

# Digitalization of Hirut<sup>1</sup>, the First Ethiopian Fiction Film and Addis Ababa International Film Festival

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In film festivals Purpose of digitalized works especially screening works are at the basic of changes resulting from the development of digital technology and information society. Film screening mediums radically changed the way of traditional film making processes such as producing, distributing, and archiving. Digitization is the second most relevant change in cinema history. It replaces conventional 35 mm film and projectors with computer workstations and high resolution electronic video projectors. It has introduced the Computer Generated Imaginary (CGI). Digital media affects all stages of communication, including acquisition, manipulating, storage, and distribution, but the computer media revolution also affects all types of media text, still images, moving images, sound, and spatial constructions (Manovich, 2002, p. 43). Ethiopian film producers slowly started to digitalize DVD formats of production. Who does this Digitalization of Hirut (2020) do? And what is the fat of AAIFF 2020? This paper seeks to address these issues. Hirut was released on DVD in March 1964 and digitalized in 2021 in the screening of the first Addis Ababa film festival. The pioneer film and theatre directors, Addis Ababa city cinema hall administrators, prominent film producers, and young film scholars participate in the Digitalization of Hirut (2020). It is there most recent contribution in digitalizing process in the history of the first Ethiopian film in Addis film festival. The author of this article used primary and secondary data. In addition to this, he directly participated in the digitalization process and presented his ongoing Ph.D. desertion project which is directly related to film digitalization. For film festivals in the AAIFF film festivals so he used participation method to investigate the data. Finally, he found that digitalization of films and government owned film festivals in Ethiopia give green light in the archiving and development of film industry in Ethiopia.

*Keywords:* Hirut, AAIFF, CGI, digitalization, cinema history

## Introduction

Ethiopia has been labeled possessing a long history of three thousand years and more. Most of the status quo today is directly influenced by the ruling that the country has gone throughout history. As a result, the film development has taken back and forth steps. The film art and technology has been introduced to Ethiopia almost as equal as to Europeans, but still the industry is in its infant stage. Cinema was introduced to Ethiopia only three

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<sup>1</sup> The first 35 mm black-and-white Ethiopian fiction fictional film has 80 minutes (2,215.6 meter) length and first released on Friday, August 27, 1965.

years after the world's first film ever was projected in Paris in December 28, 1895. The first film known to be produced in Ethiopia was a short 16 mm black-and-white film, produced by a certain Tedla on the occasion of Empress Zewditu's coronation day in 1914. The first film screening in Ethiopia took place during Emperor Minilik II regime at the palace. However, according to some scholars, the public was introduced to film after 26 years of the first cinematography arrived in the country. In 1923 the first cinema house owned and built by Ethiopians. Unlike the rest of the African countries who were introduced to cinema and films through colonialism, Ethiopia was introduced to cinema through the natural course as other agencies of modernization-railway, postal, modern education; telephone, etc., were popularized in the country. Emperor Minilik II is credited to the introduction of cinema to Ethiopia. During Italian occupation in the years between 1936 and 1941, the Italians exploited the power of film medium in the glorification and promotion of their culture and politics.

They built movie houses in Addis Ababa, Debre Markos, Dessie, Dire Dawa, and Jimma. The first Ethiopian movie *au de Menilek* was made in 1990 by a French man, Charles Martel. Derg tried to nationalize or the existing commercial cinemas in to People's Cinema with extreme censorship in place. The first step in formulating the Ethiopian film industry was taken over 30 years ago when the country provided the set for the filming of *shaft* in Africa in 1973 and the local production *GUMMA* in 1975 by Michel Papatakis.

The Ethiopian film center was established in 1978. The center was then replaced by the Ethiopian Film Corporation (EFC), which was established by Proclamation No. 306/1986(7). However, after the fall of the military government of Dergue in 1991, there was almost no film production for a decade. Consequently, the government totally dissolved the former more fruitful Ethiopian Film Corporation by Proclamation No. 151/1999.

