

E.x.N K.K.
presents

LOST LAND

(HARÀ WATAN)



A film by Akio Fujimoto

99 min. | Drama | Japan, France, Malaysia, Germany | Rohingya | 2025

World Premiere - Orizzonti Competition of Venice International Film Festival 2025

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Logline:

In the hope of reuniting with their scattered family, four-year-old Shafi and his nine-year-old sister Somira leave a Rohingya refugee camp in Bangladesh on a perilous journey to reach Malaysia.

Synopsis:

After living in a Rohingya refugee camp in Bangladesh, four-year-old Shafi and his nine-year-old sister Somira embark on a perilous journey to Malaysia with a group of fellow Rohingya in the hope of reuniting with their scattered family. They spend seemingly endless days on an overcrowded smugglers' boat until an incident at sea leaves them alone — and lost — in Thailand. But the kindness of the people they meet along the way, and their own indomitable spirit, reveal to them that they are never alone in the world, no matter how far from home.

Statement from Director Akio Fujimoto:

For twelve years, I have been working on films in Southeast Asia, particularly in Myanmar. I often heard about the repeated persecution endured by the Rohingya people. It was hard to believe that such cruelty exists in today's world. In Myanmar, speaking openly about the Rohingya was considered taboo. So I remained silent, as I feared my professional consequences. That silence became a burden and led me to this film, LOST LAND.

When I began thinking about what kind of story to tell, I felt strongly that I wanted to portray the journey of the Rohingya people as they leave their homeland in search of a place where they can live in peace. Their path is filled with obstacles — the forces of nature, exploitation in cross-border trafficking, and the constant challenges that test their strength and resilience. Depicting their journey was essential to express the reality of the Rohingya: people without nationality or citizenship, forced to live in precarious conditions wherever they go, always searching for a place they can truly belong.

I was incredibly fortunate to have met over 200 Rohingya people who took part in this film, including the brother and sister who play the main roles. Most had personally experienced the perilous journeys the film portrays. Though none were trained actors, the weight of their lived experience gave an unmistakable strength and authenticity to their presence on screen.

Rather than being made within the conventional framework of a Japanese film, this work was created through a borderless collaboration involving Japan, which has a deep historical connection with Myanmar; Malaysia, where many Rohingya have sought refuge; and European countries where immigration issues are pressing and immediate.

LOST LAND portrays the long journey of refugees through the eyes of children, blending the harsh reality with elements of fantasy. If cinema is an art form that can serve as a metaphor for “living together,” I hope that through this film, the Rohingya, who may seem distant to many, can feel closer to us, as neighbours, as friends.

Statement from Co-Producer Sujauddin Karimuddin:

HARÀ WATAN (LOST LAND) is very important to me because it is not just a film: it is a Rohingya story, grounded in truth and lived experience. I believe in this film and became involved because it is one of the most powerful ways to share the reality of Rohingya life. The journey depicted in the film — from the refugee camps of Bangladesh (where over a million Rohingya fled to from Myanmar) to Malaysia (where many Rohingya now live) — is an all-too familiar one. Almost every Rohingya, and every family (including my own), who has had to flee, has been affected by this experience in one way or another.

What makes this film extraordinary is that the Rohingya cast are telling their own stories, stories most of them have personally lived, and which remain an ongoing reality for our people. This is not just history; it is an ongoing phenomenon — human trafficking, refugees escaping by boat, and the many ways our people are still suffering today. It is also the first-ever Rohingya-language movie, acted entirely by Rohingya.

At a time when genocidal forces are working to erase not only the Rohingya people but also our language, our music, and our very existence, this film stands as an act of language preservation, resistance, remembrance, and truth-telling.

Statement from Director of Photography Yoshio Kitagawa:

When people immerse themselves fully in something — pursuing it with complete seriousness — moments can arise in their lives that surpass reality, as if stepping into the realm of fiction. Director Fujimoto was someone who, above all else, wished for the camera to stand alongside them in those moments. “*Them*” refers to the Rohingya people who, with remarkable courage, agreed to appear in this film.

This story follows Somira and Shafi. Though our time together was brief, the camera was able to bear honest witness to the days they devoted to the making of this work. The choice to shoot handheld was not a stylistic attempt to mimic documentary form, but a way to share in — and honor — the courageous, precious time they spent before the lens, and to build a genuine relationship with them. The breath of life before us, and the breath of the camera that captures it — like a dance, these fragments of time and joy, I believe, will reach the audience as a testament to *the strength and warmth of their lives*.

