

# A Glimpse on Ethiopian Film Through a Cinematographer of *Aster*<sup>\*</sup>: Interview With Abebe Ketsela

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In film production cinematography is a visual medium that connects the film experience to the viewers. Just like other crew members such as directors and actors, specific names of cinematographers become common in the African film industry. Abebe Ketsela, who has a career spanning many decades and popular designations, is regarded as one of the best intellect cinematographers in Ethiopian cinema. This qualitative content analysis examines his works his cinematography skill emerged from his ability to utilize shot selection, framing, and composition. This qualitative content analysis of *Aster* film focuses on the Cinematography concept of camera mobility, and lighting techniques to tell the story naturally so. This is the revised transcription of an interview with Abebe Ketsela that took place on September 27th 2021 at the Department of Film Production Studio at Ale-School of Fine Arts and Design, Addis Ababa University, St. marry Avenue, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, the place where African filmmakers teach film directing, Cinematography, and screenplay writing. The film production Department is the first Film School which is opened in 2015. This place in this site is a vigorous Black African center as film making education school at the level of second Degree and the excremental area of his creative works. The interview spanned three and a half hours and roofed an extensive range of topics, most of which pivoted around: A glimpse on Ethiopian film through a cinematographer of *Aster*: how his visual creation reveals in his cinematography.

*Keywords:* cinematography, Experimental Cinema, composition, lighting, *Aster*

## Introduction

Film being an inherently cooperative and international medium, amateur filmmakers need to develop skills beyond the basics. They must work with local and international peers and mentors. They must also have a dedicated space to regularly meet, network, and learn from each other and from other stakeholders about many creative, technical, institutional, and cultural aspects of contemporary cinematography.

In Ethiopian notable festivals such as Addis Ababa City Administration Film Festival<sup>1</sup> producers emphasize the importance of prompt application for registration to work on the red carpet, because during the premiere of a headline-making film and celebrities' appearance, access to this very event may be limited due to many requests from deferent media representatives. Concerning the shooting of artists during the so-called photo calls, then a

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\* The first Ethiopian 35 mm color Feature film produced by Ethiopian film corporation in 1990.

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<sup>1</sup> Addis Ababa City Administration Film Festival was held in Addis Ababa from 11 December to 14, 2019.

separate registration should be held for already accredited photographers, but cameramen and cinematographers are not given access there. The organizing committee of the film festival announces more about this on its official website: The photo calls to take pictures of the filmmakers and actors of the films in Official Selection but in the world film festivals each year, major film festivals attract not only screen artists, but also technical staff from various types of media from around the world. Their main task is to transmit the atmosphere, to catch images of different personalities and to reveal news from this very film event, which might be not only interesting but also historically important in terms of modern culture and art.

To realize it professionally and to a high standard, one could use not only his or her creative ingenuity but also implement new technical equipment and software based on his or her creativity power. However, despite the rapid progress in this area, the author, based on his own evaluation, is often faced in film productions and film festival event documentations. Cinematographers give the effect of continuity of life in its screen version; and show the event, the action as a whole. They give an idea of the place of action, and how the objects are located in addition to this they can emphasize the importance of a detailed shot that will add cinematography, both when filming interviews and when filming on the red carpet so the interview focuses on visual creation in cinematography.

I then went back to more specific questions about his own work: What is the message he is trying to express in his visual creation of cinematography? Is he able to make successful shots in each film? The last part is about lists of his films.

I would like to take advantage of this introduction to thank Mr. Abebe Ketsela for agreeing to the printed version of this interview and for his help in proofreading the transcription by incorporating his archive.



*Figure 1. Abebe Keasel in his studio (2019).*

Paulos Aemero: I would like to thank you for sparing your time for the interview. I hope your information on your life long engagement in the Ethiopian film as a notable cinematographer, and professor of film studies would be informative to students of film arts in particular, and Cinema scholar in general. Just for a start: you are the cinematographer of *Aster* which is the first Ethiopian 35mm color Feature film; Am I right?

