

**TESFAYE / HOPE**

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## ABSTRACT

*Tesfaye* is a 25-minute experimental documentary film based on the extraordinary life of an Ethiopian refugee, rescued from the sea in Madagascar and now living in Canada.

Shot in Ethiopia and Canada, the film recounts the life of *Tesfaye*, who fled his country nineteen years ago in search of a better life, and arrived in Canada after spending years as a refugee in Malawi, Mozambique, Swaziland and South Africa. His last attempt at finding a home in Africa ended when he was thrown overboard in the middle of the Indian Ocean after he shipped out as a stowaway on a ship to Japan. After three days and nights without food or water, he washed up on the shores of Madagascar where he would spend seven years before he was finally able to emigrate to Canada.

To experiment with alternative methods of film exhibition, this film was made as an accompaniment to an Ethiopian traditional coffee ceremony, which is composed of three sections. This ceremony is practiced all over Ethiopia for generations and is one of the cultural devices that help foster community discussions where people share their experiences and tell stories.

Similar to the Ethiopian coffee ceremony, the film is also broken into three sections and screened in parallel with the ceremony. It is to be stopped at the end of each section for a refill of coffee and discussion.

## **DEDICATION**

Dedicated to my late father, Debebe Negatu.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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## INTRODUCTION

As a newcomer to Canada in 2014, one of the challenges I faced was continuing my career as a filmmaker, as I did not have the proper networks to get jobs or find collaborators to produce work with. Add to that the pressures of trying to raise our newborn baby without the support mechanism of an extended family/ community, which I took for granted in Ethiopia, meant that I could not be picky about the employment I was seeking. It soon dawned on me that these were tough questions every immigrant had to face coming to a new land. How does one stay connected to their roots but still flourish in another land? What part does a community play in easing the difficulty of new immigrants in situating themselves? These were some of the questions that fueled my interest in this project.

I first met Tesfaye two years ago at a reggae concert in Dundas Square during the summer of 2016. Soon after we first met, Tesfaye told me his incredible story. The general positivity he maintained as he recounted the hard-to-believe details of his journey, which included an epic near-death experience in the Indian Ocean, stood out for me. I was left wondering how such experiences might shape an individual. Tesfaye, like me and many other immigrants, did not know anyone when he first arrived in Canada. I wanted to know more about his story and how he navigated the transition of establishing a home in another country. I came to know more about Tesfaye's story as I occasionally ran into him at Dundas Square throughout the summer.

In the fall of 2016, I was struggling with my master thesis film proposal, about an Ethiopian farmer forced to work as a daily laborer after selling his land to international investors. While this was an idea I was still interested in at the time, I was struggling with the feasibility of shooting it in Ethiopia at a time of civil unrest where the government had issued a state of emergency. At the time, Tesfaye, whom I was then meeting regularly, started expressing interest in sharing his story to a wider public, and so I proposed to help accomplish this, as part of my thesis work at York University.

## **Film Summary**

When Tesfaye first arrived in Canada, he had already spent 9 years as a refugee in many African countries. Once in Canada, Tesfaye quickly enrolled in school and got a good job after graduation. He started to successfully integrate into Canadian society, until an encounter one night with the Halifax police landed him in jail and resulted in a criminal record. But Tesfaye was convinced it was not his fault, but a case of racial profiling. This experience would later prompt Tesfaye to leave Halifax and move to Toronto, where he struggled to gain employment because of his criminal record.

In November 2015, peaceful demonstrations turned violent in Tesfaye's home country, Ethiopia. In less than a year, the demonstrations spread throughout the country and hundreds died as a result of the government's crackdown. In between looking for jobs, Tesfaye fervently took part in demonstrations organized by the Ethiopian diaspora community in Canada, protesting against the atrocities in Ethiopia.



Conditions continued to worsen in Ethiopia, as Tesfaye struggled to make ends meet in Canada. Alone in Toronto, Tesfaye got more involved in many campaigns to address the situation in Ethiopia but steadily grew discouraged at the possibility of affecting real change. It has been almost twenty years since Tesfaye saw his family and friends in Ethiopia. Caught between nostalgia for his home country and the possibility (opportunity) of a better life in another one, this film explores Tesfaye's struggles; in a constant state of transition, trying to find a place he can call home.

With this project, I look at how film can be used to share immigrant experiences and foster community dialogue about the challenges of living in another country. I also look at adapting traditional practices and rituals as alternative venues and platforms for exhibiting films to the public.

