

# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## Heroic 'Difret' Wins Sundance Audience Award

Sophia Stein · Wednesday, February 5th, 2014

I saw thirty films at the Sundance Film Festival over ten days in Park City, Utah, and I must admit, while many of the films that I had the honor of watching were stimulating and provocative, very few were heroic or uplifting in the most classical sense or experience of cinema. For the nuanced and inspiring retelling of the true life story of two Ethiopian heroines — Nobel Prize nominee and human rights attorney Meaza Ashenafi and the fourteen year old girl, Hirut, whose life Meaza defended — Ethiopian filmmaker Zeresenay Berhane Mehari deservedly won the 2014 Sundance Film Festival Audience Award in the World Cinema Dramatic Competition for his feature film *Difret*. Sensitively and intelligently scripted, impeccably shot on 35mm film, and precisely and movingly acted, *Difret* holds the additional honor of being the first film ever shot in Ethiopia to have screened in competition at Sundance. It is a remarkable achievement and little wonder that Angelina Jolie has signed on as Executive Producer of *Difret*.

As the story opens, a promising young student, Hirut is abducted and raped by a man who intends to make her his wife. While trying to escape, she kills her abductor-rapist and must stand trial on penalty of death in both the official state courts and the village tribunal. “Telefa” or abduction into marriage has been a tradition practiced in the villages of Ethiopia over many generations, where Mehari explains, “it was not seen as a violation or even violence.” Hirut’s case gained media attention in June, 1996; however, it was not until 2004 that the criminal code in relation to “telefa” was revised in Ethiopia. The film is shot in Amharic (the primary language of Ethiopia), and the title, *Difret*, is a double entendre which can mean either “courage”/“to dare” or “rape.”

Director Mehari was born and raised in the city of Addis Ababa, three hours from the rural village in Ethiopia where *Difret* is set. “We had electricity, running water, TV, cinema—all of that,” he recounts, but “as a kid, I was shielded from the day-to-day occurrences of rural areas.” Mehari studied filmmaking at University of Southern California, and after graduation, divided his time between working in the film industry in Hollywood and the emerging film industry in his native Ethiopia. He spent three years researching and one year writing the screenplay for *Difret*.

“Challenging cultural norms is never easy, but it often begins with individuals who dare to break with tradition and those courageous enough to support them,” Mehari suggests. *Difret* is a film that leaves the audience feeling hopeful that change is possible, that progress is worth fighting for. In a climate dominated by sarcastic and anti-heroic storytelling, such a classically heroic tale as *Difret* comes as a breath of fresh air. Film as an agent for social change is utilizing the media for perhaps its highest and most noble function.

With such an auspicious first feature, I look forward to seeing what this promising young filmmaker will bring us next. It was my pleasure to speak with director and screenwriter Zeresenay Berhane Mehari at the 2014 Sundance Film Festival in the lobby of the Yarrow Hotel, just prior to a screening of his film *Difret*.



*Zeresenay Berhane Mehari, screenwriter and director, Difret. Photo courtesy of Haile-Addis Pictures and Truth Aid Media.*

**Sophia Stein:** When you first arrived in the United States in 1996 from Ethiopia, with the goal of being admitted as a film major at USC, did you experience culture shock?

**Zeresnay Berhane Mehari:** Right from the start, I felt that I belonged here [in the United States] because I lived through movies all my life. My dad took me to my first movie theatre, the Cinema Ethiopia, when I was just six years old. It became a family tradition to go to the movies every Sunday rain or shine, and this continued until I was eighteen. The very first movie I can remember was a typical Bollywood picture, the story of a love affair between a young man and woman from different classes, where you know it is not going to work out because the families are not going to approve their relationship, with dance thrown in. What was so amazing to me, was not necessarily the movies themselves, but the theatre! The Cinema Ethiopia was built in the mid-1930's during the Italo-Ethiopian War, designed like a traditional Western theatre with two floors, forty foot walls and balconies, and it seated about 1,200 people. It was just magnificent! The culture of it — that we came together, all these people. It was almost a religious experience. The Cinema Ethiopia became a Mecca for me. You would fight to get in, and then you would sit there and watch three movies. There was an intermission in between, and you went and had soda and sandwiches. In my teenage years, video cassettes and VCR's came into being, and all we did was watch American music videos and movies — whatever you could get your hands on. So I felt that I belonged to that culture. When I came to the United States, I don't know that I ever experienced culture shock, to be honest with you. I missed home, my friends, my brothers and sisters, but a couple of years later, they all moved abroad — some to Europe, and some to the US also.

