

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Martial Frindéthié, PhD

COURAGE / Difret (2014)

Zeresenay Mehari

OVERVIEW

Auteur One of seven siblings, Zeresenay Mehari was born in 1974 in Addis Ababa. Upon winning a Diversity Visa lottery, Mehari went to the United States, where he studied cinema at the University of Southern California School of Cinematic Arts and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree. While working on his diploma, Mehari founded a production company named Haile-Addis Pictures. In 2000 Mehari was a production assistant for *All About Eve* and *The Seven Year Itch* in 2000 television serial *Backstory*. Then he was the production assistant for episode *M*A*S*H: Comedy Under Fire* in 2001 serial *History vs. Hollywood*. Later in 2006, he was the producer of a short, *Leila* directed by Hanelle M. Culpepper. Later in the year, he made his first short film *Coda*.

Film *Difret*, meaning 'courage' but also 'rape' in Amharic, is based on the real story of a young Ethiopian girl, Hirut Assefa whose killing of her abductor and rapist brought attention to the Amhara tradition of *telefa* (marriage through abduction). After following Hirut's case, the filmmaker decided to turn it into a film. Slated to start in 2009, the filming of *Difret* did not begin until 2012 because of casting problems. *Difret* won several international awards, among which are the Audience Award: World Cinema Dramatic at the Sundance Film Festival and the Panorama Audience Award and the Berlin International Film Festival in 2014. However, in Ethiopia, the authorities stopped the premiere of the film but two lawsuits later compelled them to let it run.

Background Abuses against women are common occurrences in Ethiopia. *Telefa*, the practice of abduction, unlawful incarceration, and rape of young girls as prospective brides is one of these gender-based abuses. When one fourteen-year-old victim of *telefa* killed her rapist, attorney Meaza Assenafi, who had been fighting for women's rights, saw an opportunity to confront her country's decision-makers with their responsibility. And filmmaker Zeresenay saw in the dramatization of this true story an opportunity to call the world's attention to the plight of women in Ethiopia.

SYNOPSIS

In this film, inspired by a true story, a fourteen-year-old Ethiopian girl, Hirut, is abducted and raped following the Ethiopian tradition that allows marriage through the abduction of child bride. While trying to escape, Hirut kills her rapist with his own rifle. The clan of the deceased demands that Hirut be put to death. A young woman lawyer, Meaza, is determined to defend Hirut. Meaza's work is not just a campaign against violence done to women and sexual assault on minor girls. It is the questioning of a masculinist culture that most traditional Amhara men are in solidarity with. Most men in little Hirut's village see Meaza's defense of Hirut as an assault on their culture and their masculinity. They verbally and physically threaten the lawyer to intimidate her into backing off. Meaza's defense of Hirut also puts her in a frontal struggle against the Ethiopian justice system. A chauvinistic Assistant District Attorney has sided with the men against Meaza and is doing everything in his power to have Hirut condemned in order to dissuade other girls from emulating her. Therefore, infused with the courage of little Hirut, who for her freedom defied the mores of her culture, Meaza decides to take her fight to the end. Meaza does the unthinkable. She takes her country's all-powerful Ministry of Justice to court. Her decision wins her support but also a lot of reprisals from the authorities. Her law license is revoked, and her law firm is closed. However, a strong media interest in her struggle and the discreet intervention of her old mentor, who has connections in high places, force the government to give in and let justice take its impartial course. Meaza wins her case against all predictions, thus winning freedom for little Hirut and many other Ethiopian women.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Hirut Assefa A fourteen-year-old girl, who kills her abductor and rapist
Gizaw The Assistant District Attorney
Meaza Ashenafi Andenet A young Ethiopian lawyer, who founded the Andenet Women Lawyers Association and defends Hirut
Hirut's father

PLOT

IDEALIST LAWYER

The Andenet Women Lawyers Association It is 1996. Meaza Andenet is a young Ethiopian lawyer and the founder of the Andenet Women Lawyers Association. She arrives at her office in the Ethiopian capital city of Addis Ababa.



A battered woman A woman has come to seek help from Meaza. Her name is Mrs. Belaynesh. Her husband has taken to drinking, and he beats her up every time he is drunk. She sought help from her relatives, but they urged her to return to her husband, telling her that her husband beats her because he loves her. Meaza promises Mrs. Belaynesh that she will speak to her husband, saying there are laws that protect her against such abuse.



