

Contesting Visions of Ethiopia in Two Amharic Sports Films: Between Film Festivals and Local Commercial Cinema

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Ethiopia, the second most populous nation in Africa and only African nation to maintain its sovereignty in the face of European colonial aggression, has traditionally drawn upon a long history of independence, empire and religious legitimacy to sustain a hegemonic national Ethiopian culture in a land that is home to over 80 distinct ethnolinguistic groups. Since the 1960s the image of Ethiopian national culture has been further enhanced by its sporting successes, earning and maintaining its status as a world power in middle/long-distance running. More recently, beginning in the early 2000s a commercially oriented and locally produced film industry has become established that harnesses Amharic, the official working language of Ethiopia, as its main form of dialogic expression. This popular Amharic cinema is centred in Addis Ababa but projects nationalist sentiments across Ethiopia and further afield as films are screened in urban cinemas throughout the country and accessed through online platforms by members of the Ethiopian diaspora. Following the establishment of the Amharic film industry, more entrepreneurial screen media producers have emerged in Ethiopia giving rise to an increasingly pluralistic media-scape with ethnocentric, nationalist and international content now all accessible to varying degrees, complicating ideas of national hegemony and identity.

In a time, then, of growing competition between cultural content produced in Amharic and in other languages spoken in Ethiopia, such as Oromo and Tigrinya, the definition of Ethiopia as a nation is continually having to adapt in order to accommodate the changes which have arisen since the multi-ethnic federal state structure was implemented in 1991. Despite such ethnolinguistic developments in cultural production, however, sporting success in the national colours remains one of the most potent national cultural forces with the ability to bring together peoples from different ethnic groups and religions in support of athletes representing Ethiopia. Following on from Andrew Higson's considerations of film 'in terms of cultural identity' (1989, p. 44), in this chapter I explore Ethiopian sports films in order to question Higson's statement that '[t]he search for a stable and coherent national identity can only be successful at the expense of representing internal differences, tensions and contradictions—differences of class, race, gender, region, etc' (1989, p. 44). A central focus of this chapter, therefore, is to interrogate the diversifying and unifying implications that the representation of sport in film has in relation to the shifting definitions of an Ethiopian national identity.

In order to recognise the place of Ethiopia in the imaginings of multiple external and internal religious, cultural and political movements and identities (from Pan-Africanism to Rastafarianism) I analyse the two most widely acclaimed Amharic sports films by considering their contexts of production and reception, both in the cinemas of Addis Ababa and in film festivals outside of Ethiopia, exploring how contrasting readings of these films may disrupt and/or reinforce hegemonic concepts of an Ethiopian national culture. The two films in question are አትሌቱ - *Atletu/The Athlete* (dir. Rasselas Lakew and Davey Frankel, 2009), a biopic of celebrated 'barefoot' marathon runner Abebe Bikila, and የገንጽ አልወላድም - *Yenegem Alweldim/I Will Not Bear Tomorrow* (dir. Abraham Gezahegn, 2016), a film tracing the trials and tribulations of an Addis Ababa-based football team and their coach during the 'Red Terror'.¹ Analysing *The Athlete* as a transnational co-production (USA/Germany/Ethiopia) made specifically for film festival exhibition; and the

locally Ethiopian produced *I Will Not Bear Tomorrow* made primarily for commercial exhibition in Ethiopian cinemas, I consider two sports films which have both managed limited exposure beyond their primary contexts of exhibition. Furthermore, as the scholarship on sports films has focused primarily on mainstream Hollywood productions targeted at American audiences (Crosson, 2013; Baker, 2003) this chapter instead offers readings of sports films considered ‘non-mainstream’ in film studies.

The films of the Amharic film industry in Ethiopia are often characterised by their didactic dénouements that participate in maintaining ideals of Ethiopian nationhood and national identity due to the commercial and political constraints on the industry (see Thomas, Jedlowski and Ashagrie 2018). As argued by Wimal Dissanayake, such popular cinemas generally ‘uphold notions of a unified nation’ and contribute to how a national culture projects its ‘legitimizing story about itself to its citizens’ (2000, pp. 146, 145). These films are rarely screened in international film festivals, just as foreign-funded Amharic films targeted at film festival audiences around the world, such as *Teza* (2008), *Difret* (2014), *Lamb* (2015) and *Crumbs* (2015), only secure limited exposure in Ethiopia (Thomas, 2015; Jedlowski, 2015). The comparison of *The Athlete* and *I Will Not Bear Tomorrow*, two sports films that cross these established boundaries of commercial local Amharic cinema and global festival cinema, thus offer insights into the imaginative and diverse use of sport as a ‘site of strategic contestation’ (Hall, 1992, p. 26) in non-mainstream film studies contexts.

