

# Ethiopian Cinema in the Era of Barrack Socialism (1974-1991)

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Ethiopia, whose history goes far beyond three thousand years and is renowned for its ancient civilizations of the Axumite Kingdom, could not consistently promote socio-economic and political development in the course of nation state building, particularly as a result of the backward feudal mode that prevailed for many centuries in the country. At the end of the 19th century however, the embryo of capitalism that sprouted in the womb of the decadent feudalism paved the way for the introduction of western modernization leading to the immergence of cinematic expression just a few years after the invention of motion picture 1895 by the Lumiere Brothers. Film screening that started in April 1897/1898 in Emperor Menelik II's palace faced challenges from the aristocracy, the nobility, and the clergy for being considered as a satanic sorcery. This tendency gradually changed through time, leading to the opening of private movie theatres mostly by expatriates, and to the production of two feature length films by Ethiopians in the imperial era. The eruption of the Ethiopia Revolution and the power grab by the Derg military dictatorship that promoted barrack socialist ideology nonetheless altered the path of cinema exhibition and production from private business entity towards state monopoly. This article hence attempts to portray the feature of Ethiopian cinema under the Derg Barrack Socialism (1974-1991) with a concern to bridge the scholarship gap for the academia pertinent to Ethiopian cinema in particular and African cinema in general.

*Keywords:* Barrack Socialism, Ethiopia, cinema, propaganda, command economy

## Introduction

The defeat of Italian invaders at the Battle of Adwa in 1896 during the First World War made Ethiopia a centre of attention to European diplomats and business men to come to Addis Ababa with western technology (Adejumobi, 2007, p. 30; Zewde, 1991, pp. 97-101). As the result, cinematic expression was introduced in Ethiopia at the palace of Emperor Menelik II by Stevenin, a French diplomat in 1897/1898 at the early phase of the development of world cinema. The overwhelmed Emperor by the new technology gave a support to the expansion of film viewing in Ethiopian, but faced resistance from the feudal aristocracy, the nobility, and the clergy who took cinema as satanic sorcery. The first movie theatre was then name by the public as *Ye Seyttan Bet*/House of Satan. In spite of this, the Emperor persisted on manipulating reactionaries by encouraging the owners of movie theatres to screen religious films; and this tactic gradually tamed the test of the public towards consuming secular motion pictures. Gradually six private movie theatres were opened in Addis Ababa and in some provincial towns by expatriate business men between 1920s and early 1930s (Ashagrie, 2016, pp. 711-726). Most of these movie theatres were demolished by Fascist Italy in 1936 and soon renovated to serve as a tool of colonial propaganda. In 1940 the number of these tools had reached 40 (Ben-Ghiat, 2003, pp. 54-55). After the defeat of fascism in Ethiopian in 1941 film business became privatized, and by 1974 the

number of movie theatres was 10 including three public theatres. Despite such an irregularity in the development of national cinema however, the imperial era has historically marked Ethiopia as the 1st country in sub-Saharan Africa to produce indigenous documentary and feature films (Ashagrie, 2016, p. 715). The eruption of the Ethiopian Revolution and the snatch of state power by the Derg<sup>1</sup> Military Committee in 1974 nonetheless have changed the course of Ethiopian cinema by borrowing two major features from the experiences of Fascist Italy and socialist countries: abolition of private film business, and monopolizing cinematic art for Barrack Socialist propaganda. This paper hence attempts to provide historical demonstration of Ethiopian cinema under the Derg's socialist regime from 1974-1991.

### **The Power of Film in Changing a Government**

The contradiction between the decadent feudalism and the immersing capitalism reached its pick in 1940s urging for new socio-economic and political order. The Ethiopian people who were suffering from poverty, inequity and absolutism under the monarchical system could not tolerate the subjugation of Emperor Haile Sellasie's government. Oppositions were then manifested for decades in the form of peasants' insurrection, attempted coup d'état, ethnic armed struggles, radical student and teachers strikes, taxi drivers and workers protest, military mutiny that finally triggered the eruption of the 1974 Ethiopian Revolution (Tareke, 2009, pp. 11-44).

One of the immediate decisive historical factors that precipitated the February 1974 Ethiopian Revolution leading to the down fall of the monarchic system was found to be a cinematic art. This is related with the work of the notable journalist Jonathan Dimpleby, who had been informed by diplomatic communities about the outrageous famine of Wollo in the early months of 1973. Dimpleby came to Ethiopia and learned that the hunger stricken people were flocking in thousands to Addis Ababa for help, but halted from entering the city by Emperor Haile Sellasie's government in order to conceal the catastrophe. At the initial period, the road was not smooth enough for Dimpleby to get permission from Ministry of Information to shoot the shocking panorama. The Emperor however could not dare to totally obstruct the mission of the acclaimed Thames Television, a British company that has helped Ethiopia to start television service on November 2, 1964 (Reta, 2013, p. 135). The project was then endorsed to be carried under strict supervision perhaps with presumption that the danger was not savior as it was meant merely for the consumption of outsiders, and for mobilizing food aid from international donors.