Warning Zeneb

Meaza goes to speak with Zeneb, Mrs. Belaynesh's husband. She finds him at the construction site where he works. She is surprised to see that an old man so apparently respectable is a wife-batterer. She threatens him with arrest if he ever beats his wife again. He angrily grabs her arm and tries to intimidate her. She does not flinch. He lets go of her arm.



ABDUCTION

A good pupil Meanwhile, in the countryside classroom, fourteen-year-old Hirut is being congratulated by her teacher. She has done well on her final exam, and he tells her that he will recommend her to move on to the next grade. The bell rings at the end of the school day. Hirut proudly rushes home to share her report card with her family.



Abducted On her way home, Hirut is pursued by six armed horsemen. She cries for help and runs but is soon captured. Hirut's captors take her to an isolated hut and lock her up there. The terrified child bangs on the door imploring her kidnappers to let her return home to her family. Unperturbed by her pleas, the men celebrate their prowess by embracing and congratulating one another.



Hirut is raped One of Hirut's abductors, Tadele, enters the dark hut. He approaches Hirut and hits her. She falls on the ground, unconscious. He ties her up and rapes her. Hirut wakes up startled as her rapist returns to the hut. He brings her a cup of coffee and declares that she is going to be his wife.



Hirut escapes Tadele is called outside by one of his friends, who says he saw some people coming in the distance. It is a false alarm, but as Tadele precipitously leaves the hut, he forgets to take his gun and close the door. Tadele and his friends sit outside to have coffee. Hirut grabs his gun, opens the door, and sneaks out.

The murder Tadele's gang spots Hirut and starts chasing her. The men catch up with the girl in the forest and surround her. Tadele advances towards her. She points the gun at him and warns him not to come further or she will shoot. He dares her. She shoots and misses. He approaches her, smiling confidently. She reloads the gun and shoots. Tadele falls, and Hirut drops the gun, terrified.





Hirut is jailed Hirut starts running. The men catch her and start beating her. One of them suggests that they cut her throat. A patrol of local, civilian police hears the screaming and arrive in time to order the men off the girl. The civilian police tell the men that Hirut will be taken to the regional police station. Hirut is jailed and is held without bail and with limited visitation. Her parents come to the police station and bring her some food. They are ordered to taste the food they brought.



Hirut's lawyers Meaza is agitated. She heard on the radio that a young girl's life is in danger, accused of killing her abductor. She calls one of her colleagues in the region where Hirut is being held and asks for more information. Meaza meets with her colleague in the region to investigate the matter. She is surprised to learn that Hirut is a mere fourteen-year-old girl. Meaza and her colleague ask to see Hirut. They present themselves as Hirut's lawyers. The police chief reluctantly lets them see her.



Visiting Hirut The two lawyers meet with Hirut and tell her that they will be fighting to get her out of trouble. The girl has a broken arm. They want to take her to the hospital, but the police refuse. Meaza tells the police chief that Hirut is only fourteen and might have other injuries she is not aware of. The police officer replies that the Assistant DA is not convinced of Hirut's age and thinks she is much older than she says.



Blaming Meaza and her colleague visit Hirut's parents, who are farmers in a small village. They tell Hirut's mother that they would like to help Hirut get out of trouble. Hirut's mother blames her daughter's situation on her husband for insisting that Hirut should go to school. She would have preferred Hirut to stay home and learn to be a traditional woman. Meaza tells Hirut's mother that her husband was right to want a school education for Hirut. The two lawyers obtain Hirut's father's authorization to represent Hirut in the legal case; however, he fears that it will start a war between his family and Tadele's. The lawyers also get confirmation of Hirut's age from her parents and baptism records.

