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# Sundance Film Review: 'We Come as Friends'

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**Hubert Sauper observes the neocolonialist exploitation of South Sudan in this disturbing follow-up to 'Darwin's Nightmare.'**

Rob Nelson

A masterfully composed and suitably outraged look at the neocolonialist exploitation of South Sudan, "[We Come as Friends](#)" is, after "Darwin's Nightmare," the second part of Austrian documentary [Hubert Sauper's](#) proposed trilogy about the contemporary plight of African countries. Six years in the making, the film observes South Sudan becoming independent, politely pillaged for its resources, and devastated by war; according to Sauper, a number of the villages seen in the docu no longer exist. Amazingly, Sauper helped design a homemade airplane with which to travel the country at will; the film, too, is a purposeful vehicle, lofty in its aims.

Where the Oscar-nominated "Darwin's Nightmare" gazed in horror at the gruesome effects of global capitalism as seen in the poverty and famine of rural Tanzanians, the similarly disturbing "We Come as Friends," winner of a special jury prize at Sundance, bears witness to another sort of rapacity in Africa. Focusing on colonization, the new film explores the fine line between Western humanitarian aid and ruthless capital investment in a country that is only three years old.

Albeit narrated by Sauper, who begins by placing South Sudan in the context of a century-old European colonial dream, the docu isn't didactic, preferring the cinema verite strategy of allowing the viewer to orient himself. This isn't to say the film is always subtle. Proving he hasn't lost his eye for the bluntly effective metaphor, Sauper, in one of the docu's many discomfiting moments, shows South Sudanese children in tears as missionaries from Texas forcibly put shoes and socks on their feet. The stated goal of these evangelical Christians is to establish the "new Texas" according to their view of the Bible.

Elsewhere in the film, a young American couple builds a large house in the middle of a South Sudanese village, setting up fences to displace the locals and their livestock. Working on a much larger scale, a Chinese company drills for oil without heed to its poisoning of the locals' water supply, and the administrator of the USAid program announces plans to make electricity available in villages. The latter endeavor, purportedly humanitarian, is celebrated in a bizarre ceremony featuring young South Sudanese boys in Oxford shirts and clip-on neckties.

"We Come as Friends" becomes more disturbing as it goes, building to a terrible crescendo in a series of scenes near the end of the film. A representative of the Dallas-based Nile Trading and Development company negotiates his "right to exploit" a South Sudanese villager's land for a paltry \$25,000. Western businesspeople at the South Sudan Investment Summit arrogantly declare their intent to "help" while making their fortunes. Chilling footage of combat, shot on a [camera](#) phone by a South Sudanese soldier, is wedded to images of well-off white people lounging poolside at a newly developed spa.

Like "Darwin's Nightmare," "We Come as Friends" is often beautifully photographed, which serves to make the horror even more pronounced. Songs by British jazz vocalist Malia, including "Wild is the Wind," periodically haunt the soundtrack. All other tech credits are sharp.

**Sundance Film Review: 'We Come as Friends'**  
Reviewed at Sundance Film Festival (competing), Jan. 23, 2014. (Also in Berlin Film Festival — Berlinale Special.)  
Running time: 109 MIN.

**Production**  
(Documentary — France-Austria) An Adelante Films, Hubert Sauper, KGP, Gabriele Kranzelbinder production, with support of Arte, Canal Plus, Eurimages, OFI, Film Fund Vienna, ORF. (International sales: Le Pacte, Paris.)  
Produced by Hubert Sauper, Gabriele Kranzelbinder.

**Crew**  
Directed, written by Hubert Sauper. **Camera** (color, HD), Sauper, Barney Broomfield; **editors**, Sauper, Cathie Dambel, Denise Vindevoget; **music**, Slim Twig; **sound**, Xavier Lieberd.

**With**  
Hubert Sauper, David Gressley. (English, Mandarin, Arabic, Ma'di, Toposa dialogue)

FILED UNDER: Darwin's Nightmare, Hubert Sauper, Sundance Film Festival, We Come as Friends

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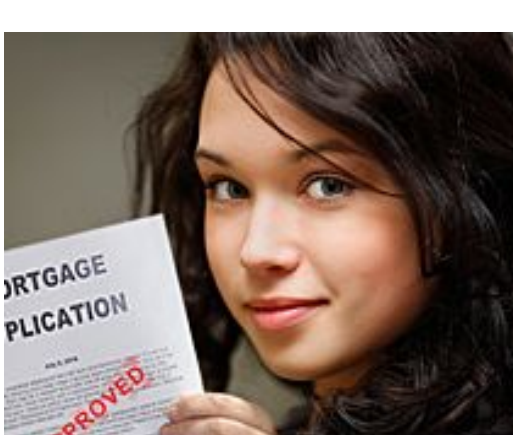
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Page 1