# BACKGROUND

## New Beginnings

To be thrown overboard in the middle of the Indian Ocean with nothing but a makeshift raft between you and the massive expanse is an experience that will shape an individual for the rest of their lives. As Tesfaye puts it “*It feels like you are given a second chance at life*”. This description is similar to how many refugees/immigrants look upon the chance to come and settle in another country - a new beginning.

Deciding to leave one’s country is never an easy decision. For many immigrants coming to Canada, the journey is fraught with much difficulty, and the experiences they have to endure shape one’s outlook on life as they prepare to make a new home in a new country. Disconnected from a family structure and community, which was once a source of security for many, newcomers are forced to cope with a feeling of loneliness and confusion as they navigate a new society with its own set of rules, climate and way of doing things. Faced with these challenges, many are forced to re-evaluate their reasons for leaving their home country, confronting self-doubt, loss of confidence and sometimes depression.

On the other hand, there is an expectation from family and friends back home that one has “made it” if they live in a developed country like Canada. Any evidence to the contrary is seen as a sign of weakness and squandering opportunity. This is added pressure on the newcomer and many keep up a veneer of "success" so as not to lose face in front of their loved ones back home.

This assumption of a better life in the western world is further perpetuated by people who go back visiting to their home countries after years of stay in the western world. Many only focus on the salient parts of living abroad and in some instances are not even believed if they linger too much on the challenges. While on holiday in their home countries, many also like to show off with the lifestyle they maintain and the money they appear to splurge because of the high exchange rates of the dollar or pound to the local currencies. Thus, knowingly or otherwise, a distorted image is portrayed of the kind of life one can expect in the west priming many locals to one day leave their homes headed for the west in search of a better life.

Can film be used to bridge this gap and provide an alternate view that will provide a realistic perspective to friends and family back home? With no strong distribution mechanisms for making African stories accessible to Africans, how can these films be viewed and shared within the community to bring about understanding? Can the single story of a single person communicate to an audience of immigrants with diverse experiences? These are the questions I grapple with in this project.

## **Ethiopia - A Brief Historical Background**

Ethiopia is a country with a proud past. It is the only African nation that was not colonized, it has its own unique calendar, alphabet and numbers and it is also the place where coffee was first discovered. Its age old history and culture have given this nation a unique quality and its people a proud sense of identity. However, this collective pride was irreparably marred by famines that hit Ethiopia in the 1980s and the atrocities of the

Derg communist regime that overthrew the monarchy of Haile Selassie I in 1974. Starting this period, thousands of Ethiopians fled the country hoping for a better life.

Since the current Ethiopian government overthrew the Derg regime in 1991, Ethiopia has been eager to portray a positive image of itself for the rest of the world. After establishing close economic ties with China, Ethiopia started exhibiting positive growth with the IMF announcing the nation as one of the fastest growing economies in the world, registering over 10% economic growth from 2004 through 2009. Suddenly there was a construction boom and a proliferation of infrastructure on the ground in Ethiopia. The high inflation rates that skyrocketed the cost of living were justified as growing pains by the government.

It was not only the physical attributes of the country that were changing but also the social, cultural and traditional fabric. Is the loss of cultural identity an inevitable compromise that comes with modernization? Why are local cultural practices and expressions deemed backward and excluded from the equation of development?

A closer inspection raises a lot of questions. While Ethiopia is one of the world's largest recipients of foreign aid, food crops are exported abroad while over 30% of the Ethiopian population exists below the food poverty line. The Ethiopian government has long faced criticism for forcibly relocating tens of thousands of people from their ancestral homes to make way for large-scale commercial agriculture, often benefiting foreign investors. There have been countless allegations of violent evictions, political coercion and imprisonment, forcing many to become exiles in other countries.

In November 2015, Ethiopia was gripped by rampant demonstrations starting in the Oromia region but soon spreading out to encompass other areas. As retaliation against the government's violent crackdown, the people started destroying the properties of wealthy government officials and factories owned by foreign investors seemingly as a measure to reclaim the land that was once theirs.

After almost three years, there seems to be no ease in the unrest in the country. A state of emergency was declared twice in a space of 10 months; the last one coming after the prime minister announced his resignation. So far, hundreds have died, thousands have been imprisoned and many have fled the country, fearing persecution by the government.

For many Ethiopians living in other parts of the world, watching the events described above unfold from a distance is a very painful experience. Starting from the rule of the Derg regime, many Ethiopians left the country fearing persecution, and this brings back painful memories. All national media outlets are either monopolized or dominated by the government, making it difficult to access any unbiased news. As a counter measure, the Ethiopian diaspora community raised money to form a news outlet called ETHSAT based in Washington DC with branches in Toronto, Amsterdam and London, UK.

