

From the Ethiopian Plateau to Europe's Film Festivals - An Interview with Yared Zeleke

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Yared Zeleke is an Ethiopian film director whose film *Lamb* won the International Film Festival Innsbruck 2016. He studied Writing and Directing at New York University and later moved to San Francisco, where he lives now. His film *Lamb* shows the story of an Ethiopian boy named Ephraim who has to move in with his uncle and his family. He is confronted with traditional attitudes and life as a farmer in Ethiopia's rural countryside. Together with his Lamb, Ephraim tries to run away, and in this attempt to flee he makes a number of exciting experiences.

I: Do you like Innsbruck?

Yes, it is just so beautiful. I live in California and I took an over night flight and when I woke up I saw these incredible mountains through the window. I couldn't believe my eyes because I couldn't imagine Innsbruck to be directly surrounded by the Alps. Wherever you look, there are mountains! I immediately sent pictures to everyone via Facebook and I told everybody how beautiful this city is. This city is simply amazing!

I: Have you already been up near the mountains?

Not yet, I want to go on Sunday.

I: How long do you stay here?

I'm going to stay until Monday and then I go to Graz, Austria.

I: Is there another film festival in Graz?

I think in Graz there will be a cinema opening. But after Graz, there is a film festival in Slovenia which I am invited to. Afterwards I will go back to California.

I: At the beginning of the movie, Ephraim, who loves cooking, can't understand why it is considered typical girls' work. However, later he breaks with the traditions. Can you tell us more about Ephraim and these Ethiopian traditions?

In Ethiopian culture men don't cook. So Ephraim breaks the gender roles as does the girl (Tzion). She wants to study instead of getting married and have children. For me the kids represent representing the future and my hope for Ethiopia to become a more educated and liberated country. This is something that is really happening.

I: The title of the film marks the important role of lambs in Ethiopia . Can you tell us more about the role of the lamb in the movie and why you chose this particular symbol?

There always were five lambs on set. Those were northern Ethiopian lambs, which are generally red. I am happy to say that we just filmed with one lamb because she was the smartest. She was the best choice. I wanted to do a story with a lamb because in Christian religion the lamb is a symbolic creature and represents innocence and this story is very much about innocence - from childhood to adulthood. I also found out that there has never been a film starring a real lamb. Of course there are movies with horses, whales and so on, but not a

single one with lambs. Maybe this is the case because lambs are not smart, but I found a smart one.

I: Do you plan another film?

Lamb is about childhood. It is like a fable of Africa, but my next film is about youth. It will be about the frustrated Ethiopian youth and is going to be set in the city. The movie is going to have rock music, it's going to have techno music, and you will see a side of Ethiopia which no one has ever seen. It will be just like city life. There is the rich part of the city, with all the tall buildings, but you'll also see the contrast between the rich and the poor kids, because this is how it is. *Lamb* was very slow and thoughtful. The next film is going to be chaotic and crazy, like a teenage portrait should be. It will cover topics like the first love, fights and road trips. The youth group is going to the rift valley of Ethiopia, which is a very different landscape compared to what you saw in *Lamb*. They go on a really, really crazy adventure, which is completely different from *Lamb*.

I: What is your new movie called?

It's called *1991* because all the kids in the movie were born that year. Ethiopia had a communistic military dictatorship from 1974-1991. Actually, we grew up with Eastern German films. It is crazy. So as a kid I didn't watch Hollywood productions, but I watched Bollywood movies and Eastern German soap operas. I grew up in communism communistic environment. Then after 1991 we became a democracy, or as my uncle calls it "demo-crazy". Ethiopia is very rich; Like most of Africa, the natural resources are very rich but the educational system is not. So a lot of kids are taking dangerous journeys across the sea to Europe, across the desert to Arabia, or across the African savanna to South Africa; and it is a shame, because they have the brain power, but they don't have many opportunities in Ethiopia. That is the tragedy of Africa and that is what I want to show. Do you remember that girl in *Lamb, Tsion*? My next film will continue with her story.

I: Is she based on a real story?

Y: No I made her up, but it's inspired by a true story.

I: So you'll link them together to a triple feature? Maybe?

Exactly. Actually, you said it! You gave away the secret, my dream is a trilogy.

I: Will the girl be played by the same actress?

Yes, but only the girl. The next film, I'd say, is even more pro-women. Because Ethiopian girls are really pretty, the country is famous for their beautiful women, but they are very poor, and the problem with this is that Arabia on the other side of the Red Sea is very rich. We have a growing prostitution problem. The majority of African models is from my country. They are very tall and have very beautiful faces, but they are poor very often. Moreover, we have the problem that the girls end up as domestic workers, for example as housemaids and cleaners in rich countries like the United Arab Emirates or South Africa. Sometimes they are even sold as sex slaves against their will. In my next movie you'll see those beautiful girls and after the movie you will know more about their lives and the circumstances.

