

**Thinking Strings Media & Memento Film  
Present**

# **BUDDHA IN AFRICA**

a film by Nicole Schafer

**HD Documentary: 90 min Feature/52min Broadcast (South Africa/Sweden) 2019**

**Production Companies:** Thinking Strings Media & Memento Film

**International Sales:** CAT & Docs

**World Premiere: Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Festival 2019**

**Sydney Film Festival 2019**

**South African Premiere: Encounters Documentary Festival Opening Night**

**Durban International Film Festival 2019**

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## LOGLINE

In a Chinese Buddhist orphanage in Africa, a Malawian teenager finds himself torn between his African roots and Chinese upbringing.

## SYNOPSIS

Enock Alu, a Malawian teenager growing up in a Chinese Buddhist orphanage, feels torn between his African roots and Chinese upbringing. Once the star performer with dreams of becoming a martial arts hero like Jet Li, Enock, in his final year of school, has to make some tough decisions about his future. Will he return to his relatives in his home village or study abroad in Taiwan? Set against China's expanding influence on the continent, *Buddha in Africa* provides a unique insight into the forces of cultural soft power on the identity and imagination of an African boy and his school friends growing up between two cultures.

## STORY OUTLINE

Enock Alu (16) is one of three hundred orphans from rural Malawi growing up in the Amitofo Care Centre (ACC), a charity-based NGO aimed at using Chinese culture and Buddhism to uplift the lives of vulnerable children in Africa.

Enock is our guide into the world of the Buddhist orphanage and the strict discipline of the Confucian value system of the Chinese. At the Centre, the day starts at 4:30 am with the sound of a Buddhist gong summoning children to prayers. This is followed by morning exercises, breakfast and then children rush off to the Yuan Tong School where their Malawian curriculum also includes learning about Chinese culture and history and how to read, write and speak Mandarin.

At the age of seven Enock was one of the first children to be recruited from his village and offered a place at ACC, when founder Master Hui Li, a Buddhist monk from Taiwan, opened it in 2003. At the time Enock was living under the care of his grandmother after his mother passed away and his father had left and re-married another woman. Enock explains how terrified he was at first, because the local villagers had told him the “Chinese eat people.”

As a young boy Enock was one of the organisation's top performers with dreams of becoming a martial arts hero like the famous Chinese superstar, Jet Li. His kung fu coach, Xiao Bei, who trained him since he was little and is like a father figure to him, says: “He was lovely and also the youngest in our group, so he was very eye-catching. When it was Alu's turn to go on stage, people kept calling his name “Alu, Alu, ...”

Every year children are taken on a fundraising tour to showcase their skills in kung-fu and Chinese song for the international Buddhist community. Enock and his school friends have travelled extensively around the world, including Taiwan, Hong Kong, China, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Japan, Cambodia, New-Zealand, Australia, USA and South-America.

The second part of the film shows how Enock starts to feel increasingly alienated from his own culture and relatives in Malawi. Once a year students are allowed to go back to their villages for a two-week holiday. Enock comes from the Yao tribe, a minority group in Malawi that follow the Islam religion. But Enock is not able to participate in any of these customs and has lost the ability to communicate in his mother tongue “Yao”. Although he can understand the language, he struggles to respond and often feels left out of conversations when Yao is spoken, as opposed to Chichewa, the national language of Malawi.

The final part of the film follows Enock through his final year at school as he starts to plan for his future and finds himself torn between returning to his village to rekindle his lost ties with his relatives or going abroad to study in Taiwan.

The film offers a snapshot of one person's experience into the expanding missions of Master Hui Li whose vision it is to eventually have a Centre in every African country in future.

## **DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT**

I first came across the story of the Chinese Buddhist orphanage while I was living in Malawi, producing features for Reuters *Africa Journal*. I was working on a story about orphans at the time that Madonna was adopting her second child, Mercy. At this time Malawi and other parts of Africa, were experiencing a rapid influx of Chinese investment and Chinese nationals - following the formalising of Malawi's diplomatic ties with the People's Republic of China. I felt this story would be a fascinating lens through which to view and engage in the debates around the implications of China's involvement in Africa.