On October 18, 1973 Dimpleby's television documentary *The Unknown Famine* (Dir. Ian Stuttard) was aired on BBC (Jansson & Harris, 1990, p. 100) shocking the world by images of dying children, elderly, and cattle, to the extent of establishing the definition of Ethiopia as famine in the Oxford Dictionary. The documentary "used a dramatic, long point-of-view shot with the camera travelling between two lines of desperately hungry people, the immediacy of this enabling viewers thousands of miles away to literally walk amid the dying" (Cowcher, 2018, p. 52). Those Ethiopians Diaspora who watched the disastrous film abroad rose with rage to denounce the imperial regime that was accountable for not giving due attention to the calamity. Soon, they exposed the negligence of the government to the Haile Sellasie I University community in Addis Ababa, and motivated faculty members to visit the famine stricken zones and display pictures of the horrific hunger on campus in April 1973 (Zewde, 2014, pp. 183-184). The exhibition exasperated the socialist oriented university students and the general urban population to intensify the struggle against the regime with slogans:

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<sup>1</sup> "Derg" is an Amharic equivalent for a committee or council, usually referring to the military council. The word was recommended to the military council for use by a letter sent from the public to the council (Ayele, 1994/2002, p. 10).

Bread to the Hungary! Down with Monarchy System! Land to the Tiller!

The extravagant ceremonies of royal wedding and the Emperor's birth days amidst the greatest famine of early 1970s also added fuel to the heat of the insurrection. No one could have predict at that time that those television documentaries which recorded the exaltation and glory of the royalty at the wedding and birth day parties would be synchronized with *The Unknown Famine* to serve the future politics as catalyst for the downfall of Emperor Haile Sellasie's regime and his death. That was however the reality actualized after few years.

On the evening of the Ethiopian New Year—September 11, 1974, the Ethiopian television station

broadcast two shows, one contrasting the lives of the people with the comforts afforded the emperor's dogs, and the other, a doctored version of the previous year's BBC show on the famine, which interspersed pictures of the tragedy with shots of the lavish life led by the imperial family and the aristocracy. (Marcus, 1994, p. 188)

The television documentary entitled *The Hidden Hunger* was the re-edition of Dimpleby's *The Unknown Famine* with additional footages from the two royal festive, synchronized in accordance with the secrete advise of Major Mengistu Haile Mariam<sup>2</sup>, the tope influential member of the then clandestine Derg—Military Committee who received Dimpleby's documentary from Shimelis Adugn, head of the National Relief and Rehabilitation Commission, while conducting a meeting at the 4th Military Head Quarter (Ayele, 1994/2002, p. 11). The paradox was that the documentary image of starving people was released right at the moment when the Ethiopian people were celebrating the New Year with feast. Time of joy then turned to despair. As the result, those spectators who used to adore the Emperor as the father of Ethiopian modernization loathed his cruelty. The documentary then laid a fertile ground for the military Derg to depose Emperor Haile Sellasie with coup d'état the following day. The proclamation of the Provisional Military Government of Ethiopia (PMGE, 1974) on September 12, 1974 thus marked an end to the longstanding monarchical rule and the birth of barrack socialist military dictatorship in Ethiopia.

It is worth mentioning here the negation of the involvement of the BBC and Thames International Television in relation to Emperor Haile Sellasie's glory on one hand, and his downfall on the other. In 1955, temporary television studio was set up in Addis Ababa by the BBC to commemorate the 25th Anniversary of Emperor Haile Sellasie's coronation by viewing the Emperor's achievements registered after the victory over the Italian invasion. The transmission however was not positively received by the general public for being observed as "a work of Satan". In spite of that, Dejasmach Daniel Abebe, a high official and member of the royal family, requested the government to establish a permanent private television in 1960. Nonetheless, his request was rejected as the council of ministers was not interested to see a private TV station. The eve of 1963 marked the change of the attitude of TV viewers when the attractive pictures of Miss Addis Ababa Beauty Contest held at the National Theatre was transmit to those standing outside the hall (Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation, 2014, pp. 11-73). It was in the same year that the permanent set up of television station was accomplished with help of Thames Television International (Reta, 2013, p. 135). Ethiopian Birr six hundred thousand (about USD 250 thousand) was spent in setting up the Ethiopian Television Service, out of which Eth. Birr five hundred thousand was a loan from a British Bank. The actual date of the first broadcasting was November 2, 1964 that covered the occasion of the 34th Anniversary of the Coronation of Emperor Haile Sellasie I, as well as the founding of the Organization of African Union (Tefferu, 2006, pp. 11-12). Obviously

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<sup>2</sup> Mengistu Haile Mariam emerged as a dictatorial leader of the Ethiopian government and atlas fled the country to Zimbabwe after the down fall of his regime in 1991.

the majestic image of Emperor Haile Sellasie was the center of attention during the transmissions. What the Ethiopian television broadcasted after 10 years however was the opposite—the dilapidation of the Emperor. The irony here is that the documentaries made by companies of democratic capitalist countries had become instruments to the emergence of military socialist dictatorship in Ethiopia.

