

Grasshopper Republic

a film by Daniel McCabe

running time: 94 mins

format: 2.35:1, 4K, Dolby 5.1

language: Luganda, English with English Subtitles

production countries: United States, Uganda

Synopsis

Every rainy season, deep in the mountain forests of western Uganda, one of the world's greatest natural phenomenon takes place.

Millions, sometimes *billions*, of Long-horned Grasshoppers swarm together to mate in a rarely-filmed reminder of Nature's epic scale. As if to underline the magic fickleness of this spectacle, these living clouds can descend for a moment before vanishing into the night as quickly as they came.

It follows that Man has found a way to profit from this beautiful reproductive cycle. Harvesting grasshoppers in rural Uganda is a seriously lucrative business; fortunes are made in a matter of weeks providing this seasonal delicacy to hungry city-dwellers in the lowlands.

Comprehensively filmed over the course of three seasons, *Grasshopper Republic* (which is also the locally-given name for the region) follows a local trapping team in strict verité style, as these modern-day prospectors push into remote forests and villages seeking their fortune by capturing this illusive prey by the barrel load. We witness massive generators being hauled up collapsing mudbanks. Light posts are erected with chemically treated bulbs, casting a lurid neon green pall over the tree canopy, irresistibly attracting the swarm to their corrugated iron traps.

In deliberate contrast to this dystopian imposition, specialized macro cameras simultaneously transport the audience into an immersive natural world on a level with the perspective of the grasshoppers. A parade of frame-filling bugs heightens this magnified reality – accentuating the bizarrely human-like qualities of these insects while also highlighting the peril that lies behind every leaf.

The risk to the human hunters is all-too real as well. As our metaphor on Man's fraught relationship with Nature continues to unfold we learn the harrowing cost that these toxic lights bestow upon our band of trappers and their homeland. A scorched earth of skin disease and ruined crops reveals the downside of this gold rush. *Grasshopper Republic* explores this strange, beautiful, and dangerous predicament by examining the balance of survival between communities and ecosystems.

Extended Synopsis

In the high stakes world of grasshopper trapping a group of young Ugandans risking it all for a chance to escape poverty upset the balance between nature and mankind.

Each year with the return of the rainy season in Africa, a renewed cycle of life begins. Deep in the idyllic mountain forests of Uganda, plants and trees bloom into green as insects and animals begin their migration and reproductive cycles. Among these creatures is the Long-horned Grasshopper (*Ruspolia differens*) which gathers in swarms to mate. These swarms can last from minutes to hours until eventually they vanish without warning into the night.

These grasshoppers are not viewed as pests. Known locally as “Nsenene”, they have been caught and eaten as a delicacy for centuries. In the past, children and adults alike would playfully capture the insect by hand. Today it is an entirely different story. With the arrival of the mating season, ragtag trapping teams scatter into the countryside like gold rush prospectors, building light traps to lure in swarms throughout the night. Massive generators are hauled deep into the forest powering dangerously bright light traps, attracting the insects en masse. Drawn to the intense light, the grasshoppers fly into reflective metal sheets and crash with a loud bang, sliding down into collection drums. Foiling their collective mission to climb up and out, the panicked grasshoppers pull each other down from the walls of the trap. With the chaotic symphony of the capture, the local population emerges. However the grasshoppers aren't the only ones facing danger.

The protective shielding of industrial sized light bulbs is removed to emit powerful ultraviolet rays, increasing the allurement to the insect's sensitive vision but also damaging the eyes and skin of any person too close. People of all ages storm the scene donning DIY protective gear; a bridal veil repurposed as a mosquito net, a motorcycle helmet, scuba mask, sunglasses. Even rubbing cassava flour all over the face as a light shield proves to be somewhat effective. Along with the grasshoppers come a variety of highly toxic insects, such as the Blister Beetle and Nairobi Fly, which are capable of causing severe and sometimes permanent injury.