Storytelling inevitably carries with it elements of fiction. It is an unavoidable truth of cinema, a medium shaped by the necessity of editing. Yet what unfolds before the camera is also what truly occurred. In the context of an international co-production, our greatest challenge was to design both the cinematography and the on-set environment in a way that could embody the deepest possible respect for *what happens in front of the camera*.

I was fortunate to be surrounded by a team whose talent and dedication were nothing short of miraculous. Their work made the shooting of this film possible. I am deeply grateful for their efforts — and I thank them, from the heart.

Biographies:

Akio Fujimoto (Writer / Director / Editor) is a Japanese filmmaker known for his intimate, socially engaged cinema. Born in Osaka in 1988, he trained in film at the city's Visual Arts Academy. His debut feature, *Passage of Life* (2017), a Japan-Myanmar co-production, received international acclaim, winning the Best Feature and the Spirit of Asia Best Director awards of the Asian Future section at the Tokyo International Film Festival. He continued exploring migration and identity in *Along the Sea* (2020), presented at the San Sebastián Film Festival. Drawing on personal and cultural experiences, his work blends fiction and documentary with a restrained, humanistic approach, often focusing on the lives of those at the margins.

Filmography:

Passage of Life - 2017 Japan / Myanmar (Tokyo IFF 2017 – Best Feature Film / Best Director)

Along the Sea - 2020 Japan / Vietnam (San Sebastián – New Directors; Tokyo IFF – World Focus)

Bleached Bones Avenue - 2020 Japan / Myanmar short film

Kazutaka Watanabe (Producer) was born in Fukui, Japan, and, after graduating from university, started to work in many facets of the film industry — distribution, talent agency, film festivals, production and subtitling/translation. In 2014, he created E.x.N K.K., a production/distribution company based in Tokyo. Watanabe has produced Akio Fujimoto's work throughout the director's career. He is also a programmer at “Yamagata Roughcut!” at the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival and is a member of NETPAC.

Sujauddin Karimuddin (Co-Producer) is a Rohingya human rights activist and founder of Elom Initiatives, a not-for-profit organization dedicated to education, advocacy and empowerment of marginalized communities. He has established a refugee school in Malaysia and is currently working to expand Elom Initiatives in Bangladesh refugee camps. Through his writing, public speaking and community organizing, Karimuddin works to preserve Rohingya identity, amplify the voices of his people, and advocate for justice, dignity and the safe return of Rohingya people to their ancestral land.

Yoshio Kitagawa (Director of Photography) works as a director of photography in a wide range of fields, including documentary films, art, music videos and feature films. He is perhaps best known for his collaboration over four films with Oscar-winning director Ryusuke Hamaguchi, including *Evil Does Not Exist*, Grand Jury Prize at the 2023 Venice International Film Festival; *Happy Hour*, Best Actress winner and Special Mention at the 2015 Locarno Film Festival. Other credits include *The Great Basin*, directed by Chivas DeVinck (2020), and *Third Time Lucky*, directed by Tadashi Nohara (2021).

Youki Yaei (Sound) began his creative work in the Kansai, Japan, underground band scene. He now works extensively as a recording engineer and sound designer for a number of Japanese films. This is his fourth collaboration with director Akio Fujimoto. Other credits include *My Small Land*, directed by Ema Kawawada (2022); *Egoist*, directed by Daishi Matsunaga (2023); and *Ghost Cat Anzu*, directed by Yoko Kuno and Nobuhiro Yamashita (2024).

Ernst Reijseger (Music) is a Dutch cellist, composer and improviser known for his unique musical style that blends genres and transcends art forms. He collaborates with a diverse range of artists, including filmmakers, actors, dancers and more. Since 2004, Reijseger has composed for films by Werner Herzog, among other leading filmmakers. His collaborations span across jazz, classical, baroque and traditional music, working with renowned artists like Yo Yo Ma, Misha Mengelberg, Trilok Gurtu and more.

Q&A with Director Akio Fujimoto

How did you first become interested in the Rohingya crisis, and what led you to this story?

Over the past twelve years, I've been working as a filmmaker in Myanmar, Southeast Asia. During this time, I repeatedly heard of the persecution the Rohingya people endured. I was shocked that such brutality could exist in our world.

However, there was a social taboo against even mentioning the Rohingya, and I stayed silent out of fear that speaking up would cost me work opportunities. That silence itself became a personal wound — a kind of moral failure — that I needed to confront. *LOST LAND* emerged from that reckoning.

Having spent so much of my life in Myanmar, I couldn't imagine continuing my career as a filmmaker while turning my back on this reality. At the same time, I also felt a growing desire to connect with the Rohingya through filmmaking.

