

FILM REVIEW

Mo Scarpelli, director. *Anbessa*. 2019. 85 minutes. Amharic. Ethiopia. Rake Films. Vimeo, rent \$3.99, purchase \$8.99.

Jessica Beshir, director. *Faya Dayi*. 2021. 120 minutes. Oromiffa and Harari. Ethiopia. Merkhana Films. Distributed by MUBI and on Criterion by Janus Films

Two recent poetically beautiful documentary films offer insight into the changing socioeconomic conditions in Ethiopia: *Anbessa*, directed by Mo Scarpelli, and *Faya Dayi*, directed by Jessica Beshir. *Anbessa* is about a ten-year-old boy named Asalif, who lives with his mother on the outskirts of Addis Ababa's suburban sprawl where a new condominium development is being built on what used to be farmland where Asalif's family lived. The film takes us inside the mind of this boy as we experience a changing world through his eyes. *Faya Dayi* is about the people in the Hararghe region of Ethiopia who are affected in different ways by economic development and an expanding khat trade. Khat is a plant that, when its leaves are chewed, gives a euphoric effect that is simultaneously stimulating and relaxing. For centuries, it has been part of the region's traditional culture, consumed by farmers during their social time together and also within the context of an Islamic ritual ceremony, but it has lately become integrated into the modern urban lifestyle and has replaced coffee as the region's most lucrative crop. In many ways, the film is a love poem to the young men and women of Ethiopia, as it sensitively and evocatively reveals the complex emotions they have about their families, their communities, and their future. Both documentaries were shot during the same transformative moment—a period of economic development and intense political protest over land and displacement in Ethiopia.

One of *Anbessa*'s executive producers is the Ethiopian fashion model Gelila Bekele. Its director, Mo Scarpelli, is an Italian-American filmmaker who has directed and co-directed several films, including the award-winning *Frame by Frame* (2012), which tells the stories of four Afghan photojournalists. In *Anbessa*, the camera follows Asalif. We see him searching the construction site for useful trash; we see him spending time in his mother's shack, inventing electronic wonders out of that trash; we see him interacting with other boys in the neighborhood; and we follow him into the café near his home where he listens to the young men discussing politics. Asalif takes us up into

the hills to look out onto the edge of the suburban sprawl—seeing the new condominium complex encroaching on the farmland. There are touching scenes, such as when his mother asks him to draw plants so that he can remember them, since, as he remarks, “the land where I was born, it’s all covered by condominiums now.” Asalif obviously possesses innate genius and curiosity when it comes to electronics. Perhaps one of the most heart-wrenching moments happens after he has befriended Fikrab, a boy who lives in one of the new condos. Asalif builds a little helicopter that actually flies, which he gives to Fikrab as a gift, but Fikrab rejects the present, remarking, “my mom could buy me a better one.” Their difference in economic status and opportunity is painfully felt. However, the film is not merely observational. Rather, it aims to reconstruct the boy’s psychological experience of his changing reality. He sometimes imagines himself as a lion (the meaning of the Amharic word “Anbessa,” which has deep symbolic resonance in Ethiopia) in order to overcome his fear of the hyenas—not only the actual hyenas in the hills but also the metaphorical “hyenas” of land developers and the uncertainty of having to relocate.

Faya Dayi premiered at the Sundance film festival in 2021 and has since won awards at the Visions du Réel, Full Frame, and Hot Docs festivals. It is the first feature-length movie by Jessica Beshir, who has previously made several short films, including “Hairat” about the feeding of hyenas outside the walls of her hometown Harar. Beshir has a unique biography. Her mother is Mexican, her father Ethiopian, and after being born in Mexico, her family moved to Ethiopia, where she spent most of her childhood in Harar. Then, because of the civil war that occurred in Ethiopia in the late 1980s, her family moved back to Mexico when she was in the tenth grade. She later attended university in the United States and now lives in New York. In interviews, she has remarked that returning to Ethiopia every year to make films about Harar and the Hararghe region around that city was a way of reconnecting with home. However, as her new movie points out, home has changed quite a lot since her childhood. What was once famously a coffee-growing region has been transformed by the globalization of the khat industry.

