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## Ben Mandell's Ethiopian Millenium Film

By *Nikodimos Fikru*

On July 31, 2007, a person named Ben Mandell posted an online message on the art-topia forum summoning the participation of the Diaspora Ethiopian community in his upcoming film, *Abyssinia Rising* (working title). At the time, what I gathered from Ben's email was that the pending work would be a feature length documentary film with a story line involving three characters (an Ethiopian American, A Beta-Israeli, a Muslim man) and their eventual return to their home country, Ethiopia, for the Ethiopian Millennium.

Although I did not get the opportunity to respond to Ben's initial email message, I learned later that Ben had traveled between the US, Israel and Ethiopia to make his dream a reality. In fact, Ben has journeyed from the production phase and is currently in post production and he hopes to release the film sometime in 2008. At the time of his email, however, his inquiry had certainly made me wonder as to how likely it would be for a non-Ethiopian to actually realize the cultural and social significance of the new millennium to Ethiopians in general. Would this person have the credence to present us with an absolutely positive and impartial film that would reveal the true essence of this once in a life time occasion and attach substantive meaning and relevance to it? Furthermore, what would compel this young American filmmaker to dispense his hard earned money and travel thousands of miles to make a film about the Ethiopian Millennium?

Surely, film making is an expensive and a difficult undertaking. Depending on its complexity, for example, a five minutes film clip on your television screen may have resulted from weeks of pre-production work, at least three hours of production, another three to four hours of editing and cost hundreds of dollars. So, in Ben's case, for instance, in addition to the possible exorbitant production cost of a feature length film, we would have to factor in travel and accommodation expenses, adding more challenge to the work at hand. Although I had thought that the project Ben was about to embark was quite commendable, I had also assumed that poor Ben may be wasting his time and money while making a documentary film especially in a time where we could argue about the existence of an Ethiopian film industry. I have valid reasons for making such a bold statement.

Ask any Ethiopian filmmaker and you would learn that the chance of breaking even from producing a film is very slim. While it is true that going to the movies is a growing trend in Addis Abeba, the money earned either from showing the film in the cinema halls or selling them on DVDs is quite nominal. There are many reasons leading to this predicament. First, getting the necessary funds for any film project can be a very challenging task. Because of this, the filmmakers must endure the burden of financing their own films. And once the filmmaking task is completed, they must also compete with other filmmakers to find a venue to show their films. Currently, there are only ten cinema halls in Addis Ababa.

The problem doesn't end there. In our current condition, there is no sensible



business model by which filmmakers could financially benefit from their works. There is this thing called 20% "recreation tax" on ticket price (not on profit) which every film producer must pay in addition to the 15% VAT (value added tax) which has to be paid at the end of the year. Second, the cinema halls charge a hefty amount for the use of their facility (except in the case of Alem Cinema which would charge \$20 birr per person and split half of it with the filmmaker). In addition, we do not have a well structured film promotion and distribution system set in place. Let us not also forget the growing problem of piracy. Venture the city of Addis and you would encounter young boys selling pirated CDs and DVDs of both old and newly released works openly. Equally noteworthy is the fact that our society's purchasing habit of original CD's and DVD's needs major improvement. So, with all these hurdles facing Ethiopian filmmakers, I had wondered where Ben's new documentary film would stand, that is, if there is ever a large market for documentary films in Ethiopia.

A recent interview I conducted with Ben dispelled all the doubts and skepticism I had harbored initially. Through this interview, I have come to realize that Ben's new film is in fact, grand in scope and aimed with a loftier purpose than what his initial email had implied. The truth is this filmmaker's aspiration goes beyond the passion he has for films or the need to earn a name or break even for his work! It stems from the humble and altruistic appreciation he has for other's cultures. He has made it clear to me that nothing could compare to the unforgettable experience he has encountered while crafting this film in Ethiopia.

