

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## ***Lamb* (2015)**

Yared Zeleke

### OVERVIEW

*Auteur* Yared Zeleke was born in 1978, in the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa. Zeleke grew up in the slums of the city until the age of ten, when he went to the United States to reunite with his father, who had fled the Mengistu dictatorship that followed the fall of Emperor Haile Selassie. In the United States, Zeleke obtained a bachelor's degree in international development and contemplated a graduate degree in agronomy before deciding to pursue studies in cinema. Zeleke earned a Master of Fine Arts (MFA) in Directing from New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. His thesis short film, *Lottery Boy*, won an award from the Hollywood Foreign Press Agency in 2012. Zeleke worked with NGOs in the United States, Ethiopia, Namibia, and Norway before committing to directing as a career. Beside his thesis short, Zeleke's other shorts include *The Quiet Garden* (2009), *Housewarming* (2009), and *Full* (2009). Zeleke is currently a script consultant as well as a lecturer on both screenwriting and directing at Wesleyan University. Zeleke is working on his second feature script, *Sunbirds*, aided by a Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship.



### **Yared Zeleke at the premiere of *Lamb* in Addis Ababa, 2015**

*Film* *Lamb* is Yared Zeleke's first feature film and the first Ethiopian film ever to be selected for the Cannes Film Festival. The filmmaker describes this work as semi-autobiographical because the main protagonist's life is somewhat the life he lived in Ethiopia before migrating to the United States. Like his character Ephraim, Zeleke grew up listening to his grandmother telling stories. Like Ephraim, the filmmaker was fascinated by the scenes of the open marketplace, where he spent hours, every day, watching people come and go and bargain. And like the film's main protagonist, the filmmaker was torn from his homeland and his comfort zone at an early age and experienced the anguish of separation from the world of his childhood.

*Background* In 2013, Yared Zeleke went to the Cannes Film Festival to seek funding for a film project. In 2015, Zeleke completed his film, *Lamb*, thanks to a partnership with French co-producers and distributors. Shot with a cast of greenhorn Ethiopian actors, *Lamb* made it to the 68th Cannes Film Festival, the 2015 Toronto International Film Festival and the 2015 Milano Film Festival, where it won "Best Feature Film". *Lamb* was also selected to be the Ethiopian entry for the Best Foreign Language film at the

88<sup>th</sup> Academy Awards but was not nominated. *Variety* selected Zeleke to be on its list of “10 Screenwriters to Watch.”

## SYNOPSIS

Abraham, an Ethiopian farmer from the village of Buya, lost his wife to a famine caused by a big drought in the country. Abraham decides to take his son, Ephraim, to his cousin, Solomon, who lives in a far-away village with his mother, his wife, and his three daughters. Solomon toils on a small, ingrate plot of land, growing lentils and vegetable and raising cattle. Ephraim has an inseparable friend, Chuni, whom he will not leave behind in Buya. Chuni, is Ephraim’s mother’s pet lamb that the boy adopted upon his mother’s death. So, Ephraim, his father, and Chuni, the lamb, head to Solomon’s farm, where the boy is entrusted to his grand aunt’s care while his father leaves for Addis Ababa a few days later. Ephraim’s uncle assumes that Chuni is a gift brought to him by his cousin to be slaughtered on the day of celebration of the Holy Cross. As Solomon’s family relishes the idea of having meat—that is, Chuni—in this time of famine, and as the Day of the Holy Cross approaches, Ephraim multiplies the attempts to save his pet lamb. He is helped in his efforts by his cousin, Tsion, Solomon’s unconventional daughter whose dream to pursue a degree in agronomy bumps against her parents’ desire to marry her off with a young farmer from a rich family of the village. Tsion is not the only person who causes worries to Solomon. Ephraim’s penchant for cooking and his lack of interest in men’s farming tasks make his uncle apoplectic. Solomon’s hostility toward his nephew and his recurrent mention of consuming Chuni on the day of the feast precipitate the boy’s plans to flee and look for his father. In the end, Chuni is adopted by a flock of sheep and refuses to follow his human friend. Ephraim returns to his uncle’s place, who finally accepts that he should do women’s work as his daughter elopes to Addis Ababa with her boyfriend from the city.

## CHARACTERS

**Ephraim** (Rediat Amare): a nine-year-old-boy, who has been left in custody of his uncle, Solomon, while his father seeks a job in Addis Ababa.

**Abraham** (Idriss Mohamed): Ephraim’s father, who has asked Solomon to take care of his son while he seeks a job in the city.

**Tsion** (Kidist Siyum): Solomon’s daughter, who wants to pursue studies of agronomy and refuses to marry and settle in the village.