Western critics were describing it as China's "colonisation" of the African continent or "China's Scramble for Africa." For many African leaders on the other hand, the feeling was that Chinese trade and investment offer a welcome alternative to a dependency on aid from the West.

Malawi is one of the poorest countries in the world. It is dependent on donor aid for most of its annual national budget. The former colonial powers have left countries like Malawi reeling in debt. Its new Asian partner offers trade, not aid. But will it treat Africa all that differently to how the West has?

While most debate around "China in Africa" at the time was focused on the so-called "colonization" of her economies and natural resources, this story showed a unique aspect of China's cultural influence on the continent. I was struck by how this orphanage was strangely reminiscent of the Christian missions during the colonial era – only here African children had Chinese names and instead of learning about the West, they were learning about Chinese culture and history. I felt the orphanage would be the perfect metaphor to explore the growing relationship between China and Africa, but also as a mirror of Western colonialism.

As a white South African my ancestry represents the legacy of colonialism on the continent. From this perspective I was drawn to how this story could help me reflect on my own historical context and questions around feeling like an "outsider" or "foreigner" in my own country.

The story is told from the perspective of Enock and his school-friends. When I was first introduced to Enock, I was captivated by the story of this young Malawian boy who dreamt of becoming a kung fu film star like Jet Li. For so long Africa has been influenced by Western culture, but this story showed how the influence of Chinese culture was shaping the minds and imaginations of a group of African children. I was drawn to how this story could enable me to look at the growing China Africa relationship through the personal dynamics of the Malawian children growing up within the Chinese culture in the family like setting of the orphanage.

As one of the first generations of African children to be raised within the Chinese culture, I was curious to know how this upbringing had impacted their identity, especially the younger children who came from their home villages at the age of five with little time to know their Malawian culture.

I discovered that while Enock, at the age of 12, had already travelled extensively to nearly every corner of the world, he had little recollection of his personal background. He didn't know much about who his parents were, how his mother died and had never seen a photograph of his parents before. So the early stages of my filmmaking with Enock involved initiating this process of reflection into his past.

As filming progressed I was interested to see how Enock and his friends were starting to question their Chinese upbringing and formulate their own ideas and identity's. Especially Enock, who challenges the monk in surprising ways. Some of the reasons Enock gives for not wanting to go to Taiwan to study; resonate with some of the questions being asked within the greater development debate. While there is the expectation from the monk that the students go overseas to gain skills and experience and then bring them back to develop the country, Enock questions how they will be able to develop the country if they come back as "outsiders".

I feel Enock's internal conflict of trying to hold onto his own culture and then the sacrifices that come with embracing the opportunities afforded by the Chinese, in many ways reflects the dilemma around the future of the African continent. If our identities and bonds with our communities are fractured, can we aid true development? Or are we simply perpetuating the cycles of the past on a continent that has a long history of foreign conquest and domination?

## **THE AFRICAN CHILD**

Enock's story provides a valuable insight into the challenges affecting vulnerable children in Sub-Saharan Africa and the complexities of trying to improve the situation. Enock is one of nearly 1,8 million vulnerable children in Malawi, many of whom are orphaned and exposed to various forms of abuse, exploitation and lack of access to basic services such as healthcare and education.

When I was working on the initial video feature about orphans in Malawi, I was looking into different orphan care models in the country. According to official government policy, orphanages are supposed to be a last resort in the care of orphans. The "Community Based Organisation" (CBO), an extension of the traditional "extended family" model, is the preferred means of orphan care. This model promotes children to grow up within their own community and culture rather than being taken into a foreign environment. However, children growing up in the village CBO model are not always able to afford schooling, clothing or food and are often forced into exploitative jobs in their quest to survive.

Despite government policy, I discovered numerous foreign orphanages, relying on foreign fundraising, and promoting different cultural practices, including Turkish Muslim, Dutch Reformed Christian, a Jewish Kabbalistic organisation and then the Chinese Buddhist orphanage.