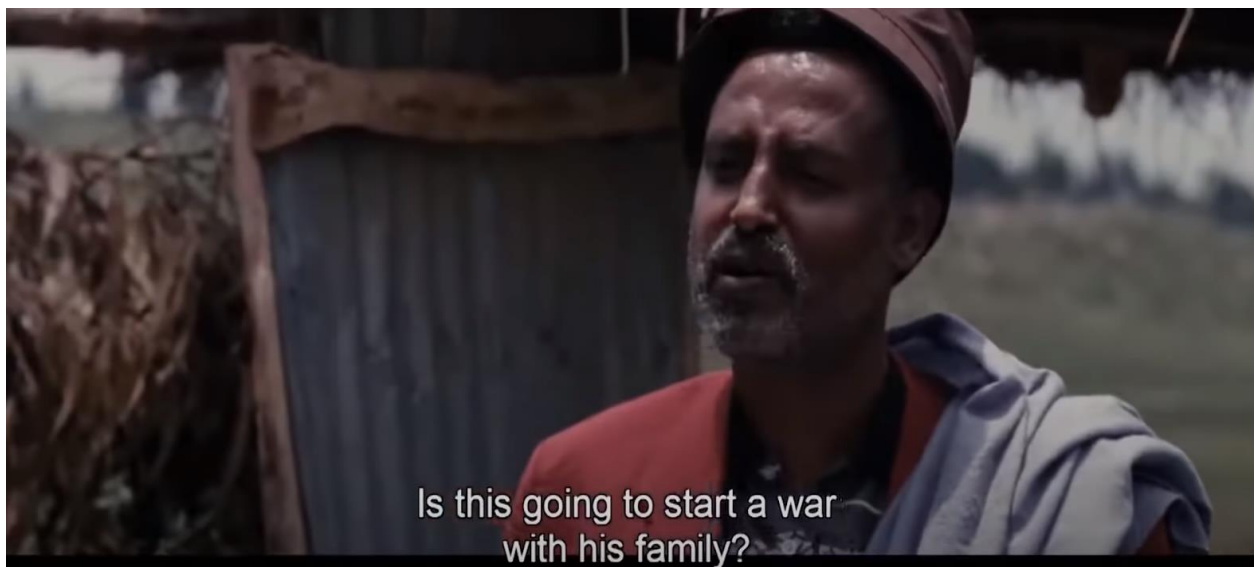




They are lawyers.
They came to help us.



would not have happened
if she had stayed home



Is this going to start a war
with his family?

Country hospitality The two lawyers bid goodbye to Hirut's parents. However, the farmers demand that they stay for lunch. Meaza insists that they must leave, but the farmers are inflexible and claim that their culture be respected. Meaza and her colleague comply.



Inflexible District Attorney Meaza arrives at the police station with the signed authorization to represent Hirut, proof of Hirut's age from the church, and a document giving her permission to practice law in the region. The Assistant DA dismisses the proof of Hirut's age on the basis that she was strong enough to carry a heavy rifle and kill a man. Meaza reminds him that every farm girl carries loads much heavier than a rifle. He wants to see a birth certificate. Meaza reminds him that hardly any child in the region has a birth certificate.



Seeking advice Meaza visits her mentor, a man with forty-five years of experience, for whom she worked in the past. She explains the difficulties she is having in getting Hirut released from jail. He promises to help her. Meaza discreetly calls one of her contacts and asks him to alert some journalists. The following day, a swarm of journalists are waiting in front of the police station as Meaza arrives with Hirut's parents. The lawyer pretends not to know who tipped off the journalists.



Determining Hirut's age The assistant DA has brought in a medical examiner to determine Hirut's age. The examiner explains that his conclusions are that Hirut is "well-developed and late into her teen years." Meaza tells him that it is insulting for him to determine a girl's age based on the size of her breasts. To make her point, she shows them Hirut's younger sister, who, although she is only twelve, has already developed breasts. As the Assistant DA is still arguing that Hirut is eighteen, he receives a phone call from his superior, who orders him to release Hirut to the custody of her lawyers. He sheepishly complies.



Hirut must die The men of the village gather under a tree to discuss the matter related to Hirut's murder of Tadele. Tadele's father is given the floor. He laments for long minutes about his son being murdered for following a long-held tradition of abducting future brides. He demands the death of Hirut as reparation.



In praise of abduction Some members of Tadele's gang take turns praising the tradition of abduction, telling of their own experiences of abducting their wives, and chastising the schoolteacher, city people, and bad parents for sowing seeds of rebellion in the village girls. The schoolteacher defends himself, saying that he is only teaching the girls to read and write and therefore to be of more help to their parents and husbands.



No apology from Hirut's father

Hirut's father is given the floor. He speaks of Hirut's older sister, who had a bright future ahead of her. She was abducted, and he did not want to oppose tradition. She now lives miserably with a drunk husband and four children. He recalls that when Tadele asked for Hirut's hand, he told him that she was still young, and that she wanted to go to college. Hirut's father blames Tadele's death on Tadele for forcing his daughter into a relationship she did not want.



The elder's decision

The words of Hirut's father anger Tadele's clan and cause the two opposing clans (Tadele's and Hirut's) to launch into insults, threats, and pushing and jostling. The elders call them to order and come to a verdict: Hirut's father will be fined 3,000 *birr* (about \$55 today), and Hirut will be banished from the village. Tadele's father stands up to protest that this decision is too lenient. He demands Hirut's death. The elders tell him that their verdict is not up for reconsideration.