**Solomon** (Surafel Teka): A farmer, Ephraim’s uncle and Tsion’s father.

## PLOT

**Food is scarce** Ephraim walks into a corn field with his pet lamb, Chuni. He steals some corn to feed the animal. The field owner surprises them and starts chasing them. The child and his lamb flee home. Ephraim’s father has prepared a meager meal for his son. Ephraim insists that his father share the meal with him. He feeds his reluctant father a few bites of *injera* (a pancake-like, spongy bread made of processed *teff* cereal)



**Boys do not cook** The father tells his son that they must leave their home before the Holy Cross holiday as there is nothing to eat nor any woman to cook. Ephraim tells his father that he cooks as well as his (dead) mother did and has been cooking for other people. His father replies that boys do not cook, and that he will not let him do a woman's work for a living.



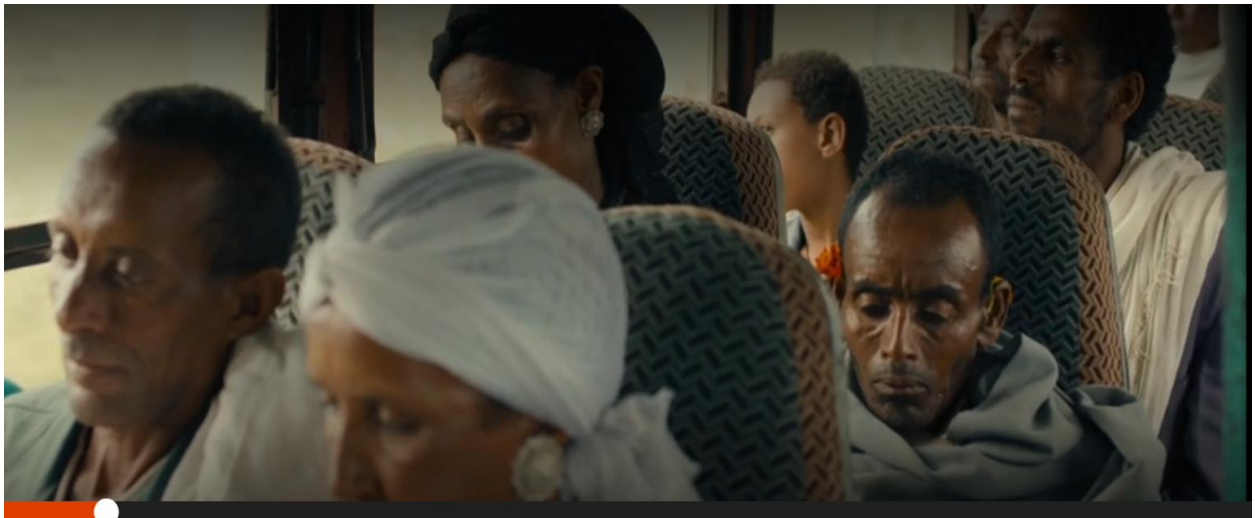
**We will never be separated** Ephraim tells his father that he will stay in their house with him and his lamb, Chuni. The father replies that they will someday have to eat this lamb if they do not want to starve. The child protests that Chuni was his mother's pet and must not be eaten. Ephraim leaves the kitchen and goes to sit on a hill with Chuni. The child promises the animal that they will never be apart.

**Leaving home** Ephraim is dejected over the idea of leaving his home. His father confides in him that he does not want to leave either, but it is either leaving or meeting the fate of his mother, who died of hunger. In the morning, the child and his father bid farewell to their friends and relatives. Ephraim casts one last look over his home and leaves with his father and his lamb to a new place.





**Greeted by Uncle Solomon** After a long bus ride and some walk on mountain trails, Ephraim, his father, and Chuni are greeted by Ephraim's uncle, Solomon (his father's cousin). Solomon covers him with kisses and admires the size of Chuni, the lamb, which he mistakes for a gift from his visitors to be slaughtered on the day of the Holy Cross.



**In the custody of the grand aunt** Solomon is a farmer, who works on a small strip of land. He lives in a small house with his mother, his wife, and his three daughters. In the house, Ephraim's aunt and grand aunt lament the death of Ephraim's mother. After the weeping has subsided, Abraham, Ephraim's father, asks his aunt if he can leave Ephraim in her care while he seeks employment in the city. She agrees, promising him to care for him as his own mother would have.



**The separation** Abraham and Solomon recall the drought that has made things difficult for farmers in his region. Abraham remembers his wife, dead because of the lack of rain and the ensuing famine. At dinner time, all the relatives gather around for a meal of injera and stew. They pray, and they eat. In the morning, Abraham leaves his son behind and goes to seek work, promising to come back to fetch him when the rain returns.



Lamb





**Ephraim cannot farm** Ephraim is helping his aunt cook. His uncle remarks that a boy must not be cooking and orders him to follow him to the field. The uncle tries unsuccessfully to teach his nephew to work the plow in the field.



**Uncle Solomon disapproves of Ephraim's cooking** Ephraim's aunt is cooking dinner and asks him to watch over the stew while she sees what is wrong with her crying infant. Ephraim's uncle, Solomon, comes home and again expresses disapproval of Ephraim's cooking. He tells Ephraim that he is a boy and must prove it this coming holiday by slaughtering a sheep, that is, Chuni.