### ***Ye Film Madaberianna Meqotateria Wanna Kifil (Film Development and Control Unit)***

In the due process of consolidating power in the following year, the Provisional Military Administrative Council often known as Derg issued the declaration of Socialism on December 29, 1975 which also became a factor for changing the course of the development of the Ethiopia cinema both in adverse and inverse directions. According to Ayalneh Mulat, former official in the propaganda section of the Derg (interview, January 15, 2019), the military government became aware of the effects of Dimpleby's *The Unknown Famine* and its re-edition *The Hidden Hunger* that cinema would be a powerful instrument to mobilize the Ethiopian people for socialist revolution. Consequently, all private movie theatres were confiscated by the Derg within a short time, and the control on the entire cinema activities fell under *Ye film Madaberianna Meqotateria Wanna Kifil* (Film Development and Control Unit) which was structured under the newly established Ministry of Culture and Sport in 1976. Dr. Aklilu Habte a former president of Emperor Haile Sellasie I University was the Minister, and Poet Laureate Tsgaye Gebremedihin was the Vice Minister when Desta Taddese who studied film arts in the Soviet Union became the head of Film Development and Control Unit. One of the major tasks of the unit was to censor western films in collaboration with Ministry of Information so that the film viewing strictly fitted to the Derg's trilogy slogans: "Down with Feudalism! Down with Bureaucratic Capitalism! Down with Imperialism!" The cut on pornographic episode was also part of the censorship.

At the earlier years of the Revolution, the military government rather focused on importing films from China, Cuba, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Soviet Union, and other socialist countries for the consumption of movie theatres; and the Ethiopian Television program of "Film of the Week" with the objective to substitute western films that were considered as Imperialist culture. Of all the films distributed to movie theatres and the Ethiopian Television, 30% were imported from socialist countries (Ethiopian Workers' Party Propaganda Department, 1980/1987, p. 130). According to Reta (2013, p. 205) the problem with the films was that they were made for their own people, and therefore the Ethiopian audience could not relate to them. Language was also another barrier. Most of them were produced in the national language of those Socialist countries, which the Ethiopian people were not familiar with. Few of Chinese revolutionary films such as *From Victory to Victory* that treated anti-government guerrilla warfare as a theme were however exceptionally welcomed by the urban youth, particularly by wider members and sympathizers of the socialist oriented Ethiopian People Revolutionary Party (EPRP) that had engaged in underground struggle against the Derg regime. But such films were banned after a while for the simple reason that they advocated anti-government guerrilla warfare which the party followed as a tactic to fight the military dictatorship. Movie theatres were also targeted by the cadres of military socialism as a hiding place of EPRP members who escaped mass arrest in residence areas. Some of them including innocents have gone to custody after movie shows<sup>3</sup>.

The disinterest of filmgoers in the eastern movies and the reservation of private distributors in film business at last led to drastic decline of box offices, thus unfavorably affecting the government income. The

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<sup>3</sup> The writer of the article has witnessed the situation as a young activist and has benefited from the regular stay in movie theatres.

Ethiopian television also lost its customers as it was totally converted to a propaganda media releasing documentary films pertinent to “Red Terror”, state “achievements”, war with the Somalia invaders and government opposition groups. Western films including television serials and series which had been viewed by the Ethiopian Television were entirely removed from the format. After nine years however, with the confidence gained from temporal victories over the clandestine opposition groups and the war with Somalia, “...the government gave permission for the import of certain films that were not considered subversive to the mission of the revolution. As a result, foreign films occupied an astounding 37 percent of television airtime” (Reta, 2013, p. 204).

In order to find an alternative, the Film Development and Control Unit sought to produce films with themes that went in accordance to government’s ideology by motivating those Ethiopians who have acquired a high level film studies abroad. As a result Haile Gerima, who studied cinematography in the USA, produced *Mirt Sost Shih Amet* (Harvest 3000 Years)<sup>4</sup> in 1976 with the assistance from the UCLA. The film is 150 min. long, 16 mm black and white feature that fitted to the revolutionary atmosphere of the period by portraying the harsh life of Ethiopian peasantry under the feudal system, thus justifying the political change made by the revolution. The film on the other hand criticizes the reluctance of the provisional military government in replacing the old feudal officialdom with a progressive man power. Kebede, the central character of *Mirt Sost Shih Amet* represents a petty-bourgeoisie class in order to amplify the middle strata as a vacillating, but a vehicle of revolution as believed in that period. In the film, Gerima incorporated songs written and sung by his father (Jackson, 2010, p. 27). *Mirt Sost Shih Amet* has won Oscar Micheaux Award for Best Feature Film, Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame 1976 (Gerima, 2016).

Following that, *Sost Shih Hulet: Ye Wendimu Tizita* (3002: Wendimu’s Reminiscences)<sup>5</sup>, a 16 mm colour doc-feature with 90 min. running time was produced in 1976 by three Ethiopians who returned back from Soviet Union after studying film arts. The film was written and directed by Teferi Bizuayehu, and it was photographed jointly by Tafese Jara and Desta Tadesse, the head of the unit. The film as an agitprop, on one hand condemns the maladministration and exploitation of the Ethiopian people by the feudal regime, and on the other hand praises the bright future under the Derg through the memory of Wondimu, the central character. Wondimu is created intentionally as a representative of working class to go in line with the Russian Socialist Realism doctrine that was endorsed to be followed by communist countries. 3002 was commissioned by Ministry of Culture, Youth, and Sports, and the execution of the production was run by Film Development and Control Unit with an ultimate goal to participate at the 2nd Black World Festival of Arts and Culture held in Lagos, Nigeria from January 15, 1977 to February 12, 1977 (MCYS, 1977, pp. 5-8). The travel to Lagos had become an outlet for Teferi Bizuayehu to seek asylum abroad in order to detach himself from the revolution. Desta Tadesse<sup>6</sup> supported the military government as a high positioned member of MEISON. MEISON was a

<sup>4</sup> The title *Mirt Sost Shih Amet* (Harvest 3000 Years) is coined to indicate Ethiopia as a 3,000 years old ancient country.