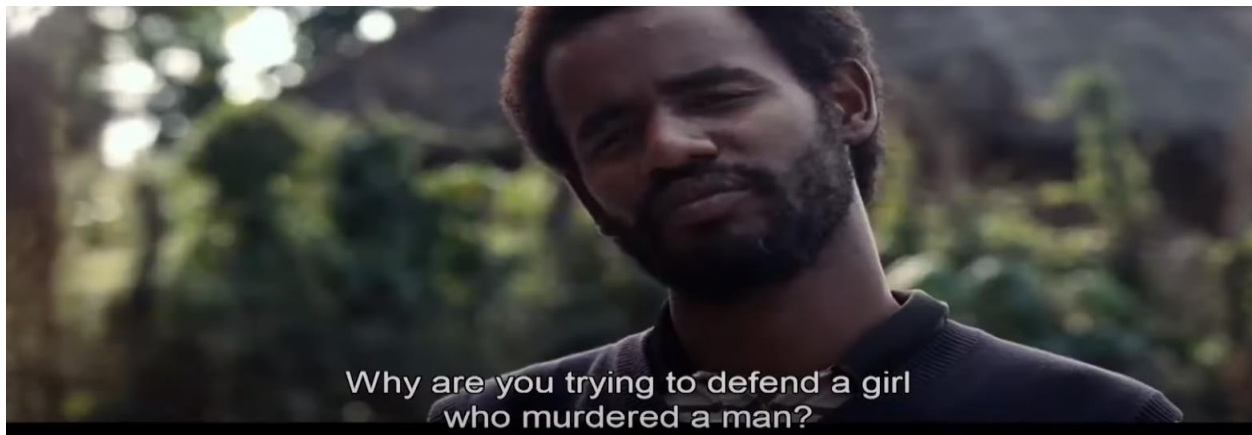


Hirut stays with Meaza Meaza takes Hirut with her back to Addis Ababa until she can find her a permanent place to stay. She shows Hirut around the house. The young girl is overwhelmed by the amenities in Meaza's place. She asks Meaza if she is not married because she is a disgraced woman. Meaza tells her that she grew up like her, in a small village, but her father wanted her to get an education and rejected all her suitors. She was not abducted either because her five brothers were there to protect her. Hirut spends her first night at Meaza's place staring at the ceiling and reminiscing about her life in the village, sharing the family meal with her mother, her father, and her younger sister. She finds the sofa bed too soft for her taste, and she puts her blanket on the floor and lies on it.



No witness The judge reads Hirut's deposition made at the police station. He asks if anyone is ready to corroborate Hirut's claim of self-defense. Tadele's gang is menacingly present in the courthouse. No one dares to come forward as a witness. Hirut's defense team is granted three months to interview witnesses. The court adjourns to the dissatisfaction of the prosecutor.

Blaming city folks Meaza goes to interview one member of Tadele's gang in the hope of making him testify on behalf of Hirut. He does not understand why Meaza is defending Hirut. She wants to make him understand that Tadele was wrong to abduct and rape Hirut. He retorts that it is their tradition to abduct girls they want to marry, and he blames city dwellers for destroying their cherished tradition. He maintains that Hirut must die.



Zeneb's husband drinks no more Meaza's disappointing encounter with Tadele's friend is followed by a happy event. As she returns to her office, she sees Mrs. Belaynesh waiting for her with a gift of baked *injera* (an Ethiopian crepe-like sourdough bread). Following Meaza's intervention, her husband has stopped drinking and beating her. She thanks the young lawyer for giving her back her husband.



Hirut disappears Hirut is alone at Meaza's. She looks at all the modern amenities in the house with wonderment. She picks up the television remote and inadvertently turns on the TV. The phone starts ringing at the same time. Hirut is overwhelmed by these sounds to which she is not accustomed. She runs out into the street and is picked up by two police officers.



Meaza finds Hirut In the meantime, Meaza is trying to find Hirut a safe place to stay during the trial. She asks an orphanage to temporarily shelter Hirut. Meaza returns home to see that Hirut has disappeared. She looks for her everywhere and goes to the police, where she is able to collect the young girl.



Hirut is homesick The other children of the orphanage welcome Hirut well and try to make her feel at home. Hirut has difficulty adjusting to her new home. She is unhappy and cries a lot. She misses her parents and her sister, and she demands to see them.