After the dissolution of Ethiopian Film Corporation, some of the members of EFC subsequently formed the Ethiopian Film Association which is currently named Ethiopian Film Production Association (EFPA).

The first film festival in the world, the Venice Film Festival, was founded in 1932, and was followed by a wave of other such festivals in Europe, such as Cannes (1939), Locarno (1946), Edinburgh (1946), Karlovy Vary (1946), and Berlin (1950). It took until the 1960s, during decolonization, for African countries to start hosting their own arts festivals, among which there was a strong film presence.

The first regularly held film festivals were the Festival International du Film Amateur de Kelibia (FIFAK), founded in Tunisia in 1964; the Journeys Cinématographiques de Carthage (JCC), also created in Tunisia, in 1966; the Festival Pan-African du Cinema et de la Télévision de Ouagadougou (FESPACO), originated in Burkina Faso in 1969; the Cairo International Film Festival, founded in Egypt in 1976; and the Durban Film Festival, created in South Africa in 1979. Creative Art Center Film Festival (CACFF)<sup>2</sup> in 1964, Filming on the Red Sea in Eritrea<sup>3</sup> (FRSE) in 1968. Addis Ababa International Film Festival (AAIFF)<sup>4</sup> are found in Ethiopian. Festivals focusing on African film but from outside of the African continent were initiated in 1979, beginning with the Festival Continents in Nantes, France. In the late 1990s, a new wave of these African film festivals began flourishing, particularly in Western Europe, and while in Africa, a flowering of new international film festivals took place, the first of which was the Zanzibar International Film Festival, founded in 1998. Around the same time, "A-list" international film festivals, such as the Toronto International Film Festival, began to introduce curators and/ or programs dedicated to films

<sup>2</sup> The present cultural center which is found in Addis Ababa University main campus.

<sup>3</sup> Asmara, Eritrea before referendum Eritrea were part of Ethiopia.

<sup>4</sup> Owned by independent film maker screened annually in the capital of Ethiopia.

by Africans. In the area of film festivals, the increased advances in technology and communications have strengthened the ability of different forms of film digitalization's in order to screen in deferent screen medias and to be used as original platforms to encourage further interaction between Africa and the wider international community not only in a cultural sense, but also in regards to politics, economics, and society, so the aim of this research is to offer some coordinates for the Digitalized of Hirut, the first Ethiopian feature film and Addis Ababa International Film Festival screening.

### **Overview of *Hirut, Who is her Father?***

In the film production history of Ethiopia Association of Country Film and Advertisement got License 4142/56 in August 1964 G.C from the Ethiopian Majesty Ministry of Trade, and it was the first film producer established as a share company. Its founding members were Ethiopians: Negist Saba Company, number of shares 50; manager Mr. Elala Ibisa, number of shares 50; Mr. Haile Meketa, number of shares 35; and Mr. Mehari Endale, Mr. Taddese Aklilu, Mr. Gulilat WoldeYohanes, Mr. Lombres Yokaris, Mr. Legese Feleke, and Mr. Daba Sunta each had 10 shares; Mr. Taddese Dilnesaw and Mr. Abbabore Mohammed Beshir each had five shares. It was publicized through the media (Copy: Addis Zemen Newspaper, Thursday July 16, 1964 G.C) that the total capital of the company was 250 thousand, and 205 shares were distributed among the shareholders. One share was equal to one hundred birr.

