

**Movie discussion resource**                      **Akoni**  
*Engage with culture without disengaging your faith.*

**Genre:** Drama/romance

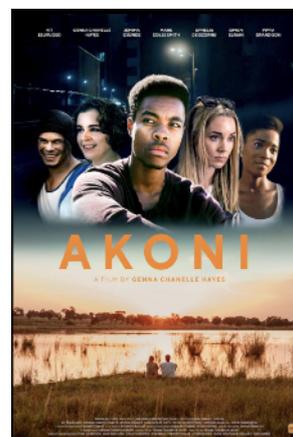
**Rating:** M

**Length:** 90 minutes

**Starring** Kit Esuruoso, Genna Chanelle Hayes, Mark Coles Smith

**Writer/Director/Producer:** Genna Chanelle Hayes

**Australian release:** October 2021



**Brief synopsis**

A Nigerian refugee struggles to integrate into Australian society after escaping the clutches of Boko Haram in Nigeria. While living on the streets in Sydney, he ends up on the receiving end of racist taunts from a group of drunken men. A young woman Violet (Genna Chanelle Hayes) comes to his aid and offers him a place to stay. She is a model living the glamorous life, but struggling with her own heartbreak with the loss of her partner. She soon finds solace in her unlikely new companion as he opens her up to a world beyond her current life of modelling, parties and social media. Genna stars in the film, as well as writing, directing and shooting it. *Akoni* is her feature film directorial debut. She has been an intrepid traveller since she was young. The story of the film reflects Genna's commitment to human rights and her passion for learning different cultures. The driving force behind the film was to raise awareness of the impact of terrorist organisation Boko Haram in West Africa, an issue she became passionate about after falling in love with a Nigerian while in London. She is also passionate about refugees more generally; her short film *Displaced* was about a Sudanese refugee living in Melbourne. *Akoni* is a remarkable achievement on a budget of only \$300,000.

**Questions for discussion**

*This is a gently told film that may be a catalyst for conversation about the plight of refugees, and the danger from which they flee. Some general questions might provide enough framework for you to discuss the movie, such as:*

- ❖ What stood out as the main points/highlights in the movie?
- ❖ What themes are explored?
- ❖ What assumptions were embedded in the story?
- ❖ What challenged you? What questions did it raise for you?
- ❖ Are there aspects of the story that resonated with your own experience?
- ❖ Are there biblical or theological themes or characters that come to mind?

**Terrorism and Displacement**

(Genna Chanelle Hayes): "Currently, over 3 million Nigerians are displaced due to the activities of terrorist group Boko Haram, and almost half a million Nigerians – mostly children – have been killed. The Boko Conflict in West Africa is just one of many violent conflicts destabilising nations around the world, and as the number of internationally displaced peoples soars toward 100 million, it is my hope that the story of *Akoni* can enhance global understanding of the circumstances refugees and asylum seekers face, and contribute to the creation of global immigration policies that uphold the human rights of all peoples".

=> A thoughtful discussion could focus on the issue of terrorism, violence and war that has led to huge numbers of IDP (Internally Displaced People) and refugees seeking safety in other countries - and how the world is responding to this humanitarian crisis.

**Welcome to the Shire!**

Sammy (Mark Coles Smith, *Last Cab to Darwin*), an Aboriginal man, befriends Akoni and offers him shelter in an abandoned warehouse, where many others are also living in improvised shelter. They may feel abandoned by the society in which they live, but create an alternate community for those 'on the fringe' - with its own rules and protocols so

everyone is able to find safety and acceptance (in contrast to the opportunist 'casual' violence endemic on the city streets). Discuss.

### **Refugees and homelessness**

"Many refugee and humanitarian entrants arrive in Australia with few or no financial resources, may be in debt and often face significant challenges in securing employment during the early stages of settlement. Additionally, many refugee and humanitarian entrants send money to family members living in dire situations in countries of origin or asylum, often sending a significant portion of their limited income overseas. This makes the task of meeting private rental costs exceptionally challenging and can result in refugee and humanitarian entrants living in poverty and overcrowded conditions for the first few years of life in Australia". (Refugee Council of Australia, Submission to the Affordable Housing Working Group). When refugees arrive in Australia through the Humanitarian Program, they arrive as permanent residents and can immediately access income support payments in the same way as any other Australian permanent resident, though they may struggle to find employment and the means to survive financially, and may have difficulty finding housing. Refugees who arrive by any other means struggle financially, and are constantly at the mercy of visas being issues in a timely way to allow them to work. Homelessness is a huge issue because there is no safety net, and too little in the way of support structures. Finding affordable, appropriate and sustainable housing is an ongoing challenge. When people fall foul of the law, often simply to survive, they are likely to be deported on 'character' grounds.

=> Discuss some of the systemic issues that leave refugees vulnerable to homelessness.

### **Silence/Making Space**

There are awkward silences between Akoni and Violet, each trying to work the other one out. It was notable that Violet didn't rush in to solve Akoni's problems, apart from his immediate need for safe shelter. She allowed the silence to settle, until Akoni was ready to talk. Attentive silence gives time for a person to process their thoughts and feelings. Silence does not indicate disinterest - it can still communicate so much that is of value, including conveying the message that "you are worth listening to". Violet seemed to open a doorway when she asked, 'do you dream?' (in contrast to more 'interrogative' questions).

=> Discuss your own experience in cross-cultural conversations, the place of silence, and the place of invitational questions (in contrast to 'interrogative' style questions).

### **Jesus was a refugee**

More than a slogan, '*Jesus was a refugee*' speaks about the lived reality of Jesus and his family fleeing violence by the political authorities. Being a refugee, a displaced person, runs in the DNA of Jesus and his family with much of the narrative from the Hebrew Scriptures following the story of the exodus and the exile, Naomi and her family fleeing famine and seeking refuge in a foreign country etc. How might this insight impact how we read the biblical narrative and how we 'read' our contemporary context? Discuss.

### **Education**

Access to tertiary education is a huge issue for refugees and asylum seekers in Australia who have to pay international fees. Who knows how many other capable students like Akoni are prevented from reaching their full potential in order to give back to their adopted country. More advocacy needs to happen to encourage universities to offer scholarships to students. Check out what is happening with the universities near you.

### **The happy ending**

Could the film have ended without the final scene? What was its purpose? Did it round the movie off, or distract from the overall message? Discuss.

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Thanks to Palace Nova for the opportunity to view the preview of the movie.*