The central consideration of Ethiopian national culture as hegemonic in this chapter draws upon the work of Antonio Gramsci (1971) and a definition of cultural hegemony as argued by John Clarke, Stuart Hall, Tony Jefferson and Brian Roberts:

Hegemony ... is not universal and ‘given’ to the continuing rule of a particular class. It has to be won, reproduced, sustained. Hegemony is, as Gramsci said, a ‘moving equilibrium’ containing relations of forces favourable and unfavourable to this or that tendency. (2003 [1975], p. 40)

Instead of taking for granted the imposition of a hegemonic national Ethiopian culture in Amharic films, then, it is important to acknowledge the historical realities and processes of contestation that contribute to the development, maintenance and changing nature of national culture. Sport, as well as film, can be seen to ‘play a central role both as a means of maintaining hegemonic power but also as sites revealing the tensions inherent in its maintenance’ (Crosson, 2013, p. 5). Revealing the extent to which a hegemonic Ethiopian national culture is maintained *and* contested in two Amharic sports films will form the central arguments of this chapter.

Developing in a period of global modernisation at the turn of the twentieth century, the codification of sport, like film and media, ‘could be viewed as part of a desire to control and provide continuity for societies in a period marked by considerable discontinuity’ (Crosson, 2013, p. 6). Crucially here, Katrin Bromber’s (2013a; 2013b) detailed research into sport in Ethiopia argues ‘for the reading of institutionalized sports as an element of Ethiopian modernity that originates from multiple trajectories, but acquires its pervasive force from a Eurocentric narrative of universal progress’ (2013a, p. 75). Modern sporting achievements by Ethiopians in the early 1960s produced new symbolic narratives that helped reinforce the cultural hegemony of Ethiopian nationalism in the face of the deep social, political and economic change the nation was experiencing. Religious and mythic tendencies of the past were infused and carefully staged within moments of contemporary international

sporting success. An example of how sporting success was co-opted by Haile Selassie's nationalist modernising agenda can be found in a 1963 issue of the magazine *Menen* that featured an article on the emperor's reception of the victorious Ethiopian national football team at the 1962 Africa Cup of Nations. During the meeting the players and personnel were decorated by the monarch who also imparted this advice: 'The human power is weak. Only God's power is not weak. By playing and winning calm[ly] and skilful[ly] you have filled your country with pride and Us with joy. What I wanted to tell you is the following: Look carefully after your life and health, but do not be egoistic. Serve your country and remain victorious. I trust you' (cited in Bromber, 2013a, p. 87). Here, Haile Selassie's actions and words represent the integration of modern sport within the potent religious and historical narratives of the past.²

In sporting terms, it was in 1960 when Ethiopia truly arrived on the world stage, due to the legendary feats of Abebe Bikila who won his, Ethiopia's and Africa's first Olympic gold medal in his much mythologised barefoot marathon win in world-record time at the 1960 Rome Olympics. This win could not have been more symbolic to Ethiopians and prophetically took place on September 10, the eve before Ethiopian New Year. The images of an Ethiopian reigning victorious on the streets of the capital city of Italy, a nation whose five year occupation of Ethiopia came to an end in 1941, was further enhanced as the plundered legacy of this period, the stolen Obelisk/Stele of Axum (then located in the Piazza di Porta Capena), was passed twice by the athletes en-route to the finish line. Furthermore, Abebe Bikila, himself a *shambel* (captain) in the Emperor's Imperial Guard, was immediately promoted to *asiraleka* (corporal) upon his victorious return home. The fact that Abebe was in the military heightened the symbolism of his feats in the marathon as Ethiopians welcomed their '*shambel* Abebe Bikila' and celebrated his sporting triumph in the same refrains as one celebrates a victorious warrior, hero or patriot returning from war. It was the historic achievements of Abebe Bikila and his contemporary long and middle distance runners, most notably Mamo Wolde (winner of the men's marathon at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics) and Miruts Yifter (winner of the men's 5,000 and 10,000 at the 1980 Moscow Olympics), whose sporting feats at the Olympics and military backgrounds cemented the position of sport in the imaginings of a national and modern Ethiopian culture.