When I began imagining the story, I wanted to depict the journey of those forced to flee their homeland in search of a safe place to live. Along the way, they face countless obstacles — natural threats, exploitation through border trafficking — and must constantly push forward, carving out a path despite the challenges.

This journey became a metaphor for the Rohingya's status: living in constant precarity without nationality or citizenship, always searching for a place to belong. I believed it was a reality that could not be captured through documentary alone.

How did your past activities and films in Southeast Asia shape the themes and approach for this film?

What has always struck me about Southeast Asian communities is their strong sense of familial care and mutual support — often more so than what I've seen in Japan. I've explored this theme of familial love in previous works.

In this project, I originally intended to do the same. But through working with the Rohingya community, I witnessed deep bonds between people who are not related by blood but who care for one another like true family. That inspired me to write a story where the protagonist is an orphan — so that the audience, too, can imagine themselves as guardians of this child. In that way, the notion of “family” in this film evolved into something broader and more universal.

How did you build a relationship of trust with the Rohingya community in Malaysia?

Although I had long worked in Myanmar, I had no direct contact with Rohingya people. With the help of an NPO, I was introduced to a private school for Rohingya children and met women involved in supporting the community. They generously helped develop the script.

Many Rohingya individuals participated in the project, not only as actors but also as collaborators. Every crew member developed their own relationships with members of the community. Creating opportunities for real communication with the Rohingya was one of our goals in making this film.

What was the casting process like, especially for the non-professional child actors?

Originally, the script centered on siblings aged around 11 to 14. While conducting interviews at a Rohingya school, I noticed a very young child playing alone in the classroom. That was Shafi, who eventually played the younger brother. His charm moved me instantly — I wanted to film him.

Coincidentally, his home was right next to the school, and that's where I met his sister, Somira. Watching their natural interactions felt like witnessing a comedy. I thought they could become a radiant, central presence in the film. After discussions, they kindly agreed to participate.

Most of the extras were also members of the school's community.

Did the children understand the story they were portraying? How did you direct their performances?

The lead siblings are second-generation Rohingya, so they hadn't personally experienced the kind of journey depicted in the film. But Somira had heard many stories from adults and seemed to grasp the reality to some extent.

Since the Rohingya language is not typically written, we communicated everything orally — including the full narrative and scene explanations. I gave almost no formal direction. Our crew worked carefully to ensure the children could act naturally, even in front of the camera.

Which parts of the story are fictional, and which are based on real events or testimonies?

Everything in the film is based on real events or testimonies except for three elements:

1. Two young children (aged 9 and 4) traveling alone. (There are cases of unaccompanied minors, but not siblings this young together.)
2. A Rohingya broker helping the children reunite with a group. (In real life, such reunions tend to happen months or years later, often in Malaysia.)
3. Death due to gunfire at the border. (There are testimonies of gunfire, though not necessarily resulting in immediate death as depicted.)

Did you incorporate improvisation or collaborative creation with the cast?

In my past works, I've often used long takes — filming for 1 to 3 hours per take and editing down to just a few seconds. Even for a simple side-profile looking at the sky, I might shoot for 50 minutes. This method helps blur the boundary between fiction and reality.

Since the camera can shoot in 360 degrees, no crew members can stand near the actors during takes. For people unfamiliar with this style, it can seem extreme.

Many crew members were new to my process, so I tried to follow the script more closely than usual to ease the burden. Somira, in particular, preferred rehearsed performances rather than improvisation. Although inexperienced, she had a sharp instinct.

Still, when capturing natural conversations or actions, I used moderated long takes of 20–40 minutes. Everyone handled it wonderfully.

Why did you decide to tell the story from the children's perspective?

Many Rohingya families have resettled outside Myanmar, and their children — second and third generation — often don't know the details of their parents' journeys.

I wanted to create a film that Rohingya adults could show to their children. That naturally led to centering the story through a child's perspective.

It also served a narrative purpose: the audience, like the child protagonist, likely knows little about the Rohingya crisis. This shared perspective allows viewers to experience the journey emotionally, without needing extensive background knowledge.

Where and over what period was the film shot?

Filming took place over about one month in Malaysia. Some scenes were also shot in refugee camps in Thailand and Bangladesh.

The film was shot in a very intimate style. How did you work with your cinematographer and crew to achieve this while maintaining respect and distance from your subjects?

My policy when directing children is that the most important thing to avoid is instructing them not to look at the camera or trying to hide the presence of the cameraman and crew. Such actions are very unnatural for children.

We intentionally did not hide from the children that Yoshio was filming nearby. The children were allowed to talk to the cameraman, and Yoshio could respond to them even while recording. In other words, the direction prioritized creating an environment where the children could behave freely without feeling pressured by the camera.