Abebe Ketsela: Yes, you are right.

PA: would you please tell us how you entered to the film world?

AK: Well, as most of the Addis Ababa “City boys” used to do, I attended movie house regularly on every weekend, and sometimes boycotted classes when famous American and Indian films were screened. I was infatuated with the film arts and became a dreamer to be a film star like those I identified with.

PA: How did the dream come true then?

AK: It was the bilateral cultural agreement between the Derg, the then Military government of Ethiopia and socialist countries that provided me with scholarship opportunity to study cinematography in Kieve Theatre and Film Institute in Ukrain which was then part of the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republic.

PA: How did you manage to secure the field cinematography? I heard that some people did not go to their first preference of academic interest due to some technical problems at the Ministry of Education.

AK: It is true that I was not placed as a candidate of Cinematography when I read my name on the notice board. I was astounded when I learned that I had been assigned to study Industrial Engineering in East Germany. For it was against my interest, I had to appeal to the Ministry of Education with a support letter written by the late Baalu Girma, a famous writer who at the time held high position in the government. At last I was granted a choice change from Germany to the USSR and then transferred to Kieve Theatre and Film Institute to study Cinematography.



Figure 2. Abebe Keasel with his classmates at Kieve Theatre and Film Institute (1978).

PA: You told me that Your Dad was an Army Colonel and you got what you wanted from the Military government unlike many other applicants. Was it based on favoritism or a mere coincidence?

AK: Honestly speaking, it was not based on favoritism. It was a mere coincidence.

PA: I presume your family was delighted with your success.

AK: Not really, my Dad as an army Colonel characteristic was not happy to see me as a cinematographer. He rather wanted me to go to Medical School where my brother and sister went. He thought that a cinematographer was not prestigious career as compared to a medical doctor's Profession.

PA: I understand that you were stuck amidst your Dad's interest and yours. Our tradition that empowers patriarchal right over their children is difficult to withstand.

AK: yes, at that time, I faced him for the first time to describing my Choices and also comparing some of his choices to mine and we agree.

PA: Did anyone have an influence on you or was it just by chance you became cinematographer?

AK: First I love the profession. Second Tafesse Jarra influences me when I worked with him in *A Position of Assistant Camera Man at ETV* (Ethiopia Television) but at the beginning was my Interest in amateur filmmaking.

PA: So how was it studying at Kieve Theatre and Film Institute School? Was it more practical or more theoretical oriented?

AK: Oh, it was a mixture of both but we integrate Experimental Cinema.

PA: what is Experimental Cinema?

AK: Experimental cinema helps you to do many self-creativities which allowed experimenting with the camera, leaving behind the typical elements of cinematographic production such as script, makeup, artificial lighting, and set design. Your camera became a game and was not an idol anymore. In fact, on a traditional film set, besides the director and the cameraman, no one could get close to it. Instead in Experimental cinema the cinematographer can play with the camera to obtain shots that at the time were considered contradictory to techniques taught in school. Speaking about experimental cinema, it is more proper to talk about filmmakers instead of directors as there is neither a script nor a coordination of the various elements of the set during the shooting so as cinematographer I used this techniques during shots of many extraordinary masterpieces Documentaries which were produced in Ethiopian and foreign producers and companies such as in Tana Beles, Man Power and Energy, The Blasting Hoover, The History of Government, Mother Arsi, Left handed Women, Coffee, Seferra, TripNorth to South, Britain in Ethiopia, The African Union.

PA: Is there any new technique to do experimental cinema?

AK: yes, an experimental cinematographer records what he or she sees without preset plans and does not use qualified actors, rather actual people, such as Amateurs, family members, friends, or colleagues. You select your own way to capture pictures in Deferent mechanisms, it depends on your creativity imaginations and cinematography skill.

