric textures, and the use and styling of embellishments like appliqués, beading, decorative stitching, embroidery, jewelry, ribbon trims, studs, and so on, have steadily changed the way West Africans have come to view and appreciate African fashion as a powerful statement of culture, identity, and representation.

### *General*

Starting with the General, my plan was to incorporate a mix of African styles pulling from all regions of the continent to reflect the composite makeup of the character and the different dictators he embodies. I was intentional about making his fashion “an African thing”, as I personally find the continuous evolution of African fashion fascinating. The General was styled with the look and manner of a wealthy, influential, and fashionable Nigerian statesman, to express his power of presence, poise, mature expression. My choice was the Agbada with some inspiration from Nigerian actor and style icon, Richard Mofe-Damijo.



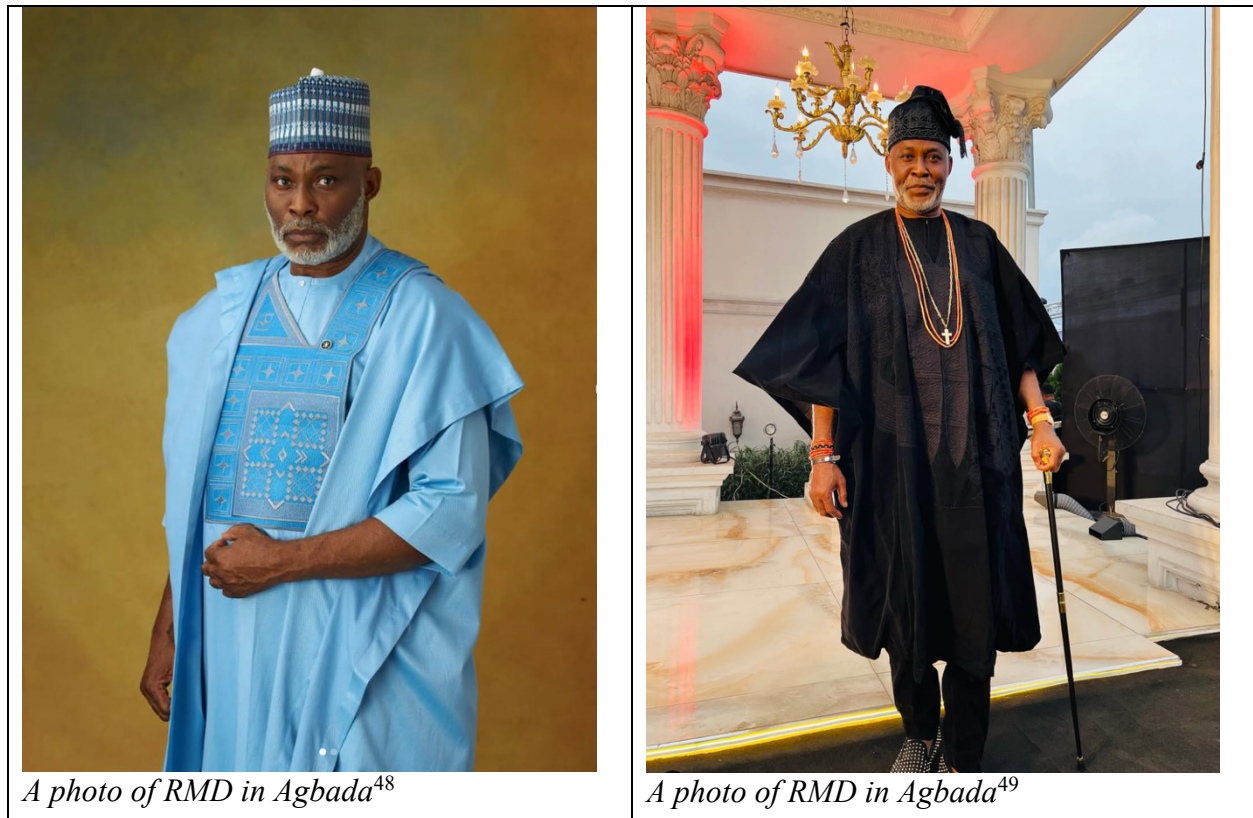


Figure 1: General's Wardrobe Inspiration

### *Aida*

For Aida, I wanted to go with the current trend of a younger, and more fashion-forward, style. To achieve this, I drew from dominant Nigerian multiculturally-evolved kaftan which has become a staple of contemporary fashion-conscious Millennials and Gen Zs in Nigeria. However, my limited budget meant I had to find creative ways to embellish Aida's eccentricities, colorful expressions, and flair. For this, I drew inspiration from one of the most popular social media influencers in Nigeria, and a notable fashion trendsetter, Ebuka Obi-Uchendu.