**Homesick** Ephraim is in the barn with his pet lamb, Chuni. He tells Chuni that he hates being at his uncle's home, and he asks why his father thought that this would be a better place for him than their old home. Ephraim takes Chuni for a walk in the mountains. He hopes to see the direction to his home from the top of the mountains.



**Dream of a united family** Ephraim falls asleep in the tall grass on the mountaintop and dreams of his mother tenderly holding him in her arm to comfort him and feeding him. His father and Chuni, too, join him, and they form a happy family.

**No money for the bus fare home** Ephraim decides to flee with Chuni before the holiday, but he does not have enough money for the bus fare. As Ephraim is returning home, he spots his cousin Tsion attending a meeting about how to improve food supplies in the country. Ephraim sees some boys being paid to carry sacks of supplies. He wants to do the same to earn some money, but they bully him, and he gives up.





**An unconventional girl** Ephraim's cousin, TSION, is often reading newspaper articles. She learns that urine is a good fertilizer, and she fertilizes the family vegetable garden with human urine. Her cousin is astounded, and her father is disgusted by the idea that human urine will fertilize the vegetables that they eat. A young man by the name of Yohannes comes to visit TSION's parents. Her mother rushes to fix TSION's hair and make her beautiful. She urges her daughter to take care of her appearance lest she should never find a man to marry her.



**TSION will not marry** TSION is winnowing lentils with her mother. TSION's mother is trying to convince her daughter to marry Yohannes before it is too late for her to find a man. She reminds her that she is the only girl of her age in the village who is not yet married. She tells her that Yohannes is from a good, religious family. TSION retorts that she does not intend to marry in order to breed children like cattle. Her mother tells her that the books she likes to read will not keep her out of hunger. TSION gets up and leaves her mother. Ephraim picks up her winnowing basket and starts helping his aunt.

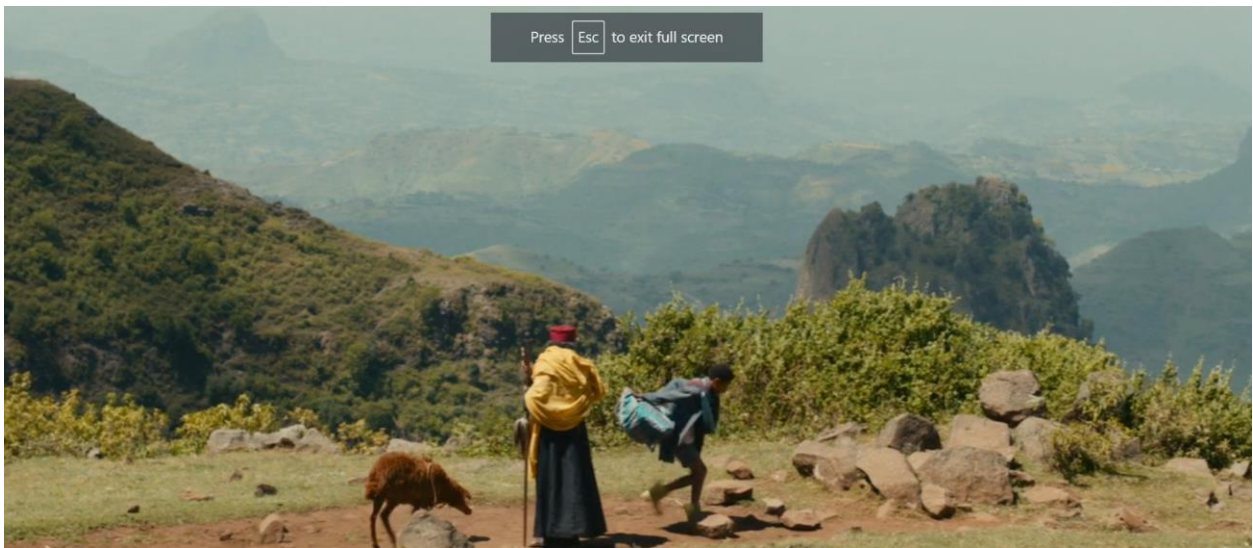




**Ephraim's wants to make samosas** Ephraim tells his aunt that he would like to make some samosas with the lentils and sell them at the market. She remarks that it is a foolish idea, for they do not have enough lentils to feed the family. Ephraim leaves, disappointed.



**Guilty conscience** Ephraim steals a hen and her chicks from the family farm and goes to sell them in the market. On his way, he meets an orthodox priest, who presents him a cross to kiss. Filled with guilt for stealing the chickens, Ephraim dodges the cross and runs to the market.





**Ephraim makes samosas** With the money earned from the sale of the stolen chickens, Ephraim buys some ingredients to make samosas. He has his aunt and grand aunt try the first batch of his snacks. They like it and think that he has the cooking talent of his late mother.



**Act like a boy!** Ephraim's uncle enters the kitchen just as the boy is making his second batch of samosas. He laments that his cousin raised his child so badly as to make him act like a girl. He warns Ephraim that he had better start acting like a boy, and he shoves him with his cane. Ephraim's aunt decides to finish cooking the samosas for him. Ephraim's samosas sell well in the village market.