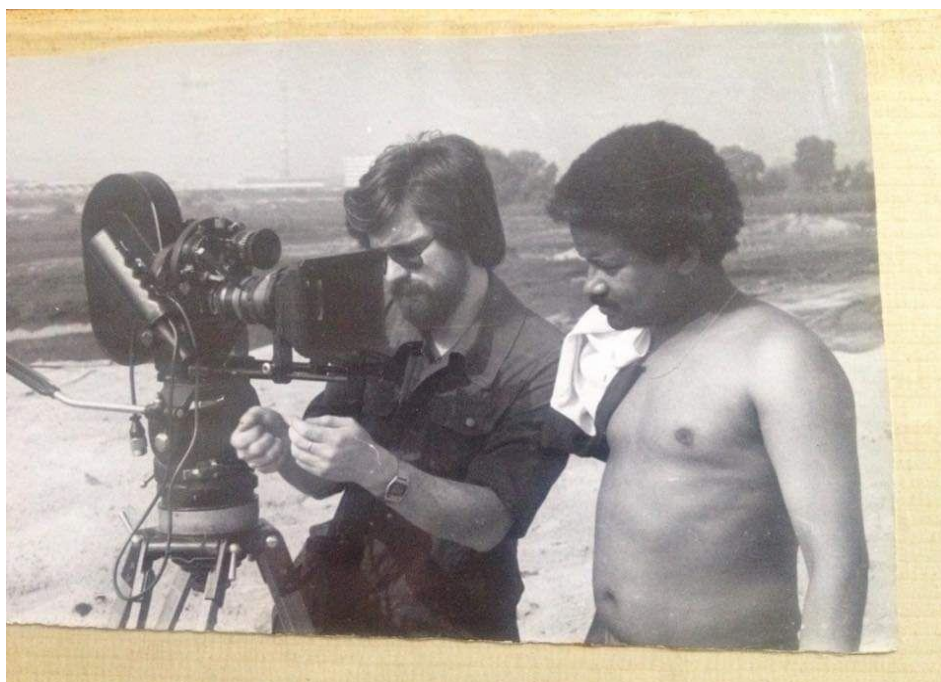
PA: After you conclude you study in Kieve, will you return back in Ethiopia?

AK: absolutely even if I have the opportunity to work and live there I return back to my home land because I determine to develop Ethiopian film industry to work with my colleagues Solomon Bekele Weya, Abebe Beyene, Berhanu Shibiru, Tamir Abera, Tiruwork Abera, Nigatu Merdassa, Ermias Woldeamlak, Yilma Belaye.

PA: Then where do you start your career?



AK: I start my working at Ethiopia Television in a position of Camera man for seven months then I joined Film Corporation in apposition of cinematographer, this first government based Ethiopian film industry focused on production of documentary films in order to introduce Ethiopian culture, land scape, social, political situations to the world. It continued with the establishment of Ethiopian film center in 1978. The center then replaced by the Ethiopian film corporation (EFC), which was established by Proclamation No. 306/1986. After the fall of the military government by Ethiopian People's Republic Democratic Front (EPRDF) in 1991, there is almost no film production that takes place for a decade. Consequently in January 1999 the government totally dissolve the former more successful Ethiopian film corporation by proclamation No. 151/1999, Ethiopian Film Corporation in 1986, we produced Feature Films out of them, the first feature-length 35mm color film *Aster* (1991), *Behiwot Zuria* (1989) and marvelous documentary films such as *Nigat Beiteya* (1981), *Yebegoch Eregna* (1983), *Yehamer Eregna ena Zimarew* (1983), *Jimir* (1985), *Addis Ababa* (1985), *Kalkidan* (1986), *Gimbata* (1986), *Wedebochachin* (1986), *Kedirk gar Tigil* (1986). Out of the above stated Documentary films some of them were produced in partnership with foreign film companies which come from Czechoslovakia, East Germany, and socialist countries.



*Figure 3. Abebe Keasel & Segey Mamin on set at Kieve Theatre and Film Institute (1980).*

PA: as far as I read from some secondary documents film corporation workers disseminate in to deferent Government instructions so in which office inter in?