<sup>48</sup> Richard Mofe-Damijo, "A photo of RMD in Agbada," *Instagram*, April 10, 2024, accessed December 16, 2024, [https://www.instagram.com/p/C5k3n7PIQdp/?hl=en&img\\_index=1](https://www.instagram.com/p/C5k3n7PIQdp/?hl=en&img_index=1).

<sup>49</sup> Richard Mofe-Damijo, "A photo of RMD in Agbada," *Instagram*, August 14, 2023, accessed December 16, 2024, [https://www.instagram.com/p/Cv7AoDWIWgX/?hl=en&img\\_index=1](https://www.instagram.com/p/Cv7AoDWIWgX/?hl=en&img_index=1).



Figure 2: Aida's Wardrobe Inspiration

In the end, I came close to my vision for styling The General and Aida. A dear friend, Ire-ne “Reney-The-MC” Edebiri, who works primarily as a Master of Ceremony and Compère for weddings, parties, and other special events, came to the rescue. He offered to loan me any piece I wanted from his very extensive and impressive wardrobe. So, in the end, the General and Aida ended up with these iconic pieces among others.

<sup>50</sup> Ebuka Obi-Uchendu, “A photo of Ebuka in Agbada,” *Instagram*, July 23, 2022, accessed December 16, 2024, [https://www.instagram.com/p/CgXYrrZtx7f/?img\\_index=1](https://www.instagram.com/p/CgXYrrZtx7f/?img_index=1).

<sup>51</sup> Obi-Uchendu, Ebuka. “A photo of Ebuka in Agbada.” *Instagram*, September 25, 2022, accessed December 16, 2024, [https://www.instagram.com/p/Ci8FshqtR35/?img\\_index=1](https://www.instagram.com/p/Ci8FshqtR35/?img_index=1).



*General's Opening Outfit<sup>52</sup>*



*Aida's Opening Outfit<sup>53</sup>*

Figure 3: Opening Outfits

### *Sanyo*

Sanyo came to me as a fully formed character, with his style seamlessly integrated into both his personality and identity. His physical traits, such as skin tone, physique and build, height, weight, and even movement, were integral to his conception as a character. His look was simple, a dark-colored turtleneck top and a complementary dark-colored suit. It was a style he conceived and adopted as his personal statement: utilitarian and pragmatic. This understated and

<sup>52</sup> Ire-ne Edebiri – Reney The MC, “Reney The MC in Yellow Agbada,” *Instagram*, July 23, 2023, accessed December 16, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CvDDXJzuZGc/?hl=en>.

<sup>53</sup> Ire-ne Edebiri – Reney The MC, “Reney The MC in Red Agbada,” *Instagram*, January 22, 2023, accessed December 16, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CnuWEREKcJZ/?hl=en>.



unchanging look was devoid of any show of power, flair, or ostentation, unlike Aida. So, while it felt like almost everything about Sanyo's personality and role changed when the story became an allegory, my original visualization of his look, as a character, did not need to change.



*Man in a Suit and Turtleneck*<sup>54</sup>

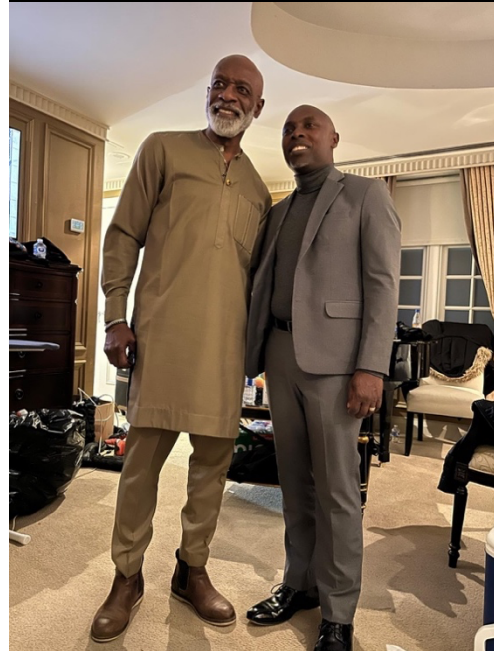


Figure 4: L - Sanyo's Wardrobe Inspiration.

| R - Production Images of General & Sanyo

<sup>54</sup> Salva Jovells, "Man in a Suit and Turtleneck," *Hockerty Blog*, June 27, 2024, accessed December 16, 2024, <https://www.hockerty.com/en-ca/blog/turtleneck-with-suit>.