<sup>5</sup> The title *Sost Shih Hulet: Ye Wendimu Tizita* (3002) is coined to signify the two years of revolution period as a transition of Ethiopia from old to new state.

<sup>6</sup> Desta Tadesse was devoted official to promote film activities in accordance to the objective of the military government. His wife Doctor Nigist Adane was also a high ranking politician in Meison, an organization that had been working as a critical supporter of the military junta. Her two younger brothers Biniam and Yosef on the contrary were top officials in the opposition organization known as Biniam hijacked the Ethiopian Air lines with six friends in 1961 Et.C during Emperor Haile Silassie’s regime, and after receiving training in guerilla warfare in Palestine advanced to Eritrean desert to start armed struggle against the Derg. Due to the hardship and health problem, he committed suicide on the journey. His brother Yosef, member of the Central Committee of the Ethiopian People Revolutionary Party, was apprehended and gunned down by Meison (his sister’s party) in 1969 Et.C. of MEISON and was more amenable to working with the Derg in strategic alliance of convenience. By 1978 MEISON lost its relevance to the military leader. Party officials went to hiding, but most of top leaders apprehended and executed by the Derg.

party that was dominated by returnees from the Diaspora who were in favor of “controlled democracy” (Adejumobi, 2007, pp. 123-145). When the party at the later stage boycotted its alliance, Desta Taddese was apprehended and executed together with his wife Tigist Adane by the Derg (Tsige, 2011, pp. 255-256).

In 1977, the military government gave instruction to the Unit to record its success in distributing lands to peasants; and the achievement registered in the National Campaign for Development, a program that mobilized thousands of Ethiopian youth and scholars with the aspiration to deconstruct the feudal socio economic and political stratum in all rural areas. As a result, *National Campaign for Development*, a 50 min. long, 16 mm color documentary was produced by a group of videographers organized by the unit to leave behind the “historical triumph to the next generation”. After the release of the documentary by the Ethiopian Television, officials of various industries, government institutions, and trade unions were encouraged by the Derg cadres to set up small studio at their places in order to document institutional revolutionary accomplishments. This led to the import of electronic apparatuses free of tax enabling the institutions to engage in VHS video documentaries (Ethiopian Workers’ Party Propaganda Department, 1980/1987, pp. 117-132). Accordingly, Ministry of Information produced *Meserete Timihirt/Literacy*, a 35 min. long 16 mm color documentary which was directed by Taffese Jarra. The film revolves around the achievement of the government in promoting national literacy campaign. All institutions were also initiated to borrow revolutionary films from embassies of socialist countries to show to their stakeholder in substitution to western films that were considered as instrument of bourgeoisie cultural invasion (interview, Mulat, January 15, 2019).

In 1978, Michel Papatakis, one of the first Ethiopians sent to Moscow with Taffese Jarra by Emperor Haile Sellasie to study film arts (Teshager, 2011, p. 15), directed *Tigil, Dil—Dil, Tigil* (Struggle, Victory—Victory, Struggle), a 16 mm 105 min. documentary which portrays, as the title indicates, the struggle with the Said Barre’s Somali invaders and the victory attained by the Ethiopian government with the military support from Cuba, Yemen, and the Soviet Union. The production was commissioned by UNESCO. Despite the contribution of *Tigil, Dil—Dil, Tigil* to the state propaganda, the director was sent to jail for two months after returning from film locations for being suspected as member of opposition political group during the Red Terror years. The film has received honorary diploma of the 11th International Film Festival in Moscow in 1979 (Fantahun, 2014).

In 1978, with administrative assistance from Film Development and Control Unit, *The Grand Rebellion* was produced by Cuban International Films in which prominent Ethiopian actors participated. Debebe Eshetu who had already won a reputation in famous films such as *A Season in the Hell* (1970), *Guma* (1973), *Shaft in Africa* (1973), *Afrika* (1973), and *Zelda* (1974) performed the role of the Ethiopian hero General Tesfaye, with Wegayehu Nigatu playing the character of another Ethiopian general. The movie is about the Ethio-Somali War and the assistance given to Ethiopian army by the Cuban army (Ashagrie, 2018a, p. 255).

