

POV Community
Engagement &
Education

DISCUSSION GUIDE



FAYA DAYI

a film by Jessica Beshir

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FAYA DAYI

A hypnotic immersion in the world of Harar, Ethiopia, a place where one commodity—khat, a euphoria-inducing plant—holds sway over the rituals and rhythms of everyday life, *Faya Dayi* captures intimate moments in the lives of everyone from the harvesters of the crop to people lost in its narcotic haze to a desperate but determined younger generation searching for an escape from political strife.

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This guide is an invitation to dialogue. It is based on a belief in the power of human connection and designed for people who want to use *Faya Dayi* to engage family, friends, classmates, colleagues, and communities. In contrast to initiatives that foster debates in which participants try to convince others that they are right, this document envisions conversations undertaken in a spirit of openness in which people try to understand one another and expand their thinking by sharing viewpoints and listening actively.

The discussion prompts are intentionally crafted to help a wide range of audiences think more deeply about the issues in the film. Rather than attempting to address them all, choose one or two that best meet your needs and interests. And be sure to leave time to consider taking action. Planning next steps can help people leave the room feeling energized and optimistic, even in instances when conversations have been difficult.

For more detailed event planning and facilitation tips, visit <https://community-network.amdoc.org/>.

THE FILM: PARTICIPANTS & ISSUES

KEY PARTICIPANTS

Mohammed Arif - a 14-year-old boy whose father is addicted to khat and whose mother has emigrated

Ibrahim Mohammed - Mohammed Arif's friend who has attempted to emigrate

Hashim Abdi - an elderly religious man

KEY ISSUES

Faya Dayi is an excellent tool for outreach and will be of special interest to people who want to explore the following topics:

- historical memory
- state violence
- marginalized identities
- traditional Islam
- the migrant crisis
- cash-crop production
- ecological change
- Ethiopian history



BACKGROUND INFORMATION**THE OROMO PEOPLE**

The Oromo comprise the single largest ethnic group in Ethiopia. They speak Afaan Oromoo, a Cushitic language in the Afroasiatic language family, and traditionally reside in the Oromia region of central Ethiopia, of which Addis Ababa (known as Finfinne in Afaan Oromoo) is the regional capital. The Oromo people have a significant presence in northern Kenya, as well as large diasporic communities in the United States and Canada.

Oromo social, political, economic, and religious activities are traditionally governed by an indigenous institution known as gadaa. Male members of Oromo society are organized into classes based on genealogical generations, and each generation has its own political, economic, and ritual responsibilities. Members progress through stages together, ultimately taking on political and ritual leadership roles in the gadaa stage. Leadership changes on a rotational basis every eight years. Women's customary institutions, such as siinqee and sanacha, also exist to promote women's interests under gadaa governance. In addition to gadaa, the spiritual leadership of the qaalluu historically offered an important, shared religious institution within the traditional Oromo religion of Waaqeffanna. This high priest guarded the laws of the sky god, Waaq, who was believed to control peace, fertility, and life-giving rains, the most important aspects of everyday life for Oromo herders and farmers. Today, the majority of Oromo are adherents of Christianity and Islam.

Prior to the creation of the modern Ethiopian empire in the late 19th century, the Oromo people led an independent existence in polities and communities of various sizes and shapes, from kingdoms to decentralized lineages. Though the Oromo lived as neighbors with the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia—then confined to what is currently northern land in the Ethiopian highlands—it was not until Ethiopia's expansion under Emperor Menelik II (1844–1913) that the Oromo lost their sovereignty and came under the military and political domination of the Ethiopian state. The struggle for self-determination has defined the Oromo political scenario ever since.

LAND AND LABOR IN ETHIOPIAN HISTORY

The Christian kingdom of Ethiopia, sometimes referred to as Abyssinia, had a class system premised upon different rights to land. This was known as the gebbar system. Under this system, tenant farmers cultivated the land and landowners held hereditary rights of

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production and ownership. Slaves, Muslims, and outcast groups were not permitted to own land in the Christian highlands. Farmers were required to give landowners a share of their crops and make monetary payments to them. The emperor also had the prerogative to award tribute appropriation rights to members of the royal family, nobility, military, and the church.

In the mid-to-late 19th century, Ethiopia underwent significant political changes when a series of emperors centralized the northern highlands and expanded the state. In the late 19th century, in a reaction to famine and economic crisis in the northern highlands, Emperor Menelik II and his armies conquered land to the south. The Ethiopian empire defined itself in ethnic and religious terms and demanded that its subjects in those newly acquired territories learn the Amharic language and convert to Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity.