## *Zibet*

Styling Zibet took a lot of thought because she appeared in just two scenes, and everything about her needed to make a statement about her role in the story. Apart from being one of the many bones of contention in the already strained father-son relationship, I wanted to showcase her instinctive and entrenched personal ambition; and how she viewed herself in her new usurping role as the General's wife—not his mistress.



Figure 5: Production Images of Zibet

Her outfit was chosen to reflect a woman who wants to flaunt her new beau to an ex-lover who, perhaps, treated her badly. Appearing uninvited and scantily dressed in revealing nightwear during a meeting between the General and his son was also a territorial message to Aida. Zibet is not only secure in her position as a wife, and perhaps a beneficiary of the General's immense wealth, but also confident in her power over the General, a power that surpasses Aida's.

## Female Guards

Because I imagined Sanyo as the architect, overseer, and leader of General's squad of personal guards, it made creative sense to imagine that Sanyo would also assign an all-black version of his outfit as what the female guards should be dressed in and be known for.



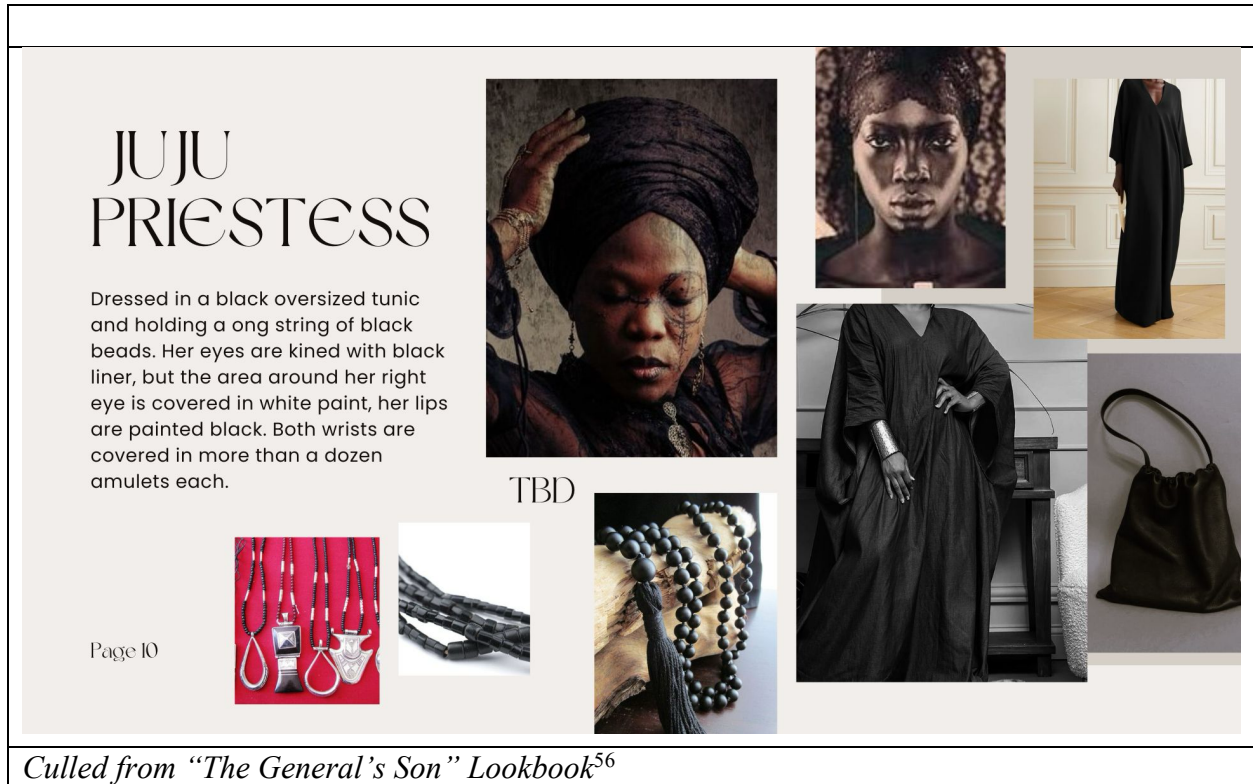
Figure 6: Female Guards' Inspiration

<sup>55</sup> Linda Mtoba (@Linda\_Mtoba), "Project Runway SA Minishoot with photography by @mini\_fotography," *Twitter*, July 3, 2018, accessed December 16, 2024, [https://x.com/Linda\\_Mtoba/status/1014206313658765312/photo/1](https://x.com/Linda_Mtoba/status/1014206313658765312/photo/1); Maristella Okpala, "Beautiful Fulani/Hausa Head Wrap," *Instagram*, July 22, 2022, accessed December 16, 2024, [https://www.instagram.com/mariselle4/p/CgUtnCFryY/?img\\_index=1](https://www.instagram.com/mariselle4/p/CgUtnCFryY/?img_index=1); "HUGO BOSS Jiadora Belted Notch Lapel Blazer," *Dealmoon*, accessed December 16, 2024, <https://www.dealmoon.com/en/product/hugo-boss-jiadora-belted-notch-lapel-blazer/5240927>; Kgalalelo Pono, "Peacoat Outfit," *Pinterest*, accessed December 16, 2024, <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/408842472436927400/>; "Y-Z Unisex Camouflage Fringe Fluffy Soft Warm Large Thick Winter Cowl Infinity Scarf Shawl Wrap for Men and