

# Difret by Zeresenay Berhane Mehari

written by Jim Ross | August 8, 2016



How often has a total stranger sat down next to you in a public place and offered to split with you their lunch or dinner? I'll get back to that.

Recently, an Ethiopian film named *Difret*—winner of audience awards at the 2014 Sundance and Berlin film festivals—finally opened in select theaters across the United States and the UK. Written and directed by Zeresenay Berhane Mehari, and Executive Produced by Angelina Jolie Pitt, the long-awaited film builds on the real experiences of an activist lawyer who stepped in to defend an abducted child who had defended herself against and accidentally killed her abductor. However, her lawyer's bigger target was one of Ethiopia's oldest cultural traditions, bride abduction or *tefela*.

*Tefela* encourages young men to abduct (aka: kidnap), hide (aka: imprison), repeatedly rape, impregnate, and forcibly marry young women, even children as young as 11. Once raped by her abductor, a young woman cannot by tradition return home to her family except as the man's bride. No other man will consider her marriable since she's no longer a virgin. Once she's pregnant, the girl and her family have almost no alternative to capitulating to the marriage demand. As a result of this case, *tefela* became illegal in Ethiopia in 2000. Globally, bride abduction is condemned as a violation of a young woman's basic rights, but—because cultural traditions die slowly—it remains widespread in rural areas of Ethiopia and several other parts of the world.

The film's title, *Difret*, has a dual meaning. In Ethiopia's official language, Amharic, *difret* most frequently means "courage" or "to dare." However, *difret* also refers to "the act of being raped."

Story line: fifth grader Hirut Assefa (based on Aberash Bekele) is abducted en route home from school by her would-be husband and five of his rambunctious sidekicks. She resists fiercely, but it's their six to her one. Her abductor then imprisons, beats, and rapes her. Later, while he and his companions sit around bragging about their prowess at quashing her resistance, Hirut sneaks out of the hut (her abductor wasn't smart enough to lock the door) and steals his semi-automatic rifle. She's almost made a getaway when they see her. She runs. Twice, she falls because the rifle nearly outweighs her. Eventually they catch up. When she displays the semi-

automatic, they laugh her off. When they fail to back off, she fires a warning shot. When her abductor comes at her, she shoots and accidentally kills him. Hirut is then arrested for murder. Legal authorities insist she's over 18. The only culturally-acceptable penalty for killing a would-be husband is execution and burial alongside him.

The Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association, founded by human rights activist Meaza Ashenafi (played with wise ferocity by Meron Getnet), rushes to Hirut's aid. What unfolds is the legal battle both to free Hirut on the grounds she shot her abductor in self-defense and to ban the practice of child abduction and forced marriage. For protection, Meaza shelters Hirut in an orphanage.

Indeed, Hirut can accurately regard herself as orphaned since her going home is likely to elicit violent retaliatory acts against her family.

Most of the audience where I saw *Difret* at the AFI Silver Theater (Silver Spring, MD) was Ethiopian. No surprise there. The Ethiopian community in DC Metro is the largest anywhere outside of Africa. I'm used to working out alongside Ethiopians and saunaing with the Ethiopian men at the YMCA. I went to see *Difret* with one of the Y guys. Just before the film began, I leaned over and said to the Ethiopian woman to my left, who was there with another Ethiopian woman, "Are you excited?" By that I meant, not only about seeing this excellent film—winner of audience awards at Sundance and the Berlin International Film Festival—but also at the imminent prospect of seeing the female lead, Tizita Hagere (Hirut), during a post-screening Q&A. Her response: "I'm sooooo excited!"

A few minutes later, as the film began, the woman on my left leaned in my direction and said, "In my culture, we never eat alone. We share. Will you share my dinner with me?" Naturally, I said yes. For the next 20 minutes, she and I enjoyed her dinner together. As the film began, not realizing there were subtitles (the actors speak *Amharic*), the woman leaned over again and asked, "Can you understand the words?" Consistent with her offering to share a meal, throughout the film, various people in rural Ethiopia say to visitors, "You're in my house. We must share a meal."