Suing the Ministry of Justice Meaza's defense of Hirut comes to an impasse. The Assistant DA tries to persuade the villagers to reverse their banishment of Hirut and the death threat hanging over her head, and the Ministry of Justice is unwilling to challenge the antiquated tribal laws that allow women's abduction and excuse their rape. Meaza tells her mentor that she will challenge the Ministry of Justice in the High Court on the grounds that such practices permit the violation of Hirut's freedom. Meaza's mentor thinks that this is an extreme approach on her part. Meaza files her case against the Ministry of Justice anyway.



Hirut is melancholic Hirut is not adjusting well to the orphanage's life. She finds her bed too soft and chooses to sleep on the floor. She does not play with the other children, and she is withdrawn in class. She reads the letters that her young sister sends her, and she learns that her father has decided to pull her sister out of school. Hirut becomes melancholic and nostalgic. She imagines herself running in the open fields with her sister.



Hirut visits her family Hirut tells the orphanage's superintendent that she wants to go home. Meaza is called upon and tries in vain to convince her that going back home will be too dangerous. Hirut is inflexible. Meaza decides to take her to see her parents and her sister for a few hours. Hirut's sister has many questions for her regarding life in the city. Hirut tells her sister that there are too many people, too many cars, and too much noise in the city, and that she hates being confined to the orphanage. Meaza tries to persuade Hirut's father to send his younger daughter back to school. He tells her that he needs help at home, and also that he would not want her to undergo Hirut's experience.



Meaza and Hirut elude Tadele's gang Hirut's presence in the village does not go unnoticed. One of Tadele's gang members has spotted her and runs to inform the others. They grab their guns and get on their horses just as Hirut's father is imploring Meaza and Hirut to start heading back to the city. The gang shoots at Meaza's car, but she is able to elude them and return safely.



Self-blame Hirut blames herself for what is happening. She thinks that if she had not run away from the hut in which Tadele confined her after he raped her, he would still be alive, the village would not be divided, and her sister would still be in school. Meaza tells her to not blame herself, and that she is right to expect a better treatment than the one offered to women in her community.



Intimidation Meaza's work on behalf of Hirut and her challenging the Ministry of Education is in the news. She receives a lot of support for it but also some setbacks. The Ministry of Justice suspends her law firm, and some of her collaborators decide to leave. They do not want the bad publicity that this might bring them. The Assistant DA requests that Hirut be removed from Meaza's custody and placed in the custody of the village police. Meaza will not tell him where Hirut is.



Meaza makes her case Meaza makes her case in court. She argues for the fundamental rights to freedom of all citizens, including Hirut. She argues that the Ministry of Justice is complicit in a traditional system that seeks to restrict women's right to freedom. She proffers that the closure of her community-based firm prevents the poor from having proper legal representation and demands that her permit be reinstated. Her mentor arrives in the courtroom to listen to her.



Meaza's permit is reinstated Meaza informs the orphanage's administrator that they have exhausted all recourse, and that they must return Hirut to the police. As she thinks that all is lost, Meaza is informed that the Minister of Justice has been fired and her permit reinstated. In the meantime, the Assistant District Attorney is removing Hirut from the orphanage to the sadness of her classmates.



Vindication Six months later, the court proceedings of Hirut's case are broadcast live on the radio and capture the attention of the country. A villager came forward to testify on behalf of Hirut. Then, Hirut tells her own story of self-defense. After deliberating, the three judges decide that Hirut acted in self-defense and must be set free. The young girl explodes in joy and relief. Her joy reaches Meaza's firm and the orphanage.



Hirut is free Hirut has won her case, but she feels dejected. She fears for her little sister, who might one day meet her fate. As she is being driven to the orphanage, Hirut asks Meaza to stop the car. She wants to walk the rest of the way. Meaza complies, gives Hirut a hug, and the young girl disappears in the crowd of passers-by.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

HIRUT (Open)

Hirut is an audacious, resilient, and intelligent fourteen-year-old girl with a bright future. When her dream of pursuing her education is cut short by a rapist who wants to marry her, she decides to kill him.

Audacious Hirut's murder of Tadele, her rapist, is a bold act, one that goes against the usual acceptance of abduction and rape of which young Ethiopian girls are the victims. Her action, so incomprehensible by the men of the village, who tend to view young girls' abductions as natural and expected, shook the entire organization of the village's social life.

