

FILM REVIEW

Xinyan Yu and Max Duncan, dirs. *Made in Ethiopia*. 2024. 91 minutes. Amharic, Afan Oromo, Mandarin, and English with English subtitles. Dogwoof, Hard Truth Films, and Gobeze Media.

The documentary film *Made in Ethiopia* presents multiple perspectives on the complex issue of foreign direct investment in Africa. It focuses on the Eastern Industrial Zone, a massive Chinese industrial park created in 2008 in the town of Dukem, about 35 km south of Ethiopia's sprawling capital city, Addis Ababa. It was directed and written by Xinyan Yu and Max Duncan, who coproduced the movie with Tamara Dawit. Dawit is already known to connoisseurs of Ethiopian cinema for her documentary *Finding Sally*.

The movie juxtaposes the stories of three main characters as it narrates the progress of the Eastern Industrial Zone from 2019 to 2023. One of the main characters is Motto, the ambitious director from China. The movie offers surprisingly candid shots of her meetings with Ethiopian government officials, her struggles to communicate with local farmers who are being forced to relocate, and her intimate conversations with her family in China whom she rarely sees. Motto appears to be a true believer in the idea that the industrial park is a “win-win” both for Ethiopia and for Chinese businesses. She proudly tells the story of an Ethiopian expat who, while shopping for shoes in America, discovered that some of them were “made in Ethiopia.” For Motto and this Ethiopian-American woman, the fact that these shoes were “Made in Ethiopia” is a sign of Ethiopia's economic development—hence the title of the film.

The second main character is Beti, one of the factory workers, who represents an ambivalent attitude toward the industrial park. On the one hand, Beti sees the factory as an opportunity to create a new life for herself, and she aims to improve her situation by studying the Chinese language. On the other hand, she is also frustrated by low wages, long hours, and inflation. One striking event occurs during the Coronavirus pandemic lockdown, when Beti and other workers have to live in the factories where they work.

The third is Workinesh, a member of the local farming community that is being asked to relocate so that the industrial park can expand. The film shows the details of her life alongside other farmers and her daughter who is learning to read and hopes for a better life. Workinesh sees the potential of economic development, but she and the other farmers are confused by the government's plans for them and do not feel they are being fairly compensated or respected. As the farmers passively resist their removal, there are scenes of community gatherings and of “Abdari” spirituality under an Oda tree, the symbol of the Oromo Gadaa system of democracy.

The drama of the film centers on the “Phase 2” plan to double the size of the industrial park into the farmland, and the film shows us some tense conversations among different constituencies, including the local municipal government of Dukem. As the film juxtaposes different perspectives, the audience is able to see moments of miscommunication and how the different constituencies may be out of touch with each other. But that is not all we see. We also see the various characters doing their best to make meaningful lives for themselves with families and friends—for example, a wedding between a Chinese man and Ethiopian woman and celebrations of Ethiopia’s Meskel and the Chinese New Year.

The movie never tries to be pedagogical or academic, and there are no university professors or professorial economists from Ethiopia’s Ministry of Finance and Economic Development offering up their expert analysis. Rather, the movie focuses on the different perspectives of the people whose jobs are at stake: the Ethiopian administrators of the industrial park, the mayor of Dukem, the factory laborers, the farmers, the Chinese managers, and so on, as we follow their stories. Nevertheless, I could not help but notice that the title of the film echoes the title of the book *Made in Africa*, written by Ethiopia’s most famous and influential economist, Arkebe Oqubay, about the Ethiopian government’s industrial policy. That book was published in 2015 at the height of the EPRDF regime’s policy of the “activist developmental state,” which emphasized public-private partnerships and synergies across sectors of the economy in order to strategically lead the nation toward progressive economic development. However, the movie begins in July 2019, shortly after the transition from the EPRDF to the new Prosperity Party government under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. In the scenes with the mayor of Dukem, the movie in some ways shows us the ambition of the new government as it hopes to expand upon the EPRDF’s economic development and take it in new directions. A year after the directors began filming, the Coronavirus pandemic drastically changed the situation. Later, military conflict between the federal government and both the Tigray Defense Force and the Oromo Liberation Army led to security concerns for foreign investors. The drama of the movie unfolds with these global events in the background. One can only speculate whether the film would have looked any different if it were made during the time of rapid economic growth in Ethiopia between the years 2008 and 2016 instead of during a more chaotic time of a change in political party, the Coronavirus pandemic, global inflation, the USA’s termination of its AGOA trade program with Ethiopia in 2022, and ongoing civil conflict.

Film scholars will naturally want to compare *Made in Ethiopia* to other well-regarded documentaries on the subject of African development, such as Katy Lena Ndaiye’s recent film *Money, Freedom, a Story of the CFA Franc* (2022) and the two documentaries by Nick Francis and Mark James Francis: *Black Gold* (2006) about the globalization of the coffee industry in Ethiopia and *When China Met Africa* (2010) about China’s activity in Zambia. In my opinion, *Made in Ethiopia* is excellent because of the close-up conversations between government officials and managers, the humanizing shots of the daily lives of the many characters,

and the diverse points of view and aspirations of people who feel conflicted or uncertain about their future.

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