The *Ethiopian Voice* newspaper, in the Wednesday August 26, 1964 issue with the announcement of the establishment of a national film and advertisement company, disclosed that the company began training actors and actresses to achieve its main objective of “producing film and presenting it to the audience by involving Ethiopian actors and actresses. *Who Is Hirut's Father?*, the first 35 mm black-and-white fiction fictional film, has 80 minutes (2,215.6 meter) length and first released on Friday, August 27, 1965 in Ethiopia Addis Ababa at Haile Selassie I Theatre Hall. The film language is Amharic and is produced by the Association of Country Film and Advertisement. The film screen play is written by Elala Ibisa; the story is based on a book entitled *Who Is Hirut's Father?* published in August, 1964. This film was directed by Lombres Yokaris, photographer Yan Onk, assistant photographer Pal Shinaider, sound producer Pal Shinaider Hinorenda, expert of varied sounds T. Kachotolo, editor of photos Lombres Yokaris in Luche Institute, Italy, assistant editor of photos Gucheleyana Nevola, editor of film series Maris Regard, film music production Franchesko D. Mazi, song production: Nersis Nalbandian, contributor of melody Azmari—folk music adept: Tesfaye Gebre, face makeup guide Barber: Jezepina, writer of the production Gabriela Gahaz, contributor of ideas to the production Lombres Yokaris, manager of the production Elala Ibisa, production enterprise Association of Country Film and Advertisement.

Performers of the film are Abebech Ejegu, Ayalnesh Demissie, Askale Ameneshewa, Almaz Muktar, Alemayehu Asefa, Almaz Zeleke, Abework Zewge, Abera Desta, Bezabish Woldekirkos, Berhanu Molla, Kostentinos Gugsu, Getahun Merdasa, Hanna Tsegaye, Enku Worku, Kebebush Mersha, Meaza Armide, Mammo Gebrekirstos, Menbere Mekonnen, Mulugeta Mekbib, Tsehay Fasil, Tesfaye Habtemariam, Wondimu Mekuria, Worku Tilahun, Yeshi Woldemariam, Yeshi Mekonnen.



Figure 1. The first poster of *Hirut, Who is her Father?* August 27, 1965.



Figure 2. Abebech Ejegu, actress who acted as Hirut.



Figure 3. Elala Ibisa, writer of the film *Hirut, Who is her Father?*

### Synopsis of the First Film

The story in the film entitled *Hirut, Who is her Father?* begins with Nazereth—a spot with hot climate, crosses Addis Ababa City, and ends in Asmara after 1,080 km. The main objective of the film signals how Hirut, a girl who was exposed to the education of her time, was popular for her breathtaking beauty, respected for her disposition and adorable.

Her fiancé was expected among musicians of those days. While at Nazereth, Hirut and her fiancé, Azmari (a folk music adept), were madly in love with each other. When she was contemplating marriage, they became worried about issues of varied abominable treatment from their families and how they could have a child. Then, due to an unexpected accident, they had no chance of seeing each other for a long time and failed to curb challenges of raising their child. Finally, the first Amharic film briefly explains the negative impact of such a marriage of those olden days.

Pertaining to any aspect of film, be it language or any other issue, according to the manager of the company, Elala Ibisa also stated that this mission was due to be accomplished in five months.

The manager further confirmed to *Zemen* magazine of those days that *Hirut, Who is her Father?* was the first of its kind in Ethiopia in terms of any aspect of film production, and its production lasted a year; the production of photos and audio recording in Ethiopia was undertaken in two months; editing the photos, and synchronizing the photos and sounds were conducted in the remaining time; the cost of the film production was 200 thousand birr; neither the leaders of tasks nor performers (actors and actresses) got salary as they all volunteered, and this exemplary deed was a sure sign of the need for cooperation to realize a common objective. Ethiopia's tomorrow would be much better than its yesterday and today, to those who learn and plan to learn through art of cinema.

The speech of the manager of the Association of Country Film and Advertisement begins with “Your Majesty” and reads, “I am very pleased to be given the opportunity to make this speech in front of your throne as, your majesty, you are due to watch the film produced in Amharic for the first time in the reign of your majesty”.

A culture or religion of a people, culture, philosophy and traditional belief, justice and opinion, economy and trade, music and song refer to all activities which every individual does for excitement, as long as he/she exists in this world. Film production mirrors all this in general and it is one of the arts employed by mankind for expressing happiness or anger. Its main function can be akin to the function of a mirror.

