



**Film Guide**  
**Uganda**

**“ABC Africa,” 2001**  
**Directed by Abbas Kiarostami**



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### “ABC Africa”

Iran/Uganda

Release Date: October, 2001. France.

Directed by: Abbas Kiarostami

Languages: English, Persian

Running time: 83 min.

### Instructions

You can locate “ABC Africa” at video stores, through Netflix and in public or college libraries. Should you have difficulty locating the film, please contact AJWS. Before viewing the film, read through this guide and the material AJWS has provided about Uganda for important background information.

The goals of this exercise are: (1) to introduce and promote critical engagement with the political, historical, social, religious and economic consequences of Uganda’s struggle with HIV/AIDS; (2) to engage with these issues emotionally; and, in the context of a Group Service Program, (3) to sow a conversational seed for your upcoming trip.

Like most of Abbas Kiarostami’s films, “ABC Africa” is patient, observational, impressionistic and meditative. In other words, it is much slower than most American film audiences are accustomed to. To help promote active learning during the film, read through the discussion questions and background facts before viewing the film.

Do not be a passive consumer of the film, but an alert, thinking respondent to it. Be prepared for an emotionally engaged activity, and then try to mobilize any emotional responses you may have to deepen your personal and critical response to the work you are about to do.

One last reminder: even though you are viewing documentary evidence of what really happened while Kiarostami was in Uganda, you are ultimately watching a very small selection of the footage that one man chose to shoot (likely less than 1% of it), carefully conceived, edited, juxtaposed, and enhanced with music and effects, to produce an intellectual and emotional experience for the viewer. It is not a simple rendering of a transparent reality.

### Background Information

- Abbas Kiarostami is one of Iran’s master filmmakers. He has written over 40 films and directed about 35. His films typically tell lean, meditative stories, frequently about children, featuring long, patient shots of landscapes and subtle suggestions about the internal lives of his characters. “ABC Africa” is his first (and, so far, only) film shot in Africa, and is one of his more than a dozen documentaries.
- “ABC” refers not just to the basic building blocks of English literacy, but also to the Ugandan-pioneered anti-AIDS campaign strategy now popular in many African countries and praised by international health organizations. The A, B and C refer to:
  - A: Abstinence.
  - B: Be Faithful.
  - C: Condoms.
  - (D: Determine & Declare. An additional stratagem currently promoted by Ugandan advocates.)

These behaviors are promoted hand-in-hand with one another, even though each behavior on its own might seem to support a different ideological agenda and vision for vaccination against AIDS.



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- The film focuses on the work of Ugandan Women’s Efforts to Save Orphans (UWESO). AJWS supports similar organizations in Uganda in three program areas: Health and Income Generation, Economic Development, and Education and Health. AJWS grantees include the Uganda Orphans Rural Development Programme, Foundation for the Development of Needy Communities, Raising Voices, Traditional and Modern Health Practitioners Together Against AIDS and Other Diseases, Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children, and Kamwokya Christian Caring Community.
- The motivation for the film came from the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD, [www.ifad.org](http://www.ifad.org)), an organization that grew out of the 1974 U.N. World Food Conference. The Conference was a response to the food crisis of the early 1970s, which affected the Sahelian countries of Africa worst.<sup>1</sup> IFAD has financed over 500 projects in over 110 countries, committing over \$6 billion and serving over 200 million people.

### Note While Viewing the Film

Please keep two running lists while viewing the film.

1. Man-made images and signs that appear in the background of the film (advertisements, t-shirts, decorative arts in homes, etc.)
2. Emotions you feel as you notice them, even if they are not strong.

### Guiding Questions

If you are viewing the film alone: After the viewing, spend a couple of minutes jotting down responses to the questions that follow. Save them and review them when your trip is over. At the end of the film guide, you’ll find additional information and suggested responses to many of these questions.

If you are viewing the film with a group: After viewing the film, discuss these questions as a group.

1. Look over your list of emotions. What do you notice about your list? Is there an overarching feeling the film left you with? Are there major shifts or patterns in the list?

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<sup>1</sup> Sahel refers to the semi-arid region of north-central Africa, south of the Sahara desert.



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2. The film opens with the Ugandan Women’s Efforts to Save Orphans (UWESO)’s memo to Kiarostami, explicitly announcing the film’s purpose: to raise international awareness about Uganda’s struggle against AIDS and its orphan problem, and to mobilize viewers for political and financial support. Given the list of emotions the film evoked for you, do you think it “worked” for you? Did Kiarostami fulfill his mandate?
  
3. Brainstorm a short list of factors impacting (1) the social determinants in the spread of AIDS, and (2) the social repercussions of treating its impacts. Which factors are gendered, that is, does being a man versus being a woman make a difference in this factor?
  
4. What role does the film assign to religious influences (for better and/or for worse)?
  
5. The film avoids engagement with issues about Uganda’s ethnic and tribal divisions and tensions, even though they contribute significantly to the country’s social and political problems, including the HIV/AIDS crisis. Why do you think Kiarostami avoided this ethnic/tribal dimension to the disease and to interventions with it?
  