**S<sup>2</sup>:** What was it like for you, navigating the expense of a private university with a hefty price tag as a film student at USC?

**ZM:** You know, when you're determined, you tell yourself – “This is where I'm going to be; however it is, I'm going to make it happen!” I completed my high school education in Ethiopia, and when I sent my transcripts to USC, they recommended that I retake a couple of classes in preparation. At first, I was living in Northern California in Cupertino, so I went to De Anza College. (I loved De Anza! They had great film classes there too.) I took about a year and a half of mostly English and Math classes, to get my skills up to US standards. After that, I applied to only one school – USC. I remember my De Anza advisor suggesting: “You know, maybe you should look at other schools because USC is the top school and they only take fifty or sixty kids a semester.” I'm was like, “No, this is what I want.” And, boom – I got in!

I had a 3.7 GPA coming into USC, so Cal Grants kicked in. At USC, they asked, “How are you going to pay for the rest of it?” “I don't know,” I admitted. The lady in the registration office told me, “Go out into the hallway, and there is a big bulletin board out there with posters for scholarships.” So I found two scholarships for writing that paid about \$5,000 each, and I applied

and got both of them. So it was working at USC cinema operations, the Cal Grant, the two scholarships, and then I took out a very minimal amount of Stafford student loans — that's how I financed my film studies at USC.

**S<sup>2</sup>: You had lived in Ethiopia under the military dictatorship of the Communists. How did that impact your thinking?**

**ZM:** They did a very good job of isolating us from the outside world. For a young person like me, the reality was what we had. We watched a lot of Soviet propaganda movies, which suggest that the world is the way it is and that Communism is the best political system in the world. “We want to know everything that you are doing, we want to hear everything that you say – even in your house. And, if you want to tell us about your father, we would love that too.” It was such an intrusive experience that we Ethiopians lost trust in each other. You didn't know who was what. The political apparatus had a wide reach. Actually, I have written a script that deals with that particular time. I remember that my parents were afraid to talk in front of their kids because, if your kid, god-forbid, went outside and said, “I heard my mom say this!” – the next day your mom is in jail. My dad went through hell. He got picked up a couple of times for no apparent reason. They kept him in prison for two or three days, and then they let him go, and then they came and picked him up a couple of days later. I did not know any other way, I didn't have anything to compare it with. In retrospect, I feel like we lost a generation. Many people were killed, many people were picked up from their homes and disappeared. We didn't know where they went. We still don't know what happened to some of them. There was no freedom of speech, there were no arts, we couldn't express ourselves. So basically, we are experiencing a delayed period of growth in Ethiopia right now. Before the Communists, we were a Monarchy, and we had a great open society. So now we are rushing back to re-establish our arts.

**S<sup>2</sup>: You have spent time working in both the film industry in Hollywood and in the emerging film industry in Ethiopia. One of your aims in making “DIFRET” is to establish new standards for film production in Ethiopia?**

**ZM:** I graduated from USC in 2002, and then my first trip back to Ethiopia was in 2003. Since then, I have returned to Ethiopia eighteen or nineteen times, about twice a year. In around 2005-2006, local productions sprung up and private movie theatres were built. (Before, you see, the movie theatres were owned by the state.) For the first time, some guy made an Ethiopian movie, and people were just beside themselves to see it. You could understand that — this was the first time they could actually hear their voices and look at themselves on the screen. So they did not care if the lighting was right, if the audio was right, if the acting was right – they did not care at all! (I can't blame them.)