Many Ethiopians living in the diaspora have rallied together to protest the conditions back home, appealing to world governments to intervene. This was a move the Ethiopian government took as meddling in internal affairs, leading to a festering animosity between members of the Ethiopian diaspora and the Ethiopian government,

with the government on occasion blaming the Ethiopian diaspora for inciting the current unrest in the country.

## **Cinema and Tradition**

The 1934 Laval Decree sought to control all images of Africa and French colonialism, giving the French authorities the right to refuse anyone permission to film in the colonies. Consequently, it is interesting to note here that some pioneering African films were actually made outside of Africa and were about immigrant experiences.

*Afrique-sur-Seine* (1955), by Paulin Soumanou Vieyra and his colleagues from Le Group Africain du Cinema, is largely regarded as the first film to be made by an African. It was shot in Paris, France and documented the plight of African students/immigrants living in another country and coping with the nostalgia they felt far away from their native land. Ten years after the release of *Afrique-sur Seine*, Ousamne Semebene released his seminal film, *Black Girl*, also raising a similar topic; the alienation felt by a Senegalese maid who moves to France after being employed by a French couple.

Since the advent of photography and cinema, power relations and access have always played a key role in how Africans represent themselves. While many Africans were prohibited from practicing cinema in pre-colonial times, it was outsiders driven by their own agendas who were largely responsible for majority of the images produced about Africa. Hence, Africans' limited access to and knowledge of the image-making technologies of the day has resulted in an unbalanced representation of the continent.

Many argue that the question of cinematic access has shifted with the advent of smartphones and personal computers -- but for these technologies of photography and cinema to incorporate themselves into a pre-existing culture, they need to be ubiquitously available in the daily lives of the people. They need to be put in service through play, trial and error, relatively free from outside influences, until they serve a purpose for the community that collectively decide their value. Although the above is also true for the rest of the world, Africa in particular lags behind in truly adapting cinema technologies.

Instead, it is my opinion that this sudden access to mass media (smart phones et al) in Africa has arrived in the absence of a pre-existing homegrown cultural base on which Africans can adapt to these technologies. Instead, the sheer dominance of western content that was and still is available for consumption through these devices meant that more and more Africans were being inculcated into western pop-culture, bringing about an alienation of many young Africans from their traditions and history.

## **Sharing African Stories**

African films have been plagued with poor distribution for decades, making them inaccessible to the general public that the films were intended for. Since the sixties, when many African countries gained independence, African film makers have tried to present a balanced view of Africa, using cinema as a tool to educate and transform their societies. However, these films remain out of reach of many Africans for various reasons, including the absence or limitation of exhibition halls and theatres, a homegrown culture of cinema viewing, and poor distribution. Instead it is much easier to view these films in Europe and North America. Ironically, one of the main reasons Ousman Sembène stopped writing

books and started to make films was to make his stories more accessible to the proletariat. The same problem of distribution and access still dogs African cinema today.

This problem of distribution is also further compounded for short format films and documentaries (categories my thesis film falls into). Apart from limited exposure at a few short film festivals, there is no real distribution mechanism within the African/Ethiopian context for such films and they have always suffered poor viewership. Therefore, one of the challenges I would like to take on for this project is to look at alternate ways of exhibiting films, to make them accessible to the locals for which they were intended.

In his book, *Convergence Culture*, Henry Jenkins discusses the function of a medium as two-fold: one is a communication-enabling mechanism (a piece of technology), and the other is a set of practices that develop around that technology. For this project, I will attempt to treat cinema purely as “a piece of technology”, divorced from the set of practices that have developed around it, and explore alternative ways of exhibiting/sharing films as accompaniments to traditional practices built on fostering community dialogue that are rooted in Ethiopian culture.

## **Ethiopian Coffee Ceremony**

Legend has it that an Ethiopian goat shepherd called Kaldi discovered coffee. Noticing his goats frolicking after eating the red berries and leaves of an unfamiliar tree, Kaldi decided to try some for himself, and soon joined his goats in experiencing the energizing effects of caffeine. Kaldi would later bring the berries to a monk in a nearby monastery who had difficulty staying up during prayer times. Upon first inspection of the



berries, the monk disapproved of their use and threw them into a fire, from which an enticing aroma billowed. The roasted beans were quickly raked from the embers, ground up and dissolved in hot water, yielding the world's first cup of coffee.