I: We have never been to Ethiopia, but in your movie we got to see a lot of Ethiopian culture and traditions. Was it one of your intentions to show the world what Ethiopia is like? What is the living situation like there? What are the traditions? Which dances and festivals are there?

Yes, exactly. Because the image of Africa is not really good. I left Ethiopia when I was 10 years old and grew up in the USA. Many people there think that people in Ethiopia live on trees or that Ethiopia is a desert. I have never seen a desert in Ethiopia. People always think that I am from the desert, but I am not from Egypt, I am not from Arabia, I am from Ethiopia. My country is twice the size of Germany and it's mountainous. My city is on 2500 meters; hence, conditions for filming are very hard as it's also very cold. It's a little bit like here in Europe. We shot at about 3000 meters. 70% of the African mountains are in Ethiopia. As you can see, Ethiopia is quite cold, mountainous and foggy, and sometimes the weather was working against us! We were in the rough part of Ethiopia, and they actually don't have electricity there, so they don't have television. This part is still untouched, it's like a virgin land! The people didn't know what we were doing. We were like aliens with strange objects making experiments with them. It was really hard to gain their trust by showing them what we are doing. The people there are very proud, especially the Christian farmers, and it took us a long time to gain their trust. When my scene photographer, a French-Canadian, came to Ethiopia she said: "This is like Austria!", and I answered that I have never been to Austria, but now I understand what she meant. There are not many African movies and not many African movies by Africans. Africa is very big, and I only know one country, but its image is not good. In Europe you can see the poorest of the poor arriving as immigrants from different African countries. The media shows you the wars, the really horrible things, which are just so terrible for us to see.

Lamb is not just about the Ethiopian culture, it's actually about humanity, about how and who we are; because kids in Austria suffer too when they lose their mum or when their parents divorce. After all, we are all human beings and breathe the same air on planet earth. I wanted to show kindness, gentleness, and beauty because you don't get to see that from Africa usually; as all you get to see is really ugly.

I: I have been to South Africa for six weeks but I think it's very different from Ethiopia.

Cape Town is beautiful, but it is a very different culture. It's the opposite of Ethiopia. We never had the European Colonialism, we look different, we are different, and have a different history. Seeing South Africa was shocking for me. It's like another world. When you go to Ethiopia, you can see very proud people, no matter how poor the farmers are. It's their land and their culture; so they know who they are, and they are very proud of being who they are. They are also very dignified. There is a great gentleness in the air and within the people. There is no violence and no hate. If you google Ethiopian crime statistics, you will see that it is one of the safest countries in the world. Even though it's poor it is very gentle. South Africa is violent and very segregated in black and white. Everyone has a gun. That's shocking for me. If you tell the people in Ethiopia that you are black, they won't know what you mean. They are Ethiopians and that's it.

I: Ethiopia is heavily affected by climate change. Did you try to show this in your movie?

Yes, I wanted to point that out. In the USA, I am sorry to compare it to the USA, but I grew up there and I lived there, climate change is a big debate, and at least half of the Americans do not believe that global warming is happening. But in Ethiopia you don't have to be educated or watch the news on television to know this because you are living climate change every day.

85 percent of Ethiopians are farmers, so we are still an agrarian society, exactly like the people in the movie *Lamb* which you saw. In Ethiopia, they really live like the people in the movie. They wear traditional clothes and are very religious. They live together with earth and know that it is changing. When people see the movie they say: "Oh, Ethiopia is so green. Why are the people there ever hungry?". The problem is that, if it rains too much and at the wrong time, your crops will die. Climate change is climate change, which doesn't mean dryness or desert; it means that the weather is changing. In Ethiopia, it used to rain from March to August, so if it stops raining in June, for example, a lot of crops will die. When you depend on a farm, this means that you are in danger, which is our main problem. Therefore, climate change is not a debate but a reality for a place like Ethiopia.

I: Are a lot of people moving into the cities and are the cities growing faster because of this?

Yes, exactly. Most of Ethiopia is still rural, but this is happening like all around the world. So this means a big change as I wanted to show in the movie.

I: How did you choose the music?

The music in the background is Ethiopian contemporary and traditional music. There is a massive movement of farmers moving to the cities. I wanted to show that with a mix of traditional and modern music. I knew that there would be Western and Ethiopian audiences, and I wanted to connect those! For the Western ears the piano is much more familiar and people will feel more connected to the film then.

I: Did any farmers see the film and did they like it?

The American news network CNN did a show on this. They did what I don't have the money for. They put all farmers on a bus and took them to the nearest city. There they saw the film and themselves within a film for the first time! Their comments afterwards were the best reviews I got for this film.

I: Which ethnical group was that and which language did they speak?

It was the Amhara group, which is culturally and historically dominant. I am half Amhara myself, from my mother's side.

I: A lot of the clothes in the film are green. Why? What is the role of it?

The costumes show what people in Ethiopia really wear. Some people think that these are special costumes but don't consider that this is what they wear every day. The green colour represents richness and reflects the land.

I: Do you like cooking?

I am from the city. I've never had a pet and I don't like cooking. A large part of this film is my imagination.