The sense of a continuity of Ethiopian national culture achieved through sport has, however, in recent times become more contested as the rise of identity politics, exploiting the many ethnic tensions within Ethiopia, has made its way into sport and destabilised the hegemony of Ethiopian national culture. This happened, most notably and significantly, in the men's marathon at the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Olympics as Feyisa Lilesa crossed his arms above his head in a political gesture of solidarity with Oromo protesters while approaching the finish line en-route to his silver medal. It is clear by this act and the increasingly volatile ethno-nationalist sentiments voiced on social media and in Ethiopian political spheres that representations of sport do not necessarily have to conform to dominant ideas of an Ethiopian national culture but instead can be quite disruptive. It is fitting that the two films, *The Athlete* and *I Will Not Bear Tomorrow*, can both be read (to differing degrees) as supporting and disrupting the hegemony of national Ethiopian culture. Through explorations into the contexts of production and reception of these two films I will now go on to demonstrate how these texts can be deployed and redeployed in different ways with contrasting results.

Contesting Contexts of Production and Reception

The Athlete was 14 years in the making and with an estimated \$3,500,000 budget was co-written, co-produced and co-directed by American Davey Frankel and the American based Ethiopian-born Rasselas Lakew (who also stars as Abebe Bikila). Unlike the earlier marathon runner docudrama/biopic about Haile Gebreselassie, *Endurance* (1998), released before cinema-going underwent a renaissance in Ethiopia in 2002, *The Athlete* was screened for a limited duration in Matti Multiplex in Addis Ababa to positive reviews soon after its completion in 2009. In fact the film was favourably reviewed both in Ethiopia and during its tour of international film festivals and limited release in cinemas in Europe and America prior to the 2012 London Olympics (see Thomas, 2013; Ashagrie 2013). This in itself is a notable feat as later ‘festival films’ such as *Difret* (2014) and *Lamb* (2015) were unable to build on the limited success *The Athlete* achieved in Addis Ababa.³ Despite this, however, *The Athlete* was only briefly screened in Ethiopia and according to Aboneh Ashagrie (2013), this was because the film was not suited to the commercial conditions underpinning the Amharic film industry. A serious sports biopic seemed to present a great gamble for exhibitors often beholden to short-term financial constraints that were more likely to be met by screening the latest films associated with tried and tested local genres and featuring local stars. As well as the economic gamble of screening a new genre without a major local star, such as the sports film/biopic that *The Athlete* represented, the film also crucially lacks some of the distinguishing melodramatic characteristics of locally produced Amharic films.

Of the hundreds of locally produced films released in Addis Ababa since Amharic films became commercially viable in 2002, only *ወርቅ በወርቅ - Werk Bewerk/Gold by Gold* (2012), a *lib anteltay film* (suspense film) foregrounds the story of long distance runners. *Werk Bewerk* is suffused with thrills and suspense as Dinkinesh Biratu (Lucy, played by Helen Bedilu), the reigning women’s 800-metre world champion, overcomes manipulation and corruption from within her own federation on her way to Olympic victory. The other locally produced film that foregrounds sport in its narrative, and incidentally is also categorised as a *lib anteltay film*, is *I Will Not Bear Tomorrow* (2016). Set in the political turmoil that followed the ousting of Haile Selassie in 1974 and in the midst of civil war, *I Will Not Bear Tomorrow* follows the story of Adugna (Berhanu Degafu), the coach of a struggling local football club who are forced to play (and throw) an exhibition match with the military in a show of the military regime’s strength. Unlike *Werk Bewerk* which was not picked up by international film festivals, *I Will Not Bear Tomorrow* was featured in African film festivals such as Film Africa 2017 in London and the New African Film Festival 2018 in Silver Spring, USA. Although not garnering the same level of international exposure as *The Athlete*, the aesthetic choices and compelling narrative of *I Will Not Bear Tomorrow* managed to gain the film limited international recognition abroad while dominating cinema listings in Addis Ababa upon its release in March 2016.

Focusing on little known sporting events concerning protagonists associated with the two most popular sports in Ethiopia is a premise both *The Athlete* and *I Will Not Bear Tomorrow* use to attract audiences and affirm national characteristics. According to Rasselas Lakew, *The Athlete*’s relative success in Ethiopia and main attraction amongst members of the Ethiopia diaspora, who eagerly attended festival screenings internationally, was the fact that ‘Bikila was a national hero’ and that ‘new information was presented in the film that made people curious’ (cf. Dovey, 2013, p. 111). Depicting the less well-known achievements of Abebe Bikila’s latter life, then,

helped to attract Ethiopian audiences despite the film not conforming to the melodramatic tendencies of fast pacing, sensational plots and the gesticulating performances characteristic of locally produced and commercially successful Amharic films (Thomas, 2015; Jedlowski, 2015; Thomas et al 2018). To a certain degree, the reverse of this argument may be applied to the limited exposure *I Will Not Bear Tomorrow* gained in international film festivals with its melodramatic tendencies and style appearing confusing or challenging to festival audiences.