But *Faya Dayi* is not a sociological analysis of the khat industry, nor is it a lurid investigation into its ills. Rather, *Faya Dayi* opens the audience to the psychological and emotional experience of young people in Ethiopia who are grappling with their economic and political condition. A complex mosaic of different voices and images, the film layers four different narratives simultaneously, like layers of reality, one on top of the other, each a part of the others: (1) it follows the labor of khat production and distribution from harvest to warehouse to sale; (2) it tells the mythology of khat’s discovery by an old Amir named Azurkherlaini after his search for *Maoul Hayat*, the water of eternal life; (3) it presents intensely intimate, close-up conversations and scenes from the daily life of the young men and women who are affected by the changing socio-economic conditions in Ethiopia, most notably a boy named Mohammed who wants to leave the country to reunite with his mother who emigrated to the Arab peninsula, while his father is addicted to khat; and

(4) it offers glimpses of the Oromo protest movement between 2014 and 2018 that shook the country. The film also reflects the mosaic of languages and cultures that coexist in that region of the country. Most of the farmers and laborers are ethnically Oromo and speak that language, while the myth of Azurkherlaini is narrated in the Harari language, and people may also sometimes speak Ethiopia's federal language, Amharic. The title of the film, *Faya Dayi*, derives from a call-and-response song in the Oromo language that the farmers and warehouse workers sometimes sing in the movie, where it means "to give birth to health." Significantly, although *Faya Dayi* is not the first Oromo-language movie, as there are many locally produced melodramas and short films in Oromia, it is the first to gain international exposure and distribution.

While watching these films, one experiences the political context obliquely. Both films begin, deliberately and significantly, somewhat out of focus. *Anbessa* opens with a close-up of Asalif's face that comes into focus as he begins to disassemble a flashlight, as if to say, this is going to be a movie that sheds light on how Ethiopia is changing by focusing the eye of the camera on the story of this young boy. *Faya Dayi*, in contrast, begins with a grainy long shot at night, as a teenage boy runs playfully out of the mist and the sound of crickets toward a motionless camera across marshy terrain. He slips, falls, gets back up, and gradually comes into focus, as if to say, this is going to be a movie where the camera patiently observes as the community gradually over time becomes intimate with it. As someone says at the beginning of the film, "humans can only see physical appearances but can we tell what's on the inside?" This question could be applied to *Anbessa* as well. Both films dare to show us visually that which exists beyond the visual. Neither film aims at a didactic explanation of political reality. There is no voice-over narrations or interviews with experts. Rather, the films are examples of the hard labor of patience and close attention required for an observational documentary film, as these two directors have managed to achieve a stunning degree of intimacy and love. At the same time, the films go beyond the genre of the purely observational documentary as they enter into the emotional and symbolic psychology of their characters.

If one situates these movies in their historical context, the images and stories take on a more profound significance, as both *Anbessa* and *Faya Dayi* were shot during a time of widespread political protest. Mo Scarpelli shot all the scenes for *Anbessa* in secret with the help of the men and women in the community on a small, handheld camera in 2016–2017, at a time when the government's state of emergency restrictions limited what journalists and filmmakers could do. Jessica Beshir began shooting her film in 2011, taking a decade to get to know the community, but most of the scenes that we see in the film were shot around the same time that Scarpelli worked on *Anbessa*, from 2016 to 2018. In both movies, references to the political context are usually indirect or in the background. Ethiopia's economy was one of the fastest growing economies in the world from roughly 2005 to 2015, which led to the rapid expansion of its capital city, Addis Ababa, and the creation of

several industrial parks throughout the country. One of the controversial issues was “land grabbing,” where multinational corporations and development projects were given land which had been historically used by pastoralists and small farmers. Many of the internally displaced persons moved to the cities looking for work. In 2014, the government passed what they called the “Addis Ababa Master Plan,” which would extend the city limits into Oromo farmland. The controversial plan sparked the “Oromo protest movement” that was further inspired by satellite news broadcasts from the Oromo Media Network, newly created in the United States by a team of Oromo activists and led by the political analyst Jawar Mohammed. In the rural areas around the ancient Islamic city of Harar, Ethiopia’s economic development has also led to a complex agricultural transformation. Global warming alongside increased pumping of water caused one of the important lakes in the region, Lake Haramaya, to dry up (Konjit Teshome, “The Resurrection of Lake Haramaya: Hope and Challenges [*Ethiopia Observer*, September 20, 2019]). The decrease in the availability of water motivated farmers to switch from coffee to khat because it uses less water, although that wasn’t the only motivating factor. In addition, as the documentary film *Black Gold* (Mark James Francis & Nick Francis, 2006) explains, the deregulation of the coffee trade in 1989 and the integration of global supply chains made it very difficult for Ethiopian farmers to continue to profit from coffee. At the same time, as Ezekiel Gebissa has analyzed in his book *Leaf of Allah* (1991), the development of transportation and telecommunications infrastructure has gradually over time encouraged farmers to transition to the more profitable cultivation and export of khat.