The Ethiopian coffee ceremony is a unique cultural practice that has been handed down for generations. Throughout the ceremony, participants drink three cups of coffee marking the three stages of the ritual: *Abol* (first), *Tona* and *Bereka* (Blessings). During the ceremony, people share stories, stay updated on current events and discuss various subjects while enjoying their coffees with servings of popcorn or traditional bread.

Mostly frequented by women in both traditional/rural and urban settings, it is very customary for neighboring women to invite one another for coffee and a lively chat two to three times a day. It is also common to all cultures and ethnicities in Ethiopia, with very small variations on the utensils used. However, the number of cups of coffee consumed during the ceremony is common to all variations.

*“A medium's content may shift, its audience may change and its social status may rise or fall but once a medium establishes itself as satisfying some core human demand, it continues to function within the larger system of communication options. Hence old media are not being displaced. Rather, their functions and status are shifted by the introduction of new technologies.”*

– Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*

Henry Jenkins defines *Media Convergence* as the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences. He also argues that this convergence should not be understood purely as a technological phenomenon but also a cultural one.

Consequently, for this project, I look at the traditional coffee ceremony as an age-old medium for exchanging stories and ideas and explore its commonalities and differences with cinema as I look into integrating one into the other.

Recently, the Ethiopian ceremony has made an interesting mutation to keep up with an increasingly fast paced and developed world. Currently in the urban parts of Ethiopia, coffee kiosks offering the traditional ceremony are popping up everywhere. It is very common to see them at the entrances to buildings, government offices and shopping malls and many Ethiopians prefer them to the modern coffee shops widely available in the big cities like the capital, Addis Ababa. Although it is encouraging to see many Ethiopians preserving a piece of their culture in a fast developing region, these “updated” coffee kiosks that provide traditional coffee come with one variation – the number of cups consumed. One rarely stops to enjoy a full coffee ceremony (3 cups), which usually lasts at least half an hour.

The fast-paced busy urban existence has made it difficult for one to stop and enjoy things. The repercussions of this lifestyle on a traditional coffee ceremony might seem small compared to the number of cups. But the extended time one has to be there to enjoy the full ceremony was the setting for a community forum that brought people together and seems to be disappearing as Ethiopia continues to be one of the fast developing countries in Africa.

It was my interest to revive the communal experience of the coffee ceremony and my desire to make my work more accessible by placing it in an already established cultural practice that I decided to adopt the Ethiopian traditional coffee ceremony as the setting for exhibiting my work.

## FORM

The film imagines the story of Tesfaye using landscapes, locations and objects to evoke his memories of pivotal moments in his life.

In one of our conversations, I asked Tesfaye what he would feel if he found the message that he placed in a bottle before being thrown overboard in the Indian Ocean. Tesfaye responded that he would feel like he was “automatically transported” back on the ship again, being forced to get off. This started a thought process about how memories can be triggered using objects and locations. I began exploring how memories are tied in with geographies/places and the interactions between the histories of these places with the personal memories of the people who passed through them.

Tesfaye’s life is marked with travels and transitions - from one place to another in an unrelenting search for a place to call home. But many of those efforts were thwarted by circumstances beyond Tesfaye’s control that would send his life on yet another trajectory. To mark this constant search, I followed Tesfaye as he physically or remotely (watching footage) revisited different places that have significance in his life’s journey as a way to recall or evoke the memories associated. Some of the locations used were the Halifax court house, the Nova Scotia Aviation Institute and present day footage of the neighborhood Tesfaye grew up in back in Ethiopia.

In some instances, some memories were disjoined from the actual location they took place in and re-associated with other locations/geographies. For instance, the Toronto islands stood in for Madagascar and South Africa while visualizing Tesfaye’s experiences in the Indian Ocean, helping to place Tesfaye’s memories in the present day

and hopefully hinting at how the past still affects the present.

The structure of the film parallels that of a traditional coffee ceremony in that it is also split into three sections. The three sections in the film are marked by events or circumstances that deflect Tesfaye's search for a home into a new direction. Though the film can be viewed in one continuous screening, it is intended to be stopped at the end of each section for a refill of Ethiopian coffee and an exchange of ideas. Stopping the film at the end of each section acknowledges the many intermissions in Tesfaye's life while also opening up the film for discussion.

The narrative component of the film comes from recorded conversations and interviews with Tesfaye conducted over a year and a half and supplemented with recorded video messages between Tesfaye, his mother and childhood friends who all live in Addis Ababa and have not seen each other for the past nineteen years.