The aim of *The Athlete*, however, was never to specifically target the local Ethiopian cinema-going public and was always intended to appeal to a global audience while projecting ‘an Ethiopian point of view’ (Rasselas Lakew cf. Dovey, 2013, p. 109). The film’s major successes mirror the international exposure the filmmakers set out to achieve with it featuring in over 40 festivals and winning 14 awards. In the articulation of a hegemonic and nostalgic Ethiopian national culture through the symbolic figurehead of Abebe Bikila and stunning vistas of the Ethiopian highlands, the film intentionally promotes a positive image and history of an African nation, celebrating an Ethiopian hero on a global stage in order to counteract common negative stereotypes of Ethiopia and Africa abroad. Rasselas Lakew’s lack of interaction with the local Amharic film industry is symptomatic of *The Athlete*’s internationalist outlook, considering himself ‘more of an American filmmaker ... having lived in New York for 14 years’, the film’s use of English as its language of voice-over narration is a clear indicator of who the film intends to address (cf. Dovey, 2013, p. 109).

In contrast, Abraham Gezahegn’s professional trajectory and the success of *I Will Not Bear Tomorrow* are rooted within Ethiopia and built upon his previous work as director of the local popular romantic comedy *Mizewochu* (2008) and the locally acclaimed drama *Lomi Sheta* (2012). Unlike Rasselas Lakew, Abraham Gezahegn operates within the local Amharic film industry in Addis Ababa where commercial constraints represent significant limiting factors in the average production values of films as reflected in the film’s budget of 1.5 million birr (roughly \$73,000). Although *I Will Not Bear Tomorrow* can be regarded as Abraham Gezahegn’s most ambitious film to date in terms of its artistic credentials, shot in black and white with red monochrome, the film was only picked up by film festivals a year after its commercial release in Ethiopia. The highly emotive performance of Berhanu Degafu as Adugna, a focal point for the narrative’s many sensational incidents that range from political killings to the prophetic birth of Adugna’s child cross-cut into the climactic football match, are signs of the film’s melodramatic tendencies and may seem unrealistic and unconvincing to global festivalgoers but is a hallmark of popular Amharic cinema.

What is striking about these two films is how they have, to certain degrees and for different reasons, managed to find their place *both* in film festivals *and* local Ethiopian cinemas, a feat only otherwise managed by the locally produced ነሽን - *Nishan* (2013) and የፍቅር ዋጋው - *Yefiker Wagaw/Price of Love* (2015). The interactions and configurations between sport and national Ethiopian culture in *The Athlete* and *I Will Not Bear Tomorrow* are central to this local/global (re)deployment of these films in different reception contexts. Readings of how sport contains and also highlights the contradictions of a hegemonic national Ethiopian culture may be appropriated or contested within different moments of the same film. To investigate this further the following sections will offer close textual analyses of these two films in relation to the local and global film circuits they participate in.

The Festival Sports Film and Projections of a National Hero

It is no surprise that a major Amharic sporting film should choose the life of Abebe Bikila as its subject. What may be surprising to some, however, is that *The Athlete*, released in 2009 and predominantly screened in international film festivals, focuses on the latter part of Abebe Bikila's life. Instead of portraying the Ethiopian origins and circumstances of a globally recognisable sportsman, as was the case in *Endurance* (as mentioned above in its representation of Haile Gebreselassie), *The Athlete* recounts the less well-known events of Abebe Bikila's post-Olympic life. The main plot of the film follows Abebe as he is preparing to return to international competition after an injury that halted his career and allowed his compatriot, Mamo Wolde to emerge from his shadow to become Ethiopia's Olympic marathon champion. His attempts, however, are in vein and become impossible after he suffers a car-crash that initially leaves him paralysed from the neck down. The plot follows Abebe on the road to recovery in the Stoke Mandeville Hospital in England. During his difficult recovery in a foreign land he slowly regains the use of his upper body through physiotherapy whereupon his participation in disabled sports reignites the indomitable spirit of the marathon champion. Abebe's climactic triumph in the cross-country dog sledding event for paralyzed competitors in Norway, symbolically named, 'the race of life' proves to be his final victory before we are told of the honours Abebe received along with Jesse Owens at the 1972 Munich Olympics followed by archive footage of Abebe's state funeral in Ethiopia.

