



## TIGRITUDES: A PAN-AFRICAN FILM CYCLE 1956-2024

# Faya Dayi

### Faya Dayi

Directed by: Jessica Beshir

©: Merkhana Films LLC

Production Company: Merkhana Films

In association with: XTR, Neon Heart Productions, Flies Collective

Production Company:

Sundance Institute Documentary Program

With support from: JustFilms, Ford Foundation, Open Society Foundations, Jerome Foundation, Doha Film Institute

Executive Producers: Jessica Beshir, Tony Hsieh, Roberto Grande, Mimi Pham, Bryn Mosser, Kathryn Everett, Rhianon Jones, Matthew Petock, Daniel Patrick Carbone, Zachary Shedd

Produced by: Jessica Beshir

Production Accountant: Gary E. Schreiber

Written by: Jessica Beshir

Filmed by: Jessica Beshir

Graphics and Titles: Dustin Waldman

Edited by: Jeanne Applegate, Dustin Waldman

Consulting Editor: Max Allman

Colourist: Alan Louis Gordon

Original Song 'Kenna Uumaa' Written and

Performed by: Mehandis Geleto

Music by: William Basinski, Adrian Aniol, Kaethe Hostetter

Sound Designers: Abigail Savage, Tom Efinger

Location Sound Recordists: Jessica Beshir, Natnael Yared

Additional Sound Recording: Efreem Degu,

Mubarik Beshir, Biniam Yonas, Mohammed Arif

Re-recording Mixer: Tom Efinger

Supervising Sound Editor: Tom Efinger

USA-Qatar 2020©

120 mins

Digital

### With thanks to

Saison Africa 2020, Institut français, Keith Shiri

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A film ten years in the making, *Faya Dayi* was conceived by director Jessica Beshir as an act of reconnecting with the Ethiopian homeland she left at the age of 16, when her family fled to Mexico to escape the chaos and oppression of the Mengistu and Derg political regimes. Later, in 2011, during one of her return trips to Ethiopia, Beshir began collecting observations and impressions of the country by shooting footage that told the stories of several Ethiopians and the social, religious, and economic forces influencing their lives.

Among those forces was the ascendancy of khat as a national cash crop. A plant with hallucinatory properties that has been traditionally harvested and chewed for ritualistic purposes, khat was, in Beshir's youth, one of many lucrative crops bolstering the Ethiopian economy. But in the intervening years, climate change, along with other factors, had forced farmers to grow khat to the near exclusion of all other plants, and its excessive presence in the country increased recreational khat usage among the younger generations. Climate change had also dried up lakes, while economic necessity and political tumult had forced people living in rural areas to look for new prospects overseas or in the capital city of Addis Ababa.

Through friends, family, and various encounters in the Oromo region, Beshir connected with Ethiopians who, in lending themselves to her camera, embodied the many dimensions of the country's hopes and concerns. For instance, while shooting in Harar, Beshir met and befriended Mami, one of several children who followed her filming excursions. Mami became one of the film's main subjects as Beshir recorded his conversations with a friend named Ibrahim about the latter's migratory experiences. Beshir also captured the activities and voices of khat packers, khat addicts, and, in the labyrinthine walled city of Harar Jugol, Sufi mystics adhering to the myth of Maoul Hayat, whose journey toward divine revelation centres on the discovery of khat.

*Faya Dayi*'s long gestation resulted in part from the need for Beshir to finance the project herself prior to receiving funds from grants and private investors. One of the major stepping-stones toward securing outside financing was the creation of the short film *Hairat* (2017) as well as several self-contained sequences from the Ethiopian footage that Beshir could show to investors to demonstrate her intentions for the project. Eventually, *Faya Dayi* obtained support from the Sundance Institute, the Doha Film Institute, and the Jerome Foundation.

### Production notes

*Faya Dayi* is, at its core, a study of liminal space: political turmoil trapping a region in a state of perpetual transition; the growth of khat transforming a national economy and its agricultural institutions; men chewing on its leaves so their minds journey as far away from reality as possible. The camera travels down darkly lit roads between the khat fields and a disembodied voice gently laments, 'I want to leave this darkness, I want to run to a place where I can't hear these thoughts. A quiet place where I can forget.'

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This documentary has a dreamy lyricism, the black and white images captured in a gauzy haze, with many scenes taking place at night, lit only by fire and starlight. The subject is an Eastern Ethiopian community filled with disillusioned young men who work hard farming the khat and cope with their circumstances by chewing it, its psychoactive qualities softening the edges of the world around them.

Having grown up in the nearby ancient city of Harar, director Jessica Beshir's connection to the region is evident; neither she nor her camera ever feels like an interloper. The movements are so gentle, and the edits so seamless, that the film glides through this world with preternatural elegance. The images she captures feel connected to the lightly hallucinatory effects of khat itself, which makes reality feel illusory. As one man intones, 'Everyone chews to get away.'

The trauma they are escaping is only alluded to for the first hour of the film, until a group of men have a therapeutic moment, sharing their experiences of being attacked, tortured and imprisoned. The broader geopolitics are never explicitly stated but the struggle of the Oromo people within Ethiopia has a long and brutal history. As a result, Beshir presents the events as belonging to no particular time, with sequences slowed down or sped up to create a lightly surreal topography of time and space. The trance-like effect of watching the images mirror the subject's mindset, where birds flying, fires burning, leaves lightly crackling in the wind have a transcendent quality, tied to some greater meaning to cling to.

Almost as surprising as the lack of documentary conventions is that this marks Beshir's feature debut. The singular aesthetic and tone of her work are as striking as they are profound, with this film marking her out as one of the most exciting voices currently working in non-fiction filmmaking. *Faya Dayi* accomplishes something extraordinary, painting a complex picture of a region and its myriad problems with a level of careful artistry that would also befit a museum installation.

Leila Latif, *Sight and Sound*, September 2022