The population boils with the swarm, snatching up everything within reach, while watchful trap keepers beat the mob back protecting their prize. When caught, the insects are bagged and loaded onto large, repurposed taxi-buses, racing the live catch several hours to the capital city of Kampala where feverish crowds clamor at the market eager to buy. Just before dawn, the overloaded vehicles begin to arrive, each swallowed up by a growing human swarm. A new bidding war emerges with each sack as drivers struggle to unfasten and unload their loot. Dozens of hands wave fistfuls of cash, pushing and climbing over each other competing for attention. As the sun begins to crest the horizon starting a new day, a cacophony of shouting, money, and madness ensues like a stock market feeding frenzy. With the arrival of more trucks, the crowd shifts, and prices change.

Filmed in a distinctive, cinéma vérité style, the viewer is brought inside the trapper's world to experience this very human journey. The camera follows the men through every aspect of their reality; from the arrival to the trapping sites to the advent of the illusive swarms they hunt. The grueling non-stop pace from set-up to trapping, breakdown and selling, exposes the hardships the workers endure in a most intimate way.

Intercut with the impossible perspective of the grasshopper depicted through "larger than life" macro cinematography, the film dives into an unfamiliar world of magic and intrigue. Immersing into this magnified reality, viewers witness the grasshopper's gentle ways, their mannerisms bizarrely taking on human-like qualities. By experiencing the beauty and balance of nature, as well as the very real struggles that exist in this "bug world," the viewer is able to join the grasshopper on its perilous journey through a life being hunted, danger lurking around every corner or leaf.

With otherworldly visuals, these distinct universes collide with a burst of emotion. The trappers, who have suffered through injury, sickness, and exhaustion, finally have their moment and relief washes over them-- briefly. As for the grasshoppers who have been lured into a trap through unnatural trickery, their path ends in a frying pan. Shifting between these two perspectives sparks consideration for man's relationship to nature and our collective effect on it.

Film Breakdown

Grasshopper Republic examines the strange, beautiful, and dangerous predicament of man versus nature. By examining the balance of survival between communities and ecosystems, questions arise about the corrupt tendencies of capitalism, environmental impact, and food source sustainability. The viewer must look inside themselves for reference and reflection. The equilibrium and cycle of nature drives the film's narrative. The grasshoppers have synced their reproductive cycles to the vegetation brought by the rainy season and the phases of the moon (a running visual motif in the film) influence and guide the swarm's migration. On the opposite end, we see trappers brutally insert themselves into this natural environment. Working around the clock, getting burned by the lights and infected by other poisonous insects, they mow down anything in their path to capture the expensive treat. This tireless, repetitive act often pushes those who dare to risk beyond their breaking point. Despite this ruthless dedication, succeeding in the grasshopper industry is beyond difficult. Police shakedowns, city official payoffs, and backdoor deals are commonplace, requiring an additional freestyle entrepreneurial zeal to navigate the corrupt waters of Uganda. The film follows one of Uganda's top grasshopper trappers, **Siraje Lubwama Ojuku** and his intrepid team. Riding shotgun with our anti-hero Siraje, human nature is revealed as he plows full force into the chaotic industry. Among the worker ranks beneath him, it becomes obvious that little is considered and much is lost in the

hunt for profit. Siraje expertly utilizes his team's vulnerabilities to get what he needs, as they in turn thrash around, held hostage by their quest for survival.

About the Characters

In Uganda, as in many countries, invisible barriers exist, separating the fortunate from the lesser. Locked into social positions and stepped on by those who are more educated, rising out of poverty is rare. For **Siraje Lubwama Ojuku**, who grew up on the outskirts of Kampala, poor and uneducated, becoming one of the top grasshopper trappers was challenging. Compensating for his humble beginnings with hard edges and few words, his powerful physique and harsh demeanor say everything about where he's come from and where he intends to go.

Siraje has a team of 24 young men that he houses in meager accommodations (a dirt floored, one room shack), though the men mostly sleep outside with the traps. For sustenance, it's one meal a day-- beans and porridge. The criteria for joining up is simple; You need to work hard, around the clock, and be willing to suffer intensely. Leading by example, he works his team hard. He doles out tough love, (borderline abuse), while keeping his eye and unwavering stamina on the prize. With years of experience, Siraje confidently uses his mastery of street style negotiation and his honed grasshopper intuition to get what he needs. In the off season, Siraje stays afloat running an ice cream machine business he started with his grasshopper profits.

