

Current Fragmented Film Festival and its Impact on the Process of Building Film Industry in Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed at examining the current film festivals and filmmaking impact on the process of film company building process in Ethiopia. Thus, in this study qualitative research method was employed. Both primary and secondary sources of data were gathered where the primary data was collected through key informant interviews having 19 film maker participants of the film industry, Directors cinematographers including academicians in Ethiopian Universities in the field of film and Theatre Arts. The secondary data was obtained through books, articles and journals. The data was analyzed by using document and thematic analysis techniques. The study found out that limited or independent film festival preparation, frequent coping from western and European film festival ideas, ineffective film production systems, loose producers company unity, lack of government support on the national film festival, an increase in film festival conspiracy, the financial, human and material constraints, acceptability gaps, the issue of departure film making action and disintegration weakened the unity and strength of the Ethiopian film festival as a whole thereby pretention obstacle in the film company building process in Ethiopia. Finally, this study recommended that strong Film company institutions are mandatory to gather crumbled Ethiopian film festivals and strength which will in turn amalgamate film corporation & film company formation process in Ethiopia.

Keywords- Film festivals, festival conspiracy and Film Company

I. INTRODUCTION

This Ethiopia has been labeled possessing a long history of three thousand years and more. Most of the statuesque 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 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 16mm 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. (Paulos, 2010)

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, Dessie, Dire Dawa and Jimma. The first Ethiopian movie

au de Menilek was made in 1990 by a French man, Charles Martel.

Film festivals has become a complex, multifaceted phenomenon extends beyond the promotion, exhibition, and reception of completed films. Many film festivals around the world have established themselves as influential institutions that have a notable impact on the entire lifecycle of films; before, during, and after production. Most of the work in the rapidly growing field of film festival studies focuses on the latter stages of filmmaking typically those that occur after the film is ready for public exhibition, scholars have gradually begun to analyze how festivals are involved in the conception and production of feature film projects as well. Since most of the major international festivals organize concurrent events such as script development workshops, initiatives that led them to form film company in focus of developing the film industry. (Ashagrie.2017).

II. METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

In this stated study qualitative research method was applied. A phenomenological research design was employed. Both primary and secondary sources of data were gathered where the primary data was collected through key informant interviews having 19 participants of film makers from the film industry, Directors cinematographers including academicians in Ethiopian Universities in the field of film and Theatre Arts. The secondary date was obtained through books, articles and journals. The data was analyzed by using document and thematic analysis techniques.

III. THE CURRENT ETHIOPIAN FILM FESTIVAL AND ITS PROBLEM OF FESTIVITY

According to Ashagrie (2017) in his Ethiopian International Film Festival has successfully run throughout Addis Ababa through each year by independent film makers which is finically supported by Europeans and Americans. Even if Film Viewing that started in Ethiopia in 1897, at the early period of the invention of Cinema, has undergone various developmental stages in the last century. Ethiopia film is not yet developed. Nevertheless, film festival is a recent phenomenon that emerged late in the last decades following the annual film exhibitions organized in Addis Ababa by European and American Embassies. It is rather the development of local feature film production, and the contacts created by international Film festival that had played the decisive role in initiating film festivals in Ethiopia. As the result of that, the first Ethiopian National Film Festival was conducted by Linkage Arts and Resource Center (LARK) in 2005, in Addis Ababa with

the advice from the organizer of the First Amakula Kampala International Film Festival.

The implementation of the advice was a prerequisite for LARK to join the international film festival arena. Within two years preparation, Lark succeeded in establishing the First Ethiopian International Film festival in 2007, and to successively demonstrate similar festivals that registered the 14th chapters in 2019. Following the foot step of LARK, not less than three festival organizations have been created to encourage film practitioners and producers through contest and awards.

The most known for regularly conducting festivals are Gumma Award film festival (GAEFF), Ethiopian international Film Festival (EIFF), Addis international Film Festival (AIFF), and European international Film Festival (EIFF). The festivals on the other hand have motivated young film writers, directors and producers to participate in regional and international film festivals where some Ethiopians succeeded in winning film awards. In spite of such a considerable productivity what has been written about Ethiopian Film festivals in journals, books and encyclopedias is minimal. Furthermore, many books published by expatriate scholars regarding world and African film festivals exclude the account of Ethiopian film festivals which has created a gap in understanding a national cinematic expression, and the wholeness of African film activities as well. In addition to this Rachel (2019) found that in the first Film Festival Yearbook, editors Dina Jordanova and Ragan Rhyne (2009, 1) argue that film festivals are 'the driving force behind the global circulation of cinema.' As such, studying film festivals is 'central to understanding the sociocultural dynamics of global cinema and international cultural exchanges at large' (2009, 1). Indeed, film festivals have long been considered crucial to the exhibition, distribution and ideological construction of a certain kind of cinema, most often termed 'art cinema' in focus to build film companies and organizations.