AK: Exactly, I return back to Ethiopia Television (ETV) in apposition of manager in production Department and I worked for 10 years. After many upside downs I determine to open my privet film academies with my friends Solomon Abera (Theatre Practioner), Ayalneh Mulate (play write and poet), Elena Mechetina (Phoographer), Berhanu Shibru (Film Director); I started to give short term training at Russian 's cultural center (Pushkin Center) until 2014 continued to maintain a studio space at the Russian Embassy's Pushkin Center until 2013, where I counseled Filmmakers such as Alatinous, Ethiopian film makers, Ethiopian producers, Ethiopian

photographer Association. Then, in 2014, when the Ethiopian universities' first master's degree program in film production was established at the Collage of Performing and Visual Arts, Addis Ababa University, I was employed to be the instructor of cinematography.

PA: In my research I recognized that in Collage of Performing Visual Arts you prepare Film studio by your own budget.

AK: Yes, I collect film corporation cinematographic materials such as cameras, lights, light matters, reflectors, stands, and other valuable equipment as a result I prepared practical and exhibition studio. In this action a well-known writer and translator Mekuria Mekasha and Demeku Ademasu (managing director of performing visual arts) helped me so I want to thank them with respect.

PA: what was your position in *Aster* film?

AK: Cinematographer.

PA: what kind of creativity do you apply in concerns of Experimental Cinema?

AK: Interesting question, as you know the camera is the tool that lets the audience see, and cinematographer handle this particular tool. He/she provides the best shot by adjusting lights and shadows, determining what should be in the background and what should be focused, and choosing the angle. That is my bases to apply some experiment and self-creative action in *Aster* film scene.

PA: How do you manipulate camera angles and lighting to portray a message in each scene?

AK: It needs to feel genuine to the moment and context of the scene, as well as evoke a reaction out of the viewers. The story doesn't have to only rely on the writing, because the camera has the ability to depict emotions without explicit dialogues so I consider this when I took shots in each scene.

PA: One of the dominant parts of *Aster* film begins with narrative. In Flashback approach, in exposition of the 1960s set, where the protagonist tells her life story to a friend during the dinner party for her wedding anniversary, you get such a vibrant picture from Experimental Cinema. Could you talk about that?



Figure 4. Abebe Keasel on set with his crew members in *Aster* production (1989).

AK: Interesting question, as far as I understand that filmmaking is a multidimensional medium. There are so many pieces that come together to create a movie, and the camera should not be ignored. It is not only just a tool to capture footage, but another way to tell a story. It is the lens of the viewer's peering into a scenario like a fly on the wall. When it comes down cinematic elements involving the camera, there are three characteristics: mise en scène, movement, and lighting so I integrate all these elements to visual arrangement on two deferent set, one is from the outset and the other is inside in which at the beginning of *Aster* life story, she lives with her father, her stepmother demands her help in the household so I used light color, to separate framing and composition. These also include technical aspects such as choice of lens and creating cross-cut shots of angles in deferential lighting & movements to show Asters' past and present.

PA: Is that technical experimenting?

AK: Exactly it is determined by the cinematographer skill of operating the camera in creating of visual narration in the perspective of mise en scène, movement, and lighting using capacity.

PA: In what way you create your own creative camera movements in each scene?

AK: As I thought you in cinematography Class, the mobility of camera is often practiced in order to give a feel for reality as you see in the film *Aster* replicated shot in a paralleled door while taking a shower (Creating experimenting by using composition of camera lens and face mirror) is applied.

PA: Why not use usual shots to express each scene reality?

AK: Of course I used dolly in, dolly out, panning and tracking shots but I prefer to create my own cinematograph technical skill such as creating situational base of camera movement in considering of frame composition of foreground, back ground, one third & center of the frame supported by natural or creative source of light (Silhouette shot), it can be candled or shadowy sunset which is adjusted by incident light meter.



Figure 5. *Aster* shadowy sunset shot which is adjusted by light meter.