Through a mirror, one can explore his/her disposition and beautify or correct oneself. Likewise, through a film, a person or people can rectify mistakes and improve living conditions by looking into general life patterns, and the morale and spirit in oneself. One can be excited and possess strong morale by looking into not only his/her mistake but also art and tact.

“Your Majesty”, says the concluding remark of Elala Ibisa, “this trial venture is a success as per the program, and in the future, we are planning to make great Ethiopian films drawn on true stories such as the Maychew and Adwa battles. I bow down and beseech with great fear so that I can be allowed to disclose that we need the morale and economic support of your majesty to proceed forward as per our plan”.

This way, it was documented that the first fictional film was inaugurated with a great ceremony and a very large attendance of the royal family of Haile Selassie I, high ranking officials, celebrities, and other attendees.

### Notes on the Distribution of the Film

Fifty years later, in 2014 G.C from the end of March until the beginning of June, at an opening ceremony of “Ethiopian Films 50th Anniversary” initiated by Eyoha Cinema, and in collaboration with the Ethiopian Federal Democratic Republic Ministry of Culture and Tourism, *Hirut, Who is her Father?* had an occasion of a special commemoration.

Fifty years after the film had been produced, and over 40 years after the Ethiopian Development Bank had cautiously kept the film, as a historical record, the bank donated with great pride the film to the people of Ethiopia through the Ethiopian Federal Democratic Republic Ministry of Culture and Tourism.

Thus, the bank once again showed at the stage of the National Theatre that it is a benefactor of the art community. Among performers in the film, those present at the ceremony were only honorable actress Askale Ameneshewa and actor Mr. Getahun Merdasa. At Haile Selassie I (National) Theatre, as both of them were given a special gift from the Ethiopian Development Bank and Eyoha Cinema, attendees rose from their seats and gave them a big round of applause and expressed their thanks and honor until evening to the organizers of the event, the Ethiopian Development Bank and to the actor and actress who were alive. After the film *Who Is Hirut's Father?* had been given to Ministry of Culture and Tourism, it was made to be cautiously documented in 35 mm and an appropriate film can at the National Theatre. Then, in an effort made by Addis Ababa City Cinema Houses Administration Enterprise to digitalize and distribute it to the people of Ethiopia, it took nearly 10 months to produce the film with great caution and quality.

### Digitalizing of 35 mm Film *Hirut, Who is her Father?*

Addis Ababa City Cinema Houses Administration Enterprise formed digitalizing members from deferent institutions such as universities, independent film companies, theatre hall, and cinema. Administration officials under the finance support of Development Bank of Ethiopia (DBE) which is one of the state-owned financial institutions engaged in providing short, medium, and long term credits over the last 112 years in Ethiopia.



Figure 4. Development Bank of Ethiopia (DBE) which sponsored the production and the digitalization of first black and white 35 mm film of Ethiopian film *Hirut, Who is her Father?*

Since its establishment in 1909, DBE, the only development bank for the 100 million and plus people in Ethiopia, is supporting the socio-economic development by availing medium and long-term credit to viable

investment projects from the government priority areas such as commercial agriculture, agro-processing, manufacturing industries, mining and extractive industries, preferably, export focused as well as for lease financing service to small and medium enterprises.

The bank's mission is to help accelerate the country's development through provision of development credit. Therefore, the bank is mandated to provide investment loans and technical support to viable medium and long term projects by mobilizing funds from sources within or outside the country; provide domestic and foreign banking services to its borrowers; manage funds entrusted to it and acting as a trustee; participate in equity investment; and issue and sell of bonds.

Thus, in the history of Ethiopian art of cinema, for the first time in Ethiopia, a 35 mm film was converted into a high definition video by Addis Ababa City Cinema Houses Administration Enterprise. Action became true by the financial support of development bank of Ethiopia.