I had left home and trained at one of the best film schools in the world, and started working in film and television after finishing school, so I had some experience, and I knew how things were done. When I went to Ethiopia and saw this film, it was just basically “theatre on camera.” Two people sitting down, and the scene would go on for ten minutes without a cut, one light blasted everywhere, one mic on the camera itself, so that if the camera is far away, you could not hear the actors very well. I thought, I would like to try to do something different in Ethiopia. I believe I may have been the first person to shoot a music video there using a four camera set-up. They thought I was crazy.

I have tried to influence things there, to see if I can find some young kids who would want to learn from me. So that is why when we shot *Difret* on 35-mm film, I hired about 60 of the crew members from Ethiopia. I basically fought with everyone and said, I cannot bring in from abroad more than department heads. In the contract, it read, “You are going to be responsible for teaching one of two people under you.” For example, the sound mixer was British, living in Kenya, but the boom operator was Ethiopian. The 1<sup>st</sup> AC [Assistant Camera] was from New York, but the 2<sup>nd</sup> AC was Ethiopian.

Film has a language. It is an international language. Regardless of what country you are from, if you follow that language, audiences everywhere in the world can relate to you. So that’s my goal. Let’s work on the technical aspects first. Then after that, we’ll focus on stories — because not everyone is a writer, not everyone is a director. There is no film school in Ethiopia, and we don’t have a national endowment for film. I have been talking to the people here at Sundance about the possibility of offering a lab in Ethiopia or bringing kids from Ethiopia here to Sundance to participate in a lab.



*Tizita Hagere (as Hirut Assefa) and Meron Getnet (as Meaza Ashenafi), Difret. Photo courtesy of Haile-Addis Pictures and Truth Aid Media.*

**S<sup>2</sup>: You have made essentially a feminist film – on so many levels: thematically, the leading characters are two strong women, and then your crew, all your department heads were women! What stirred you to tell this story, to become a champion for women’s rights?**

**ZM:** Donna Raphael (who had worked on the women’s movement with Margaret Mead) has this program at the United Nations focused on violence against women, and she invited me to speak at the United Nations in 2007 or 2008. I was asked, “Why you? Why are *you* doing this? ... Because men from your country and culture, are generally not concerned with these kind of issues?” It was such a huge question and the only response I could find was that the house in which I was raised was like that. My mom and dad married out of love. I had never heard my dad scream at my mom or hit her or anything like that. We had such a democracy at home. We were four boys and three girls, and the girls had the same access to everything we had. We went to school together. If my dad bought me shoes, he would buy my sister shoes. That was my reality. So, of course, I did not see myself as a feminist. But when I heard Meaza Ashenafi’s story, that was a turning point for me. I asked myself: “Am I contributing to this culture of violence against women by not talking about this? — by basically being quiet about this violence that happens?” How many people have known about “telefa”? We lived three hours away in the city where none of that happens, and then only three hours away in the village, these things do happen. So, while I didn’t set out to make a feminist movie, it was a great human story. The courage that both these women had, in effect, became the inspiration for me to have the courage to question my own culture.

Then I met Mehret Mandefro, my producer. She read the screenplay and had the same questions: “What the hell! Why, you? And where did you learn to write such women characters?” Even in film school, my first few short scripts had very strong female characters. My short film had a female lead. My first feature length script had a leading woman. So I don’t know why, but I gravitate towards telling stories about strong women.

**S<sup>2</sup>: You wanted to make a film about what happens when traditions that are passed down**

**from generation to generation become interrupted. “DIFRET” is about “telefa” – the practice of abduction into marriage. How did you learn about “telefa” and what are some other examples of traditions that you have been considering?**

**ZM:** Telefa has been part of our vocabulary and part of our lives forever. It is a centuries old tradition. If you were Ethiopian, you knew about telefa. But since it was removed from your own life, it was not *your* problem. Because it happened in the villages, it was *their* problem. Mind you, until ten or twenty years ago, we only had 4,000 km of paved roads in the second biggest country in Africa. Ethiopia is the size of Texas. When I left home in 1996 we were about 46 million people. (Now we have about 90 million people.) You have 46 million people, and there is no way that these people can connect. So there was no interaction between cultures and traditions and ethnicities. The people in the city (like me), did not see or were not concerned about telefa.