The idealised representation of Abebe Bikila as the definitive Ethiopian sporting hero can easily be read in the Ethiopian context as affirming the hegemonic constructs that underpin Ethiopian national sentiments. I have previously written of how the film portrays Abebe Bikila as the 'ideal' Ethiopian man (Thomas, 2013, p. 115) and clearly contributes to the representation of national culture by promoting an Ethiopian masculinity founded upon stoic pragmatism and determination. Aboneh Ashagrie, reviewing the film in the context of a local Ethiopian screening, similarly comments on the film being 'symbolic of Ethiopian patriotism' (2013, p. 119) while also highlighting its fatalistic tendencies, reading the film as representative of a widely believed Ethiopian proverb that dictates 'that every event and every man's destiny, either good or bad, is totally under the control of the will of God' (2013, p. 119). This reading is supported in the film by Abebe Bikila's speech to journalists during his rehabilitation in England as he explains 'It was the will of God that I won the Olympics, and it was the will of God that I met with my accident', reaffirming the centrality of devout religious belief and the sacred Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church doctrine in hegemonic constructions of Ethiopian nationality. Such nationalist sentiments bound by religious fervour and affirmed by acts of sporting achievement seem to be a recurring feature in sport films made across the world (see Crosson, 2013, pp.78-85 and 167-169).

The prolific use of archive footage in *The Athlete* to depict Abebe Bikila's Olympic victories is interspersed with the fictional narrative throughout the film and grounds the retelling of his life firmly within the realms of what is 'real'. But there is also a far more political purpose to the use of archive footage in the film. This is immediately apparent during the film's opening credits as archive footage of the Ethiopian Olympic jersey and Abebe Bikila running to victory at the Rome Olympics are intercut with Ethiopian soldiers marching under the stoic gaze of Haile Selassie. Abebe Bikila's sporting victory and Ethiopian military victory over European colonisers are plainly positioned side-by-side, up front and centre and further intercut with images of a projector seemingly projecting these celluloid images in a darkened

auditorium. This powerful self-reflexive montage at the film's opening recognises the very potency of the filmic medium and echoes the sentiments of Dittmar and Michaud that: '[f]ilm, like any system of representation, cannot accurately reproduce historical events. Its simulation ... is necessarily mediated by the cinematic apparatus as well as by the perspectives brought to bear on the depicted events by those engaged in a given film's production and reception' (1990, p. 10). In reconstituting this newsreel footage of Ethiopian sporting and military success *The Athlete* opens by creatively repurposing colonial era footage from European archives. On a transnational level, therefore, the film is effectively positioning itself in opposition to the '(neo)colonial discourse, that has repeatedly and anxiously attempted to shoehorn Africa and Africans into a literal narrative, an anthropological narrative, an authentic(ating) narrative, a native/nativist narrative' (Dovey, 2016, p. 168) that the very same newsreels once propagated. An indication of the film's primary participation in global film festivals is this staunchly political position against a global hegemony or 'regime of truth [that] has assigned Africa to an overwhelmingly literal narrative, both in the ways that 'Africa' becomes produced and read' (Dovey, 2013, p. 168).

More prolonged montage sequences of these archive footage scenarios (Abebe Bikila's Olympic victories in Rome and Tokyo and of war in Ethiopia) reoccur at different moments throughout the film but it is telling that the only dramatized moment of sporting glory is that of the paralyzed Abebe's lesser known dog sledding victory in Norway. This victory is less a symbol of national heroism, as is the case in his Olympic victories, and is instead much more representative of the transcendent power of sport and human nature in keeping with climactic sporting sequences in mainstream sports films (Crosson, 2013). Representing the power of sport to overcome adversity, this fictionalised moment strikes a more dramatic chord than the archive reels of Abebe's Olympic feats as Abebe unexpectedly crashes in the icy tundra, marking a final dramatic twist before he achieves victory in 'the race for life'. In turn, this scene has the effect of championing human individualism, briefly foregoing the film's broader tones of Ethiopian patriotism. The fictionalisation and heightened drama of this climactic sporting moment, devoid of Ethiopian patriotic overtures, enables the film to resonate with diverse communities around the world through a shared appreciation of sport's transcendent qualities. The sporting climax can also be seen as engaging with the conventions of mainstream sports films to the extent that the film recognises the role of 'paternalistic White society' in containing threats to 'hegemonic White society' (Crosson, 2013, p. 158) as exemplified in Abebe Bikila's convalescence in England and final race in Norway. The position of the individual's performance as key to personal success and redemption also echoes with other sports films that 'reflect the sophisticated functioning of hegemonic popular culture' (Crosson, 2013, p. 158). In *The Athlete*, however, this moment is then quickly subsumed by cutting away to archive footage showing Abebe's heroic return to Ethiopia and his state funeral, clearly resituating Abebe Bikila's story in a distinctly Ethiopian context.

Using archive footage in the film's closing sequence overrides the fictional-world of the film and contextualises not only the real life story of Abebe Bikila, but with its final intertitles, clearly positions his achievements within the realms of Ethiopian nationalism and the ramifications of this nationalism as a leading light of African independence. This position is clearly signposted as a closing intertitle before the credits reads:

Beyond igniting East Africa's dominance in long distance running, Bikila became a quiet champion of hope for a continent that was in the midst of its struggle for self-determinism. It was said: It took 500,000 Italian soldiers to occupy Ethiopia, and one Ethiopian soldier to conquer Rome.