Director's Statement

Grasshopper Republic is an immersive exploration of Uganda's grasshopper industry which meditates on the way humans engage with each other and the world around them. This is an environmental film, a film about human nature, survival and the balance within communities. It is designed to draw the viewer in without overloading them with politics and data, letting the most important considerations rise to the surface organically. Conflicting questions about climate change, environmental impact, the corrupt tendencies of capitalism and food source sustainability are woven throughout, challenging the viewer to look inside themselves for reference and reflection.

— Daniel McCabe

About the Film Production

In the fall of 2011 Michele Sibiloni, an Italian photographer based in Kampala, was traveling by bus at night in remote western Uganda when he noticed a very strange bright green light on the horizon. When the bus got closer he saw that the lights were powering an industrial scale grasshopper trapping operation. He'd often seen these grasshoppers seasonally being sold in the streets as a delicacy but he hadn't understood the process and the work to capture them. This was the beginning of Michele's 6 year photo book project about grasshopper trapping in Uganda.

In 2014, Daniel McCabe and Alyse Ardell Spiegel were based in the Democratic Republic of the Congo finishing production on their feature documentary *This Is Congo (2017)*. Michele, who often traveled as a photojournalist and videographer in the Congo, presented his photos to the filmmaking team and the seed for a future collaboration and cinematic expression of the trapping phenomenon came about.

In 2018, Daniel and Michele traveled to Uganda to begin scouting for a possible documentary film. They moved around the country exploring the grasshopper trapping hotspots Michele had spent years on the ground getting to know. They finally landed in a small town named Bundibugyo and met Siraje Lubwama Ojuku, the main trapper featured in the film.

In 2019 Daniel and Michele were embedded within Siraje's trapping team for the entire season from October to the end of December and in 2020, Alyse joined the team in the field where they focused their attention on the world and perspective of the elusive grasshopper. Francis Sengendo, a Ugandan entomologist and expert in the long horned grasshopper came on board to help them learn about the intricacies of the grasshopper's life and they were able, for the first time ever, to capture their birth on film.

This project was born of the collaborative desire to create an experiential journey for audiences and bring them into this little known world where the balance between man and nature is on full poetic display.

To enhance the aural experience for viewers, the team sought out avant-garde creator and composer, Robert Aiki Aubrey Lowe. Robert's unique sound enhances the collaborative nature and interpretation of the material.

The painstakingly careful process and style of verite filmmaking, where cameras can disappear in environments unaccustomed to filmmakers and equipment, was a priority for this team. Building trust between the filmmaking team and the subjects of the film was paramount and required many years on the ground with the trappers and the community they're trapping in to achieve such results. This film is a collaborative artistic expression of this rare process and we hope viewers are left with their own thoughts and poetry about the collective human predicament and its effects and influence on the natural world.

Filmmaking Team

Daniel McCabe (Director, Producer, Cinematographer) is an American filmmaker and photographer currently based in New York. As a photo/video journalist McCabe has covered gang conflict in Honduras, Kenya's 2008 Post-Election Violence, the 2010 Earthquake in Haiti and the ongoing conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (2008-2015). He has traveled

extensively in Africa and his work has appeared in National Geographic, The New York Times, Time Magazine, BBC, Al Jazeera and CNN among others. Daniel's first feature-length documentary film *This Is Congo*, tells the story of four lives lived amongst war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, premiered in 2017 at the prestigious 74th Venice International Film Festival and has won numerous awards worldwide.

Alyse Ardell Spiegel (Producer, Editor) is an award-winning documentary film editor, producer, and writer based in New York known for structuring complex narratives into compelling character driven films. She has always gravitated towards projects that shine a light on under-told stories. Spiegel most recently edited the critically acclaimed HBO series, *I'll be Gone In the Dark* and executive produced *BEBA* which was acquired by NEON and Hulu after its premiere at TIFF / Berlinale. Her feature editing credits include Academy Award nominated *Paradise Lost 3: Purgatory*, as well as *CRUDE*, *Unraveled*, and *This Is Congo* which amassed awards throughout the world. Spiegel consults on several projects and has worked in the field as a creative Producer in Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua, throughout Africa and North America.