In abonh ashager ideas that Local film production preparation the first feature-length film of Sub-Saharan black Africa. The development of cinematic culture and the business prospect attracted the attention of Ethiopians to get organized in order to start film production locally. As a result, a private production comapany Yehager Filminna Yemastaweqiya Mahiber Yefilm Dirijit [Indigenous Film and Advertising Association's Film Company] was formed by 14 members where Elala Ebsa was elected as an executive director. The first move of the company was to produce a film Salsawi Dawit [King David the III] written by Prime Minister Mekonnen Endalkachew, which was rehearsed for a number of months, but halted due to lack of finance (Aboneh, 2012, p. 4). Elala Ebsa himself wrote the feature film script in Amharic as Hirut Abbatua Mannew [Hirut, Who is her father?] and it was directed by Lombrus

Yukaris, another member of the company. The editing was done in Italy with the production of 25 copies. The story of the film centers on the life of a country side girl who is forced by socio economic circumstances to engage in urban prostitution. The film was shot in Ethiopia, in which Askale Ameneshewa, Alemayehu Asefa, and Abebech Ejigu performed. The technical film crews nonetheless were Europeans. The production cost was Birr 140,000 [then \$70,000], and Hirut Abbatua Mannew was launched on Friday evening, Nehassie 21, 1957 E.C [August 27, 1965] in the presence of Emperor Haile Sellassie. Papatakis remembers that (Abebe Teshager, 2011, p. 14) the Emperor had walked out amidst the screening with dissatisfaction, commenting on the content of the film "Why a story of prostitute when Ethiopia has a lot more significant history!" In spite of that, the Emperor had received the Askale Ameneshewa in his palace to bestow financial and gold necklace as a gesture of encouragement for best performance regardless of her incapability to read and write (Aboneh, 1994, p. 126). The film run for about four years and it was attended only by about 20,000 viewers facing box-office failure due to the technical standard. The company then was unable to pay back the loan it obtained from Ethiopian Development Bank for the production of the film, and Hirut Abbatua Mannew at last was confiscated by the Development Bank. Nevertheless, the production of Hirut Abbatua Mannew, the 35 millimeter black and white feature film with 80 minutes running time has marked a turning point not only in the history of Ethiopian, but also as the first feature-length film made in Sub-Sahara Africa. This point calls for another historiography of African and world cinema, and requires amendment of those scholars who write that *La noire de of the Senegalese's Sembene*, produced in 1966 (Angela, 1982, p. 107) is the first feature-length film made in Sub-Sahara Africa (Nowell, 1996, p. 668; Petty, 2007, p. 49). In 1967, the author of Hirut Abbatua Mannew had envisaged to produce the second feature film "King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba with the help of an Israeli film company, but plans have never really gotten beyond the idea stage...movie production in Ethiopia has not been a profitable business" (Ross, 1969, p. 12). The other important event in the history of the Ethiopian cinema in early 1970s was the return of three Ethiopians: Getachew Desta, Michel Papatakis, and Tafesse Jarra from the Soviet Union with higher education in film Arts. This led to the formation of the 2nd film company "Amare Film Dirijit" (Amare Film Company) by Michel Papatakis and Asrat Getahun where the latter acted as the general manager. With 50,000 Birr loan from a bank, the company produced *Guma* [ransom for blood guilt], a 35 millimeter colored feature film with 90 minutes running time. The film was written by Michel Papatakis and Yilma Manaye, and directed by Michel Papatakis whose mother heroically resisted Italian