The residents of previously sovereign territories, including the Oromo lands, were forcibly incorporated into the empire through permanent settlement and the imposition of a feudal system of land tenure. This included the confiscation of land, tenant farming, and forced labor. Areas where the state was unwilling or unable to maintain a permanent presence were subjected to periodic military raids and seizure.

The 1960s saw the emergence of the Ethiopian student movement, as students flooded the streets of Addis Ababa and chanted, “Land to the tiller,” calling for an end to the system that kept farmers impoverished. They spoke out against the monarchy and called for self-determination for Ethiopia’s diverse nationalities, who were marginalized by a small group of Amhara elites. A committee of military officers known as the Derg overthrew Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974 amid widespread protests throughout the country and famine in the north. While the Derg abolished the feudal system and enacted important land reforms, it also violently suppressed dissent in the country and instituted a single-party state. A coalition of ethnic insurgent movements known as the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) overthrew the Derg in 1991 and created a federal state in which regions were defined by ethnicity and the constitution stated, “All sovereign power resides in the Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples of Ethiopia.”

In April 2014, protests began against the proposed expansion of Addis Ababa, the federal capital, into the surrounding Oromia region. The protests in Oromia grew in late 2015 and 2016, animated not only by the Addis Ababa Master Plan but also by grievances over the historical and contemporary marginalization of the Oromo people. Eventually, the protests led to mass arrests and deaths at the hands of government forces.

ISLAM IN THE HORN OF AFRICA

Islam reached the Horn of Africa long before it spread through the Arab world. In the year 614, in the midst of intense persecution in Mecca, the Prophet Muhammad sent a group of his early followers to seek refuge in the Christian kingdom of Aksum in present-day northern Ethiopia and Eritrea. This migration is known in Islamic history as the first hijra, and some of the earliest mosques in Africa date to this period. Islam took hold initially in port cities along the Red Sea and Indian Ocean, as these areas had a long history of commercial activity and exchange with western Arabia. Arabs and Africans traded not only goods, but ideas, too. Gradually, Islam spread inland and by the ninth century, Islamic kingdoms known as sultanates were established in parts of present-day Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Somalia. These sultanates existed in uneasy tension—and often outright conflict—with the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia.

Harar grew prominent as a capital of one such sultanate, Adal, which flourished during the Middle Ages but experienced a collapse in the years following a prolonged war with Ethiopia that saw the intervention of the Portuguese under Cristóvão da Gama. It was not long afterward that the emir, or leader, Nur ibn Muhajid constructed the city's iconic protective walls. In 1647, 'Ali ibn Da'ud founded the emirate of Harar, an independent kingdom nominally associated with the Ottoman Empire. The residents of Harar are known as Harari and are defined by their distinctly urban identity, Islamic traditions, and language. The Oromo, who inhabit the surrounding agricultural lands, and nearby Somali herders have also shaped the city in various ways. The emirate of Harar ceased to exist in 1887, when armies from the kingdom of Shewa, led by the future Emperor Menelik II, defeated the last emir, 'Abd Allah II, at the Battle of Chelenqo.

In any case, the establishment of Islam in the Horn of Africa was never a wholesale adoption of the faith; the peoples of the Horn of Africa drew from their deeply rooted indigenous traditions to adapt the religion. Sufi Islam, with its ideas of introspection, spiritual closeness to God through ritual practice, spiritual learning with guides, and genealogical links with ancestors, easily grafted onto pre-Islamic belief systems. Harar was an important center of Islamic learning and mysticism, and Muslims from across the Horn of Africa came there to study the Quran and Sunnah (the ways of the Prophet

Muhammad) with prominent Islamic scholars. It is often referred to as the fourth holiest city in Islam, after Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem.

KHAT

Khat is a leafy, flowering plant native to the Horn of Africa that contains cathinone, a natural stimulant similar to amphetamine. It is widely consumed in Yemen, Somalia, and Ethiopia, where its euphoric high has long been used in Sufi Islamic ritual practices that seek to increase mystical experience and religious ecstasy. In these regions, khat-chewing is generally reserved for male consumption, with cultural taboos discouraging women from chewing. The World Health Organization (WHO) considers khat a dependency-producing substance and has identified insomnia and withdrawal symptoms after heavy use as side effects. Khat production is increasing and its use is becoming increasingly popular outside of culturally sanctioned occasions and rituals, with major socioeconomic consequences. Studies have shown that khat dependency is associated with unemployment, financial loss, absenteeism, and a variety of ailments, including elevated blood pressure, lack of concentration, arrhythmia, gastritis, and malnutrition.