**Ephraim is robbed** While Ephraim is counting his money, he is accosted by the gang of boys who bullied him a few days earlier. They beat him and take his money from him. Fortunately, Ephraim had some money stashed away, which he gives to his aunt when he returns home. She returns some of the money to Ephraim for him to buy more ingredients and carry on with his samosa business.





**Revenge** Once again, Ephraim's path crosses that of the gang of bullies who torment him. He fills a ball with rocks and throws it in the middle of the boys, who rush to play with it. The head of the gang kicks the ball and issues a painful cry, accusing one of his gang members of tricking him. As a fight breaks out among the gang, Ephraim sneaks off and runs home. He arrives home too late for dinner and must content himself with roasted grains offered to him by his cousin, TSION.



**Urine as fertilizer** Salomon is disgusted that his daughter fertilizes the vegetable garden with human urine. He tells her that her foolish ideas come from the books she reads, and he snatches her notebook and throws it to the ground. Tsion gathers the pages of her book and continues her reading.



**Tsion's idol** Ephraim is curious about the contents of Tsion's reading. She tells him that it is about a real-life Ethiopian researcher, Dr. Gabisa Ejeta, who was awarded the World Food Prize for his work on drought resistant sorghum that saved lives in Ethiopia.



**Tsion's idea of alternative proteins** Ephraim is worried that he still has not been able to gather the necessary money to take his lamb back to his native village. The holiday is approaching, and so is the imminent slaughter of Chuni. Seeing Ephraim's sadness, Tsion suggests to her parents that they eat lentils, chickpeas, and *injera* (a spongy flatbread made of processed teff cereal), which have as much protein as Ephraim's lamb. Tsion's parents think that this is another stupid idea from her books.





**Almost losing Chuni** Ephraim comes out of his stupor and decides to take Chuni home. They stumble upon a tax collector, who accuses Ephraim of trying to evade taxes on livestock by hiding Chuni. The man tries to confiscate the animal. Ephraim holds on to his friend and beg the man to let them go. The man lets the child and his pet lamb continue their way when he learns who Ephraim's relatives are.



**Hiding Chuni** At the market, Ephraim sees some shepherds tending to their sheep. He asks his cousin, TSION, to help him convince one of them to keep Chuni in his herd for him. The shepherd agrees to watch Chuni for an agreed upon price. The shepherd cuts short Ephraim's farewell to Chuni and drags the animal to his herd.





**Ephraim defends Chuni** Ephraim is sitting in the marketplace. He hears his pet lamb scream in pain and realizes that Chuni's screams come from the shepherd beating the animal. Ephraim runs to the rescue, jumps on the shepherd's neck and starts fighting him. Tsion, who is having coffee with her boyfriend, sees the commotion and pulls her young cousin out of harm. Tsion's boyfriend pays what is due to the shepherd for watching after Chuni and recovers the lamb.





**Ephraim is whipped** At dinner time, Ephraim's uncle is relishing the thought of eating meat during the holiday. Ephraim has bought some chicken for the feast, but TSION informs the family that the lamb has gone missing. Ephraim tells him that the lamb was stolen at the market. The uncle is furious and wants to borrow the grandmother's whip to punish Ephraim. She refuses to relinquish her whip, which she names 'she-rains', to symbolize her authority. The uncle frantically whips Ephraim with a tree branch. TSION holds her cousin in her arms and comforts him.



**Coffee ceremony** A coffee ceremony at Solomon's gathers the neighbors. They recall the devastation of the big drought. They also learn through Solomon that Ephraim's mother was one of the victims of the drought.



**Extra holy water for Ephraim** On the night of the Festival of the Holy Cross, Ephraim watches the revelers dance around a bonfire. The elders gather the family and friends to recall stories of the Ethiopian resistance against the Italian invaders in the 1930s. The priest closes the ceremony with a prayer and blesses everyone with holy water. When he comes to Ephraim, who had run away from him days earlier, he recognizes him and gives the boy an extra splash of holy water on the face.





**Money is tight** Solomon's younger daughter is ill, and her condition is worsening by the day. Her mother is thinking of calling for the priest, but TSION tells her that what her little sister needs is medical attention at a clinic. Her mother replies that for that they will need some money, and she accuses TSION of not being of any support in that regard. The grandmother offers her savings toward the hospital fees.

**TSION'S ambition** TSION is telling Ephraim about her desire to go to college and be a "doctor of the land," like Dr. Ejeta, her hero, who is fighting to find a solution to the drought. TSION's mother scolds her for talking when the rest of the family is trying to sleep. She tells her mother that she is tired of her nagging and the confinement. Her mother replies that she can leave the family home if she is unhappy there.

**TSION leaves the village** TSION tells Ephraim that she is leaving for the city with her boyfriend. He begs her to take him with her so that he can find his father. She tells him that the family needs him, and that he is too young to leave home. Ephraim sneaks in the back of the truck with Chuni. On the way, the lamb's bleats give the clandestine passengers away and TSION's boyfriend puts them off his truck.