## **Audience Engagement**

Cinema, in its current exhibition form of theatrical screening or home viewing, is a one-sided affair. The audience is but a witness to the culmination of images, consuming ideas on the screen without an invitation for engagement. Cinema can be an authoritarian figure where it does all the "talking" and we passively listen and watch with amazement. Although an openly accepted reality, this one-sided interaction is not common in many African cultures, where interactivity is an ingrained sensibility.

The exchange/interaction that takes place during an Ethiopian coffee ceremony is the very fabric of social life that has connected people for generations, serving as a support mechanism and reservoir of experiences and memories. I think cinema can learn from the coffee ceremony in opening up the space for people to interact with the work and amongst themselves and occasionally, also embody the work themselves. Consequently, this thought process has informed the decision to open up the form of the film, inviting audience participation at periodic intervals in the film.

This stopping and resuming the film also has the effect of nudging the audience out of the “spell” of watching images on a silver screen - the film diverts attention away from itself and acknowledges another age old medium - the coffee ceremony, opening up the space and time for audience input in moving the story forward.

To encourage this interaction, certain details in the story are left open for the audience to fill in through conversation and their imaginations, drawing from their own feelings and experiences.

## ARTIST BACKGROUND

Coming from an engineering background, most of the expertise and experience I garnered during the initial stages of my filmmaking career was self-acquired. I taught myself Final Cut, how to shoot and write scripts and I simply started making films.

My first films were made as part of a participatory video project with an artistic collective of HIV/AIDS orphans in Addis Ababa called *Sudden Flowers*. I was responsible for teaching basic photography and videography skills to children aged 8 to 18 and adapting their life stories into short film scripts with the full participation of the children and guidance of a professional play therapist. The children were also involved in the shooting and editing of the films and had to sign off on the final cut before it was screened for the group.

One of the films that came out of the program was called *Fighting With Father* and it dealt with the autobiographical reworking of painful life experiences of having to cope after losing a parent due to HIV/AIDS. This film opened a lot of doors for me to build on my skills and experience as a filmmaker. It was screened at many international film festivals in Europe and Africa and paved the way to present my work at Harvard University, Duke University – Center for Documentary Studies, NYU-Tisch and other esteemed educational institutes in North America. The film was also screened by UNICEF-Ethiopia around the country for advocacy purposes.

Another prominent milestone in my filmmaking journey was an opportunity to study at the Imagine film school in Burkina Faso under the auspices of Gaston Kabore

who is one of the forefathers of African Cinema. This intensive two- month program really opened my eyes to the possibilities of using film as a cultural tool. My stay in Burkina Faso also helped me further hone my technical skills and develop an appreciation of cinema outside of mainstream Hollywood, introducing me to the works of African film makers like Haile Gerima, Ousmane Sembène, Abderahman Sissako and many more.

While in Burkina Faso, I also had the opportunity to work with Burkina TV in documenting the FESPACO film festival, which gave me free access to network and brainstorm with a variety of filmmakers across Africa. I believe my time in Burkina Faso was when I really grew as a filmmaker - my experiences left me questioning where I want to position my work and what I wanted to accomplish with cinema. During my stay there, I wrote, directed and edited a short experimental film, *Hide+Seek*, about the internal struggles of a man torn between what he wants versus what is expected of him. This film is indicative of the transformative nature of my time in Burkina Faso.

(<https://vimeo.com/15218301>)

In 2009, I was working as a creative director at one of the top production offices in Ethiopia and producing content for many international clients like UNICEF, MTV- Staying Alive and the Nike Foundation. I also wrote, directed and edited my first narrative short film called *I-Witness* and won the Jury Prize at the Images that Matter short film festival in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

As of 2014, I started collaborating with a friend, American photographer Eric Gottesman, on adapting the work of an Ethiopian author (Bealu Girma) who disappeared



shortly after publishing a book (*Oromay*) on the communist Ethiopian government's "Red Star" campaign to defeat the Eritrean opposition in the 1980s. We wanted to use Oromay as a vehicle to engage in local discussions about the central conflict between creative expression and authority. So far, we have produced a multi-channel video, photographs and a short film surrounding the work of Bealu Girma.

I look at my thesis film, *Tesfaye*, as a continuation of my exploration of Ethiopian/African history and culture. I'm very interested in working on the convergence of age-old indigenous African/Ethiopian mediums with modern, technology-driven ones such as cinema, photography, VR and AR, thereby discovering new ways of telling stories, engaging audiences and fostering community values, understanding and tolerance.