Women," *Alibaba*, accessed December 16, 2024, [https://www.alibaba.com/product-detail/Y-Z-Unisex-Camouflage-Fringe-Fluffy\\_1600494677007.html](https://www.alibaba.com/product-detail/Y-Z-Unisex-Camouflage-Fringe-Fluffy_1600494677007.html); "ALAÏA Black Cross-Over Jacket," *SSENSE*, accessed December 16, 2024, <https://www.ssense.com/en-ca/women/product/alaia/black-cross-over-jacket/14639481>.



## Priestess

Because she was brought in to express the impending graveness of General's imminent and ominous verdict on Aida, the priestess was styled to instill fear in Aida.



Culled from “The General’s Son” Lookbook<sup>56</sup>

Figure 7: The Priestess Inspiration

<sup>56</sup> The Bead Chest, “225 Vintage Black Cylindrical Nigerian Glass Beads: African Seed Beads Nigeria Glass Bead Strand (GHN-CYL-BLK-177),” *Etsy*, accessed December 16, 2024, <https://www.etsy.com/ca/listing/518395236/225-vintage-black-cylindrical-nigerian>; “Moonlight Benjamin,” *last.fm*, accessed December 16, 2024, <https://www.last.fm/music/Moonlight+Benjamin/+images/7276f9a1a525f00cb1502648d0c54f36>; Garden of Earthly Delights, “Matte Black Onyx 108 Bead Mala Necklace,” *Etsy*, accessed December 16, 2024, <https://www.etsy.com/ca/listing/1528223100/custom-order-for-yamie>; XplusWear, “Plus Size Casual Dress Navy Blue Tencel Denim Kaftan V-Neck Maxi Dress Navy Blue-5XL/28,” *Pinterest*, accessed December 16, 2024, <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/483222235034691938/>; Henüz Yorum Yazılmamış, “UNTIMELY V-Yaka Detaylı & Astarlı Oversize Siyah Krep Elbise,” *Trendyol*, accessed December 16, 2024, <https://www.trendyol.com/pd/untimely/v-yaka-detayli-astarli-oversize-siyah-krep-elbise-p-867168184>.

## The Use Of AI

### *Context*

The decision to use Artificial Intelligence (AI) in my thesis project was inspired by my encounter with the work of an incredibly talented visual artist, Malik Afegbua, on LinkedIn. His imagined creative body of work using AI stirred the idea of including AI as a part of my visual design of the film. I contacted him and we talked about how we could integrate my vision with his demonstrably mastered skill in using AI. I created a brief based on our conversations, being made aware of the possibilities and limitations of our plan.