The heavy use of archive footage of Abebe Bikila's Olympic triumphs, of Ethiopian military victory over the Italians and Abebe Bikila's state funeral all help to position the film's narrative within a meaningful social and historical context. *The Athlete* uses archive footage to emphasise its connection to the real life events of a remarkable Ethiopian hero, feeding into a narrative that affirms the Ethiopian nation and its place in history. On another level, however, the film propagates the proud and independent symbolism of Ethiopian national identity and uses cinematic features and devices to contest 'Western' hegemony in an attempt to 'constitute a new politics of truth' (Foucault, 1977, p. 14).

The formal features that the film uses to voice its political position, however, also have the effect of directly targeting a 'western' audience in ways that are challenging or confusing for local Ethiopian cinemagoers. The first of these formal features is that the film constantly deploys Abebe Bikila's first-person narrative voiceover to address a specifically international audience. In the pre-opening credits sequence, for example, this voice speaking English in a thick Ethiopian accent is heard saying 'it is for others to dwell on the victory, but for a champion the lasting memory is always the loss and the race unfinished. It is this race that makes a nation's hero merely a man. My race is now unfinished and I'm just Abebe Bikila.' This English narration combined with an extreme close-up shot of Abebe Bikila (Rasselas Lakew) wrapped up warmly in a snow bound climate (see image 1.) is certainly a foreign experience for Ethiopian spectators and somewhat confusing, as in the fictional diegesis of the film Abebe Bikila only speaks Amharic (even employing a translator in a press meeting in England). The second formal component of the film less familiar for local cinemagoers but to be expected by festival goers is the naturalist lead performance by Rasselas Lakew as Abebe Bikila. This, along with the film's realist and 1960s/1970s period mise-en-scène, disrupt the expectations of Ethiopian audiences accustomed to local Amharic cinema that deploys a more gesticulating acting style foregrounding characters' emotions and commonly set contemporaneously in the interior spaces of urban Ethiopia.

(insert image 1.)

The Local Sports Film and the Democratisation of Football

Based on true events and adapted from *Ihapa and Sport* by Genene Mekuria, *I Will Not Bear Tomorrow* follows the story of the coach of the Shining Stars football team, Adugna, as he struggles to motivate and hold together his team and maintain the security of his pregnant wife in the wake of the Red Terror atrocities of 1977-1978. The government's political opponents, the EPRP had, however, successfully infiltrated many local institutions, such as local football clubs. In *I Will Not Bear Tomorrow* this creates a central dilemma for the politically neutral Adugna as he discovers the new star player of his team has carried out assassinations on behalf of the EPRP. Adugna is increasingly caught up in politics as his players are also increasingly suspected of being EPRP members and arrested. Stuck between the politics of his players and the pressure of the military regime, he is reliant on his coaching position to avoid conscription into a local government-approved security

force with the training pitch providing the only place of sanctuary in the ensuing chaos. The climactic football match at the end of the film then demonstrates the democratising capabilities of football in a game that pits the Shining Stars against the Derg's military team, as Adugna is coerced into throwing the match in the military's favour. In a pivotal scene during half time, the Shining Stars players confront and accuse their coach of deliberately playing players out of position in an attempt to scupper their chances of winning the symbolic match. In a change of heart and recognition of the bonds he's developed with his team, Adugna changes formation and explains:

I see you want to make a difference, so do I. How you want to bring change is by dying, but I want to live. I want to see my baby ... If you want to make a change, start here on the field. Those people you want to fight are here on the field. Your torturers are on the field. Beat them. Beat them and then please go back to prison peacefully.

After the Shining Stars overcome Adugna's self-imposed shambolic first half of football, they triumph through a display of superior skill and will in the second half. This brief victory for the underdogs, however, is short lived as the players abide by Adugna's wishes and peacefully return to prison after saying their final goodbyes. As Adugna is left alone, he picks up and reads a pamphlet calling for democracy, one of many spread by the EPRP like confetti at the end of the match. His gesture of smirking and shaking his head in disbelief at the audacity of his young players, before walking off down a corridor, points to the film's underlying political concerns about the situation of 'democracy' in Ethiopia today.