### ***Ye Ethiopia Film Maikel (The Ethiopian Film Center)***

The Derg, motivated by the success of the aforementioned film productions, and being aware of the persuasive nature of cinema, formed an ad-hock-committee that came up with a proposal leading to the establishment of national film industry with the merge of Film Development and Control Unit, and the Ambassador Cinema that was confiscated by the Derg. The ad-hock-committee was chaired by Poet Laureate Tsgaye Gebremedihin, then the Vice Minister of Culture and Sport, where Ayalneh Mulat and Abebe Beyene who perused higher education in Moscow and upon their return assigned at the head office of the ministry had

served as committee members. As the realization of the proposal, *Ye Ethiopia Film Maikel* (the Ethiopian Film Centre) was established in 1979 with a mandate to import, distribute, produce films, and administer 26 public cinemas as a sole government entity. Cinema Ambassador which was the largest cinema hall in Ethiopia with 1,447 seats and many rooms became the head office and a centre to exhibit exclusively documentary films. A new department *Ye Sinetibebat Memriya*/Department of Arts was structured under Ministry of Culture and Sport to oversee the activities of the Ethiopian Film Centre. Two million five hundred Birr (at the time equivalent to one million USD) was also allotted as seed money for equipment and man power (interview, Mulat, January 15, 2019). *Ye Ethiopia Film Maikel* then started to function with a 16 mm camera and six staffs: five in production section and one in film import and distribution section (Ethiopian Film Corporation, 1988/1996, p. 13). The improvement in film import and distribution had gradually attracted more filmgoers to movie theatres where the Ethiopian National Theatre alone registered a sale of 65,000 tickets in the year 1981 (Ke Muyachin, 1981, p. 44).

Within the following seven years, the Ethiopian Film Centre had produced more than 22 color, 16 mm, and 35 mm documentaries mainly for the consumption of the Ethiopian Television. Three documentaries were produced jointly with expatriate anthropologist. Evo Shetraker directed *Ye Fiyeloch Abbat* (Goats' Father, 1983, 45 min.) and *Ye Hamer Erengna inna Zimmarew* (The Hamer Shepherd and His Songs, 1983, 45 min.). The films portray the life of nomads of the North Eastern parts of Ethiopia. In 1985, *Sinetibeb be Etiopia* (Art in Ethiopia, Dir. Shlenker, 30 min.) documented the Ethiopian indigenous arts. The center had also sponsored productions of five 16 mm color documentaries which were produced mainly by Ethiopians who returned home after perusing film education abroad: *Ginbata* (Construction, 1986, Dir. Desta Worku, 34 min.) narrates the progress made on infrastructural development. Solomon Beqel directed four documentaries: *Biruh Tesfa* (Bright Future, 1985, 35 min.) picturing the accomplishments of the Derg; *Settoch be Etiopia* (Women in Ethiopia, 1985, 30 min.) highlights the place women should deserve in society; *Nigat* (Dawn, 1986, 34 min.) views the socio political change from the dark past to the anticipated socialist progress; and *Ke Dirqi Gar Tigile* (Struggle With Draught, 1986, 35 min.) reflects the attempt made to combat famine in Ethiopia. In 1986, a documentary *Rejimu Gozo Siatir* (The Long Journey Shortened, 16 mm, Dir. Solomon Beqeale, 31 min.) which registered cultural and economic development was sponsored by NGO. Four color documentaries that documented the life of people in the Ethiopian country side were produced in collaboration with Socials Countries: *Ke Amba wede Amba* (From Hill Top to Hill Top, 16 mm, Dir. Solomon Kifle, 24 min.) with a German Democratic Republic Film Company in 1981 and *Nigat Be Itteyya* (Dawn at Itteyya, 35 mm, Dir. Eckerd Potraph, 30 min.). In collaboration with the Bulgarian Television in 1985, *Jimir* (The Beginning, 35 mm, Dir. Ejigayehu Sibhatu and Pojarlev, 30 min.) was produced to show the progress under the Derg's regime. In the same year the Ethiopian Film Center, with the Czechoslovakian Television filmed the picture of the Ethiopian capital city as *Addis Ababa* (16 mm, Dir. Tesfaye Sinjie, 27 min.). The Center had also produced three documentaries sponsored by varies ministries: *Bunnachin* (Our Coffee, 1985, 16 mm, 30 min., Dir. Desta Worqu)<sup>7</sup> that portraits the success achieved in coffee agricultural development. The Ministry of Sea and

<sup>7</sup> The writer of this article had the opportunity to narrate the script of *Bunnachin* in the studio. He remembers the studio as disorderly, cramped with huge boxes and tables, not convenient for professional production. The most uncomfortable experience was that, due to backward recording technology, the 30 minutes narration had to be done again and again for almost five hours leading to dehydration of saliva in the mouth. The less uncomfortable experience was that the narrator secured 200 Birr (almost equivalent to 75 USD) out of the 300 Birr deal for the narration; the 100 Birr was borrowed by the General Manager at the spot of the payment. Since that moment the lender and the borrower avoid eye contacts never to greet each other.

Transport commissioned *Wedebochachin* (Our Ports, 1986, Dir. Solomon Beqele, 51 min.) that documented Masawwa and Asab, the two national ports at the Red Sea coast located in Eretria Administrative Region which at the time was under the Ethiopian Government.

Some challenges were also observed in the Ethiopian Film Center in regards the documentation and exhibition of films. *Qal Kidan* (The Oath, 1986, Dir. Michel Papatakis, Getachew Yirqu, and Abebe Qetsela, 57 min.) was not released to the public with a belief that the material could threaten national security by exposing military secrets. A documentary script which was written by Captain Fiqresellasi Wogderes, the secretary general of the military government was not produced as it was rejected by Abdu Muzeen, then the head of film department for its unprofessional contents. As the consequence, Abdu Muzeen soon was deposed from his position (interview, Qetsela, April 3, 2018). Solomon Kifle broadcasted over the Ethiopian Television a documentary that contrasts the destitute life of Ethiopian people with those army officials parting and enjoying life in early 1980s. This led to an immediate dismissal of Solomon Kifle (later escaped to the USA, worked there as a journalist of VOA and currently retired), and Tefera Gizaw, head of Television from office (Reta, 2013, p. 210).

