

FAYA DAYI

A film by Jessica Beshir



Ethiopia, USA, Qatar | 120 min. | 2021

WORLD PREMIERE 2021 Sundance Film Festival
AWARDS Grand Jury Prize & Fipresci Prize at Visions Du Reel

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LOGLINE

A spiritual journey into the highlands of Harar, immersed in the rituals of khat, a leaf Sufi Muslims chewed for centuries for religious meditations and Ethiopia's most lucrative cash crop today. A tapestry of intimate stories offers a window into the dreams of youth under a repressive regime.

SHORT SYNOPSIS

Ethiopian legend has it that khat, a stimulant green leaf, was found by Sufi Imams in search of eternity. Inspired by this myth, *Faya Dayi* is a spiritual journey into the highlands of Harar immersed in the rituals of khat, a stimulant green leaf, that for centuries Sufi Muslims chewed for religious meditations and has become Ethiopia's most lucrative cash crop today. Through the prism of the khat trade, *Faya Dayi* weaves a tapestry of intimate stories of people caught between violent government repression, khat-induced fantasies and treacherous journeys beyond their borders, and offers a window into the dreams of the youth hunted by a repressive regime.

LONG SYNOPSIS

For centuries in Ethiopia, the Sufi Muslims of Harar have chewed the khat leaf for the purposes of religious meditation. However, over the past three decades, khat consumption has broken out of Sufi circles and entered the mainstream to become a daily ritual among people of all ages, religions and ethnicities. It's also become Ethiopia's most lucrative cash crop. *Faya Dayi* takes us on a spiritual journey through the prism of the khat trade and offers a window into the aspirations of the unemployed and oppressed youth and elders alike for whom chewing khat to achieve *Merkhana* (the high of khat) has become a radical escape, a space of socialization and revolt against oppressive forces. For many, Merkhana is the only place where their hopes, dreams and aspirations can live.

Faya Dayi features the khat supply chain from harvest to market as its ever-present humming background. At the film's heart is Mohammed, a fourteen-year-old who works as an errand boy for the daily khat chewers in the walled city of Harar. He lives with his father who, like so many in town, chews khat daily and often fights with Mohammed due to the mood swings caused by his addiction. The khat-chewing lifestyle of the adults that surrounds Mohammed and the inherent political pressures against oppressed Oromo youth like him, lead him to dreaming of reuniting with his mother who "took the boat" across the Red Sea to Saudi Arabia in search of work when he was a small boy. He often speaks internally to her as a survival mechanism to ward off his loneliness. Through his eyes, we meet the dwellers of Harar and Mohammed's friends in the khat farming community who are instrumental in shaping his decision to finally take the treacherous journey to join his mother across the Red Sea.

Faya Dayi follows the energy that pulses through khat farmers and the various processing stops the harvested leaf passes through on its way to sale and export, moving through the highlands of Harar and examining the landscape through hypnotic vignettes that highlight the vast economical force Khat represents as the country's top cash crop and as one of the top job creating industries in Ethiopia. These vignettes are juxtaposed with inner journeys, images and sounds that as in dreams that penetrate the innermost thoughts and spaces of the people in the film. All of these images are connected consciously and subconsciously to the cash crop that inhabits so much of people's lives in Harar. Weaving stories of characters caught between violent government repression, khat-induced fantasies or treacherous journeys beyond their borders, the film itself becomes a visual and sonic Merkhana trip. Through this lyrical and immersive experience, *Faya Dayi* channels the rebellion and reverence of khat into an ode informed by Ethiopia's turbulent history unfolding into the urgent present.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

When I was in the tenth grade, I was uprooted from the country of my childhood, from my family and friends in Harar, to escape the violence and political turmoil that ensued during the reign of Mengistu and the Derg regime. We fled the country and moved to Mexico. Ever since, I have felt a void, a kind of loneliness that I realized I was healing from with each trip I took back to Ethiopia. Filming *Faya Dayi* over these last ten years has become a way to reconnect with my childhood memories, which are both as vivid and abstract as a dream. During this time, I have retraced my past, while creating new and imagined spaces where I could reawaken my inner home. *Faya Dayi* is a humble rendition of the world I met in my return to Harar and all of its beautiful complexities.

On my first return I found myself leaving the metropolis of Addis to seek the beginnings of my uprooting. The changes I saw from my childhood were vast, but the most visually striking change was in the landscape. The crops that painted the 12-hour-long drive from Addis to Harar—teff, sorghum and coffee—were now replaced by a green blanket of khat, an ancient stimulant turned cash crop. Haramaya, the lake where my family took excursions to, was all dried up. Most people we knew now resided in the capital or elsewhere as political exiles. Again, the void in my soul was amplified; nothing remained the same in familiarity. I gravitated towards the farms and just took pleasure in the earth and its people. The Oromo farmers' Sufi chants rejoined my soul in a sort of embrace. I realized later in retrospect that I was attracted to the language of my grandmother, who used to grow khat in her small garden among spinach, tomatoes and green peppers. *Faya Dayi* features Afaan Oromoo, the Oromo language as well as the Harari language, both languages I grew up hearing. Knowing that *Faya Dayi* is perhaps the first film in Afaan Oromoo playing at the Sundance Film festival, knowing that the world will get to hear my grandmother's beautiful language is truly cathartic to me.