**No bride for Yohannes** A coffee ceremony brings Solomon's and Yohannes's families together with a priest. Yohannes has come to officially ask for TSION's hand, and his mother wants to know the whereabouts of TSION. TSION's parents lie that they sent her on an errand while still hoping that she will reappear late as usual.



**Chuni finds a new family** On his way home, Ephraim sees a young shepherdess with her flock. He asks her if she can keep Chuni for him. She agrees. The boy reassures his pet lamb that it will be happy among the herd, bids him farewell and leaves, promising to come and fetch him later. Just like his father said to him.



**Chuni will not follow Ephraim** Ephraim runs to the little shepherdess to get Chuni back. The lamb has gotten accustomed to the herd and refuses to follow him. As he pulls Chuni, the shepherdess urges Ephraim to let the lamb stay with its kind. Ephraim watches Chuni go with the herd, heartbroken.





**The aunt's disappointment** Ephraim is counting his money. His aunt surprises him and is upset that he has been hiding cash when she needs it to save her daughter's life at the clinic. She takes Ephraim's money to the grand aunt and slaps Ephraim as the boy tries to explain his action. The grand aunt gives back the child his money and asks him to buy some food for the family to show his respect.



**Ephraim is lost** Ephraim runs to the station to catch a bus to Buya, his hometown. However, he arrives too late. The last bus has already left. He climbs the mountain top to gauge the distance to Buya and realizes that it will be impossible on foot. He sits in the tall grass weeping. He falls asleep and wakes up to realize that he is lost in a strange forest. He is rescued by the village tax collector, who takes him to his grand aunt's.



**Change** With Tsion gone, Solomon has now adopted his daughter's methods and fertilizes his vegetable garden with urine. Ephraim cooks for the community, and his dishes are much appreciated. The people praise his culinary talents and comment that it is his mother cooking through him.





## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### **Ephraim** (Open)

*Loyal* Ephraim is a loyal friend to Chuni. From the very start, he promised his pet lamb that they would never be separated, and Ephraim did all he could to keep his promise. To protect his pet lamb from slaughter, Ephraim escaped with him but was overwhelmed by the unsurmountable mountains and returned home. Then he had a shepherd hide Chuni in his flock while he was making and selling samosas to buy them a bus ticket home. As time was running out, and the holiday approaching, and with it, too, the eventuality that Chuni would be slaughtered, Ephraim tried to sneak on a truck with the animal in the hope of reaching Addis Ababa, where his father had gone to seek employment. When his efforts failed, Ephraim paid a young shepherdess to temporarily look after the animal.

*Melancholic* Ephraim never felt comfortable about leaving his village, his family home, and his friends. At the home of his uncle, he felt out of place, lonely, and afraid for his pet lamb that his uncle was determined to slaughter for the feast of the Holy Cross. In his dreams, Ephraim had visions of his mother, his father, his pet lamb and him, forming a united family on a lush and productive land of their own. By contrast, Ephraim saw his uncle's home as a place of lack and confinement. On several occasions the boy tried to return to his hometown, but his efforts were met with disappointment. Ultimately Ephraim decided to stop trying to flee and settled at his uncle's.

*Flexible* Ephraim is a resourceful boy. To save his pet lamb from slaughter, he devises several strategies. He figures that for him to run away with his friend, he will need money for the bus fare, which he does not have. He asks his aunt to give him some ingredients for him to make and sell pastries. When she refuses, he steals and sells some chickens. With the money earned, Ephraim starts a samosa business. However, the prospect of losing Chuni approaches with the nearing of the holiday. So, after his deal to have a shepherd hide Chuni in his flock in the marketplace falls through, Ephraim decides to go away with the animal, by travelling clandestinely on a truck. They are discovered by the driver and dropped on the road. At the end, Ephraim asks a young shepherdess to keep Chuni in her flock. There, the lamb finds company among his kind and refuses to follow Ephraim any further. Ephraim returns to his uncle and resolve to make the place his home.

### **Tsion** (Rational)

*Supportive* Tsion is a supportive cousin to Ephraim. She tries to stop her parents from slaughtering Ephraim's pet lamb by persuading them that the proteins they seek in meat are also available in *teff* (a cereal native to Ethiopia and Eritrea, and which constitutes the basic staple food when transformed into a spongy flat bread called *injera*) and lentils. When Ephraim is sad and homesick, she has his head in her lap and talks to him like his mother would. She convinces a shepherd to let Ephraim hide Chuni in his flock for a price, and when Ephraim wants to follow her to the city, she protectively asks him to remain with her parents, for he is not old enough and ready to take a chance in the unpredictable city of Addis Ababa. To Ephraim, Tsion plays the role of a surrogate mother.