### **Ethiopian Film Corporation**

Such a production capacity of the Film Centre and the pace of national political objective reality then urged the Provisional Military Government of Ethiopia (PMGE) to establish a more advanced film institution. A committee comprising representative from five ministries and commission office: Ministry of Culture and Sport, Ministry of Education, Ministry Information, Ministry of Mine and Energy, and National Rehabilitation Commission, was formed in 1983 in consideration that these ministries could be the immediate stake holders to promote documentary filming (interview, Mulat, January 15, 2019). After three years of preparation, a proclamation was issued (PMGE, 1986) to establish the Ethiopian Film Corporation with an objective to organize, expand, and conduct film activities in the country. Power and duties of the corporation stated in the proclamation were: to conduct any film activity; to import for its own use any film equipment pursuant to authority given to it by the Ministry of Foreign Trade; to set up and manage cinemas and places for screening film; to enter into contracts; to sue and be sued in its own name; to acquire, possess, pledge and mortgage, sell and exchange property; to perform such other activities as are necessary to attain its objectives; conduct study relating to the enhancement of film-making and film industry in the country. The General Manager of the Corporation was appointed by the government upon the recommendation of the Minister of Culture. The proclamation in Part 5 Article 20 earmarks that 30 million Birr (about 12 million USD) is allotted as authorized capital, of which four million seven hundred thousand Birr is paid up in cash and kind. Furthermore, general mandates were given to the corporation to record history of the nation and current activities in various fields; in disseminating knowledge and in fulfilling recreational needs; enhance film making and film industry; organize a national film archive; import film equipment; set up and manage movie theatres. All the properties of the Ethiopian Film Centre including man power, production, and post production equipment were transferred to the corporation. The confiscated stately home of Tsehafi Tizaz Wolde Giorgis Wolde Yohannis, the ex-Emperors' high ranking cabinet member was also assigned as a centre for film productions (interview, Mulat, January 15, 2019). According to a document of the Ethiopian Film Corporation (1988/1996, p. 51), the institute has moved forward with three 16 mm and one 35 mm cameras, two editing tables, sound, light, and photograph equipment. Moreover, electronic and light equipments that were abandoned in Asmara during the closure of *Kangaw*

*Station* (the American Military Base) by the military government were also given to the corporation. By then, many Ethiopians have returned back from the USSR, Czechoslovakia, Cuba, Ghana, and Kenya with higher education in film directing, cinematograph, sound, editing, script writing, production, camera, and light. The increase in man power was significant in that there were 26 film experts in film production section, nine permanent employees in film import and distribution section, and 57 in the administration and exhibition section. Never the less, the capacity for final editing and printing of films was not yet built at that stage. Partial processing was carried out by the Ethiopian Television that changed its transmission in 1985 from black and white to color on the 10th Anniversary of the Derg rule. At the early period of the corporation, 70% of post production works such as processing, editing, sound truck, mixing were done abroad by European as there was no as such a full-fledged equipment and color film laboratory in Ethiopia at that period. But the capacity has improved to 50% afterwards (interview, Beqele, February 2, 2011).

Seven 16 mm color documentaries were produced by the Corporation with the sponsorship of various ministries and international organizations (Ethiopian Film Corporation, 1988/1996, pp. 45-46). Ministry of Mine and Energy produced two films reflecting the mining activities in the country: *Sew-Tefetiro-Hayl* (Man-Nature-Energy, 1989, Dir. Tesfaye Sinqe, 40 min.) and *Adola Ye Werq Maidin* (Adola Gold Mine, 1990, Dir. Ijigayehu Sibhatu, 40 min.). Ministry of Culture, with the support from UNESCO, has produced four documentaries: *Lalibela* (The Rock Hewn Church of Saint Lalibela, 1990, Dir. Desta Worqu, 25 min.), *Gonder Castle* (1990, Dir. Desta Worqu, 20 min.) on cultural heritage, *Bunnachin II* (Our Coffee II, 1991, Dir. Desta Worqu, 30 min.), and *Bunnachin III* (Our Coffee III, 1991, Dir. Desta Worqu, 35 min.) on coffee plantation. With the fund from UNICEF, The Ethiopian Nutrition Institute has also produced *Yelij Amegageb* (Child Nutrition, 1991, Dir. Desta Worqu, 35 min.).