As I spent more time with the farming community, I witnessed the profundity of the state of marginalization of the Oromo people, the systemic discrimination, the effects of decades of political repression, the seizure of their lands, and economic disenfranchisement. I learned how many farmers had turned to the cultivation of khat in place of coffee or other grains to survive. The dreams, if you will, of the young—awake, but gone in their minds elsewhere. Khat for most unemployed youth had become a way to overcome the sense of hopelessness, a way to transcend this reality and attain Merkhana, a state of grace untouched by terrestrial

oppressions. Many others turned their hopes towards the Mediterranean or the Red seas. I've seen my childhood self-mirrored in the youth of my film. They too are being forced to leave, except their journeys through the deserts and the seas are treacherous where very few survive. We are all searching for a sense of agency that we can't find and living with the contradictions of loving our land, but incapable of living in peace.

The Oromo people have fought against these marginalizations for decades but in 2014, protests broke out in Oromia in opposition of the “Master Plan”, the government’s land grabbing scheme to widen the city of Addis Ababa by dispossessing the Oromo people of their lands. In response to this, the Oromo youth also called Qeerroo, or unmarried youth, featured in *Faya Dayi*, launched a formidable resistance that saw over five thousand Oromo youth killed by the government’s armed forces and thousands more imprisoned. The Qeerroo sustained this resistance through 2018, forcing the prime minister of the Ethiopian People’s Democratic Front (EPRDF) ruling party to resign. That is when Abiy Ahmed was propped up by the same party as an Oromo, as a change maker. Most people including the Qeerroo had high expectations for him. After all, it was their own blood that had ushered this change. When Abiy Ahmed came to power, the changes were palpable immediately. He freed thousands of Oromo political prisoners, invited exiled and black-listed journalists back into the country and promised freedom of speech. He also made peace with Eritrea and won a Nobel Peace Prize for it. Soon however, Abiy Ahmed started to backpedal on all the changes he had made and quickly returned to the repression of the Oromo youth on whose back he came to power. He also imprisoned the entire Oromo opposition party including Jawar Mohammed, an Oromo activist turned politician who was supposed to run against Abiy Ahmed in the upcoming elections and now is in jail under terrorism charges. Today, most of the Oromo youth featured in the film are on the run, some have fled to Kenya, some are hiding in the farms.

Ambulating in Jegol, the labyrinthine walled city of Harar, I spent most of my time with Sufi Imams whose duas (prayers) and teachings led me to the myth of Maoul Hayat and the legend of the discovery of khat. The film is both a meditation and a hallucination; a transgenerational journey through the soul of the highlands of Harar, traversing field labour, daily rituals, dreams of possibilities of life, and at its core—the ancient myth about mortality. The entire work is a Dua, a prayer. “Faya Dayi” is the hymnal sung by Oromo farmers during the harvest of khat. It means to give birth to health/wellness. Like the meaning behind the title, filming *Faya Dayi* healed me of my displacement with the beauty and spiritual color of an entire world I came back to and connected with, a decade-long love affair.

– *Jessica Besbir*

BIOS

Jessica Beshir Writer | Director | Producer | Cinematographer

Jessica Beshir is a Mexican-Ethiopian writer, director, producer and cinematographer based in Brooklyn. She made her directorial debut with her short film *Hairat*, which premiered at the 2017 Sundance Film Festival (Criterion). Her short films, *He Who Dances on Wood* (PBS) and *Heroin* (Topic), have screened in festivals and museums around the world including Hot Docs, IFFR, IDFA, Tribeca Film Festival, Eye Film Museum, and MOMI New York among others. Beshir has been honored with grant support from The Sundance Film Institute, the Doha Film Institute, the Jerome Foundation. *Faya Dayi* is Jessica's feature debut.

Jeanne Applegate Editor

Jeanne Applegate is a film editor based in New York. Her notable credits include Tim Sutton's *Dark Night*, Joshua Z. Weinstein's *Menashe* and Ekwa Msangi's *Farewell Amor*.

Dustin Waldman Editor

Dustin Waldman is a filmmaker and editor based in Brooklyn, New York. His short films have screened at festivals such as the Rotterdam International Film Festival, Rooftop Films and Indie Memphis, among others. He edited the feature narrative *Are We Not Cats*, which premiered at the Venice Film Festival in 2016. Dustin works frequently as an editor for the Museum of Modern Art.

Tom Efinger Sound Design and Sound Mix

Tom Efinger began his film career in New York City in the early '90s. He has worked with many notable directors including Todd Solondz, Lisa Cholodenko, Tom McCarthy, Ramin Bahrani, and, more recently, with Josh Marston, Mike Birbiglia, Ti West, Larry Fessenden, and Charles Ferguson. He now has well over 200 credits for sound design, sound supervision and mixing. Tom works in both documentary and narrative film, video art, TV drama and VR. He received a Grammy for Best Comedy album for his engineering work on Lewis Black's "Stark Raving Black."

CREDITS

Music

Original Song “ Kenna Uumaa”

written and performed by **Mehandis Geleto**

Faya Dayi Theme

Composed and Performed by **Kaethe Hostetter**

“Cascade” “ Water Music II”

Composed and Performed by **William Basinski**

“Reveri ”, “Seraphim II”, “Evelia”, “ Aislin (In Silver Dust)”

Composed and Performed by **Adrian Aniol**

Executive Producers

Merkhana Films

Jessica Beshir

XTR

Tony Hsieh, Roberto Grande, Mimi Pham, Bryn Mooser, Kathryn Everett

Neon Heart Productions

Rhianon Jones

Flies Collective

Matthew Petock, Daniel Patrick, Zachary Shedd

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