There are so many traditions — like female genitalia mutilation, that’s one issue that now we are making great strides on. There is another tradition where if your dad dies, the land does not go to your mother. The wife does not get the land. The first-born, or the second-born, or the third-born girl would not get the land. It’s only the first-born male that inherits the land. So I was very curious about how we respond when we are actually faced with this type of traditional reality. What Hirut did, was to force everybody in the Country to ask themselves: Whose side are you going to be on? Are you going to say, I’m not going to concern myself with this because this doesn’t happen here, so it’s not going to happen to my daughter. Or are you going to say, there has been a violation of this girl’s civil rights? And are we going to do something about that as a Country? How we deal with that conflict as a nation, is what interests me.



*Meron Getnet (as Meaza Ashenafi), Difret. Photo courtesy of Haile-Addis Pictures and Truth Aid Media.*

**S<sup>2</sup>: You were introduced to Meaza Ashenafi, the lawyer, by her brother?**

**ZM:** I first learned of Meaza Ashenafi from her brother at a friend’s dinner in Ethiopia. My friend introduced me: “Meet Zee, he’s a filmmaker.” So the guy goes, “You should make a movie about my sister.” I’m like “Yeah, I’ve heard that one before.” Then, he continued, “No, no, no, I’m serious. You should make a movie about my sister!” She had been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, she was an iconic figure in Ethiopia where the organization she founded, Ethiopian Lawyers Association, had become renowned. He recounted her story, and then I was like, “Wait a minute!” I hadn’t heard of Meaza Ashenafi before because I left Ethiopia in 1996, and this case happened four or five months after I had departed.

**S<sup>2</sup>: Did you ever have an opportunity to speak with the real Hirut? Has she ever considered leaving Ethiopia as a political émigré?**

**ZM:** I have never met Hirut. She is in hiding. I don’t believe that she wants to emigrate. Her personality as you see in the story is such that she is not somebody who would run away from difficulties. She knows about us and the movie. She has not seen it yet. Even the lawyer has not seen it yet. No one has seen it because I did post-production here, and then I submitted it to

Sundance.

**S<sup>2</sup>: The dialogue is so nuanced. The scene where Hirut is alone with Meaza, in Meaza's apartment for the first time. Hirut knows that Meaza is not married, and she asks, "Did you disgrace your family? ... I am not a virgin anymore. What is going to happen to me?"**

**ZM:** My mother and father are from the village. I have aunties and uncles who are from the village. Not that particular village, but in my mind, I think of all villages in Ethiopia as the same. Except for geographical differences — other than that, their traditions are the same in most places. Abduction, or telefa, is not necessarily one tribe's problem, or one ethnicity's problem, or one religion's problem. It is an overall national problem we have.

Ethiopian men are not any different than men in Afghanistan or in the US or anywhere else. The thing that differentiates them is the tradition that they follow. That tradition that came from their grandfathers and was passed down to their fathers, and to them, and now they are going to transmit that tradition to their kids. Whether you like it or not, you have to find a way to exist in that tradition. So when Hirut asks, "I am not a virgin anymore, what is going to happen to me?" She is thinking about her future ... because no one from the village is going to marry her now, and her family cannot support her forever, so she is going to have to be forced out to find her own way. So when she sees Meaza, the first question that comes to her mind is that "Did you disgrace your family?" In the village, only women who have disgraced their families, live on their own. The rest get married.



*Tizita Hagere (as Hirut Assefa), Difret. Photo courtesy of Haile-Addis Pictures and Truth Aid Media.*

**S<sup>2</sup>: The gorgeous film score combines regional music and classical music. What was your approach?**

**ZM:** I wanted the audience to have a sense of what Ethiopian music sounds like. I thought about the fact that in Ethiopia, we don't have any filmic music. So David Schommer (who has been to Ethiopia many times, who knows Ethiopian music very well) and I sat down and came up with a plan. All the big emotional notes are played on cello, but because they are Ethiopian themes, when you hear the music, it doesn't sound like it's from Europe. We used Ethiopian themed music played on Western instruments.