### **Description of the Digitalized Film in the First Addis Film Festival**

Film Title: *Hirut, Who is her Father?*

Film length: 86 minutes

Production year: 2020

The first film release: 2022

Country: Ethiopia, Addis Ababa



*Figure 5. Professionals who contributed to Digitalizing of Hirut, Who is her Father?*

Production enterprise: Addis Ababa City Cinema Houses Administration Enterprise

General production leader: Mr. Asnake Teshome

Assistant production leader: Mr. Elias Mengistu



Figure 6. Professionals who contributed to the documentation of this historic film.

1. Mr. Abebe Ketsela ... (Technical committee of the film)
2. Mr. Pawlos Aemero ... (Technical committee of the film)
3. Artist Debebe Eshetu ... (Member)
4. Director Berhanu Shibru ... (Member)
5. Mrs. Varvara Asefa Gorpick ... (Member)
6. Director Alemtsehay Bekele ... (Member)
7. Director Manyazewal Endeshaw ... (Member)

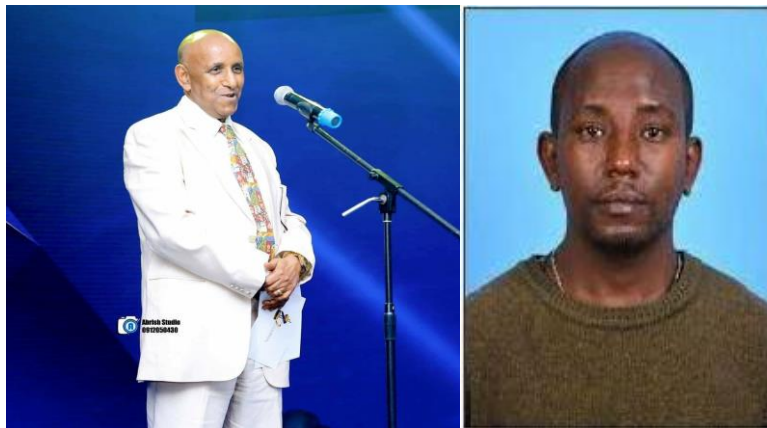


Figure 7. Fasil Abreha & Elias Mengistu<sup>5</sup>, experts who digitalized the film *Hirut, Who is her Father?*

### Addis Ababa International Film Festival

Film festival is usually a multi-day event during which a selection of films is played for audiences. Film festivals tend to take place in a single locale that has several screening areas available, so that multiple films can play at once. A film festival is held in a single city to screen films from different areas at one screening venue,

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<sup>5</sup> He is currently working as a marketing manager at the Addis Ababa Cinema Houses Administration Enterprise and acting on behalf of the organization as an assistant manager and he is kind and help full person to the author of this article who gives all the necessary data and coordinate the Digitalization of Hirut and the first AAIFF 2019.



including the foreigners. In case of an international film festival, films from different countries are screened. It promotes the idea of film making and culture of each country (Valck, 2008).

From this concept of film festival, Addis Ababa International Film Festival is facilitated by the digitalizing members and the Addis Ababa Cinema Houses Administration Enterprise (AACHE).

Under the motto of upraising about renovating, restoring, and modernizing of cinema under AACHA, the digitalizing members of this festival prepare this program in the government owned form for the first time in the history of Ethiopian film industry. The members of this film festival have objective of digitalizing the DVD film formats and as the same time to have started the operation to return former glory as Ethiopian film corporation.



Figure 8. Cinema ambassador (former film corporation head office) & workshop presenters.

This charming screening workshop and screening program takes place at cinema ambassador from December 11 up to 14, 2019. The workshop is delivered by film scholars from Addis Ababa University College of performing and visual arts in the Department of Film Production and Yofthaghe Nigussie School of Theatre Arts.



Figure 9. Posters of the programs.

The event of AACHAЕ launched primer program for introducing AAIFF of 2020. It is being prepared to fundraise for the renovation of cinema Ethiopia and to add other transforming values on the enterprise and the program aims to create awareness on benefits of the festival. It also shows and discourses that film and cinema houses are a cultural tool with a key role in promoting freedom of expression that Ethiopians need. The festival is also served as a junction between the Ethiopian cinema and the rest of cinematographic world.