It is not difficult to see why *I Will Not Bear Tomorrow* was exhibited in international film festivals - particularly those with an African agenda such as Film Africa in London. The film's period setting and striking aesthetic choice of shooting in black and white with red monochrome make the film stand out visually from other productions from Ethiopia and the rest of the continent (see image 2.). The historical, political and sporting overtures along with the fact that the film is an adaptation also all add to the intrigue of international film festivals and their audiences. Like *The Athlete*, the authenticity of the story, adapted as it was from a book based on real events, positions audiences in a particular relationship to the historical events on screen and encourages 'a particular regime of truth that assigns Africa to being [...] interpreted literally' (Dovey, 2016, p. 170). It is the inclination towards a literal reading of the film as an authentic representation of historical events that risks foregoing the imaginative potential of the film. The idealised fictionalisation of the democratic spaces and moments provided by football (fields, training and matches) in *I Will Not Bear Tomorrow*, therefore, risk being overlooked as literal readings of graphic sequences depicting assassinations, abductions, police brutality, torture and mass executions that reaffirm the global news-generated stereotypes and negative imagery associated with the continent. As Lindiwe Dovey argues, 'the legacy of this widespread practice of producing 'literal Africa' is that fictional works of Africans are, in turn, frequently interpreted in the most literal and unimaginative ways' (2016, p. 169). A specific example of this phenomenon occurred in one of the screenings of *I Will Not Bear Tomorrow* hosted by Film Africa 2017 in which the audience questioned director Abraham Gezahegn solely about the history and politics of Ethiopia during the Derg era and his film's accuracy in representing the violence, fear and torture synonymous with this period in Ethiopian history.

(insert image 2.)

A literal reading of *I Will Not Bear Tomorrow*, however, is complicated by the film's refusal to attach a clear meaning or message at its close. Instead of reaching a clear pedagogical dénouement, as is common in most locally produced Amharic films, *I Will Not Bear Tomorrow* ends on a note of provocative ambivalence as the viewer is forced to actively read a meaning into Adugna's reaction to reading the pamphlet calling for democracy in the film's closing. Depending on the context of reception and each viewer's interpretation, varying degrees of political significance may be inferred. At the very least the film's narrative may be read literally as a retelling of the historical events and figures that led to a football match in which members of the EPRP manipulated the outcome to promote their struggle for democracy in Ethiopia in the face of the authoritarian military Derg regime. It does not take much imagination, however, to read the film's democratisation of football, in the midst of one of modern Ethiopia's most politically fragmented and bloody moments, as a product of contemporary concerns surrounding the state of democracy in Ethiopia today.

Ethiopian films produced within the commercial Amharic film industry, centred in Addis Ababa, tend to be strongly invested in positive and hegemonic articulations of Ethiopian identity and nationhood. *I Will Not Bear Tomorrow*, a film set in a tumultuous period in Ethiopian history with a political message, however, can easily be read as contesting hegemonic constructions of the nation. It also represents a rare exception of a film that has secured an exhibition licence despite the censor's remit extending to the control of potentially contentious political, religious, ethnic and/or sexual content (see Jedlowski, 2015). Here, a literal reading of the film as confined to its period setting may have led to the film being awarded an exhibition licence despite another altogether subversive reading, one responding to contemporary democratising agendas in Ethiopian political discourse, also being possible. This idea alludes to Dittmar and Michaud's contestation that 'attention to authenticity is at best insufficient and at worst even misguided' (1990, p. 10).

The idealised position of football in *I Will Not Bear Tomorrow*, depicted as a sport that imaginatively represents a democratic light in the midst of socio-political turmoil is the key fiction that literal readings of the film overlook. As David Rowe makes clear, when commenting on the changing nature of the sports film:

all films that deal centrally with sports are at some level allegorical, that they address the question of the dual existence of the social and sporting worlds as problematic, and that they are preoccupied with the extent to which (idealized) sports can transcend or are bound by existing (and corrupting) social relations (Rowe, 1998; cited in Crosson, 2013, p 60)

The closing sequence of *I Will Not Bear Tomorrow* clearly binds sport within corrupting social relations as the transcendent democratisation of the football match is abruptly undermined when the Shining Stars players return to jail as political prisoners. Effectively curtailing the democratic symbolism of the game, political freedoms are short-lived, granted and taken away within the apparatus of control maintained by the authoritarian Derg regime. As Adugna considers the EPRP's pamphlet calling for democracy, an allegorical reading of the representation of football in the film leads the viewer to question the very nature of contemporary

Ethiopian politics and the democratic credentials the nation has espoused since the overthrow of the Derg and Mengistu Hailemariam's dictatorship in 1991.