I've experienced spontaneous acts of sharing before, such as in France, where a high school girl sat down next to me on a bench at the bus station and said, "Would you split my sandwich with me? It's more than I can eat by myself." And, something similar to the Ethiopian tradition of inviting guests occurs when I walk the hills in rural West Virginia. When I stop to talk with strangers, some often invites me with words such as, "If you like Chinese, you're welcome to stay for dinner." Such experiences offer hope we can learn to live as one.



When the film was over, after my Y friend and the dinner-sharer departed, I stayed behind. Making herself freely available for conversation and photos, I met and talked with Tizita Hagere who plays Hirut. At one point she said, "I saw you were taking pictures of me when I was on the stage." I hurriedly said, "I'm sorry, was it distracting?" She said, "Oh, no, it was really exciting!" I told Tizita about the woman sitting next to me who spontaneously shared her dinner with me. That's when Tizita gave me a hug.

Several of orphan girls in the film, including Tizita, came from orphanages run by the Selamta Family Project, whose mission is uniting "orphaned children and marginalized women to create forever families and bright futures by providing stable homes, excellent education and developmental resources in Ethiopia." The marginalization of the orphanage Moms results from their having been raped and deemed unmarriageable or from having run away from an abusive relationship.

According to Marisa Stam, Executive Director the Selamta Family Project, who sat on the stage during the Q&A with Tizita and mingled with theater-goers after the screening, "Tizita is a child of Selamta Family Project and lives in a Selamta Forever Family with 9 brothers and sisters, a Mom and a supportive Auntie in the Bethel neighborhood of Addis Ababa. She is now 17 years old and in grade 10. While she looks forward to more acting opportunities in the future, she is currently focused on her education. She has her grade 10 National Exam coming up in the Spring, which is critical to her future education."

Asked about the Selamta Project's reach, Marisa said, "At Selamta, we currently have 11 Forever Family homes that serve 95 children. Each Forever Family serves 8-10 children. Many of our families include biological sibling groups reunited after splitting up after the loss of their parents. Several of our Moms have biological children in the home and a few do not."

Child abduction interferes and is incompatible with girls' education for two reasons. First, to avoid abduction, many girls stay home under the protection of their families rather than attend school. Second, girls who are abducted and gotten pregnant as early as age 11 are forced to marry and break off plans to continue their educations. The real life Aberash Bekele, who lived

in exile for years after she was exonerated of murder charges, recently came out of the shadows and began to adopt a more visible role in campaigning for girls' rights. She says she was inspired to speak out because of Malala's courage and promotion of education for girls.

A friend who has offered college guidance counseling to hundreds of Ethiopian high school students in Metro DC told me many students claim their families left Ethiopia precisely to escape bride abduction and forced marriage. She said many students describe in their college admissions essays their plans to ensure empowerment among Ethiopian young women.

Historically, the abduction, rape, and forced marriage of child brides was considered acceptable in many cultures. Today, despite efforts to raise consciousness so it comes to be viewed as a sex offense, it remains common practice in rural areas in many parts of the world, including certain countries in Africa and in Central, South and East Asia. It is also condoned within certain subcultures in the Americas and in Europe among Romani.

A broader issue implied by the film involves the slow death of all sorts of cultural traditions. The generous sharing of meals, even with a stranger like me, is a cultural tradition I hope manages to survive. We've continued to talk for weeks about this film and its ramifications in the men's sauna at the Y. Conversations about the stubbornness of cultural traditions that can't be justified from a human rights perspective will continue far longer.

Like many films that challenge deeply-held social traditions, especially those considered "grisly" to the general public, *Difret* faced significant challenges securing anything like a national release, even with the help of Angelina Jolie Pitt. Investors fear losing their shirts in supporting the distribution of a film the public is unlikely to embrace for political reasons, despite artistic merits. What social obligation is there to see that the creation and distribution of such films is given necessary support to help promote awareness and accomplish social change? Perhaps the odds of *Difret's* chances of success would increase if all viewers were promised a free lunch.