Khat is Ethiopia's most lucrative cash-crop. It is mainly produced in eastern Ethiopia, where scarcity and land degradation have made it an appealing option for farmers, who are able to generate more income from khat per kilo while using less water than they would to grow coffee and other crops. Khat leaves begin to lose potency and wither within 48 hours of being picked, so the flow of trade from rural farmland to urban consumers is swift. There are a number of nodes along the way: farms, road junctures, village market collection hubs, central markets, and transport centers. Trucks and airplanes deliver fresh khat to cities in Ethiopia and export markets in neighboring Djibouti and Somalia daily.

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STARTING THE CONVERSATION

Immediately after the film, you may want to give people a few quiet moments to reflect on what they have seen. You could pose a general question (examples below) and give people some time to themselves to jot down or think about their answers before opening the discussion. Alternatively, you could ask participants to share their thoughts with partners before starting a group discussion.

- Reflect on your experience of the film. How did you feel while watching the film?
- What did you learn from *Faya Dayi*?
- Did the film leave you with any thoughts or questions?
- Describe a moment or scene in the film that you found particularly moving or disturbing. What was it about that scene that was especially compelling for you?

COLLECTIVITY AND COMMUNITY

Faya Dayi centers the communal experience of the Oromo people of eastern Ethiopia, a historically marginalized ethnic group.

- How does the use of multiple narrative voices convey a sense of collectivity?
- How does the film invoke memory and historical experience?
- Did the film make you feel hopeful or cynical about the future?

THE RHYTHMS OF EVERYDAY LIFE

The life-cycle of khat production provides structure to the film, as farmers cultivate and harvest the crop; warehouse laborers sort, sift, and bundle leaves; and truck drivers load up and deliver bundles of khat to sellers in the market. There is also movement through the geography of the city as the characters make their way through the narrow, winding alleys of the old town of Harar. The rituals of Islam punctuate the daily lives of the subjects.

- How is Islamic spirituality—beliefs, practices, rituals—represented in the film?
- In what ways can the city of Harar itself be considered a central character in the documentary?
- Discuss and compare the different functions of khat depicted in the film. Has it made the lives of the characters better or worse?

ORAL TRADITION AND STORYTELLING

Like many Africans, the Oromo are a traditionally oral people; the Latin-based orthography for Afaan Oromoo was only formally adopted in 1991. The Oromo have preserved their history through oral tradition; their stories have been told and retold over generations.

- How does the story of Azerkherlaini, the folk story, frame the events and characters in the film?
- What is the role of storytelling in the film? What stories do the subjects tell?
- In addition to narrative and storytelling, silence is deployed strategically, and many stories appear fragmented and unfinished. What do these silent moments reveal?

LANDSCAPES AND ECOLOGIES

Faya Dayi casts a cinematic gaze upon the landscapes of eastern Ethiopia—specifically, the city of Harar and the surrounding khat-producing farmlands of Oromia. Land in Oromia is under threat from climate change as well as economic exploitation and dispossession. Indeed, climate change was a precipitating factor for the Oromo protests that began in 2014.

- Reflect on the story of Azerkherlaini and the mention made by one farmer that his people switched from coffee to khat production due to less rainfall. Do you consider *Faya Dayi* a film about climate change?
- How do political tension and conflict shape the lives of the film's subjects and their living conditions?
- The young men in *Faya Dayi* are torn between remaining in Ethiopia and making the dangerous journey abroad. What are their reasons for wanting to emigrate?

CREDITS & ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Discussion Guide Author Safia Aidid

Safia Aidid is an interdisciplinary historian of modern Africa and an assistant professor of history and African studies at the University of Toronto. She holds a PhD from Harvard University. Her research addresses anticolonial nationalism, territorial imaginations, borders, and state formation in the Horn of Africa, with a particular focus on modern Somalia and Ethiopia. She is currently working on a book entitled *Pan-Somali Dreams: Ethiopia, Greater Somalia, and the Somali Nationalist Imagination*.

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Discussion Guide Producer: Courtney B. Cook, PhD | POV, Education Manager
Copyeditor: Natalie Danford