Resilient Hirut is also a resilient young girl. She underwent some painful moments at the hands of her abductors. However, as soon as the occasion presented itself for her to free herself, she did not hesitate to act. She seized her aggressor's gun and fled into the forest until her abductors caught her. Determined not to be captured a second time, she shot and killed her rapist.

Intelligent Hirut is an intelligent young girl with a promising future. Her teacher is satisfied of her work and proudly recommend her to be placed in 5th grade the following year. It is while running home to show those promising grades to her parents that she is abducted.

MEAZA (Open)

Meaza is a determined, altruistic, and compassionate lawyer. She could have made a comfortable life working elsewhere. However, she decided to commit her skills and time to defending the abused women of her country.

Determined Meaza's determination to defend Hirut puts her at odds with the millions of Amhara people in Ethiopia who see abduction of young girls as normal traditional practice, and she faces the intimidation of a government that finds it convenient to enable the practice of *telefa*. Meaza is shot at when she visits Hirut's parents. The government suspends her law permit. Nevertheless, she does not give up and forges ahead with her fight for women's rights.

Altruistic Meaza is a selfless person, who has chosen to put her skills as a lawyer at the service of the millions of abused women in Ethiopia, representing them for free, while she could have made a good salary and lived a comfortable life working for a profitable organization. This is what some of her collaborators did when the situation became difficult. But Meaza decided to sacrifice her own financial comfort and continue the fight for women's rights.

Compassionate To be so disinterestedly committed to defending the freedom of others demands of a person a good dose of empathy; it demands that one be able to put oneself in another person's place. Even though Meaza's past was different from Hirut's, the young lawyer was able to identify with the fourteen-year-old's pain enough to fight for her when all the odds were against her.

HIRUT'S PARENTS

These parents are open-minded people. Although they cherish some aspects of their culture, such as hospitality, they will not accept the abhorrent tradition of child-bride abduction and rape. They want a better life for their daughters than what their Amhara tradition is offering them.

Open-minded In a community that finds it unnecessary to educate girls and considers it natural for men to abduct and rape them, Hirut's parents think otherwise. They put their three girls in school and support the girls' desire to someday pursue higher studies. At the village assembly, where the men gather to discuss Hirut's fate after she kills Tadele, Hirut's father publicly declares that Tadele, his daughter's rapist, deserves what came to him, and that he has no intention to apologize for his daughter, for she was merely defending her right to freedom. The crowd disapproves, but Hirut's father remains adamant in his unconventional attitude.

Hospitable Hirut's parents do not have much. In fact, they are among the poorest people in Ethiopian society, and they struggle to live on a small plot of land that produces little. However, their hospitality is

remarkable. They make it a point of honor to invite whoever crosses their threshold, whether announced or unannounced, to share their meals with them. And they feel insulted if their guests refuse their invitation. Being hospitable is for them a fact of culture, as they tell Meaza.

THEMES

SOCIETY

Culture In the rural area, determining a date is not necessarily based on conventional calendars. One of the main points of contention between the Assistant District Attorney and Hirut's defense team is determining Hirut's real age to see whether she was a minor girl at the time of her abduction. The Assistant DA insisted on seeing her birth certificate, which, like most children born in the countryside, she did not have. Her parents, however, had a clear idea of her age, which they determined according to other events in the village. To give Hirut's age, her mother has this to say: "[Hirut's] sister was born on the Day of Saint Mary, in the year that I lost my mother. And my mother's 10-year anniversary was two years ago. That makes [Hirut's little sister] 12. So, Hirut is 14." Thus, the determination of Hirut's age brings up, not only religious events tied to Hirut's little sister's birth, but also events tied to the death of Hirut's grandmother, all as temporal topoi, or insertion points that help record a whole family's story or a whole community's history. Thus, Hirut's birth is not dated by a year, a month, and a day on the calendar, but by a collective assemblage. She is not a mere individual, but a person who carries within her shared stories. Her name is rich with familial and societal experiences. She is a temporal reference.

Class The distinction between the haves and the have-nots is obvious in *Difret*. The countryside is the place of depletion and privation. Hirut's parents are peasants who labor on barren land. Hirut, her young sister, and her parents all share a one-room hut that serves as a bedroom, and the kitchen. Nonetheless, this poverty does not prevent the family from sharing the meager meals they have with whoever crosses their threshold. When Hirut arrives in the city under Meaza's protection, she is overwhelmed by the amenities and the abundance of food in the young lawyer's house. Hirut and Meaza withdraw for the night leaving a plentitude of leftovers on the dinner table, which will certainly go to waste in the garbage. Likewise, at the orphanage, each child has his/her own plate of food. Hirut has trouble sleeping as she imagines her father, mother, and sister, gathering around a single, austere dish in their hut. She cries thinking about them. This socio-economic gap between the country folks and city dwellers is exacerbated by the government's dereliction of duty. It is this failed policy that Meaza delicately criticizes in her tense exchange with the Assistant DA.