### *The Process*

Afegbua requested a lot of pictures from my chosen cast, professional, amateur, and personal ‘selfie’ pictures taken over their lifetime. The cast sent me as many pictures of themselves (solo and with other people) which I shared with Afegbua, and he carefully chose specific images that reflected the changes that they had physically undergone with age. In the end, the images went as far back as childhood to the present day and showed their facial features from as many angles as possible. The results showed me how powerful a tool AI can be and shifted my skepticism and fear about the impact of AI in film and the arts.

Given the creative world's skepticism about AI, the decision to use generative AI in my film as part of my production design was underscored by my feeling that AI was best used in the hands of a skilled graphic artist to create images that would have taken a lot longer to create without AI, and would have significantly raised my production costs. In this instance, using my main characters' pictures to produce images that placed them in this fictional allegorical world that I had composed—so I could strategically position them on set to bring The General's world



to life—enabled me to achieve a much more impactful introductory context that accelerated the story’s immersive backdrop for the audience.

Additionally, I used the generated AI images in post-production as a way to introduce the audience to the grandness of the General's world before they eventually meet him. And so, the incorporation of AI-generated images as part of the production design for my film was a deliberate choice aimed at balancing creative ambition with practical constraints. By leveraging AI technology, I was able to transform photographs of the main characters into compelling visual representations that seamlessly integrated them into the fictional, allegorical world I had crafted. This approach not only brought the General’s world to life on set but also offered a cost-effective and time-efficient solution to a traditionally labor-intensive aspect of production design. But these practical considerations helped justify my decision as follows:

**1. Integrating Fictional Worlds with Real Characters:** The use of AI allowed for the creation of highly personalized and context-specific images that connected the characters directly to the narrative’s allegorical setting. These images served as immersive visual elements that enhanced the realism and depth of the fictional world. Without AI, achieving this level of customization and detail would have required significant manual effort, relying on traditional digital art techniques or elaborate hand-drawn designs. AI provided a streamlined process to conceptualize and produce these visuals while maintaining the artistic intent behind the narrative.

**2. Addressing Creative Skepticism Toward AI:** The use of AI in creative fields often invites skepticism, with critics questioning its impact on artistry and originality. However, this project demonstrated that AI, when placed in the hands of a skilled graphic artist, becomes an enhancing tool rather than a substitute for human creativity. The artist’s expertise was integral to guiding the AI’s outputs, ensuring that the images aligned with the project’s aesthetic and thematic goals.

This collaboration between human creativity and technological capability highlights how AI can augment rather than replace the artistry inherent in filmmaking.

**3. Efficiency and Cost-Effectiveness:** From a production standpoint, AI significantly reduced the time and costs associated with creating intricate and compelling visual elements. Traditional methods of designing and rendering these images would have required extensive labor, time, and resources, driving up production costs and potentially delaying the project timeline. By utilizing AI, the team was able to produce high-quality visuals at a fraction of the cost and time, reallocating those savings to other critical aspects of the film, such as set design, cinematography, and post-production.

**4. Enhancing On-Set Immersion:** Placing these AI-generated images as visible props/elements on set created a tangible connection between the characters and the fictional world, deepening the immersion for both the audience and the actors. This decision reinforced the allegorical nature of the narrative by providing visual anchors that reflected the underlying themes and symbolism of the story. The images acted as an integral part of the set design, elevating the overall production value and contributing to the storytelling.

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### *Finally*

As such, the decision to incorporate generative AI in the production design was not made lightly; but rather as a strategic response to the challenges of balancing creativity, budget, and time. AI served as an enabler, allowing the artistic vision to flourish while mitigating the logistical constraints typically associated with such ambitious projects. Far from diminishing the creative process, AI enhanced it by providing a dynamic and efficient tool that complemented the work of skilled artists. This experience underscores the potential of AI as an invaluable asset in filmmaking; particularly when its application is guided by thoughtful and intentional artistic choices.

## The AI Brief

Different types of images will form the 'picture wall collection' of this General in his study.



Figure 8: AI Image: The General - Multiple portraits of the man at different times.



Figure 9: AI Image of General & Aida - The final shot of the film featured a blended image of the General at Aida's age, created by visual artists using photos of both actors.





Figure 10: AI Image of General & Sons - A portrait of the General and his two sons dressed in ceremonial military uniforms.



Figure 11: AI Image of General and allied World Leaders at different ages (A).





Figure 12: AI Image of General and allied World Leaders at different ages (B).





Figure 13: AI Image of General and allied World Leaders at different ages (C).