fascism as a guerrilla fighter. *Guma* is the first Amharic colored feature film ever directed by an Ethiopian. The story of the film is based on the Ethiopian customary law, revolving around a character that mistakenly kills his friend and obliged by the society to pay ransom to the family of the deceased in order to avoid vengeance. The technical aspect of the production was mostly handled by French cinematographers. Michel Papatakis's son Tasso Papatakis, who acquired cinematographic experience in Paris, was the cameraman. The main roles were played by Debebe Eshetu, Kibrom Hagos, Siyum Mulugeta, Negash Abdi, and Selamawit Gebre Sellassie. *Guma* was launched on Friday evening, Ginbot 9, 1965 E.C (May 5, 1973) in the presence of Emperor Haile Sellassie I (Ethiopian Herald, May 12, 1973). *Guma*, however was challenged again with a box office failure, unable to compete with the standard of American and European film productions. As a result, the company could not pay back the loan and the three original copies of the film were confiscated by a bank. *Guma* was handed over to Ethiopian Film Corporation by the Derg Military Government, and after the downfall of the regime, transferred to the possession of the Ministry of Culture and Truism. Few years ago, it was screened for the public at the state owned Ambassador Theatre, and now preserved at the Ethiopian National Archive. Then after, no Ethiopian dared to go into feature film production business for a decade. On the other hand, film producers from abroad started to focus on Ethiopia locations for shooting international films. The first film was a sailor from Gibraltar, which is based on the story of a sailor from Gibraltar who had a romantic attachment with a French lady and the adventures they were going through. It was directed by British director Tony Richardson and produced by the United Artists Films (1969). It gave an eye opening opportunity for Ethiopian actors, Debebe Eshetu, and Wogayehu to involve in international films with famous actors like Hugh Griffith, Jean Morroeu. *Unastagioneal' inferno. A Season in the Hell*, commissioned by the owner of Melotti Beer was produced as a joint venture by French and Italian Film companies, and it was directed by Nello Rissi in 1970. The film is based on true story of Rambo, a French poet who came to Ethiopia as a trader to sale fire arms to Emperor Menelik II. Three Ethiopians: Debebe Eshetu as Emperor Menelik II, Wogayehu Nigatu as Ras Mekonnen, and the notable journalist Eleni Mekuria as a lady had performed in the film. The main Character was casted to Filorina Bolkan, a Brazilian actress because of the difficulty in finding Ethiopian actress who could speak English at that time. *Shaft in Africa* (1973/74), the third series was written by Stirling Silliphant, Directed by Jhon Guillerma, and produced by Roger H. Lewis in which Ethiopian casts such as Debebe Eshetu (Wassa), Wogayehu Nigatu (messenger), Zenebech Taddese (bar

lady) and Almaz Dejenie (the future wife of Debebe-A passenger) performed along famous actors like Frank Finley (Amafi), Richard Rountree (John Shaft), Vonetta MacGie (Alem), Neda Arneric (Jazar) and Spiro Focas (Sassari). It was premiered at the Haile Sellassie I Theatre in the presence of the Emperor Haile Sellasie I. It is based on the story of human trafficking from Africa to Europe for cheap labor, and it was shot in Ethiopia, France, New York, and Spain. The Emperor and the aristocracy who considered the dressing style of the role of Zenebech as pornographic, however walked out amidst the screening. The Emperor nonetheless received the production crew at his palace (Interview, Debebe Eshetu, 4 December 2021). From late 1950s to early 1970s, more focus was rather on production of documentaries. The USSR¹ CSDF produced *The Emperor* (1959; 1967); *Indian and Ethiopian Troops* (1955), *Duke in Ethiopia* (1958), *The British Destroyers Visits Ethiopia* (1960), *Royal Tour of Ethiopia* (1965), *Christmas in Ethiopian Children of the Emperor* (1968) were produced by the British. The Emperor's visits to the USA (1963), and The Emperor's visits to Jamaica (1966) were also documented by western countries (www.nazret.com). Locally, Solomon Beqele who studied film in Germany and France made *The Rotten Existence* (1968), about corruption; *Social Complex* (1970), which criticizes the education system in Ethiopia; and *Present Situation of African Film* (1972), which considers the contradictions presented in African cinema (Angela 1982, 54). To be told a nation and Yetedebeqe Nigus [The Hidden King] were commission by Emperor Haile Sellassie to magnify his positive images against the successive accusations and protests by the Haile Sellassie I university student on the eve of the eruption of the 1974 Ethiopian Revolution. The bond of cinematic art with socio economic and political reality of Ethiopia was vividly demonstrated by a documentary film that contributed to an end to the monarchical system that existed for about 2,000 years. Regarding this, a historian (Bahru, 2007, p. 235) writes: On the night of 11 September [1974], the ultimate act of vilification was perpetrated as the public was treated to a doctorate edition of a famous film on the 1973 famine produced by Jonathan Dimpleby of Thames Television. A canny collage of royal feast and peasant famine drove home the emperor's alleged callousness to the suffering of his people. The following morning, representatives of the Derg [committee of military] went to the Jubilee palace and read a statement proclaiming his deposition... Thus ended not only one of the longest and most remarkable reigns in Ethiopian history but also a dynasty that traced its origins to King Solomon and Queen Sheba. The writer of this article also wants narrate and show the fragmented film festivals in order to show the green light in preparation of co-production formation in of deferent film producers.