Robert Aiki Aubrey Lowe (Composer) is an artist, curator and composer that works primarily with, but not limited to voice and modular synthesizer for sound in the realm of spontaneous music. Along with analog video synthesis works, he has brought forth an A/V proposal that has been a focus of live performance and installation/exhibition. Lowe's works on paper tend towards human relations to the natural/magical world and the repetition of motifs. As of late Robert has also directed focus on composition for film, both in solo scoring and collaboration. Over the last several years Robert has collaborated on projects or provided sound in a featured artist capacity for such films as *End of Summer*, *Sicario*, *Arrival*, *Last and First Men* with Johann Johannsson and *It Comes at Night* with Brian McOmber. Recently Robert has scored *Candyman* for Nia DaCosta, *The Color of Care* for Yance Ford, *Master* for Mariama Diallo and *Grasshopper Republic* for Daniel McCabe. Through collaboration Robert has worked with Tarek Atoui, Ben Russell, Ben Rivers, Rose Lazar, Nicolas Becker, Rashaad Newsome, Jóhann Jóhannsson, Hildur Guðnadóttir, Sabrina Ratté, Philippe Parreno, Evan Calder Williams, Ariel Kalma, Susie Ibarra and YoshimiO, as well as many others.

Francis Sengendo (Entomologist) is an insect expert and a researcher specialized in natural sciences based in Kampala, Uganda. Francis's main focus is on the utilization of insects as alternative protein sources for humans and animals. Francis is the author of a published research article titled; '*Effect of Temperature on Egg Hatchability of House Crickets: (Acheta Domesticus)*'. He is a co-author of published research articles titled; '*Suitability of Egg Hatching Conditions and Commonly Available Food Plants for Rearing the Long-horned Grasshopper *Ruspolia differens* Serville (Orthoptera: Tettigoniidae)*' and '*Effect of Alternative Rearing Substrates and Temperature on Growth and Development of the Cricket *Modicogryllus Conspersus* (Schaum)*'. Francis has completed research on evaluation of the modified trapping technique for long-horned grasshoppers 'Nsenene' and he is currently writing two papers; one on the efficiency of the modified trapping technique and another on the cost-benefit analysis of the modified Nsenene trap compared to the current trap.

Michele Sibiloni (Producer, Cinematographer) is an Italian photographer, cinematographer and journalist based in Parma, Italy. He has covered a variety of pivotal events on the African Continent including South Sudan Independence (2011), Libyan Uprising (2011), Ugandan Elections (2011/16), Egyptian Revolution (2013), M23 Rebellion in Democratic Republic of the Congo (2013-14) and the attempted Coup in Burundi (2015). Sibiloni's editorial work has been published in The New York Times, The British Journal of Photography, Vice Magazine, The Wall Street Journal, Bloomberg Businessweek, M Magazine and Wired Magazine among others. He has also produced two photographic book projects with publisher Edition Patrick Frey. *FUCK IT*, documents Kampala, Uganda's gritty nightlife scene, was selected as one of Time Magazine's *Best Photo Books of the Year 2016* and *NSENE* which documents Uganda's grasshopper trapping industry published in 2021.

Otto Bell (Producer) is a British filmmaker and producer. Bell's debut feature "The Eagle Huntress" was the highest grossing documentary of 2016, nominated for a BAFTA® and shortlisted for the Best Documentary Oscar®. After premiering at the Sundance Film , the film was subject to a bidding war, ultimately won by Sony Pictures Classics. The film was released theatrically in over a dozen international territories and currently holds a 94% "Certified Fresh" rating on Rotten Tomatoes. Apple currently hold the option for the animated rights to the documentary. Known for his accessible, genre-bending approach, penetrative interviews, far-flung locations and strong commitment to cinematography, Bell's other work includes the short documentary "The Toxic Pigs of Fukushima" that was bought and distributed by Vice Media in 2020. He is currently in post- production on the epic documentary feature "The Badass Librarians of Timbuktu" based on the NYT bestselling book of the same title. On top of his filmmaking duties, Bell is also a Founder and Chief Creative Officer of Courageous – CNN's commercial studio for branded content. Here he manages a team of 85 Emmy and Murrow-winning Directors, Producers, Designers and Editors making hundreds of short films and campaigns every year for 200+ advertisers.