PA: Is there any additional Cinematography technique that you apply in *Aster* feature film?

AK: Yes, in Experimental Cinema consideration bases I create behind the mirror shot, frame freezing, creating identification color of each mise en scène are applied. All this and other creativity skills of a cinematographer are got by understanding and interpreting the concept of Experimental Cinema.

PA: You have participated 20 international film productions in the position of main & assistant cinematographer, produced more than seven advertisements, worked as university instructor, as jury member of Ethiopian International Film Festival and board member of Ethiopian Cinema Hall Administration. Is there any other award you won within these inclusive activities?

AK: Yes. I was given an award for managing the digitalizing process of the first Ethiopian black and white 35 mm, Hirut Abatwa Manew from the Ethiopian Ministry of Culture and Addis Ababa Cinema Hall Administrative; the Abyssinia Award for Lifetime Achievement in Ethiopian Cinematography; “Ethiopia is grateful for your service” a national recognition award from our Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed.



Figure 6<sup>2</sup>. Abebe Keasel “Ethiopia is grateful for your service” honors Award (2021).

PA: Finally, based on your vast experience, how do you observe the Ethiopian film industry today?

AK: In current time it showed progress in film making. In these days individuals take self-responsibility to upgrade themselves by their own exposition especially in visual creation reveals in cinematography. Skill but they have to educate in the institution of higher education. It is believed that cinematography professional knowledge and skill should be grasped from professionals than that of ammitters discourse so higher educational training is mandatory to uplift the skills, in this regard there is high gap between Ethiopian film makers and the profession.

<sup>2</sup> Photo from Ethiopian prasss Agency.



Table 1

*Cinematography works of Abebe Kesela.*

No.	Movie Title	Type of the Film	Year
1	<i>Aster</i>	Feature	1991
2	<i>Behiwot Zuria</i>	Feature	1989
3	<i>Tzetzet</i>	Feature	1993
4	<i>Three Birds</i>	TV serial Dream	2003
5	<i>Endurance</i>	Documentary	2004
6	<i>School Girl Killer</i>	Documentary	2002
7	<i>Tana Beles</i>	Documentary	1989
8	<i>Man Power and Energy</i>	Documentary	1986
9	<i>The Blasting Hoover</i>	Documentary	1987
10	<i>Kalkidan</i>	Feature	1984
11	<i>The History of Government</i>	Documentary	1987
12	<i>Mother Arsi</i>	Documentary	1985
13	<i>Left handed Women</i>	Documentary	1985
14	<i>Coffee</i>	Documentary	1987
15	<i>Seferra</i>	Documentary	1985
16	<i>Cultural Music of Ethiopia</i>	Documentary	1988
17	<i>Trip North to South</i>	Documentary	2003
18	<i>Britain in Ethiopia</i>	Documentary	1986
19	<i>The African Union</i>	Documentary	2008

### Conclusions

In film production Cinematography is a visual medium that connects the film experience to the viewers. Thus, according to the author, the cinematographer Abebe Ketsela, has a career spanning many decades and popular designations, is regarded as one of the best intellect cinematographers in Ethiopian cinema, and roofed extensive range of topics, most of which pivoted around his contribution to Ethiopian film corporation in apposition of cinematographer his most recent action in rearranging school film studio by his own budget and his experience especially in visual creations in film production and film festival. So film festival organizers and film makers should understand that visual creation in cinematography should always be that very creative platform that will provide new opportunities and a further improvement in the practice of technical and artistic skills in cinematographer filming process. All related professions to the cameraman, namely: photographers, light men, video bloggers, and other audiovisual content makers, also have a high chance to improve their professional level by sharing on set film festival practical experiences from the pioneer cinematographer especially by considering each film festival welcomes newcomers by granting accreditation to shoot on the red carpet. That is why the author emphasizes that Ethiopian film festivals, especially major ones, should be considered as well as a kind of accelerator for those who plan or are already involved in cinematography profession.

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