This also involves explorations of two seemingly contradictory sensibilities in the cultures from which these mediums originated: values of moderation, reverence for nature and communal living, in contrast to values of individualism and superfluous comfort aided by technology. But does this mean one precludes the other? What are some problems prevalent in modern society that wisdom from indigenous cultures can address?

As many Africans look to the west as a way of life to aspire to, many traditional practices that constitute the core social functions within African societies are fast becoming obsolete. I have made it my responsibility as a filmmaker to document, re-tell and re-imagine African stories to help them stay relevant in an increasingly developing world. Cultural identity should not be a compromise for development.

## Influences

### Third Cinema

During the making of this film my research has been informed by the writings of the late Ethiopian cinema scholar Teshome Gabriel on third cinema. In particular, his discourse on audience participation was crucial, where the audience is invited to explore the spaces between representation and reality and become producers rather than consumers of culture. The participatory and collaborative approach prevalent in third cinema that is not focused on a consumerist/market driven agenda but on social transformation is a quality that has resonated with me as I was making this film.

### La Hora de los Hornos / Hour of the Furnaces

*Hour of the Furnaces* (1968), a film by Octavio Getino and Fernando Solanas, is regarded as the embodiment of third cinema sentiments at the time of its making during the Argentine Revolution.

The film is a revolutionary call to action, meant to awaken the consciousness of the passive Argentinian citizenry and inspire socio-political revolution. Running a little over 4 hours, it is divided into three segments - *Neocolonialism*, *Act for liberation* and *Violence and Liberation*.

Shot clandestinely between 1966 and 1968, the film was also screened covertly to sympathetic audiences who would regularly interrupt the projection to discuss concepts and issues raised in the film, making it a participatory viewer experience requiring self-reflection and interpretation of the subject matter as it is being presented.

## West African Griots

*“In truth, the griot (...) before being a historian is, above all, an artist. Therefore, it would follow that his songs, chants, poems and legend are all works of art. The oral tradition is more closely related to art than science. Exactly like the African sculptor, the historical reality placed in front of the griot is not always told as it is.” – Camara Laye*

Traditionally, griots served as the oral historian, musician and entertainer of communities in West Africa. All griots descended from a long line of griots who served a variety of functions in the society including storytelling, historical preservation, and performance. One of their assigned tasks was to preserve the history of the country through story and song.

In post-colonial Senegal, the functions of the griot shifted along with the sociopolitical order as Senegal emerged as a free nation. This was the time when many self-proclaimed griots emerged.

Ousman Sembène was one of the most prolific and influential members of this group of professional modern griots. Having written books prior to making films, literature was his first choice of artistic expression. But Sembène realized his written works were only accessible to the cultural elites and decided to make films to reach a broader African audience.

Sembène started making films using whatever was accessible to him, including rolls of scrapped and expired film that was sent to him from his friends in Europe. He worked with non-actors, using natural light and filming on the open streets of Senegal, showing African life through an African lens.

The mechanisms of Sembène's films closely resemble neo-realist cinema, but Sembène also incorporated other traditional ways of story-telling in his films; the most notable of which is the griot. By relating filmmaking to the West African griot, he calls for a reinterpretation of past griotic functions and in doing so, he both critiques and redefines the role of the griot in West African society as evidenced in his films:

*Borom Saret* (1963), *Xala* (1975), and *Ceddo* (1977).

Another self-proclaimed griot from Senegal who has also been influential in my work is Djibril Diop Mambety, the writer/director of *Touki Bouki* (1973) and *Badou Boy* (1970).

*"The word griot...is the word for what I do and the role that the filmmaker has in society...the griot is a messenger of one's time, a visionary and the creator of the future."*

– Djibril Diop Mambety

*"One has to choose between engaging in stylistic research or the mere recording of facts. I feel that a filmmaker must go beyond the recording of facts. Moreover, I believe that Africans, in particular, must reinvent cinema. It will be a difficult task because our viewing audience is used to a specific film language, but a choice has to be made: either one is very popular and one talks to people in a simple and plain manner, or else one searches for an African film language that would exclude chattering and focus more on how to make use of visuals and sounds."*

– Djibril Diop Mambety

## **PREP / PRODUCTION / POST NOTES**

I met Tesfaye regularly during the early stages of the film, and recorded our conversations, alternating between using a camera and an audio recorder. I soon noticed that Tesfaye had an inclination to “perform” for the camera, looking down the barrel of the lens to address an imaginary audience. I was concerned that this “performance” would take away from his story because at times it felt like he was more focused on how he would present the story and not necessarily on the details. On the other hand, whenever I used only the audio recorder, Tesfaye was more engaged and exploratory in talking about his feelings, memories and the past. I used a combination of these two approaches as we entered the production phase of the film.