I found that the concept of the CBO was largely ineffective compared to some of these foreign orphanages, since most CBO's received little financial support from government but were expected to raise funds within their own poor communities. Foreign orphanages had access to vast wealth from tax incentives and donations from various religious organisations abroad.

The Malawian government in partnership with various stakeholders and members of civil society are actively involved in efforts to improve the livelihoods of orphans and vulnerable children in the country. Malawi is also part of the International Convention of the Rights of the Child and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.

## **THE AMITOFO CARE CENTRE**

The Amitofo Care Centre (ACC) is a widely supported international, non-governmental, Buddhist, charity-based organisation founded by Master Hui Li, a highly respected Buddhist monk from Taiwan. Master Hui Li is also known as the "African monk" for his efforts to support vulnerable children across Southern-Africa. His mission is to spread Buddhism and Chinese culture around Africa and his vision is to have an institution such as ACC in every African country in future. ACC in Malawi was founded in 2003 and has since also established branches in Lesotho, Swaziland, Mozambique, Namibia, Botswana and several more planned around the continent.

Malawi is one of several African countries in 2008 that were forced to give up their long-standing diplomatic relations with Taiwan in favour of China. China still considers Taiwan a part of its own territory and in line with its "One China" policy does not permit any relations with countries that recognise Taiwan as an independent state. In accordance with this, ACC was redefined as a "Chinese Buddhist institution" when Malawi entered relations with China in 2008. The Chinese government now provides assistance with volunteers coming from Mainland China to teach Mandarin at the school. The majority of its funding still comes from public donations from the international Buddhist community.

The origins of ACC can be traced back to a Buddhist monastery in Bronkspuit just outside Pretoria, in South Africa. The opulent Nan Hua Buddhist Temple is the largest Buddhist temple and seminary in Africa and serves as the African headquarters for the largest monastery in Taiwan, the Fo Guang Shan Order. In the early nineties, South Africa, like Malawi still had diplomatic ties with Taiwan and Master Hui Li was sent to spearhead the Buddhist mission in Africa. It was in 1998 that Master Hui Li first visited Malawi and was troubled by the high levels of poverty and orphans in the country. It is from this trip that the inspiration behind the Amitofo orphan care programme stems. Buddhist trainees at the Nan Hua Buddhist Temple come from all walks of life and different African countries, including Kenya, Congo and Zimbabwe. Most of the Malawian staff at ACC were trained at the Nan Hua Temple.

## **‘Buddha in Africa’ Director Nicole Schafer on China’s Soft Power Play**

Variety - [CHRISTOPHER VOURLIAS](#)

If you were looking for evidence of Chinese designs on building a modern-day empire, you would have to look no further than Africa: a vast continent whose natural resources – and government borrowing sprees – have helped fuel the engine of China’s economic growth. So goes the conventional logic, at least; yet the reality of Chinese investment and influence on the continent is more complex, as evidenced by South African director [Nicole Schafer](#)’s “Buddha in Africa,” a years-long study of one teenager growing up in a Chinese Buddhist orphanage in Malawi.

Schafer’s documentary, which world premiered at [Hot Docs](#), is a sensitive portrayal of a young man torn between the kung-fu dreams and Confucian doctrine of his Buddhist upbringing, and a Malawian culture whose powerful roots might ultimately be holding him back. Through the lens of one teenager’s journey, “Buddha in Africa” paints a complicated portrait of what’s been described as the latest chapter in Africa’s long struggle against colonization.

Schafer spoke to *Variety* about Chinese soft power in Africa, the convergence of two drastically different cultures, and how her South African ancestry offers a distinctive lens on the 21st-century scramble for Africa.

**You first came across the story of a Buddhist orphanage in Malawi when you were working there as a journalist. What did you expect to find at the Amitofo Care Center (ACC) before you saw it with your own eyes?**

I was working on a story for Reuters’ magazine program *Africa Journal* about orphans in Malawi at the time that Madonna was adopting her second child, Mercy, in 2009. I was actually quite surprised during this period of research that there were quite a number of different orphanages or institutions promoting different cultural practices, from Dutch Reformed Christian institutions, to Islamic Turkish ones. Madonna subsequently set up her Kabbalist institution, too.