*Rebellious* Tsion does not conform to her community's idea of womanhood, which is to get married around age twenty, to settle, and give her husband a flock of children. She tells her mother that she does not intend to marry Yohannes and breed children like cattle. She wants to go to university and study agronomy. Therefore, she is more into her reading and her think tank discussions at the marketplace than into learning to cook and fix herself to please Yohannes. Her attitude, which her parents see as boyish, puts her at odds with her mother. Tsion's ultimate act of rebellion is when she elopes with her boyfriend to the city on the very day Yohannes and his parents come to officially ask for her hand.

*Rational* Tsion does not think that Ethiopia's drought and famine are fated. A good disciple of Dr. Ejeta, a renowned world agronomist working to find solutions to famine in Ethiopia, Tsion is convinced that famine is eradicable through scientific research. She wants to be a part of the problem solvers in Ethiopia and dreams of pursuing studies in agronomy. In the meantime, she applies some of Dr. Ejeta's methods, such as fertilizing her family vegetable garden with urine and advising her parents to substitute scarce animal proteins with available vegetal proteins like teff, chickpeas, and lentils.

## **Solomon** (Closed)

*Narrow-minded* Solomon has a traditional idea of gender and gender roles. For him, a man's place is on the farm ploughing, and a woman's place is in the kitchen cooking. He gets apoplectic and violent each time he sees his nephew in the kitchen helping the women. He either drags him to the fields to teach him how to farm or hits him with his cane to get him away from the kitchen. Solomon laments the upbringing that Ephraim received from his father, which, according to him, turned the boy into a girl.

*Severe* Solomon is a severe father and uncle, who rules his household by caning and whipping. Most of Solomon's violence is directed at his nephew, Ephraim, whom he sees as a failed boy, because of the child's passion for cooking, which he received from his late mother. Solomon's violent attempt to "restore" his nephew into manhood fails. In the end, Solomon has to admit defeat and accept Ephraim's culinary propensity, consoling himself with the idea that it is the spirit of Ephraim's mother who cooks through the child.

## THEMES

### **SOCIETY**

**Community/myth** The community in *Lamb* is a close-knit one, held by a common myth of religion, resistance, and culture. The harsh lives of the villagers are made bearable by their orthodox faith. The priest is a constant presence among the villagers, whose sorrows he relieves with holy water, kisses of the holy cross, and prayers. When Ephraim steals some chicken to sell at the market, he feels guilty and dodges the priest and his holy cross. Ephraim's guilt is typical of how fear of divine punishment keeps the community in check. On the night of the Holy Cross celebration, the community listen to Ephraim's grand aunt recounting the acts of bravery of the Ethiopian freedom fighters, who chased away the Italian invaders. This retelling cements the bonds between the Ethiopian people.

**Patriarchy** Despite the strong presence of Solomon's mother, Ephraim's grand aunt, who rules the household with a whip, Solomon is the authority in the house. It is his law that his mother and his wife, as his auxiliaries, enforce. And that law has designed spaces and roles along gender lines. According to that law, Ephraim is of the masculine gender, and he must remain obedient to his gendered role of farming and slaughtering sheep during the holiday. When Ephraim gives the slightest indication that he might act otherwise, that is, "like a girl," Solomon scolds him and beats him into line. As regards Tsion, Solomon's law has decreed that she must get married at a certain age, and in the meantime learn to cook and make herself attractive. It is to the mother that the responsibility to make Tsion abide by this law falls. And when Tsion fails to play her gendered role, she and her mother are whipped by her grandmother, the father's primary auxiliary. Solomon can rely on his mother and his wife to maintain his patriarchal grip on the family. Patriarchy does not need to be materially present to enforce its rule. He can count on the help of several people in the community, among whom women, to ensure his reign even in his absence.

**Matriarchy** Ephraim's uncle, Solomon, is the leader of the family. However, Ephraim's grand aunt is, in fact, the person whose authority is most felt and respected. A whip tucked under her thigh, she sits in the family's hut, on a platform dominating the rest of the room. From there, she watches every movement and listens to every conversation and passes judgement and punishes the impertinent members of the family. She whips her grand-daughter for speaking back to her mother, and she whips her daughter-in-law for allegedly having taught "bad manners" to her grand-daughter. Nevertheless, she also consoles. She comforts Ephraim's father when he comes to his relatives with news of his wife's death, and she consoles and advises Ephraim on what to do when his uncle's wife slaps him for stashing money that could have been used to pay for his cousin's hospital bills. Ephraim's grand aunt is also the storyteller around whom the family and the community gather to hear deeds of past heroes. Her presence is fundamental and reassuring.

**Gender** Ethiopian society is one of gendered roles and spaces. Tsion is a girl, and her parents expect her to live her life according to assumed "natural" behaviors associated with her gender. Yohannes, a young man from the village, has been chosen for her. The expectation is that she will marry Yohannes, settle in the village with him, and bear children for him. However, Tsion has other aspirations. She tells her mother that her intention is not to be a housewife and breed children like cattle. She intends to pursue her studies



in Addis Ababa and become a “doctor of the land,” an agronomist, who finds solutions to the advancing desertification and recurrent drought of Ethiopia. Tsion’s ambition is a matter of concern for her parents, who see her as a failed girl.