### **Addis Ababa**

It was the realization that Tesfaye had not seen his mother for almost two decades, which gave me the impetus to film her in Addis Ababa. The original plan was for one of my friends to shoot this part in Addis Ababa and send me the footage. However, in 2017 I had to travel back to Addis Ababa due to a family emergency and so decided to take on the task myself.

I did not want to start filming right away during my first encounter with Tesfaye’s mother. I wanted to introduce myself first and tell her about the project I was doing with her son, which she immediately warmed up to. We had a lively conversation over a traditional coffee ceremony and I left after making arrangements to return for an

interview on a later date. Eventually, I also met and filmed Tesfaye's childhood friends who still hold fond memories of him.

During my stay in Ethiopia, a state of emergency was in effect and filming in public places was prohibited. I wanted to record and show Tesfaye the neighborhood that he grew up in, and how it looks now, so I had to wake up early in the morning to get driving shots with a GoPro camera when there was not a lot of people on the street; being careful not to draw too much attention to myself.

Before I returned to Canada, I went back to Tesfaye's mother to say goodbye and see if she had any more messages for her son. On this day, I received blessings and encouragement from her for choosing to tell her son's story. This is one of the moments/memories I hold dear during the making of this film.

## **Halifax**

Since I was in Halifax for only seven days to shoot this portion of the film. I knew I had very little time, and thus, the best I was hoping for was to get some interviews and footage of Tesfaye with his daughter and wife. Knowing Tesfaye used to work at the airport while he was in Halifax, it made sense to fly into the city together so I could also film him at the airport.

During my research on Halifax, I learnt about Halifax's history of migration and settlement and found out about the Pier 21 Museum of Immigration. Our visit to Halifax coincided with world refugee day on June 20 so I thought it would be a good idea to go visit the museum on this day. The management at the museum was kind enough to let us

shoot inside without any prior notification and I am indebted to their cooperation as the sections I shot inside the museum turned out to be instrumental in shaping the film in editing.

Although I tried to realistically plan the trip to Halifax, I also wanted to remain open to what would unfold in front of me as Tesfaye took me on a tour of Halifax, introducing me to all kinds of people wherever we went. It seemed Tesfaye knew everybody in Halifax -- he seemed more at home there than anywhere I had seen him.

Tesfaye's daughter, Sabba, had seen a short film I did as a class assignment, an excerpt from her father's story, and was keen on participating in the project. Tesfaye's ex-wife, Elizabertho, also invited Tesfaye and I for dinner to her house and that is where I shot most of the interviews with her and Sabba.

The film was shot with minimum equipment; mostly on a 24mm prime and 18-135mm kit lens recording sound directly into camera from a wireless microphone and an on camera boom for ambiance. Following Tesfaye as he visited different locations, I had to move fast and adapt to various shooting scenarios on the fly. Although very demanding, this approach also allowed me entry to spaces and moments that would have been simply impossible to access with a lot of equipment and crew.

## **Festival Plan and Community Screenings/Discussions**

Editing the same film you have shot comes with a great disadvantage - the lack of a fresh pair of eyes to critically look at the film and all its possibilities. To counteract this setback, I was able to hold small test screenings for the film at various stages of the post-

production process. Some of these screenings were planned around an Ethiopian coffee ceremony with invited guests from various walks of life within the Ethiopian community. Apart from being very helpful in getting insightful feedback to finalize the film, the audiences' responses to using the coffee ceremony to get people together and experience a film was very encouraging. I am organizing more community screenings in the coming months.

Although I recommend the film be watched in parallel to a traditional coffee ceremony, I am confident the film can also work if screened from beginning to end as one continuous work, in synch with traditional ways of cinema exhibition. Consequently, I am also interested in submitting the film to various festivals in Africa, North America and Europe.



## **ETHICAL ISSUES**

It has now been five years since Tesfaye separated from his wife. Apart from the occasional trips during the holidays and frequent phone calls with his daughter back in Halifax, Tesfaye feels he is missing out on seeing his daughter grow up. There is also a lot his daughter does not know about the countries her parents are from. According to Tesfaye, this is one of his regrets in life - he did not get the chance and time to properly tell his daughter about his journey and the proud history of his country.

It is my hope that this film will help Tesfaye stay connected with his daughter.

As a result, I have chosen not to include certain details, also on the good advice of my supervisors, for the safety and security of my subject and the preservation of Tesfaye's memories for his daughter. Although I feel these omitted details do not make a significant difference in the film I set out to make, their inclusion might have provided an added dimension to the story. I also believe no film project supersedes the safety of any individual, in this case, an individual whom I have grown to consider a friend throughout the making of this film.