As *I Will Not Bear Tomorrow* has emerged from the local commercial Amharic film industry, it is also integrated within the different expectations and tendencies of local Ethiopian cinemagoers and exhibitors. The characterisation of the film's protagonist, Adugna, as conveyed through the overtly emotional and unrelentingly expressive performance by Berhanu Degafu may also jar with festival audiences attuned to more naturalistic performances such as that of Rasselas Lakew in *The Athlete*. The representation of Adugna in *I Will Not Bear Tomorrow* inspires little empathy from an audience not accustomed to the often contradictory mix of melodramatic and fatalistic dilemmas outwardly expressed by protagonists in local Amharic productions. Many of the actions committed by Adugna in the film's narrative may be perceived as naïve or selfish reactions to the climate of fear spread by the Red Terror atrocities he is forced to negotiate. Although understandably wanting to protect his family and own life, in comparison to the bravery of his Shining Stars players who are willing to die for their cause, Adugna's actions may ultimately be perceived as cowardly although he clearly wins the respect of his players. Through his emotional portrayal and personal dilemma of being caught in between aiding the EPRP and being forced to conform to the military regime, Adugna represents those who seek neutral ground in the midst of warring parties, running the risk of being shot by both sides. *I Will Not Bear Tomorrow*'s political message of promoting moderation and democracy while also emphasising the horrors of political violence crucially contributes to Ethiopian national culture by harnessing an episode in the nation's bloody past to emphasise the contemporary risks facing a nation that promotes its own questionable democratic credentials. As Ethiopia struggles to conceive a political playing field as free, fair and equal as the football pitch in *I Will Not Bear Tomorrow* symbolically represents, it hints at the double edged destabilising and unifying potentials that the very nature of the democratic game and ethno-national political structure in Ethiopia poses, ultimately reinforcing the uneasy relationship between contemporary Ethiopian politics and Ethiopian national culture today.

Conclusion

On the face of it, *The Athlete* and *I Will Not Bear Tomorrow* seem to occupy diverging ends of the spectrum in both their contexts of production and reception, and their representation of national culture through sport. *The Athlete*, a transnational production celebrating the life of an Ethiopian sporting icon and aimed primarily at an international film festival going audience, emphasises a more idealistic representation of Ethiopian national culture as a beacon of African victory against all odds. *I Will Not Bear Tomorrow*, on the other hand, produced locally and primarily aimed at the local cinemagoing audiences in Ethiopia, is a story of a little known sporting event amongst non-professional but highly politicised football teams during one of the bloodiest eras in modern Ethiopian history. Instead of reproducing images of an idealised Ethiopia and national hero, *I Will Not Bear Tomorrow* uses the democratising representation of sport and fallibility of its protagonist to probe at the very political inconsistencies faced by an Ethiopian national culture today as it struggles against the tide of ethno-nationalist identity politics that defines our times.

The Athlete and *I Will Not Bear Tomorrow* incorporate common features associated with the conventions of the transnational sports film genre that include 'the foregrounding of athletes, sporting events or followers of sport in narratives that depend significantly on sport for plot motivation or resolution' (Crosson, 2013, p.

157). The representation of sports in film, much like films themselves, ‘do not simply represent or express the stable features of a national culture, but are themselves one of the loci of debates about a nation’s governing principles, goals, heritage, and history’ (Hjort and MacKenzie, 2000, p. 4). *I Will Not Bear Tomorrow* and *The Athlete* harness sport’s potential in film in ways that can appropriate or reject Ethiopian cultural hegemony. Through different moments, the same filmic text may also even be identified as displaying contradictory textual features. *The Athlete* harnesses Abebe Bikila, a national sporting hero, to inspire and reinforce not only a sense of national Ethiopian identity, but also African pride, by exploiting the rich history, sporting culture and heritage of Ethiopia. *I Will Not Bear Tomorrow*, however, uses sport to contest political and social hegemony in a period of Ethiopian history that can either affirm the narrative of the successive (current) regime or be grafted onto the contemporary moment with potentially destabilising results. This analysis has hopefully shown how divergent representations and readings of sport in films from outside Hollywood can complicate mainstream understandings of the genre as necessarily affirming national cultural hegemony and offered a glimpse into the diversity of Amharic films.

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Notes

¹ The Red Terror was a heavy handed security campaign instigated by the military Derg regime between 1977-1978 in response to the call to arms against them by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (Ihapa or EPRP) resulting in the mass killings and arrests of suspected EPRP members.

² See Katrin Bromber's 'Improving the Physical Self: Sport, Body Politics, and Ethiopian Modernity, ca. 1920--1974' for more examples of how nationalist institutions, particularly the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, and the Ethiopian military, played an important role in the spread of modern sports in Ethiopia.

³ See Aboneh Ashagrie's review of *The Athlete* for a more detailed response to the film from within Ethiopia, of particular note is the criticism of the very limited release of the film in Addis Ababa's lone multiplex.