6. The theme of “saving” comes up in the film consistently with a variety of different meanings. What are some of the ways that this theme referenced? What are the implications for making “saving” a main theme for this film?
  
7. Visually, the film is preoccupied with faces. Frames frequently feature children whose facial expressions are at odds with one another, with some children smiling and laughing, while other children look bewildered or suspicious. There are many still and slow-motion shots of faces. What is the message or strategy here?
  
8. There very few images of suffering, pain or illness in this film. When they do appear, they are juxtaposed with sounds and sights of smiling care-givers, laughing and playfulness. Why do you think these directorial decisions were made?



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### For Further Thought

If you are viewing the film alone: Choose one of the following themes to explore in more depth as you prepare for your volunteer experience. During your time abroad, you may find more opportunities to reflect upon this issue and discuss it with a variety of people you meet.

If you are viewing the film with a group: In groups of 3-4, choose **one** question to discuss.

1. **Philanthropic Interventions.** Based on your viewing of the film, what kinds of philanthropic support would be most productive in response to high number of AIDS orphans in Uganda? The film suggests several options for international help/intervention including adoption, micro-credit economic activity programs, cash support for grandmothers supporting large families of orphans, and educational programs. Which of these approaches seems most effective to you? What else would you want/need to know about this issue in order to make this assessment? Each approach might have its own set of underlying values (for example: giving the best possible care to one child; giving basic care to many children; raising a child within his/her community). For the approaches that you found most compelling, what seem to be the underlying values?
2. **Medical Anthropology and Etiology (where do diseases come from and what are they).** Consider the scene in the film that captures a philosophical conversation about the nature of disease in Uganda. In the long scene in the dark, Kiarostami and his assistant Seyfolah Samadian, ponder electricity, mosquitoes and the difference between death by malaria and death by AIDS. One of them suggests that dying from AIDS is the product of a “life choice,” whereas dying of malaria “had to be the ultimate betrayal.” What are the implications of these characterizations? Is the AIDS epidemic in Uganda (or elsewhere in Africa) simply the result of bad life choices? What kind of “betrayal” might the Iranian film maker have been thinking about?
3. **Domestic and International Politics.** Regional warfare and the movement of refugees flowing across Uganda’s borders (in both directions) over the last 40 years have exacerbated social tensions. On the other hand, efforts to promote regional economic, health and political cooperation (like the efforts to establish the European Union-like East African Community) have helped Uganda, and indeed the whole region, become more self-sustaining. To complicate matters further, international organizations and foreign nations have a strong hand in the shaping of various national policies and politics. If you were “in charge” of a large humanitarian mission to Uganda, what strategies would you pursue to ensure that you were helping provide self-help, rather than promoting dependency on foreign assistance?

### Suggested Additional Activities

#### For Individual Volunteers:

- View Kevin McDonald's 2006 movie, “The Last King of Scotland,” before your trip. This dramatic recreation of Idi Amin’s brutal dictatorial psychology and practice, circa 1971-1973 (see Uganda history timeline for more details), gives a sense of the political circumstances that contributed to Uganda’s violent civil strife, particularly through the 1970s and 1980s. This political background undergirds much of the economic and some of the health struggles Uganda has faced since.
- Make sure to thoroughly read AJWS’s Uganda Country Profile. Familiarizing yourself with this material before the trip will dramatically enhance your experience in Uganda.



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### For Groups:

- Invite a speaker to discuss politics, religion and/or economics in Uganda, Central Africa, or the entire continent. This could be a local immigrant from your host country, a professor, a returned AJWS Volunteer Corps participant, a returned Peace Corps volunteer or another local expert.
- Select one of the recommended readings about your country and have a “book club” night.