Like Tsion, Ephraim does not conform to the gendered role laid out for him by his society. He likes to do what is considered “women’s work,” such as cooking, which wins him his uncle’s scorn. As a child, he saw his mother cook, and when she passed away, he cooked for his father and himself. It was a practice that carried no gender label. His uncle, however, would not have it this way and laments that Ephraim has been ill-raised. For Solomon, Ephraim is a failed boy. At the end of the film, however, Ephraim succeeds in having people accept the role he has chosen for himself across the gender lines. He cooks for the community, and they appreciate his talents, even though they justify it as his late mother working through him.

**Education** A recurrent theme in Ethiopian cinema, as evidenced in *Difret* (2014) and *Embi* (2018), to cite only these few, is education. More precisely the belief in education as a means for transforming lives. Tsion believes in the power of education to pull her compatriots out of obscurantism and put them on the path to better days. She is the only female member of a discussion circle that meets often at the marketplace to devise solutions to Ethiopia’s famine. Dr. Ejeta’s articles are part of her daily reading, and she gardens using his expert advice. Tsion is convinced that she can better help her community by pursuing a degree in agronomy. Her parents’ plan to marry her off to Yohannes, a well-to-do young man from the village, does not fall within Tsion’s educational aspirations. So, she leaves the village on the day that Yohannes and his mother come to officially ask for her hand. As she told her mother, her education is primordial, and she does not intend to be confined in a traditional marriage breeding children for a man.

**Orality** Even though Ethiopia is among the African countries that have an ancient written tradition, orality is still strong as a form of communication and storehouse of historical events. The traditional daily coffee ceremony that gathers families and neighbors is always an opportunity for people to exchange news, to learn about newcomers, and to recall the lives of those who have passed. It is at such a ceremony that the cause of the death of Ephraim’s mother is evoked. She died of a famine brought about by the drought. At that ceremony, one also learns of Ephraim’s background. He is Jewish by his mother. The stories orally exchanged by neighbors and families, such as the devastation of the drought, of which Ephraim’s tragic loss of his mother is typical and illustrative, will be passed on to future generations by future elders. An example of the oral preservation and transmission of history is observable during the night of the Holy Cross celebration, when, after the bonfire, the community gathers to listen to Ephraim’s grand aunt’s rendition of the defeat of the Italian colonizers by the Ethiopian people. She tells of the prowess of local heroes and their humiliation of the coward Italian invaders, who were forced to flee without their boots. The continuance of orality in the Ethiopian countryside is for many Ethiopians the continuance of a proud tradition.

**Science** Tsion’s hero is a man she calls a “doctor of the land.” He is an Ethiopian scientist who has come up with a solution to the issue of famine brought by the recurrence of drought. He developed a drought-resistant type of sorghum that will help push back famine. He is the man Tsion looks up to and wants to emulate. His writings are part of her daily reading. Some of his scientific methods, which the young girl reproduces on her parent’s farms, such as fertilizing gardens with urine, are resisted upon by the girl’s parents, set in their old, traditional ways. In the countryside, Tsion has become Dr. Ejeta’s mouthpiece, and her constant clashes with her parents, especially her mother, symbolize the clash between science and obscurantism. Her parents are convinced that famine will cease as a matter of divine intervention, whereas she believes that human scientific manipulations of crops are likely to push back famine. Her mother is convinced that her ailing little sister will be cured by the priest’s holy water, but Tsion urges her to take her sister to the clinic instead. Tsion’s family believes that the proteins that their bodies need are only available in animals. The young girl advises that they seek it in lentils and teff. Tsion sees her family’s narrow-mindedness as antithetical to her aspirations to become a scientist. She leaves for the city of Addis Ababa to pursue her dreams of becoming an agronomist.

**Poverty** Yared Zeleke, the director of *Lamb*, stated in an interview with CNN that he wanted to present another image of his native country, Ethiopia. An image different than the one that has so long presented Ethiopia as a barren land where famine and poverty reign supreme. Zeleke’s showcasing of the lush Ethiopian landscape is impressive. Nevertheless, the image of lack, scarcity, and poverty is inescapable in *Lamb*. The big drought that has caused Ephraim’s mother to die of hunger, and which has

forced Ephraim and his father out of their homeland for lack of food, is one of the many droughts that has befallen the country since 1928. In Zeleke's film, the villagers live under the fear of a prolonged drought and the uncertainty of a better tomorrow. In *Buya*, at his father's house, Ephraim is forced to steal corn to feed his lamb. The meal is so meagre that if Ephraim did not insist that his father take a few bites, the father would sleep hungry so that his son would have enough to eat. Scarcity and poverty are constantly on the horizon in the Ethiopian society, especially in rural areas. Ephraim's aunt tells him that lentils are barely enough for the family, and that he cannot use them for his samosa business. Meals are very austere, and anyone who misses a meal can be sure that they will sleep hungry. At his uncle's place, Ephraim comes home after mealtime and must make do with a handful of roasted cereal for his dinner. Zeleke's effort to show a positive image of Ethiopia is commendable. Nonetheless, the film is also replete with unavoidable scenes of poverty.