By continuing with long takes, the children gradually began to feel the act of being filmed more naturally and often stopped reacting to the camera.

Although Yoshio is not a cameraman who usually uses many long takes, in this film he patiently observed the children for extended periods with a handheld camera. Yoshio moved freely, as if dancing, matching the children's rhythm and energy, and was able to capture their most lively and spontaneous moments.

In this way, when the cameraman freely moved around among the children with the camera, it felt as if he was playing together with them. I felt that this was equivalent to the audience also playing along with the children. This allowed to create the sense during the final hide-and-seek scene that Shafi is playing with the audience.

Sujauddin, the Rohingya interpreter and co-producer (who is also a community leader and advocate for Rohingya in Australia), was an essential presence on set as he was the one who created the environment and foundation that made it possible for all of the above to happen.

As a fellow Rohingya, he built close relationships with the cast, creating a safe and supportive environment that allowed the children to fully engage in the filming process. He also gave speeches before scenes involving large numbers of Rohingya extras, helping to raise their morale and unify them as a group. Thanks to his presence between the crew and the Rohingya participants, I felt that the Rohingya cast were able to actively engage with the project in a meaningful way.

How do you hope this film contributes to the global conversation around statelessness, forced migration and human rights?

I hope the film helps people remember the importance of kindness.

Have you shown the film to the Rohingya community? Do you plan to? Will they be part of the film's journey?

After the world premiere at the Venice Film Festival, I hope to organize a screening for the Rohingya cast and community. Since they have no citizenship, they cannot obtain passports and therefore cannot attend international festivals.

My dream is to win a Best Actor award in Venice, then roll out a red carpet and hold another award ceremony with them at their own screening.

Of course, I want Rohingya communities around the world, including those in Japan, to see the film. But simply having them “watch” the film is not enough.

I hope our producers will create a system where, after the film's international run ends, the screening rights are made freely available to all Rohingya individuals and organizations supporting them.

If someone in the Rohingya community loves the film, they should be free to show it to family, share it locally, or even organize screenings to raise funds. More than just being viewed, I believe the real journey of this film begins when the Rohingya themselves start showing it.

When depicting an urgent humanitarian crisis, what does “cinema” mean to you?

It's not enough for people to simply say the film was “interesting.” Cinema, to me, is an artform that can deeply touch people's hearts and potentially spark real societal change.

How would you like audiences to receive this film? What kind of dialogue or action do you hope it inspires?

The film is structured so that the Rohingya, who once felt like distant strangers, are shown arriving in spaces that feel familiar to the audience. I hope viewers will journey with the characters and, through that process, feel a sense of friendship and closeness. When we see someone as a friend, we don't allow division to take root.

How does LOST LAND mark an evolution from your previous films?

My approach of capturing performances in a raw and realistic manner has remained unchanged. What's new, however, is the blending of that realism with a touch of fantasy — something I hadn't explored in

my previous works. I envisioned Rohingya children as potential viewers of this film. I wanted the viewing experience to feel almost like reading a picture book, while still maintaining a tone that reflects both a modern-day fable and an unflinching reality.

Credits:

Director: Akio Fujimoto

Screenplay: Akio Fujimoto

Produced by Kazutaka Watanabe

Executive Producers: Mizue Kunizane, Shogo Yasukawa

Co-producers: Angèle de Lorme, Sujauddin Karimuddin, Elise Shick, Christian Jilka

Consulting Producer: Eric Nyari

Director of Photography: Yoshio Kitagawa

Editor: Akio Fujimoto

Sound: Youki Yaei

Colorist: Yov Moor

Music: Ernst Reijseger

Production Designer: Tam Khalid

Costume Designer: Jessie Yeow

Assistant Director: Bilal Kawazoe

Line Producer: Gabrielle Lee

Production Companies:

E.x.N K.K. (Kazutaka Watanabe)

Dongyu (Mizue Kunizane)

KinemaTowards (Shogo Yasukawa)

Panorama Films (Angèle de Lorme)

Elom Initiatives (Sujauddin Karimuddin)

Cinemata (Elise Shick)

Cineric Creative (Eric Nyari)

Scarlet Visions (Christian Jilka)

Film Specifications:

Original Title: HARÀ WATAN

International Title: LOST LAND

Year: 2025

Countries: Japan, France, Malaysia, Germany

Language: Rohingya

Runtime : 99 minutes

Camera: Sony BURANO

Format: Digital, Color

Screening Format: DCP

Aspect Ratio: 1.5:1

Frame Rate: 24fps

Sound: 5.1

Resolution: 1920 x 1080