### Guiding Questions with Additional Information and Suggested Responses

1. Look over your list of emotions. What do you notice about your list? Is there an overarching feeling the film left you with? Are there major shifts or patterns in the list?
2. The film opens with the Ugandan Women’s Efforts to Save Orphans (UWESO)’s memo to Kiarostami, explicitly announcing the film’s purpose: to raise international awareness about Uganda’s struggle against AIDS and its orphan problem, and to mobilize viewers for political and financial support. Given the list of emotions the film evoked for you, do you think it “worked” for you? Did Kiarostami fulfill his mandate?
  - The film was shown mostly in film festivals in the U.S., France, U.K., Netherlands, Australia, Argentina and Hong Kong, and was released by a major distributor in the U.S. in 2005.
  - No data can be found on the financial repercussions of the film, but it might be helpful to consider the high degree of competition for international attention about ongoing and sudden humanitarian matters needing education, funds and support at any given moment.
3. Brainstorm a short list of factors impacting (1) the social determinants in the spread of AIDS, and (2) the social repercussions of treating its impacts. Which factors are gendered, that is, does being a man versus being a woman make a difference in this factor?
  - Prostitution (highly gendered).
  - Sexual violence in warfare (highly gendered).
  - Sexual education/awareness (gendered).
  - Grandmothers are repeatedly admired and occupy a particularly large presence in the film’s depiction of the on-the-ground burden of labor in the wake of the AIDS epidemic.
4. What role does the film assign to religious influences (for better and/or for worse)?
  - The film touches on the Catholic Church’s opposition to the “C” of the “ABC” anti-AIDS strategy (Abstinence, Be faithful, and use Condoms). The “A” and the “B” are both consistent with Church ideology. Advocates in the film express frustration with the Church’s opposition to this campaign prong.
  - Toward the end of the film, a news spot on the radio describes Church officials who blame the AIDS problem on the “Satanization” of Uganda, and who suggest that carriers of the disease are to be linked, somehow, with Satan. This paints religion as a force of social control and moral/spiritual propaganda.
  - Several scenes show children singing religious songs (the word Hallelujah appears several times) during casual celebration and educational activities (including writing lessons in English). This paints religion as a force of education, communal support and joy.



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- The film makes no mention of religions other than Christianity, even though about one-third of the country is Muslim and many tribal, local and native religions are practiced. Many of the country’s tensions surround religious difference.
5. The film avoids engagement with issues about Uganda’s ethnic and tribal divisions and tensions, even though they contribute significantly to the country’s social and political problems, including the HIV/AIDS crisis. Why do you think Kiarostami avoided this ethnic/tribal dimension to the disease and to interventions with it?
- The complexity and the politics of difference would likely dilute the power of the message that the film tries to articulate: the suffering is simple and the solution (moral and financial support) is simple. However, in truth, complex differences and tensions between different groups of people have a profound impact on virtually all aspects of Uganda’s social problems. Consider a few points of background information:
  - The Europeans and Asians who returned to Uganda after the Amin regime fell generally have better access to health care and lower rates of HIV/AIDS infection.
  - Refugees to Uganda from neighboring Sudan, Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo) and Rwanda likely have infection rates that are comparable to those of the most afflicted Ugandans, but even less access to medical care than their Ugandan counterparts.
  - The Buganda are generally dominant in the commercial sector. As such, their access to health intervention resources has been greater.
  - The Acholi and Lango tribes people, on the other hand, have less political leverage, less financial power, and therefore less access to the state’s resources.
6. The theme of “saving” comes up in the film consistently with a variety of different meanings. What are some of the ways that this theme referenced? What are the implications for making “saving” a main theme for this film?
- **Money:** Micro-credit programs are primarily concerned with saving money for mutual loan societies.
  - A UWESO official claims that Ugandans must “learn to save to become better people.”
  - **Lives/Bodies:** Save the orphans – a social and humanitarian slogan with many permutations and combinations in the international and domestic non-profit worlds.
  - **Souls:** Jesus saves – “saving” here meaning, religious, existential, eternal salvation of the soul.
7. Visually, the film is preoccupied with faces. Frames frequently feature children whose facial expressions are at odds with one another, with some children smiling and laughing, while other children look bewildered or suspicious. There are many still and slow-motion shots of faces. What is the message or strategy here?
- The emphasis on the face is an emphasis on the human – over the medical, political, historical or administrative dimensions of the problem or its solutions.
  - Among the strongest visual motifs of the film is that of “children being filmed.” Children do not simply appear in the frame, but are consciously being filmed, with scenes of the cameraman filming children appearing regularly. There are also several shots of children looking at other children through the camera’s view-finder. In a sense, the children in the film are not just the objects in the film, but are made to be the “viewers” (the ones who see). They are shown looking through the lens, from a perspective they share with the viewer, an outsider or the filmmaker. This is a film technique that makes the children subjects, not just objects, and is therefore clever and politically conscious. By making the



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technology of viewing transparent (showing the camera in the film), the director tries to collapse the distance between the viewer and the viewed.

8. There very few images of suffering, pain or illness in this film. When they do appear, they are juxtaposed with sounds and sights of smiling care-givers, laughing and playfulness. Why do you think these directorial decisions were made?
  - The film has a strong sense of “aftermath,” showing life in the wake of tragedies, but not tragedies themselves.
  - The emphasis is on recovery and resilience – not depressing hopelessness. This is part of the film’s fund-raising purpose. Note that most grant applications – including the ones written for funding from AJWS – almost always use the same tone.



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**American Jewish World Service (AJWS)** is an international development organization motivated by Judaism’s imperative to pursue justice. AJWS is dedicated to alleviating poverty, hunger and disease among the people of the developing world regardless of race, religion or nationality. Through grants to grassroots organizations, volunteer service, advocacy and education, AJWS fosters civil society, sustainable development and human rights for all people, while promoting the values and responsibilities of global citizenship within the Jewish community.

For more information, please visit [www.ajws.org](http://www.ajws.org).

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