Figure 14: AI Image of Glory Days - Consists of images from the different decades of General's 45-year dictatorship (A).





Figure 15: AI Image of Glory Days - Consists of images from the different decades of General's 45-year dictatorship (B).

## Production

### *Overview*

The first two days of our three-day production took place at the Windsor Arms Hotel in Toronto. I chose this location because its high-end furnishings and decor significantly reduced the need for additional production design, providing essential props and an authentic, luxurious atmosphere. Key spaces in the hotel were identified, and I obtained permission to use them for specific scenes. The Presidential Suite served as the backdrop for four distinct scenes, while the hotel's tearoom became the setting for one of the production's most visually stunning moments: the Dining Room scene. However, the height and limited space in the suite, coupled with the presence of filming equipment, created a more claustrophobic environment than anticipated. This constraint, while initially challenging, inspired a creative shift toward tighter, more intimate shots rather than the wide, grandeur-revealing frames I had initially envisioned.

The production moved to Glendon Manor on York University's Glendon Campus on the final day. This historic structure, originally built as an elegant suburban country estate, embodied the exterior of the General's mansion. The opening scene was filmed on the grounds of the campus, utilizing one of the two large black SUV rentals. Filming inside the SUV was logistically challenging, as the vehicle could not accommodate the director of photography, sound team, and director simultaneously. This required the actors to rely heavily on rehearsals and precise delivery to ensure quick successful takes. Despite these logistical hurdles, the beauty and serenity of the location (and its immediate environs) made for seamless and undisturbed filming: adding depth and authenticity to the production.

## *Lessons & Regrets*

Filming began chaotically, plagued by delays that cost me the time needed to accommodate all the shots I had painstakingly planned during pre-production. We had to make decisions on the spot about which shots to cut. However, this was in no way the fault of the camera team or crew. The most stressful and mentally draining part of the entire production process was waiting to receive the AI-generated images from Malik. Since the AI images were provided as an in-kind contribution, I felt powerless to place demands on him, especially because he had explained he had a very busy schedule. Not only did I want to work with him, but he was also the only visual artist of that skill level willing to take on the job at no cost. As a result, I felt both grateful and truly powerless.

The AI images arrived about twelve hours before the production call time on the first day of filming. However, it was the middle of the night, and the printers wouldn't open for another seven hours. By the time I picked up the images and arrived on set, my crew had been waiting for over five hours. This set a frustrated tone from the start, and although I apologized and explained, I understood their irritation. The delay on day one created a ripple effect, causing further delays and sending the entire production into a tailspin that I struggled to manage.

Adding to their collective frustration was the sheer number of students who unexpectedly showed up in the presidential suite. When I began pre-production for my thesis film in the fall term of my second year, I set my sights on hiring an external independent crew. However, I had missed the MFA production priority window in the summer and could not secure firm commitments from my cohort members due to scheduling conflicts in the fall. Working with the independent filmmakers I had engaged became both daunting and suspicious, as the budget for my student film ballooned with every meeting. By late January, just two weeks before filming,

the budget had increased by seventy-five percent (75%). Desperately, my co-producer and I reached out to Prof. Djigo for guidance. He immediately identified the problem: by hiring professionals outside the York student body, I had inadvertently turned my student project into a commercial production.

At that point, I wished I could pause production to reorganize my crew. Unfortunately, the Windsor Arms Hotel, who had only agreed to let us shoot on their premises in February because it was an off-peak period, warned us that delaying would not be possible without incurring additional fees. Reassembling a student crew under tight time constraints was challenging, but many passionate students and recent graduates joined the project. However, in our rush to repopulate the crew, we overlooked the need to control the number of people who responded to our call. As a result, over thirty students showed up in the presidential suite of the Windsor Arms Hotel. I should have delegated this organizational task to a specific person, but that never happened. The urgency and immense pressure under which the crew was assembled meant that we skipped the careful selection process necessary to ensure synergy, especially with such a large group. This left room for troublemakers to capitalize on the frustration caused by the delays, creating additional compounded issues. Disorderliness breeds both intentional and unintentional chaos. Despite these challenges, the core crew, though frustrated, showed up on time every day and worked tirelessly to make the most of a tight schedule. For their dedication, I remain deeply grateful.