Hospitality The filmmaker also tackles the issue of country hospitality and selflessness, as opposed to city selfishness. Rural generosity is dramatized by Hirut's parents when they insist, on two occasions, that people who visit them, even unexpectedly, be their guests at their dinner mat. Hirut's parents are poor peasants, who do not have much. However, they are disposed to share whatever little they have with others. They take pride in the fact that hospitality is part of their cultural heritage. When Meaza, pressed by time, declines their invitation, they feel insulted, and they remind her to not forget her culture.

Education Education has a transformative power, which can take people from a state of indigence and dependency to one of independence and prosperity. Hirut's father believes in the power of education and, unlike most fathers in his village, decides to send his three daughters to school even though he needs hands to work the family land and herd the cattle. Meaza's parents, too, believed in the power of education, and so, they put her to school alongside her five brothers. Today, as a lawyer and an independent woman, Meaza can choose to marry or not, for marriage is not the necessary passageway to her happiness and fulfillment. This is what she explains to Hirut when the young girl asks her why she is not married. She urges Hirut to stay in school, and she praises Hirut's father for choosing education for his daughters as the father feels guilty for causing his daughter's rape by sending her to school.

Tradition vs Modernism Hirut's killing of Tadele and Meaza's legal defense of the young girl reveal the deep divide between tradition and modernity in Ethiopia. Among the Amhara people, who constitute roughly 26% of the Ethiopian population, women's abduction and rape are ordinary parts of the courting ritual. A man would abduct a girl he wants to marry and rape her to take away her virginity and make her unmarriageable by no one but him. Hirut's father's outrage about the tragedy his daughter went through and his confession that he feels no remorse for his daughter killing her rapist are met with indignation from

Tadele's father and gang members. One by one, Tadele's friends rise to denounce modern education and city influence for alienating the girls in their community. They recall their own experiences of abducting and raping their wives. It is incomprehensible for them that one would defend Hirut instead of calling for her death. For Meaza, Tadele's case is an opportunity to align traditional tribal laws with modern national laws, the latter which protect women rights, by suing the Ministry of Justice for dereliction of duty. Although he supported Meaza and certainly maneuvered discreetly to help her in her fight, Meaza's mentor and some of her collaborators believed that Meaza was seriously swimming against the tide. The Amhara community is large and influential, and the government would rather not engage in confrontation with it, hence the continuance of a tradition that demeans Amhara women. Meaza's fight against this aspect of tradition was epic, and she won it. Her law firm is said to have helped emancipate about 30,000 women from violence and oppression.

JUSTICE

Injustice The general problematic of *Difret* is that the justice system in Ethiopia is skewed against women and in favor of men. The injustice against women is observable in the city, where men often beat their wives with no fear of any consequences, and in the countryside, where antiquated traditions encourage men to abduct, beat, and rape women. As Meaza sets about to defend Hirut for the murder of her abductor and rapist, she faces the hostility of villagers for whom abducting and raping women is natural and expected; Meaza also faces the skepticism of her own legal partners, who see her fight as unwinnable. Her own mentor, who will discreetly use his influence in high places to help her, cautioned her against challenging the Ministry of Justice in court. Some of her partners, so committed to the defense of women's rights, were afraid of the eventual consequences of her fight and decided to leave her law firm. The injustice against women was so systemically entrenched and so strongly empowered by the government that fighting it made even some of the strongest proponents of equal justice buckle. Meaza, however, remained determined and ultimately won justice for Hirut.

POLITICS

Political intimidation During her first encounter with the Assistant District Attorney, Meaza makes veiled political criticisms that do not escape her interlocutor. Her criticisms are related to the Ethiopian government's inability to create conditions of wellbeing for the people. The Assistant DA insists that only a birth certificate or a government medical doctor will prove to him that Hirut is really fourteen years old. Meaza interjects that no farmer child has ever been recorded in the birth registry nor been vaccinated, and that the country does not possess a single technical medical center capable of providing such expertise, thus alluding to the government's failure to provide adequate healthcare for its people or trained medical staff or to even record their existence. The Assistant DA is skeptical that a fourteen-year-old girl can be so strong as to carry a heavy rifle. Meaza replies that most girls in the country carry heavier loads than a rifle, alluding to the difficult conditions of children, forced to labor like workhorses instead of enjoying their childhood. The Assistant DA warns Meaza to watch what she is saying. She rejoins that she has said nothing explicit against the government, and that his attempt to intimidate her stems from his own pretensions about having access to her thoughts. The criticism about a failed government is there, and both Meaza and her interlocutor understand it, though one of the protagonists—the Assistant DA—is on the side of the government and the other one—Meaza—is on the side of the people.