During the interview sessions, my approach was more conversational and supportive when exploring some of the traumatic experiences Tesfaye suffered on his journey. Sometimes I would go back and ask him the same questions again after I felt he had processed his feelings better. I was also careful when interviewing Tesfaye's ex-wife, Elizabertho not to revive what I am sure are painful memories of her separation from her husband.

There were also times when I had to let go of or modify certain ideas I had for the film because Tesfaye did not feel comfortable or interested. These included visual experiments in hybrid fiction, and role-playing exercises where Tesfaye would impersonate different people relevant to his story (including the former prime minister of Ethiopia.) I also wanted to film him in the ice-cold waters of Lake Ontario in June but had to cut the filming session short because of the frigid waters.

Looking back, the decision to shoot an excerpt of Tesfaye's story (a short film called *SOS*) for a class assignment not only helped me explore different ways of approaching the film but also solidified the trust between my subject and I after he watched what I had put together for the assignment.

## CONCLUSION

My intention for this film is that it be used as a vehicle to engage in discussions within communities on the subjects of immigration, identity and culture.

As a new comer to Canada myself, I relate to many of the challenges faced by Tesfaye in trying to find/make a home in another country. Like many immigrants, I too am affected by nostalgia for my native country, family and loved ones, and I am also familiar with the feeling of helplessness at having to witness the turmoil in Ethiopia from a distance.

Now that I am living in another country, my work feels like one of the few ways I can stay connected to my roots. As a filmmaker and pacifist, I also need to believe there are other ways of resolving problems without resorting to violence. Ethiopian history has been mired with bloodshed since the 60s when the Derg military regime took power from king Haile Selassie I in 1974 and ruled with absolute autocracy for 14 years before the Derg was itself overthrown by the regime ruling Ethiopia today.

The government and military in Ethiopia is now dominated by one ethnic group; Tigre/Tigray, which comprises of under 10% of the total Population. This has led to grievances from other ethnicities fighting for representation and their concerns to be addressed.

At a time of gaping ethnic divisions in many parts of the country, this film is in many ways an attempt to bring Ethiopians together to have open and honest discussions using a platform that is common to all – the Ethiopian coffee ceremony. I am hopeful,

against all odds, that appreciation of our commonalities is a good staging ground for constructive discussions, realizing that what we have in common far outweighs our differences. I am betting cinema can play a healing role in repairing the social fabric of a people that seems to be thinning out due to political strife and modernization/development.

All of the screenings I was able to organize during the making of this film were small and intimate, not involving more than ten people at a time. There is also a limitation to the number of cups of coffee one can brew with just one pot, thereby putting a cap on the number of participants. In the coming months, I intend to continue holding community screenings in Ethiopia, US and Europe, and look forward to working further on this presentation format, figuring out ways to scale it up to accommodate bigger audiences.

During the writing of this paper, conditions have improved in Ethiopia with the election of a new prime minister, Dr. Abiy Ahmed. He comes from the Oromo tribe, which holds the majority of the Ethiopian population and the area where the unrest originally started. After his election, the demonstrations stopped.

In a space of three months, Dr. Abiy has so far struck a peace deal with Eritrea after twenty years of bitter rivalry, made significant strides to ease ethnic tensions spreading rampantly throughout the country and released thousands of political prisoners and journalists.

The newly elected Prime Minister is making great headway in appeasing the people and stabilizing the country and many are hopeful that his efforts will bring a lasting change in Ethiopia. However, a failed assassination attempt on the new prime minister at a mass rally self-initiated by the residents of Addis Ababa in support of the changes he is making was a bitter reminder that there are forces still lurking trying to deter the recent developments.

Recently, Tesfaye was also able to finally secure employment in his profession in Toronto. With conditions slowly stabilizing back home, he remains hopeful that he will soon see his family and friends in Ethiopia.

Canada is a country of immigrants with everyone having their own stories of how they ended up here. I hope the discussions that take place during the coffee ceremony around which the film is screened, not only complement the work but also provide further content to clear the way for better cultural understanding and tolerance as we live in a diverse community.

I believe film can play a paramount role to articulate critical realities and truths and to foster tolerance and understanding among human beings. It is a tool and a methodology that we can use to see and analyze collectively what we, as individuals, can only see partially and fleetingly. Through appreciation of each other's culture we come one step closer to celebrating what is common among all of us regardless of where we come from.

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