

***On Becoming a Guinea Fowl*** (2024, Zambia/Ireland/UK, 95 min.), written and directed by Rungano Nyoni; with Susan Chardy (Shula), Elizabeth Chisela (Nsansa), Henry B.J. Phiri (Dad), Doris Naulapwa (Mum); Norah Mwansa (Widow); Esther Singini (Bupe); Blessings Bhamjee (Young Shula); in Bemba and English. Shot in Lusaka.

*In traditional African culture, you've got to show respect, but you also have to find your voice.*—Director Rungano Nyoni

*I think it's really important for everyone to take away what they can for themselves from it. It's a quietly empowering film throughout, and I think at the end it's supposed to make you feel like you—it made me personally feel—like, you know what? I'm worthy, I have a voice and I need to use it not just for myself but for other people. And I think Shula actually finds her voice through trying to speak for others. So yeah, I would say, *No to Silence*.*—Susan Chardy (Shula)

As the film opens, Shula is driving home from a friend's costume party, dressed as a (rapper) Missy Elliott look-alike. She is, as we come to surmise, briefly back in Zambia after living many years abroad.

And then she sees a body on the side of the road. It turns out to be that of her Uncle Fred. Shula spends the night in her car beside the body, waiting for the police to arrive. She is joined by her raucous, drunken young cousin, Nsansa, another of Fred's nieces. The two cousins' reactions to their uncle's death seem strangely off. Shula shows no emotion, while Nsansa spews raucous mockery. Neither shows any grief—in stark contrast from what we will see, from the Aunties, Fred's many sisters.

We come to understand why as the film progresses.

The Aunties come to Shula's hotel to shame her into returning to her mother's home to help with the traditional funeral rituals—rituals that she seems barely to understand. However, this modern young woman is ultimately unable to resist these powerful women.

Shula attempts to do what is expected of her, but she increasingly finds herself caught between the real and the surreal, silence and confession, waking reality and dream, past and present, the overt and the suppressed.

But truth will ultimately come out.

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Veterans of the Cascade Festival of African Films are familiar with stories built around the clash between tradition and modernity, and this film touches in part on that conflict. In some of the earliest films that we showed, the focus was on preserving the higher moral principles of the traditional community against the encroachments of a corrupt

modernity. Others have had a more complex view of the traditional, showing that the abuse of power, particularly by men over women, the mature over the young, has a long history indeed. Maintaining traditional abuses in the name of preserving tradition is something to be resisted in these films. *On Becoming a Guinea Fowl* falls into the latter category.

The film's title derives from a reference in the film to the role of the guinea fowl. We learn that the guinea hens make an especially loud alarm call when they feel threatened. The alarm puts the whole flock on high alert, which warning helps keep them safe from would-be predators.

This metaphor comes to anchor the film's dynamic, its questions, and its ultimate messages. When is it appropriate to remain silent, and when is it necessary to speak up and speak out? When is it appropriate to maintain tradition, and when is it necessary to break with long-standing injustice?

This is the question that the younger generation of women in the film—Shula, Nsansa, Bupe, and even Uncle Fred's young widow—must ultimately confront and resolve.

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This is the third film by **Rungano Nyoni** to be shown at the Cascade Festival of African Films. We showed her award-winning short film, *Mwansa the Great* (2011), <https://www.africanfilmfestival.org/2013/mwansa-the-great/> in 2013, and her first feature film, *I Am Not a Witch* (2017) <https://www.africanfilmfestival.org/2019/festival/films/i-am-not-a-witch/> in 2019.

She won the 2018 Outstanding Debut Award from the British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) for this first feature, having already won BAFTA's 2009 Award for Best Short Film for *The List*. *I Am Not a Witch* was featured at Cannes' 2017 Directors Fortnight.

Born in Lusaka, Zambia, Nyoni and her family moved to Wales when she was a child. She studied acting at London's University of the Arts and received her Masters from the Drama Centre London.

She has been writing and directing films ever since. *On Becoming a Guinea Fowl*, her second feature, premiered at the Un Certain Regard section of the 2024 Cannes Film Festival on May 16, 2024. Nyoni was named Best Director at Un Certain Regard. (You can watch a YouTube of her accepting that award here. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=igVLRX9LkKk>)

The film has been shown at several film festivals since then (including Toronto and New York). It is scheduled to have its American theatrical release on March 7.

In addition to her award at Cannes, Nyoni has also won last year's British Independent Film Award for Best Director. Here's an interview with Nyoni in *Screen Daily*, <https://www.screendaily.com/features/rungano-nyoni-talks-feeling-the-pressure-with-her->

[second-film-on-becoming-a-guinea-fowl/5193670.article](#) made at the time of the film's release.

*On Becoming a Guinea Fowl* includes a mix of professional and non-professional actors, veterans and novices alike. This is the first feature film for Zambian-British actress **Susan Gossage Chardy**. Trained in Performing Arts, she has also worked as a model and has been very active in philanthropy. She won last year's British Independent Film Award for Breakthrough Performance and was nominated for Best Actress. She is married to tennis star J r my Chardy.

Here's a very informative video interview with Chardy, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oi\\_zjAZ16K8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oi_zjAZ16K8) made during the 2024 London Film Festival, in which she speaks about her background and her role in the film.

And here's a *Deadline* video interview with both Nyoni and Chardy. <https://deadline.com/video/the-on-becoming-a-guinea-fowl-team-on-the-code-of-silence-rungano-nyoni-susan-chardy-cannes-studio/>

--Notes by Michael Dembrow