With this Chinese Buddhist orphanage, it also happened to be the time when Malawi and other parts of Africa were entering into official diplomatic relations with the People’s Republic of China, and there was all this debate about China’s supposed colonization of Africa. I felt this orphanage was an interesting way of engaging in these debates. For the first time, one was seeing the impact of Chinese cultural influence on the lives of these African children. It played into many of the Western fears about China’s supposed colonization of not only the continent’s resources, but this idea of China colonizing African culture, and African children, which is essentially the future of the African continent. I was really captivated.

**China’s growing influence in Africa is almost always depicted within the framework of economic policies, trade, foreign resource extraction. Did you think the use of “soft power” on display at the orphanage offered an important counter-balance to that narrative?**

It’s very unusual to find a place where one can so vividly see the convergence of these two very different cultures coming together under one roof. Despite the extensive numbers of Chinese nationals that have come into Africa in recent years, African and Chinese communities still live very separate lives—I think primarily because of the cultural barriers. The language makes the Chinese culture certainly very inaccessible to Western, African people. In that respect, this orphanage is very unique. I felt it was a very interesting way to look at the cultural differences, some of the tensions that exist between these two cultures, but at the same time, the very real relationships that are being forged inter-culturally through Enock’s personal story.

**How did you find Enock, and how long did it take to follow his growth and his journey over the course of this film?**

When I first went to the Amitofo Care Center, I was just doing a little video feature. I went in there for half a day to film the story, and the organization actually put me in touch with Enock. I asked if they could identify one or two kids who were fluent in Mandarin, and good at kung-fu, who would be able to talk to me. Enock has always been one of the organization's model students. He was always one of the favorites. The organization does these international tours for fund raising, and he was always one of the star performers.

It took many years to capture his story and to build access. When I first started filming, he was very used to doing all the promotional inserts for the organization, so he would say all the right things. He was very rehearsed in front of the camera. So it took quite a while for me to break through that, and to get through to the real Enock. At the same time, he was also growing up, so I had all these other challenges. It was quite a challenge to try to capture his full story. It took a good four years of filming.

**Master Hui Li, the Buddhist monk from Taiwan who established the ACC, seems to have genuine warmth for the orphans in his care, but he's also condescending and often blames Malawians themselves for the fact that their country is poor. What did that attitude reveal to you about Master Li, his intentions, and the orphanages he's establishing across Africa?**

There are many scenes in the film that show this kind of tension between the Chinese characters being caring and supportive, but at the same time harsh and patronizing. While the monk and other characters have good intentions and mean well, I think there is a lack of awareness around the historical context between Chinese and African communities. This idea that the poverty of Africa is the fault of Africans rather than the centuries of Western colonialism, and then the stifling loans and structural adjustment programs that came after "independence," is a view that is very much echoed by the West in relation to Africa.

As a white South African my ancestry represents the legacy of colonialism on the continent. So from this perspective I feel scenes like this are very much a mirror of my own context. The monk is able to provide Enock and his friends with a remarkable opportunity and the possibility of a future that would have been very different had they remained in their villages. But the question is to what extent the monk will be able to "save" Africa without perpetuating the cycles of the past.

**Towards the end of the film, as Enock prepares to make the difficult decision to either stay in Malawi or continue his studies in Taiwan, he wrestles with the personal sacrifices he'll have to make – leaving his country, his family and friends – in pursuit of a better life. How do you think that dynamic plays out at the national level, and the prospects for development that China is offering Malawi and other African nations?**

I feel Enock's dilemma very much represents the greater dilemma around the future development of the African continent, especially within a globalized context. It's not only about China and Africa, it's also about Africa's relations with other foreign nations, including the former colonizers. I suppose it's just this idea that the key to the future of the continent's development is always held by outsiders, and that in order to succeed, we always have to adapt to foreign value systems and policies. I think Enock's story challenges this idea in very refreshing ways.