**S<sup>2</sup>: What were the greatest challenges for you, in the process of making this film?**

**ZM:** Getting financing for the film took the longest really. It's not because the script wasn't great; everybody loved it. People wanted to buy it and do it their own way. Some investors wanted me to film it in English. Others wanted to finance it, but they wanted "so and so" to play the leading role. I said "No" to all of that. Primarily, I made the film for Ethiopian audiences. I want this film to be accessible for young girls who are facing this situation back in Ethiopia. If I had made it in English or if I had made *Difret* with a known actor, then it would have been a different film altogether. So that was the biggest challenge we had.

Other than that, shooting on 35mm film was not that easy because we don't have resources and

support facilities in Ethiopia. So getting the film camera and film stock itself to Ethiopia was a challenge. We flew in close to 2500 tons of celluloid, about 110,000 feet of film, and three cameras. We had to send it off to Mumbai, India, for processing. We shot the first nine days without seeing a single daily. We were blindfolded, to be honest with you. We did testing previously, and I believed the cinematographer 100%. Still, as you can imagine, I was concerned with the performances. But when we saw what we shot nine days later, we just were floored really.

**S<sup>2</sup>: The community meeting and village tribunal is such a great scene. How did you approach casting this scene?**

**ZM:** Hirut's dad, the dead man's father, and the village judge, those three are professional actors. The rest of the villagers are not. It is a very important scene. It is nine minutes long. This film is very sensitive. I didn't want to point fingers at the men, or the government. The Constitution was there. It wasn't enforced, and I understand why it was not. Most of the time it is lack of resources. Other times, people are simply not accustomed to going to the police. They have their own customs and legal systems that they operate under. I needed to show people that it is because of the traditions they follow that they behave that way. That scene became a trip into the minds and workings of that tradition. It was a difficult scene to write, and a difficult scene to shoot, but by far, it's everybody's favorite scene.

**S<sup>2</sup>: When did Angelina Jolie sign on as an Executive Producer? And what will this mean for the future of *Difret*?**

**ZM:** Angelina Jolie came on five months ago during post-production. Executive Producer, Julie Mehretu, made the introduction. I got the call that Angelia Jolie wanted to see the film, and I was nervous because it was not fully finished. I sent her a copy anyway, and Angelina Jolie phoned me: "This is a beautiful film. The acting was unbelievable, and you captured the Ethiopia that I know." Jolie is not new to Ethiopia. She goes there every couple of months. She has projects there. She has adopted a child from Ethiopia. She got it. Being the philanthropist that she is, Angelina Jolie will help us to bring attention to the film. We are very, very lucky to have her on board.

**S<sup>2</sup>: The credits of your crew members are so impressive. Who came on-board first?**

**ZM:** Producer Mehret Mandefro came first. Mehret is a Harvard trained physician. She is a medical anthropologist. She has used media in order to talk about health disparities. Although this is her first narrative feature film, she has made two feature documentaries that were very successful. We met when she was doing a documentary in Ethiopia and I was working as a cinematographer on another film. About three years later, I was in Washington, D.C. with a film that I had shot, and she was in the audience. After the screening, and she asked me what I was working on. I told her that I was looking for funding for a screenplay that I had written. She asked to read "DIFRET." A couple of months later, she came to Los Angeles for this health conference at UCLA. She was completely blown away by "DIFRET." "I'm definitely going to help you find the money to tell this important story," she vowed. "DIFRET" became a co-production of Haile Addis Pictures with Truth Aid Media, Mehret's production company. We started working together in 2009. In 2011, we got married; and in 2013, we had a little boy, Lucas, who is eight months old today. I don't think this project would have happened if it was not for Mehret Mandefro's

involvement.

**S<sup>2</sup>: The name of your production company Haile Addis Pictures — what does it mean?**

**ZM:** “Haile Addis” means “New Generation.”

**S<sup>2</sup>: New Generation ... that you certainly are! Congratulations to you and the team of *Difret* on this inspiring accomplishment.**

*Top Image: Tizita Hagere (as Hirut Assefa), Difret. Photo courtesy of Haile-Addis Pictures and Truth Aid Media.*

*For additional information, visit the [Difret website](#).*

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