Figure 10. Workshop posters of the first government owned Ethiopian film festival.

Addis Ababa International Film Festival (AAIFF) designed almanac event for recognizing screening and awarding films released both locally and internationally with in the given year. Thus from AAIFF (Addis Ababa International Film Festival) are expecting to establish abridge with the international film festival such as Cannes, Vienna, Pan Africa Film Festival (PAFF) to participate and partner up. It also contributes expansion of inter-cultural exchange and improvement of local film production awareness by hosting multiple workshops and trainings; in addition, scholarship opportunities will also be provided for the authentic person.

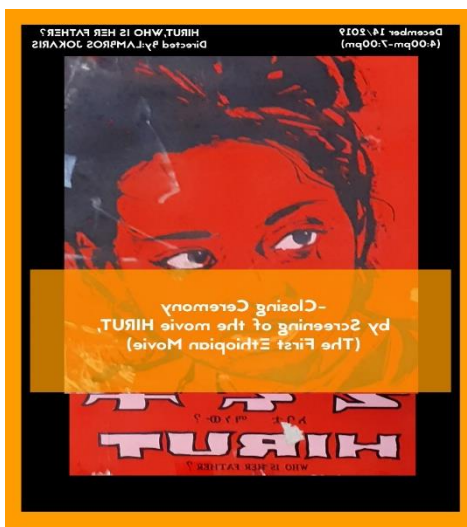


Figure 11. AAIFF closing ceremony poster.

On Addis Ababa International Film Festival 2020 event (AAIFF) expected more than 5,000 people to join from Ethiopia and around the world. Furthermore, local and international Medias are invited on the upcoming historical event in Addis Ababa Ethiopia but all this plan and dream is stopped by the pandemic disease (COVID-19) which happened over the world.

### **Conclusion**

Digital cinema in digital technology as a major revolution or a glorious solution to all the challenges faced in archiving solution of analog film industry in Africa, especially in Ethiopia.

In this perspective, the Ethiopian movie industry operates outside the established channels of screen financing, production, and distribution. This is because the Ethiopian industry faces numerous barriers including lack of digitalized production facilities, poor market organization, inadequate rules and regulation, limited understanding of global markets, lack of bargaining power, and international relationships. All these barriers resulted in the Ethiopian movie industry operating outside the established channels of screen financing, production, and distribution.

Digitalizing *Hirut, Who is her Father?* In the first Ethiopian feature film and Addis Ababa International Film Festival ends with the aim to incorporate of economic, political, legal, social, and cultural institutions in facilitating and participate in shaping the Ethiopian film industry and its development in the basses of Film technology & Film festival preparation funding, the Author this article agreed that this kinds of action helps in archiving and screening previous Fiction and Documentary films as historical documents of the country, so Digitalization of films should be done continuously during preparation of film festivals. In addition to this Addis Ababa City Cinema Houses Administration Enterprise and The Film Festival Committee should plan to open annual Addis Ababa International Film Festival (AAIFF) that premeditated almanac event for recognizing screening and awarding films released both locally and internationally.

Finally this research notes, Thus from Addis Ababa International Film Festival (AAIFF) are expecting to establish abridge with the international film festival. Moreover, while digital technology can potentially allow for wide, innovative forms of distribution and there is indeed an underserved black market that needs to be addressed, the current exhibition/broadcast mechanisms are not sufficient to deliver the mass of content needed to sustain an alternative narrative cinema. Therefore, although digital technology might be seen as an ideal mechanism for democratization of cinematic production and consumption in present time of Ethiopian cinema, it should not be viewed as a means for independent filmmakers to make it alone. In this regard, the technical members achieved the digitalizing and screening of the film in the opening of the first government owned film festival.

Even if all this actions are done during the digitalizing process and the festival the researcher investigated that state support is still needed to maintain digitalization of films, a diversity of product promotes new digital technology functions and ensures the sustainability and skillful transformation of this developing industry in Ethiopia.

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