IV. ANALYSIS OF FRAGMENT ETHIOPIAN FILM FESTIVAL AND ITS PHENOMENON

Film festivals have become a widespread phenomenon since their inception at the Venice Film Festival in 1932, the first festival to be organized on a regular basis. Film festivals proliferated in particular from the late 1960s onward. Today a film festival takes place every day somewhere: the estimated total number of film festivals varies from 700 to 1,500 annually. From studies on film festivals (e.g. Dayan 2000; Turan 2003; De Valck 2007) it is clear that they (can) serve various agendas or interests – geopolitical, economic, as well as cultural. However, their main function is cultural: to screen films that fall outside the circles of regular or commercial distribution and exhibition. It is through film festivals that niche films more commonly referred to by scholars as well as programmers and critics by terms like world cinema,” various national cinemas, art cinema, reach global audiences. Moreover, with competition programs, prizes, and press coverage, festivals are able to add value (symbolic capital) to such films and, in this way, act as stepping stones to further distribution, for example via art-house exhibition, TV broadcasting, video on demand (VOD), and DVD releases. Social justice cinema at film festivals ancillary markets. Whereas in commercial circuits films are predominantly evaluated on their performance at the box office, film festivals place emphasis on criteria of aesthetic value or innovative style, personal voice, authentic stories and social relevance such as topicality, social urgency, and political message.

Following the announcements and calls for participation on FM radios and private newspapers, films representing Africa, Europe, Asia, north and South America have participated on the festival. The festival was sponsored by AMA Art Moves Africa, Hubert Bals Fund, Cinema Mondial Tour & Jan Vrijman, Bedele Special Brewery (the Title Sponsor), Sheger 102.1 FM Radio, Infiniti Digital Printing & Advertising, Instiuto Italiano de Cultura, Midastouch, Pushkin Russian Center for Science and Culture, and Republica Federativa Do Brasil. Five members of the jury for the competition of Ethiopian films were recruited to represent the Ethiopian Film Association, the Ethiopian Writers Association, Ministry of Culture and Tourism, School of Theatre Arts of the Addis Ababa University, and the film society. Just a month ahead of the festival, a workshop on the procedure and criteria of evaluating films and movie makers was conduct by EIFF for the jury. The jury was also briefed that the festival would comprise nine award categories for: Audiences' Best Choice, Best Actress, Best Actor, Best Cinematography, Best Director, Best

Feature Film, Best Screenwriter, Best Supporting Actress, and Best Supporting Actor. As all the members of the jury were permanently engaged with government and NGO career, each member had to set his own convenient timetable to roam around movie theaters for evaluation. It was mandatory for each member of the jury to present a weekly progress report to the director of the festival every Fridays at lunch sessions sponsored by LARK. This tradition had become a good mechanism to narrow the gaps of the jury's performance in meeting the deadline for the festival. Furthermore, special arrangement was made with film producers to screen movies at the Shalom Cinema continuously for two days so that those few members of the jury who had lagged behind would cope-up with others in submitting the results of the evaluation. The films were screened in 15 movie theatres in Addis Ababa. The five public movie theatres that hosted the festival were Cinema Ambassador, Cinema Empire, Cinema Ethiopia, Cinema Stereo, and The Ethiopian National Theatre. The eight private movie theatres were Aggona Cinema, Alem Cinema, Cinema Embilta, Cinema Yoftahie, Habesha Cinema, Sebastopol Cinema, Shalom Cinema, and WaFa Cinema. The two cultural centers were Instiuto Italiano de Cultura, and Pushkin Russian Center for Science and Culture. Almost all the public and private movie theatre including Pushkin Russian Center for Science and Culture had run four to five screening sessions a day during the festival week. The ticket price 5 Birr (\$0.25), a 75% discount from the regular entrance fee, was relatively affordable to the bulk of urban youth to attend many festival films. Ashagrie (2017)

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Ethiopian film festival critically engaged with independent film producers and foreign film festival makers in fragmented way so in this context where topics such as indigenous cultural forms of festivals, formation of film industry and co-production approach of film festival preparation is not yet formed this were intensely debated by film scholars, leading them to critical desiccation. As usual in a foreign country in opulently various international film festivals in which filmmakers present their films in festival screening and this led them to use cinema as a device in international visual commination and also led them to form film industry in their homeland. In this Current time fragmented Film festival preparation Impact on the Process of building film industry in Ethiopia so this film making generation then should played a role in the film industry formation of the next film makers. Based on the results of the study, film makers who answered the interview questionnaire are motivated to form Film Company.

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