As the socio economic and political contradictions in Ethiopia were ripening fast due to the dictatorial rule, the pressurized military government hesitantly attempted to loosen its command economy by introducing “Mixed Economy Policy” just to moderately accommodate the western economic system as a tactic. The Ministry of Culture then gave permission to private film distributors to import feature films from western countries in order to compete the Ethiopian Film Corporation with a share of 35% gross income. After a protest by private film distributors because of the imbalance of the income share however, the government raised their share by 5% that brought the total to 40%; lowering government income to 60% (Hager Fikir, 1998, p. 31). Being motivated by this, private distributors imported attractive western films that fitted to the already established test of the Ethiopian film goers. This became a blessing in disguise in shifting the agitprop productions of Ethiopian film to a relatively apolitical but nationalist direction under a slogan “Produce Ethiopian film!”. The Ethiopian Film Corporation with the leadership of Yihun Belay—the general manager and Solomon Beqele—deputy manager then stepped forward to planning feature film production of commercial nature, although the increases of tax on entertainment from 25.5% to 37% in 1988, and from 37% to 47% in 1990 was discouraging. “This is contrary to the spirit of the Cultural Charter for Africa which recommends tax exemption for creative works of art and literature as one means of promoting their development” (Eshete, 1982, p. 33).

The first feature film production of the Corporation is *Be Hiyiwote Zuria* (Revolving Around Life, 1989), a 16 mm, 135 min. long, black and white, adapted and directed by Birhanu Shibiru from Tekele Desta’s television drama script. Birhanu Shibiru and the cinematographer Abebe Qetsela attended graduate program in directing and cinematograph respectively in the Soviet Union. The work-print, the negative-matching, the final

editing and printing of *Be Hiyiwote Zuria* was accomplished in London. It was premiered on June 7, 1989 at the Ambassador Theatre in the presence of Major Girma Yilma, Minister of Culture, and then screened at all movie theatres in Addis Ababa and other major cities in Ethiopia. The film is a family drama which revolves around Almaz, a lady character who struggles for gender equity against a male chauvinist husband. The film received a warm reception for being much closer to the life of the Ethiopian people, and for involving actress and actors such as Fiseha Beliy, Mulugeta Balcha, and Aynalem Tesfaye who acquired basics of film acting at the Addis Ababa University. The fact that the film was performed in the national language and produced by the total engagement of indigenous film personnel, indeed was a pride to the filmgoers. The production of *Be Hiyiwote Zuria* on the other hand had indicated that the potential for screen writing, acting, directing, and cinematography was promising for feature film production in Ethiopia; saved the synchronization of actors' speech with action.

The Ethiopian Film Corporation soon entered in to a valuable experience of joint production with the French Mechado Film Company to produce *Ferenj* (Foreigner, 1990, 35 mm, 88 min.) color feature film in which Yigrem Retta, Nigatua Kelkay, and Asnaqech Worku performed. *Ferenj* revolves around the life of a Rambo, a notable French author who lived in Ethiopia in 18th century. It was first screened and awarded at the Paris exhibition in March 1990. Five months later, it was premiered at the Ambassador Cinema in September 1990 as the second feature film produced during the Derg period.

Another feature film produced in parallel to the production of *Ferenj* was *Aster*, written and directed by Solomon Beqele who received film education in Germany and France. *Aster* is the first 35 mm, 155 min. feature film produced by the Ethiopian Film Corporation as the first colored feature made by Ethiopian producers independently during the Derg period. *Aster* is of course a low budget film that cost barely half a million birr, around two hundred thousand USD (Gudeta, 1992). The film was premiered in July 1990 in the presence of Liule Sellasie Timamao, Minister of Culture. The story of the film revolves around Aster, a lady whose living turns miserably as the result of gender inequality, and strives for a better life. Elsabet Melaku and Teferi Alemu who studied theatre arts at the Addis Ababa University have acted in the film. After the shooting and editing of *Aster* was completed, further work on the movie was however interrupted for a year and a half because the film had to be sent to London for post production process. The post production was relatively successful as compared to the harmony of sound and action in *Behiwot Zuria*. In general terms however, the post production accomplishment of *Be Hiyiwote Zuria* and *Aster* was not to the international standard. According to Shibiru (2011, p. 11), the project which was proposed few years earlier by an Italian film company to establish Ethio-Italy Film Industry with the capacity to produce 500,000 meters long films annually with well equipped laboratory could have avoided the technical deficiencies which had been accepted by the Ethiopian Film Centre as a positive move.

An important issue that should deserve a significant place in the development of film activity during the Barrack Socialism was the advent of video equipment in late 1970s and its consequence. According to the document produced jointly by the Propaganda Department of the Ethiopian Workers Party and Ministry of Culture and Sports (1980/1987, pp. 1-18), it was very difficult to own video camera and VCR as it was considered by the party as luxury item and dangerous in disseminating western culture. Those few who had the chance to go abroad and returned home with the equipment had to deceit the custom officer at the airport that what they were carrying was a tape-recorder, due to the fact that the tax for a tape-recorder was much lower than that of video equipment up until 1977. To the surprise, a ban was made on the import of any audio-visual

equipment including blank VHS cassettes and recorded films in 1984. The ban was however lifted after a year, but with a highly exaggerated tax imposition. This tendency led to the prevalence of contraband giving access to not less than 25 music shops, photograph studios, and electronics shops in Addis Ababa to clandestinely distribute uncensored western films to individuals. The film business then generated a competition to projecting romantic melodrama with more pornographic contents. Rented video films were screened with entrance fee to the public, particularly to young viewers in living rooms and tents erected in resident areas. Hotels and bars also had benefited from such video film exhibitions in order to attract customers, and sometimes to generate extra income by additional tope ups on their services. The three thousand video films which were scrutinized annually by the ministry up on the request of video “theatre” owners for permission to be screened totally became of less of interest to audiences due to major cuts on attractive episodes. The effort made by the Ministry of Information to control the lust of the youth for western romantic and pornographic video films nonetheless remained in vain. Such a reality on the other hand became *raison d’être* for the mushrooming of cottage film shows at every corners of towns in almost every region of the country.