## **FUNDING SUPPORT AND AWARDS**

*Buddha in Africa* received the IDFA *Most Promising Documentary Award* when it was first pitched at the Durban FilmMart in 2011 and has since been awarded funding from several international funds including the IDFA Bertha Europe Fund in the Netherlands, Hot Docs-Blue Ice Group Doc Fund and the Alter Cine Foundation in Canada, Chicken & Egg Pictures in New York, the South African National Film and Video Foundation and the KwaZulu-Natal Film Commission.

In 2018, *Buddha in Africa* was selected to participate in the Cape Town International Film Festival and Market Works-in-Progress lab. It received the highest award, combining two weeks of Online by Monk and two weeks of Grading at Priest Post with the following motivation: “For its unique subject and its meticulous patient development, for the crossroad of important themes, and for the different worlds that have overlapped and met in tangible captivating characters, the jury chose to give the combined two prizes to the very promising Malawi-set film project *Buddha in Africa* by Nicole Shafer.”

## **BIOGRAPHIES**

**DIRECTOR, PRODUCER & CINEMATOGRAPHY- Nicole Schafer - (South Africa)** *Buddha in Africa* has been many years in the making by first-time South African director Nicole Schafer (1980). Nicole has lived in Malawi where she produced award-winning stories for Reuters pan-African magazine show Africa Journal. Other production credits include South Africa’s leading investigative programme *Carte Blanche*, Lonely Planet TV’s *Six Degrees* and *Sport Traveller*. Nicole is the director of the production company, Thinking Strings Media, based in the KwaZulu-Natal midlands. She has an MFA degree in Film and Television production from the University of Cape Town. Her thesis film, *The Ballad of Rosalind Ballingall* was shown at the Frijbourg Film festival in 2006.

### **CO-PRODUCER - David Herdies – Memento Film (Sweden)**

David Herdies has produced over 20 feature documentaries and shorts that have been screened and awarded at festivals all over the world. Among his previous films can be mentioned *Madre* by Simón Mesa Soto (Official Short Film Competition, Cannes 2016), *Ouaga Girls* by Theresa Traore Dahlberg (Grand Angle competition at Visions du Reel 2017 and 60+ festivals), *Hamada* by Eloy Domínguez Serén (First Appearance Competition at IDFA 2018) and *Transnistria* by Anna Eborn (Big Screen Award Rotterdam IFFR and Dragon Award Gothenburg IFF 2019). David Herdies has participated in international producer’s workshops such as EAVE, ACE and Eurodoc, and was Producer on the Move in Cannes 2018.

**EXECUTIVE PRODUCER: Don Edkins – STEPS (South Africa)** is a documentary filmmaker and producer based in Cape Town. He’s produced documentary film projects that have been broadcast around the world, such as *Steps for the Future*, *Why Democracy?* and *Why Poverty?* earning multiple international awards including an Oscar for *Taxi to the Dark Side*, and the Special Teddy Award at the 63<sup>rd</sup> Berlinale. The Peabody-awarded *Why Poverty?* was screened globally by 70 broadcasters. He is Executive Producer of AfriDocs, a free-to-view VOD platform and broadcast documentary strand across Africa, and of *Dare to Dream*, a documentary film project with South East Asian filmmakers. He is currently developing a new project with African filmmakers, *Generation Africa*.

### **EDITOR: Bernhard Winkler (Sweden)**

Bernhard Winkler was born in India, raised in West Germany and now lives in Stockholm, Sweden. He studied editing at the Stockholm Academy of Dramatic Arts 1994-97 and has been working as a film editor since then. Bernhard has edited many award winning fiction as well as documentary films.

### **EDITOR: Mary Stephen (France-Canada-Hong-Kong)**

Born in Hong Kong, raised in Canada, Mary Stephen has lived in Paris for 40 years where she was film editor and occasional music co-composer with French New Wave director Eric Rohmer. In the last decade, Mary also worked with documentary and fiction filmmakers from several continents, editing, coproducing and consulting, including Li Yang’s *Blind Mountain*, Du Haibin’s *1428*, Fan Lixin’s *Last Train Home*, Seren Yüce’s *Majority* and Ann Hui’s *Our Time Will Come*. Mary continues to direct her own film and guest-lectures and mentors in many institutions.