In *Anbessa*, the Addis Ababa Master Plan and Oromo protest movement are never explicitly identified as such. When Asalif hangs around the local café, we hear some of the young men complaining about their situation and debating what might be done, sometimes joking about the possibility of getting arrested. Asalif sings a traditional song about “who will inherit this land” while performatively imitating a lion in segments that seem somewhat surreal. Scarpelli has expertly edited her content to juxtapose different images and sounds in provocative ways. For example, in one scene, as Asalif is assembling a radio and finally gets it to work, the audio track that we then hear is a news broadcast about the condominium construction, in which a politician claims that “sustainable community development... means benefit for all.” The contrast of the audio with the image is deliberately ironic. Also ironic is the figure of Asalif himself. In a sense, his inventive do-it-yourself ethos embodies the ideology of the Ethiopian state. An influential book *Made in Africa* (2015), written by Ethiopia’s most well-known economist and adviser to the ruling party Arkebe Oqubay, argues for the future of Ethiopia’s “activist development state” to chart its own path in the global economy, building its own nation-centered industries. However, the scene where the wealthier boy rejects Asalif’s invention by pointing out that his mom can just buy him one indicates an ironic truth about the contradiction inherent in Ethiopia’s ideology of state-driven developmental capitalism, which relies heavily on

foreign capital. It also echoes a concern widely felt across Ethiopia that the Ethiopian middle-class are becoming westernized consumers of foreign goods. Reflecting such anxiety, many locally produced melodramas and romantic comedies in Ethiopia's movie industry—one of the most popular in Ethiopia being *Rebuni* (Kidst Yilma 2014)—express a pride in Ethiopia's traditions and a resistance to westernization and land appropriation. So, although *Anbessa* was not made by an Ethiopian filmmaker, it echoes some of the conflicted emotions and symbolisms that one might also find in movies produced inside Ethiopia. Perhaps the question to ask of this film is, why is the focus on the imagination of a child rather than on the young men and women that we see in the background? The sentimental figure of the young boy will certainly be endearing to movie audiences, and it is perhaps a somewhat safer way to approach such a politically controversial topic. An additional advantage is that it opens the filmic possibility to the emotional and symbolic world that Asalif is imaginatively trying to piece together, as it allows the audience to try to piece it together with him. Nevertheless, watching the film, one might also wonder about the adults in the movie, what they think, and what political challenges they face.

In contrast, *Faya Dayi* foregrounds those young men and women who are in the background in *Anbessa*. It focuses on their labor, their frustrations, their dreams, and their sadness. One young man relates his past experience of attempting to emigrate as a refugee to the teenage boy Mohammed. Later, Mohammed reflects on his own desire to emigrate; he is missing his mother and critical of the effects of khat on his father. An older man at a khat warehouse discusses the job with a younger man. In another scene, a group of men discuss the problem of water and their “sin” that caused Lake Haramaya to dry up. A young woman expresses her feelings to her friend about how she missed her boyfriend while he was in prison. A group of young men discuss the protests that took place in 2015 and mourn their friend who was killed by police. “It is on our own land that we are dying, being imprisoned and forced into exile.... Our struggle is not new.” Some of these young men are what in Oromo culture are called *Qeerroo*—which might be described as a youth movement rooted in the Oromo tradition of democratic governance called the “Gadaa system.” Many of the *Qeerroo* feel that the political analyst and journalist Jawar Mohammed has given voice, unity, and purpose to their struggle, and in one scene in the film, a man shouts out, “Jawar has the truth.” When Jessica Beshir shot this scene, Jawar was an active political figure, but in July 2020, he was imprisoned by the Ethiopian government, and he was still in prison while *Faya Dayi* was screening at international festivals in 2021.

However, *Faya Dayi* is not a film that intends to explain the politics of Ethiopia. Rather, like *Anbessa*, it is about the conflicted emotional psychology beneath the politics. As Beshir has remarked in an interview, “I wanted viewers to meet people before they became news” (Matt Turner interview, *Filmmaker*, February 1, 2021). Her comment could just as well be used to describe *Anbessa*, as one comes away from seeing that film wondering what the future is for brilliant boys like Asalif. But *Faya Dayi* is unique in its approach.

By layering the many different voices, stories, images, and sounds on top of each other, it achieves a spiritual transcendence that in many ways feels more like a visual poem than a documentary film—like a cinematic ode dedicated to the future generations of Ethiopia.

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