## *Post-Production*

With production now done, it took about two weeks to go through all the footage and see how well we did. Given the delays and chaos, I was very worried about the footage we had collected, keeping in mind the shots we sacrificed to get all the essential coverage. I reached out to an offline editor who created the first assembly of footage.

Acting on the instructive feedback and advice from my Supervisory Committee, I engaged the services of a highly skilled editor who specialized in narrative drama. Entering this phase of production on this film, I held my breath and braced for cutting to come. I wanted to and, perhaps somewhere deep inside me, I hoped I could hold on to the things I was insistent on covering during filming, thinking it would make the reality of the film close to what I had envisioned while writing. But all those delays caught up with us in post-production and it became clear that to etch out something I would be proud of presenting, I must view the cutting and re-arrangement process itself as the savior of the story and all my hard labor and sacrifice.

The film went through multiple iterations once editing began. During production, I prioritized capturing several key shots, particularly in the opening scenes, as I believed they were crucial to the film's visual storytelling. However, due to the loss of daylight and the challenges of maneuvering the camera inside the SUV, we were unable to capture all the supporting shots necessary to give those key shots the context and relevance they needed to make sense in the final cut. Every scene went through extensive cuts and rearrangements with each iteration as I became open to feedback from people outside my supervisory committee. For instance, the idea of opening the film with a news report voiceover came from a colleague, who suggested it would help introduce and explain the General in this allegorical world. I was forced to reimagine each scene—and indeed the entire story—within the limits of the available footage, rather than relying

on what was originally written. This was a transformative process because I learned to prioritize the overall goal of telling the story, even when key shots had to be cut. I realized I was emotionally attached to some of these shots because of the great effort it took to capture them. Feedback from various perspectives, such as during the viewing session with my cohort, proved invaluable. It reminded me that the story was more important than saving my "darling" shots. This experience reinforced the importance of adaptability and staying focused on the core narrative's essence.

One of the most memorable moments of the production was receiving the in-kind grant from Keslow Camera. I was thrilled to secure this support after thoroughly researching their equipment and carefully selecting what I wanted to work with. In the end, the value of the equipment rental provided by Keslow Camera far exceeded the grant's stated amount. My camera of choice, the Arri Alexa Mini LF, was not a familiar piece of equipment to the DoP, but they were excited about taking on the challenge to experiment with it. Keslow Camera's generosity and flexibility allowed the DoP to be adventurous with additional accessories than originally envisioned. As the director, I was willing to allow this experimentation on my film project; partly because I had no more wiggle room left in my production schedule for yet another search for a DoP and I was resolutely determined to not change my choice of camera. While researching cameras, I had watched multiple review videos that suggested that the Arri Alexa Mini LF was foolproof which made me confident that even in my limited knowledge of cameras, this camera could produce impressively usable footage no matter how badly formatted it is. Keslow Camera's generosity in equipment and accessories selection gave me a cushion of confidence to proceed with my DoP and my camera of choice.



Another unforgettable highlight was the process of color grading the film using the in-kind grant from Alter Ego Studios. Initially, I stubbornly believed that the most important part of the production process was the choice of camera and equipment. However, my in-person exposure to the power of high-end color grading drastically shifted my perspective. The colorist reaffirmed that my camera choice facilitated their work but emphasized that the camera is not the most important consideration when preparing for production. Analyzing each scene and determining the appropriate color tone was an invaluable experience.

Before my appointment at the studio, I received an email requesting my choices of visual tones. This threw me into a tailspin, as I realized I had no idea what those were. While I appreciated the camera's output quality, I recognized that I had overlooked color choices during pre-production. Researching and discussing color grading with my editor helped me understand the significant difference that thoughtful color choices in production design, costume, and lighting could have made. Reflecting on the mistakes I made due to inexperience, time constraints, and limited resources was immensely instructive. I now know what I will do differently in the future.

I thought I understood the basics of using color in film to enhance characters' appearances—such as skin tone, facial features, and correcting lighting errors. However, Alter Ego's generosity in welcoming me to their studio transformed my perspective as a filmmaker. They demonstrated the practical importance of integrating color themes into storytelling through production design, lighting, and costume design. Most importantly, I learned how the final phase of color grading ties all these elements together, achieving truly remarkable creative results in filmmaking. Although I wished I had put more detail into my planning and design, I was grateful for the opportunity to see this theory I had studied over time come to life in a deeply practical

and meaningful way. They allowed me to observe, ask questions, take extensive notes, and gain the knowledge I needed to make informed decisions about color tone for both my current and future films. Watching the colorist manipulate the tools and bring the visuals to life was nothing short of magical.