The Derg at that point could not tolerate what it assumed as the imperialist cultural invasion that hypnotized the youth with artistic images of adventure, crime, adultery, and egocentrism; and then raided cottage film centers to put the filmgoers and owner of the business in custody. The restriction nonetheless remained beyond the control as the test for western films went to climax.

What is worth mentioning here pertinent to the emergence of VHR is the impact it demonstrated on the change of the Ethiopia culture, particularly on wedding ceremony. In 1980s, a new tradition developed among bride and bride groom to have an exalted documentation of wedding ceremony. Kebede Mergia and others who have acquired skills of video camera and editing at the Ethiopian Film Centre became active in the business of recording wedding ceremony, birthday, and burial events for family memoir and self pride. To make the documentation more pleasing and pompous to the customers, they had to create an illustrious artistic compositions and picturization by guiding the bride, bride groom, and best men to act as if they were in luxury of high economic profile. Later on, a new job specialization emerged where a lady with a title “Protokol”/Protocol led the artistic organization for the cameramen. Such an impact of video technology on cultural change has now become controversial among cultural activists. Some say that the VHS tradition has adversely affected the originality of endogenous wedding ceremony, when others see it positively as an inevitable reaction of technology in view of cultural globalization.

### **End of Ethiopian Film Corporation With the Collapse of Derg Regime**

The Ethiopian Film Corporation became inactive after the overthrow of the Derg by The Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) in May 1991. In order to revive its productivity, film personnel organized themselves to run the Corporation on private business bases. But the EPRDF preferred to liquidate the Ethiopian Film Corporation on January 21, 1999 with no substantiated rationale explained except stating that “ it has become necessary to dissolve the Ethiopian Film Corporation established by Proclamation No. 306/1986” (EFDR, Proclamation No. 151/1999). What has been heard from party cadres was the pretext to privatize government institutions. Invitation to bid (auction) for sale of the Corporation was issued two times, but bidders proposals were rejected by the Liquidating Committee. As the result, all employees were dislocated and those like Birhanu Shibru who appealed to the Vice President of the country for the payment of the remuneration of *Behiwot Zuria* that they had been denied were purged from job and sent to prison with the

instruction from the Minister of Culture<sup>8</sup>. At last, film equipment was abandoned, and the studio's mansion turned to a military centre of the EPRDF to ascertain the total removal of a national film institution. Such an act has not been welcomed by film practitioners and the academia, and the struggle for the reinstatement of the Ethiopian Film Corporation is still in progress<sup>9</sup> (Ashagrie, February 2018b).

### Conclusion

Screen media in Ethiopia had played decisive role for the down fall of Emperor Haile Sellasie's regime and the emergence of military dictatorship in Ethiopia. Following the tradition of communist countries, the barrack socialist government had focused on exploiting cinematic art as a weapon of propaganda, which on the other hand had contributed to the development of film production in the country. The military government, in order to consolidate its weapon with educated man power, had sent considerable number of students to socialist countries and neighboring Africa to return back with diploma and degree in film studies. High consideration was also given to establishing a film centre and Ethiopian Film Corporation respectively where over 25 documentaries and three feature films have been produced. Almost all the documentaries were produced for the political consumption of the socialist military government, with few exceptions that were commission for socio-economic advocacy by non government organizations and various ministries. The experiences and skills acquired through the process were indeed a blessing in disguise for the development of self reliance in making local feature films by Ethiopia artists and in establishing film schools. At last, the fifteen and half years of centralized cinema activities came to an end with the collapse of the military government, giving a way to market oriented private business. It is discomfoting to learn that most of the films produced in those years are not easily accessible in Ethiopia due to the absence of film archiving system. The attempt made by the Addis Ababa Cinema House Administration to screen *Be Hiyiwot Zuria* on the Addis Ababa International Film Festival that took place from December 11, 2019 to December 14, 2019 has failed because a bulb of 16 mm project is not available in the country. Nonetheless, more than thousand Ethiopian films are preserved by Vis News, Great Britain Film and Television Archive in London. The Ethiopian Ministry of Culture hopefully will maintain diplomatic relation to the repatriation of Ethiopian documentary and feature films in the near future.

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<sup>8</sup> Birihan Shibru was disrespected by the Minister when he requested to be paid for directing *Be Hiwot Zuria*. Being highly emotional, Birihan appealed to God by pointing his finger towards the sky and said, "I pray to God so that I see you deposed from your ministerial chair!" and went out of the office. Because of that, he was imprisoned with instruction from the minister. After the fall of the Derg, Birihan Shibru walking with Ab ebe Qetsel (interview, April 3, 2018) met the deposed minister by coincidence on street and shouted at him that God has shown the truth. The ex-minister expressed his regret and asked for forgiveness.

<sup>9</sup> The act of liquidating of the national film corporation is not considered as a positive move by film professionals and unions, as the decision made is seen as a mere revenge taken by the new government to abolish an institute that served its opponent. There is still a strong demand for reinstating the Ethiopian Film Corporation.

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