As an artist and an experienced filmmaker, Ben plans to use this film as a tool to capture the truth and share his vision with the rest of the world. After the interview, I have also come to realize that without Ben's new film, for many of us the Ethiopian millennium and its significance in our lives would perhaps remain just a memory etched in the back of our minds. It may be through this film that we may come to cherish and reflect upon this important moment in time for years to come. I have no doubt that Ben's new film would bring about hope, change and inspiration to every Ethiopian as well as serve as a true reminder that Abyssinia is indeed rising.

The following is an interview I conducted with Ben about his upcoming film. For further information, you may also visit his website [www.ethiopianmillenniumfilm.com](http://www.ethiopianmillenniumfilm.com).

1. Ben, thanks for giving me the opportunity to do this interview with you. Can you tell us a little bit about yourself?

My name is Benjamin Vishnu Mandell. I was born in Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania and I attended The Pennsylvania State University as an undergraduate and Columbia University as a graduate student. I have spent a good deal of time traveling and working abroad which has developed into a real love of other cultures.

2. What is your background in the film industry?

This is my debut as both producer and director. In the past, I worked as an associate producer for Entheos Productions and as a marketing manager for New Video, a film distributor in New York City. My very first experience in film was as a lowly production assistant in charge of casting on a Japanese television show called The World's Most Astonishing News.

3. What is your film project about?

My film is about Ethiopia celebrating the new millennium. I am telling the story of a country with a promising future through the eyes of individuals doing their part to create a better tomorrow.

#### 4. What prompted this project?

I spent most of 2006 working in southern Africa and since then I have really wanted to make a film with a positive African theme. I tend to see magic and inspiration where others see problems. I wanted to share the deeper side of an African culture, the strength behind the tears. When I learned about the Ethiopian Millennium I knew it would be a great opportunity to tell a fun and uplifting African story.

#### 5. Do you have a title for your film already?

No title yet, but my favorite so far is "Abyssinia Rising."

#### 6. What has been the most challenging aspect of this project thus far?

Film making is a lot of work, and doing it in Ethiopia means extra ambiguity and plans often falling through or taking much longer than you expect.

In addition, I have personally funded the entire film, and it has proved to be more expensive than expected. I ended up spending my entire savings, used two credit cards and borrowed money from my brother, mother and grandfather. Moreover, the production phase was expected to last four months. But at the end of this period the film was not complete. I needed more time in Ethiopia but our entire budget had been spent. So, I started looking for creative ways to extend my visit and finance the rest of the shooting. I cut my living expenses back to 50 Birr a day and moved out of my apartment and into a friend's house. I sold my equipment on the condition that I could continue using it until I was done shooting, and I asked my friends for an outrageous number of favors. In fact, I am so grateful for everyone's help including my mom who sent me money three times so I would have enough for food.

#### 7. What are some of the memorable events surrounding this project?

There are so many, the millennium night, trips to Gonder, Bahir Dar and Lalibela, events like the Great Ethiopian Run, the Mary of Zion festival in Aksum, Haile Selassie's Coronation weekend in Shashemene with the Rastafarians and so many others. But really the greatest moments came through individuals, seeing how people care for their brothers and sisters is truly inspiring and is at the heart of my film.

#### 8. I know you've stated that you've been in Addis for the past five months working on this project. What was your initial time projection to complete this project? Have you gone beyond what you anticipated or are you meeting your objectives as planned?

I spent six months in Ethiopia researching and shooting the film. I initially planned on spending four months and ended up extending my trip. The main reason is that the scope and content of the film had expanded. The more I do, the better I want the film to be, and then the more work I need to do. I also underestimated the amount of time it would take to complete the shooting in Ethiopia. Everything moves slower there.

#### 9. Who else is collaborating on this project?

Melissa Donovan  
Co-Director, Cinematographer

Bethlehem Dejene  
Line Producer

Zelalem Mariam  
Associate Producer

Tewodros Yifru  
Associate Producer

Meron Dagneu  
Casting Director

Ras Mweya Masimba  
Animator

Emily Taylor  
Still Photographer

David DesRoches  
Research

10. When will you start editing and where?

I will start the post-production including the editing after the New Year in New York City. I use to live in NYC and have a network of film professionals who can help create the work of art I so want for this film.