This surreal experience gave me a profound appreciation for the artistry of color in filmmaking and ignited a desire to explore it further. This newfound interest has even led to ongoing discussions about me pursuing an arts-grant-funded internship for professional development with Alter Ego Studios; focusing on the role of color in production design, costume design, lighting, and color grading for my next film project. Despite faculty members cautioning my cohort not to treat our film projects as the culmination of everything we learned in the MFA program, I found myself making that very mistake. Yet, through this process, I discovered more about myself and the triggers that drive me professionally than I ever have in a single experience.

Finding music for the project was an unexpected yet rewarding part of this process. Initially, I had selected songs for the film and obtained permission to license them from the artists. However, these tracks didn't align with the project's tone and theme. Unsure of the sound I wanted, I sought feedback from my dear friend, Obinna Okerekeocha, a multi-talented artist and musician. In response, Obinna offered to create original soundtracks for the film as his in-kind contribution. After several conversations with my editor and me, he composed a collection of eight original pieces. This was my first time working with custom music, deciding how to use, isolate, and rearrange tracks in layers to suit specific parts of the film. It was a vastly different experience from simply purchasing music from a licensing website and plugging it into the timeline.

Additionally, I discovered Filmstro through my sound editor and mixer, who recommended it for its ability to isolate and manipulate music layers. On Filmstro, I found a song I felt was perfect for the closing scene. Experimenting with its features allowed me to customize the song's tone and flow, depending on the flexibility the producer had incorporated. This process was incredibly enriching, as it helped me explore my creativity and understand my limitations.

### *Conclusion*

I am very proud of how this film turned out because of the effort invested in it and the lessons learned from the challenges faced. The process not only strengthened personal and professional relationships but also fostered new collaborations, making this journey incredibly rewarding. These experiences have taught me invaluable and powerful lessons. This journey also revealed important truths about me, both professionally and personally.

One of the most significant lessons was the need to dissociate myself from the story after completing the writing process. A great deal of personal emotion goes into creating characters and stories; but working on *The General's Son* required me to step away from the narrative as a writer. Instead, I had to approach the production with the focus, attention to detail, and leadership required of a director. Balancing my roles as producer, writer, and director was challenging, often leading to internal conflicts that I was not fully aware of at the time. Upon reflection, I realized much of the pressure I felt in pre-production and on set stemmed from these clashing roles.

I recall a YouTube interview with British actor and filmmaker Hugo Blick<sup>57</sup> that I watched while conducting research for an assignment during Prof. Djigo's *Directing Actors* class. Blick was asked how he balances his multiple roles on projects, including writer, director, producer, and actor. His response resonated deeply with me and has provided clarity throughout my filmmaking journey. From the time I watched the interview to the post-production of *The General's Son* and my second film, *We Die Here*, his insights have continued to help me better understand my limitations, strengths, and areas for growth.

Delegation was another significant hurdle. On *The General's Son*, I felt immense pressure to take on everything myself, driven by concerns that others might not fully commit to their roles. This worry was amplified by the financial investment I had made in the project. Consequently, I often found myself managing logistical issues instead of focusing on directing. Crew members frequently approached me with problems, and instead of delegating, I took on these tasks myself.

Given the same circumstances again, I would approach things differently. One key change would be to meet with my crew before production day to express my expectations and listen to theirs. While I focused extensively on meeting with my actors virtually and in person, I neglected to do the same with my crew. If I had met with them as individual departments and as a collective production team, it would have better aligned us and likely improved the overall process. Conversations with experienced producer-writer-directors have since helped me understand that this is a common challenge. They emphasized the importance of viewing a

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<sup>57</sup> BAFTA Guru, "Hugo Blick: Television Mini Masterclass", *YouTube*, Nov 7, 2012, accessed on December 16, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pc5i4c7auJU&t=220s>.

project through the lens of each specific role and adapting to the needs of the production at different stages.

This experience has been both a blessing and an education. It has taught me to respect each role I play, approach them independently, and give each the attention it deserves. Moving forward, I aim to monitor my emotional triggers, implement systems to manage stress, and collaborate with clarity about my expectations. By addressing these lessons, I hope to avoid fear-driven micromanagement and create an environment where both my collaborators and I can thrive.

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