## CREDIT LIST

Director, Producer, Cinematography: Nicole Schafer  
Co-producer: David Herdies  
Executive Producer: Don Edkins  
Editors: Bernhard Winkler, Mary Stephen, Catherine Meyburgh, Nicole Schafer  
Additional Editing – Emily Bussac  
Post-production Supervisor – Barry Strick  
Sound Designer - Ted Krotkiewski  
Dialogue Editor: Thomas Jaeger  
Final Mix Engineer - Barry Donnelly  
Colorist: Francesca Verveckken  
Online Artist: Grant Aerts  
Visual Effects Artist: Nathan Anderson  
Motion Graphics Artist: Amelia Cohen  
Priest Post-prod supervisor: Michelle Barrow  
Title Design: Inka Kendzia  
Letter Artist: Leesette Turner  
Refinery General Manager: Lauren van Rensburg  
Refinery Post-coordinator: Peta Synnot-Marzetti  
DCP Mastering: Armien Baradien  
Interpreters: Mercy Simbi, Tessia Chipote, Dipo Katimba  
Assistant Editors: Sibonelo Mabaso, Simphiwe Ngcobo, Dominique Wiggill, Shannon Milojevic, Lika Berning  
Production Assistants: Dominique Wiggill, Shannon Milojkovic  
Photographer, Malawi: Arjen van de Merwe  
2nd Camera Malawi: Peter Mazunda  
Director of Photography / Producer, USA: Grant Greenberg  
Multi-camera set up, SA: Peter Heaney, 9MM Films  
Sound recordists, USA: Andrey Radovski, Rafiya Mason  
Publicist: Sharlene Versfeld - Versfeld & Associates  
Digital marketing: Mathias Noschis & Valentina Neumann -Alphapanda  
Poster Design: Toby Attwell

## TRANSLATORS

Xuijie Ma	Dumisa Mbanjo
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Josh Xiao	Tessia Chipote
Leifang Xu	Dipo Katimba
Lala Chen	Cogitator Wilton Mapala
Teresa Chen	Chrispin Kampala Phiri
Angela Chen	Takuze Chitsulo
Amy Chen	Betty Chitsulo
Eric Chiang	Chikondi R. Chanthunya
Can Luo	Chenjerai Maseko
Vicki Tang	Lucy Chibambo
Kristin NG-Yang	Cao Xiuyu
Jing Bian	Anita Jack

## MOMENTO FILM SWEDEN

Co-Producers: David Herdies & Michael Krotkiewski  
Production Coordinator: Rim Boujemaa  
Production Assistants: Mirjam Gellhorn, Maria Åkesson  
Technical Support: Sergio C. Ayala  
Accounting: Pia Janols & Uno Janols / Filmekonomi  
Insurance: Gefvert

## MUSIC

"Ikhaphi Volume 2", Madala Kunene  
"In This World", Dominik Luke Marsden Johnson, "Time Has Past", Dominik Luke Marsden Johnson - EMI Music Library

## DEVELOPED AND PRODUCED WITH SUPPORT FROM

IDFA Bertha Fund, Hot Docs-Blue Ice Group Doc Fund, The National Film and Video Foundation of South Africa, The KwaZulu-Natal Film Commission, Chicken & Egg Pictures, Women Make Movies, Alter Cine Foundation, AfriDocs.

Durban FilmMart, 2011, Hot Docs-Blue Ice lab 2012, Hot Docs Deal Maker 2013,  
IDFA Academy Summer School 2013, Chicken & Egg Pictures Editing Workshop 2014  
Visions du Reel "DOCS IN PROGRESS" 2017, CTIFM FILM MARKET, "WORKS IN PROGRESS" 2018

## TECHNICAL INFO:

**Running time:** 90 min 33 sec **Aspect Ratio:** 2k/1920x1080 (16:9) **Frame Rate** 25 - **Resolution:** 1920x1080 -  
**Sound:** Dolby 5.1 or Stereo - **Language:** Mandarin/ Chichewa - **English Subtitles (Burnt in)** - **Colour:** HD - **Screening copy:** DCP SMPTE on NTFS Drive