11. How long do you think that will take? Who will do that?

I am planning for a 3-4 month post-production. I will recruit a talented editor and sound producer to help finish the film.

12. Recently, a Japanese Film maker and anthropology student by the name of Itsushi Kawase screened a couple of his films in Washington DC (Lalibeloch and Room 11, Ethiopia Hotel). I particularly loved Room 11, Ethiopia Hotel for many reasons—especially because of the style of story telling he did—he basically let the story tell without any narration what so ever. Instead he documented his days following the lives of two street boys from Gondar. It was quite a touching and memorable film. However, Kawase was faced with many criticisms on a panel he held for his first film, Lalibeloch. Apparently many felt that he had misrepresented the historical aspect of Lalibeloch and painted their characters in a negative light. He was even asked if he had paid some of the characters in his documentary film. My question to you is (again assuming I have very little knowledge of what your overall project entails) what sort of approach are you using to be objective and fair in your film?

If anything, I would say I am taking a positive slant. I heard about Room 11 and I would love to see it. With any film, you will get criticism regardless of what you do. I have tried to understand Ethiopia as well as possible which is one of the reasons I spent six months living in the country. Compare that with the other film crews doing documentaries on the millennium who spent a month. I have also involved several Ethiopians in all phases of the film so that I can give the film as much authenticity as possible.

13. Will your film be in English with Amharic subtitle or vice versa? Do you have anyone in mind to do the narration?

The first version of the film will be in English. Some of the interviews were done in Amharic and Hebrew (we filmed in Israel as well) and those pieces will be subtitled in English. I would like to release an Amharic version of the film in Ethiopia as well but it will have to be secondary because I need the funds from the US distribution to pay for the Ethiopian release.

14. Are you aware of other documentary film makers working under the same topic? In your opinion, what do you suppose makes yours different? I am aware that two friends I know (Henok Assefa and Yehedego Abesolom) are perhaps in Addis Ababa currently working on the same topic as yours.

Overall, there are two big differences between my film and the other 3-4 films being made about the millennium. First, each film actually has a different focus. My focus is on individuals making for a brighter Ethiopian future. Other people are focusing on the Diaspora and others are focusing on the big events. Second, I am spending more time, more money, bringing more experience and better equipment and doing more work than any other crew.

15. Have you been to Ethiopia before?

This is my first time to Ethiopia but my fifth trip to Africa. I spent most of 2006 working in southern Africa and have visited a dozen or so African countries.

16. What has been your experience so far with the people in particular? Have you found people helpful? Friendly? Resentful? Suspicious? E.t.c...

Most people have been incredibly friendly and supportive. A few are suspicious, but after spending some time with me they open up and become supporters of the film. I expect some resentful folks but so far nothing.

17. Do you speak Amharic?

Tinish, tinish

18. What do you expect to come out of this project? Film festival? Screening in Ethiopia and all over the world? PBS?

The film will speak for itself, good or bad. I will submit it to film festivals and the response will determine much of its future. My goal is to get it viewed as widely as possible including a limited theatrical release, TV, DVD and the Internet.

19. Do you have another project lined up?

Not yet. I have had a few offers but given the timely nature of the millennium I really want to get this film done ASAP.

20. Have you been to any of the cinemas in Addis? If so, what are your thoughts on the films being produced there?

I have several friends that are filmmakers in Ethiopia. Everyone would agree that the film industry is very young and has a long way to go. Very few films make money so everyone needs a "day job" to pay for their creations. There is a general lack of

infrastructure, equipment, skilled crew and trained actors. It will take time for the industry to develop but even today there are many creative and passionate filmmakers working hard to create the next generation of Ethiopian films.

*Nikodimos Fikru is an Ethiopian filmmaker based in the Washington DC area. His latest film due out this year is entitled, "The Thieves Next Door". Nikodimos is a contributing arts writer for The Ethiopian American.*

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