## RELATIONSHIP

**Family/love/care** The African adage that "it takes a village to raise a child" finds its full manifestation in the support Ephraim receives when his father entrusts him to his great aunt and goes to look for work in Addis Ababa. It is obvious that Abraham has no illusions about how his son will be treated. He knows that Ephraim will be punished if he must. But he also knows that his son will receive the love and learning necessary for his development. Once the father leaves, Ephraim becomes the responsibility of his extended family, and even members of the community outside his family. Determined to make him a man, his uncle set about teaching him how to work the plough and ox and to stay away from the kitchen and women. Having failed, by dint of cane and whip, to make Ephraim a man as he would have wished, the uncle abandons him to the women. First, to his great aunt, who showers him with compliments and advice. Then to his aunt who appreciates his contribution in the winnowing of lentils and the preparation of evening soup. And finally to his cousin, Tsion, who showers him with affection, consoles him when he weeps, and defends him against a violent shepherd. When Ephraim gets lost in the forest, the whole community mobilizes to find him. And the one who brings him back to his great aunt is the local policeman who had once threatened to take Chuni from him. At the coffee ceremony, the story of Ephraim, his origins, the culinary talents of his late mother, is told by the community and included in the history of the community, like a thread woven into the collective web. Ephraim is not just the child of his extended family. He is the son of the whole community from which he receives love, compassion, advice, training, and protection.

## QUEST

**Quest** In various forms, the theme of quest is recurrent in *Lamb*. Abraham's quest is that of fulfillment of happiness through work. The famine caused by the drought has taken away his wife and his livelihood. He entrusts his son to his cousin and aunt and goes to seek employment in the city of Addis Ababa. Abraham's decision undermines his son's and the boy's pet lamb's freedom. Not only does Ephraim feel confined in the house of his uncle, who wants to impose upon him a traditional gendered idea of being a man, but his pet lamb is also in danger of being consumed on the day of the feast of the Holy Cross. So, Ephraim attempts, unsuccessfully, to escape from his uncle's home on foot, by bus, and, finally, by riding clandestinely in the back of a truck. Ephraim makes his uncle's home his home and finds solace only when his aspiration to be a cook is accepted by his uncle and his family. Like her cousin, Ephraim, Tsion feels trapped in the village and seeks fulfillment outside the narrow, traditional, and dogmatic world by entering into the universal truth of science. Unbeknownst to her family, who have arranged a marriage between her and a young man from the village, Tsion leaves the village with her boyfriend to pursue studies of agronomy in Addis Ababa.

## CHANGE

**Transience/Change** While Tsion's parents are set in their old ways, the young girl is part of a generation in evolution. Tsion's mother's hope is to marry her daughter to Yohannes, a God-fearing young man from a rich family, which will ensure that she does not die of starvation. Tsion, on the contrary, has other ambitions. She wants to go to university, become an agronomist, and help solve the recurrent famine problems in Ethiopia. Her reading of agricultural literature has developed in her a new appreciation of farming methods and eating habits, which she tries to pass on to her parents with limited success. She tells them that urine is an effective fertilizer for vegetable gardens. Her father, however, sees the idea as disgusting. With the scarcity of meat, Tsion tells her family that they can substitute vegetable protein for



animal protein. Like Tsion, Ephraim, too, is an agent of change in his community. His insistence on crossing the gender border and acting “like a woman” by cooking and helping in the kitchen is not well received by his uncle at the beginning. However, Ephraim forges ahead and finally wins his community’s admiration and respect. It was not only Ephraim and Tsion who found their place in society. Chuni, too, found himself among his own. The love that Ephraim gave him, though praiseworthy, was only the love of one species to another. And if Chuni returned this love to Ephraim, it was only by simple instinct, because it was, for Chuni, never a complete love. It took Chuni to find himself in a flock of sheep, in his community, for him to feel the measure of his true self, and to say goodbye to his human friend. Ephraim cried because he is endowed with the faculty of rememory. Chuni walked away without looking back, simply following his animal instincts. Nevertheless, Chuni’s moving on is nothing different from how we, human beings, move on with life, when we go to college, when we have a new job in a new town, or when we have a new partner in life and say goodbye to friends and families. Sometimes our human memory compels us to reconnect. And sometimes, we simply move on, without looking back.

## QUESTIONS

1. How does your culture see men in the kitchen? Does your culture have traditional spaces and roles associated with gender that must not be crossed? Describe in detail.
2. Myths are often the glue that holds communities together as they provide them with a common beginning or foundation and a common end or goal. Can you share some myths specific to your nation, your ethnic group, or your community?
3. Ephraim ends up settling at his uncle’s place after his desire for cooking is accepted by the community. What message does this convey about the meaning of “home” to a person?
4. What do you think is the message in Chuni’s refusal to follow Ephraim at the end of the film?
5. In an interview with CNN’s “Inside Africa,” the filmmaker states that his film has political content without elaborating on his statement. What political content can you detect in *Lamb*?