RELATIONSHIP

Marriage Traditional Amhara marriage is characterized by the dominance of men over women. The abduction and rape of girl brides finds its explanation in this relationship of domination. When Tadele's friends abduct Hirut for him and confine her in a small, dark hut, Tadele approaches her and hits her. She falls to the ground unconscious. Then he proceeds to rape her. When she regains her consciousness, he offers her a cup of coffee and tells her that she will be his wife. The beating and the rape are meant to put Tadele's signature on Hirut, to brand her with violence, to make her his property and make her unwanted by all other men. The cup of tea is to symbolize caring, as if to say, "You are now my wife, my slave, my property, and I will take care of you." This perverted mixture of violence and "care" bonds the wife to her husband as a slave to her master in traditional Amhara marriage. The relationship is not one of partnership but of domination.

PSYCHOLOGY

Blame/Self-blame Blaming oneself or another person is a means for coping with helplessness. Hirut was abducted and raped by a young man from the village, whom she killed in self-defense as he tried to recapture her during her flight from the hut where he kept her incarcerated. Hirut's action has unleashed tensions in the village, and to protect her little sister from undergoing reprisals, Hirut's father withdrew her from school. Faced with the inability of the justice system to protect her, Hirut blames herself for what is happening. She tells Meaza, her lawyer, that she should have accepted her abduction and rape without protest. She, the victim of a failed justice system, now presents herself as the victimizer. Likewise, Hirut's mother blames the young girl's father for the situation. She tells Meaza that it is Hirut's father's determination to send Hirut to school that caused the situation they are living in. For her, had Hirut been kept at home, she would never have been abducted and raped, and she would never have killed her rapist and start a conflict in the village. In the absence of justice protecting their rights, the poor find no other solution than to place the blame on the weakest, themselves, rather than on the decision-makers.

Courage As the title of the film indicates, courage is the main theme of *Difret*. The first act of courage is that of a child, Hirut, who refuses to submit to a traditional practice that restricts her natural rights to freedom and seeks to cut short her aspirations. By killing her abductor, Hirut calls into question a long-held tradition taken for granted as natural. Her act is anti-genealogical. It stops the continuance of a cultural practice and makes her the target of her community's wrath. Yet, she does not back down, and she takes the stand in her own defense at court. However, Hirut's has had doubts about her posture, and her act of courage will not have been possible without the courage of a young female lawyer, Meaza, determined to go so far as suing her country's political powers to fight for the rights of women. Meaza's bravery is what allayed Hirut's fears, and even Hirut's parents' doubts, and strengthened their resolve to challenge prevailing cultural practices. Indeed, Hirut's father, too, showed great courage when he stood up at the village's assembly to say that he has no regret about his daughter's killing Tadele and that he blamed Tadele's death on no one else but himself. Nevertheless, Hirut's and her father's courage would have made them pariahs of their community had not Meaza been brave enough to force the justice system to declare the practice of child-bride abduction and rape a violation of the rights of the abducted. Meaza's determination also gave the justice system the courage to pronounce the law.

Questions

1. In your country, is the contrast between the countryside and the city as pronounced as it is in this film? Is the country a place of depletion or of plenty? What accounts for the conditions of the rural and the urban zones in your country?
2. Would Hirut have received the same treatment in your culture as she did in the Amhara culture of Ethiopia? Elaborate on your answer.
3. Why does the Assistant DA make the prosecution of Hirut an emotional and personal fight?
4. To what extent is *Courage* a criticism on Ethiopia's social, political, and economic conditions?
5. It seems like Meaza's mentor has intervened twice to help her advance her case: The first time to have Hirut put into the custody of Meaza, and the second time to have the Minister of Justice fired and Meaza's law permit reinstated. Do you think that his interventions in the legal system are ethical? Explain your answer.
6. What is the symbolism in Hirut's decision to walk into the crowd of the city at the end of the film?