

# BOOK REVIEW

**Tekletsadik Belachew. *Stories from the Fireplace: Theological Meditations on Haile Gerima's Cinema*.** Bamenda, Cameroon: Langa Research & Publishing Common Initiative Group, 2022. 384 pp. Recommendations. Appendices. Bibliographies. Index. \$48.00. Paper. ISBN: 978-9956-552-75-7.

Scholars of Africa cinema may already be familiar with Tekletsadik Belachew's earlier work on Ethiopia's most internationally famous filmmaker, Haile Gerima, whose films about his motherland include *Harvest: 3000 Years* (Mirt Sost Shi Amit, 1976), *Imperfect Journey* (1994), *Adwa: An African Victory* (1999), and *Teza* (2008). His feature-length films on the African-American experience include *Bush Mama* (1976), *Wilmington 10—USA 10,000* (1978), *Ashes and Embers* (1982), and *Sankofa* (1993). In *Stories from the Fireplace: Theological Meditations on Haile Gerima's Cinema*, Tekletsadik Belachew takes his research in a new direction by using Gerima's films as inspiration for his own theological meditations.

In this book, Belachew enters into the discourse of African Christian theology for which he utilizes Haile Gerima's films as critical tools to interrogate the racist biases and colonialist worldviews of Eurocentric Christian theology. Toward this self-consciously "imperfect journey" inspired by the cinematic tactics of Third Cinema, he takes several turns. He first provides a biography of Haile Gerima that situates Gerima both in his local Gondari cultural context and within the global context of other African filmmakers, especially Gerima's compatriots Ousmane Sembene (from Senegal) and Med Hondo (from Mauritania). He also reveals the influence of Haile Gerima's father, Abba Gerima Taffere, and usefully provides lengthy translations of the father's writings about history and religion. He brilliantly takes us through Ethiopian Orthodox Christian theology's conceptualization of the visual icon to then theorize a new way of appreciating cinema in a theological context. He focuses on some of these iconic images from Gerima's films, such as the west African icon of the *Sankofa* bird looking back over its shoulder, as inspirations for an anti-colonialist Christian theology. He places this theology in dialogue with major African philosophers such as Frantz Fanon, Amílcar Cabral, and Achille Mbembe, and challenges the assumption of African culture as primarily "oral." Ultimately, Belachew

advocates for a recuperation and appreciation of ancient African Christianity that would include the Orthodox churches in Ethiopia, Egypt, and other kingdoms across North Africa. He aims for an “Afro-Ethiopic theology of icons” that “bridges theology and cinema” (226).

This is arguably a bold move, considering that many scholars of African cinema have observed a resistance to Christianity as a colonizing religion in the films of Haile Gerima, Ousmane Sembene, and Med Hondo. It is well known that these films have a tendency to instead value progressive politics and/or other indigenous forms of African spirituality. For example, in Gerima’s 1993 film *Sankofa*, the Christian minister is a hypocrite who not only supports slavery but also allows for the rape of African women by their enslavers. The biracial product of one of those rapes, the character named Joe, is tragically conflicted about his identity under the tutelage of that priest. The heroes of the film, Nunu and Shango, maintain indigenous African religious practices for their community, and indeed the title of the film *Sankofa* derives from an Akan religious symbol and expresses, through the song of a *griot*, Amílcar Cabral’s slogan, “return to the source.” In Belachew’s interview with Haile Gerima (included as an appendix), Gerima reflects on his films that aim to show the “destruction of African spiritualism” by colonization (248). Similar to Gerima’s *Sankofa*, Med Hondo’s film about slavery *West Indies* (1979) characterizes the priests as hypocritical compradors working on behalf of imperialism. In Hondo’s epic *Sarraounia* (1986), the hero of the film is the sorceress-queen Sarraounia who wages an epic battle against French colonialism, and rejects both Christianity and Islam in favor of her indigenous religious practices and institutions. Gerima’s early film *Harvest: 3000 Years* is at its heart a celebration of the laborer. In it, the crass landlord hypocritically exploits his laborers while at the same time praying to Jesus. In *Bush Mama*, about an African-American woman confronting systemic racism and oppression in Los Angeles, the primary iconic figure is the poster of a female Angolan freedom fighter with a gun in one arm and a child under the other. In a disturbing climactic moment in the movie, when the main character is debating with herself whether to abort her child as her social worker has recommended, the film presents a surrealistic dream sequence, in which a montage of images includes a cross emerging from between her legs. On the cross, instead of the icon of Jesus Christ, there is an icon of a pregnant woman who has been sacrificed. In Gerima’s last film *Teza*, the Ethiopian church attempts an exorcism of the main character Anberber, which fails. In the end, Anberber instead finds solace in his secret romance with an outcast woman and through his calling to become a teacher for the children, who represent the future.

Considering such challenging moments in the films of Gerima and Hondo, Belachew’s project to use these films as inspiration for an “Afro-Ethiopic theology” is provocative and important, because his main idea is that such a theology must necessarily be critical of the racist assumptions and colonizing symbolisms of European theology. Readers of *Stories from the Fireplace* who might be looking for sustained and focused analysis of the many

allusions and references to Ethiopian culture in Gerima's movies might be better served by Belachew's earlier chapter on "The Religio-Cultural Symbolisms in the Amharic Films of Haile Gerima," in the edited volume *Cine-Ethiopia: The History and Politics of Film in the Horn of Africa* (Michigan State University Press, 2018). His new book delivers exactly what its subtitle promises: *Theological Meditations on Haile Gerima's Cinema*. The iconographies of the films, such as the *Sankofa* bird, serve as launching pads for Belachew's own theological flight.

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