I: How did you finance *Lamb*? Was it difficult to find resources to make the movie?

It was very difficult because of the animals and the children. In the USA, they say you should never produce a film with animals or children. It is very dangerous for investors to invest in such a film, and also the shooting in Africa, especially for this type of movie, is very expensive because there is no electricity there. You have to bring big trucks, fill them up with gas, and take them into rural areas across the mountains to this cold place. The whole investment came from Europe and I am really thankful to Europe for this.

I wrote a script and the script won the French film board. It is not very common for African scripts to win, but I was very lucky. The French film society really liked the script, and it was number one in 2012. From then on people took me and my producer serious. They took us very serious because it is a big award and, therefore, we were able to get more money. Most support came from France, Germany, Switzerland, Norway, and Qatar. Those are the countries which invested money in the movie. At the end, the budget was 1.5 million euros, which is really a big sum for a first movie anywhere in the world but especially big for Africa. I know my situation is very strange and rare, but it opens the doors for other filmmakers to make movies in Africa.

I: Are you famous in Ethiopia now? Do the people know you?

My actors are, but not me. They see them, but they don't see me.

I: Throughout Ethiopia? Are you known there?

No, because I'm quite shy, so I don't really get on TV shows and things like that, but my actors do. When they ask me for interviews on TV, I just say that the actors should go there. Even on this stage here my hands were shaking.

I: What do your family and friends say about your success?

They are awesome! They support me every day. Tonight, they show my movie in New York City and in San Francisco, where I actually live, and all my friends are supporting me and my movie. I am really lucky to have them.

I: How did you get into filmmaking? Did you receive training?

I have a master degree in Writing and Directing from New York University, which is a famous American film school. For example, Martin Scorsese went there. Some of my teachers were, for example, Spike Lee and Todd Solondz.

I: Has it always been your dream to become a director?

Yes, it has always been my dream, but I pushed it away for a long time. Then I did my masters.

I: Which one is your favourite scene in the movie?

Of all the questions you asked me, this is the most difficult one. Okay, to be honest, I have not seen my movie for a long time. I just introduce it and leave. It stresses me out because I am still critical. I have not seen it for, more or less, one year. I like the dancing scene in the end, so, usually, towards the end of the movie I come back into the cinema auditorium to see the dance and the crowds. I also like the prayer scene with the Muslim girl. When I wrote it, I saw exactly how I wanted it to be. I tried to catch the feeling that it's not about being Muslim or

Christian or Jewish or atheist, it's just about the spirit, about this planet and who we are. There is a spirit in everything; I just wanted to show that. I don't know if other people have seen it, but I can feel the spirit. For me, it's not about the Muslims; it is about the connection to nature which we've lost in modern times.

I: Do you want to build bridges and break with gender traditions?

Yes, that's right.

I: Would you change anything about the movie, in retrospect, if you could?

To be honest, I don't know if I would change anything. I am very lucky, of course I watched it and thought I want this or I want that, but, in the end, I can't complain about the movie. For example, I am very proud of my non-actor, actors, and everyone.

I: How long did the production of the movie take from the beginning to the end, also the time in Ethiopia?

The whole film took five years, from writing down the first idea to the Cannes Filmfestival. Now with the travelling it's six years, but it took five years to make it until it was introduced to the world. The shoot in Ethiopia took 36 days, crazy 36 days. We visited different parts of the country. The visual and all sound was done by Germans; therefore, the sound was edited in Berlin.

I: Where did you sleep during the shoot in Ethiopia? You have been to rural places. Was it difficult to find something?

We slept in the nearest Hotel, which was one hour away from the location.

I: How many people were part of the crew?

The crew had about 50 members, mostly Ethiopians. A lot of crewmembers were French, German, Belgian, Canadian. Then the cast was about another 50, so it was about 100 of us. We basically took over the whole hotel. We were there for one month, and when we left the people there were crying because it was in the middle of nowhere they had grown close to us. They are not used to things like this. For them it was a big deal, so the staff and the manager cried. Ethiopians are very dramatic. We said: "We will visit you in the future". The Europeans were crying too because they had never experienced such a thing and the people there had been very kind.

I: How difficult is it to get permission for filmmaking in Ethiopia?

(He answers in German): Es ist schwer, zu schwer. Die Bürokratie dort ist nicht an internationale Filmproduktionen gewöhnt. Die äthiopische Regierung kann sehr streng sein, aber am Ende haben wir die Erlaubnis bekommen. (It is really difficult, too difficult. The bureaucracy is not used to international film productions. Ethiopian government can be very strict, but, in the end, we got the permissions).

I: Why do you speak German?

(In German) –Ich habe Deutsch auf dem College in den USA gelernt, aber ich habe lange kein Deutsch mehr gesprochen. Ich habe vieles davon vergessen. (I learned it in college in the USA, but I haven't spoken German for many years. I forgot a lot of it).

I: Thank you very much for the interview.

Thank you, dankeschön.