

The Power of Silence: A Business Storytelling Perspective of Ethiopian Cinema Through the Work of Sewmehon Yismaw

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Abstract

We briefly explore the work of Ethiopian filmmaker Sewmehon Yismaw from a business storytelling perspective. Bringing together the narrative lens of *Bruner* (1991) and the idea of effecting change through the storytelling of *Denning* (2005), we suggest that Yismaw's work has built a cultural brand that highlights the importance of everyday life. Using silence in conversations and circular plots that are born in traditional Ethiopian storytelling he was raised with, his films have become a beacon of cultural identity that indirectly built a creative industries brand.

Keywords: visual storytelling; Nollywood; cultural entrepreneurship

An old Ethiopian adage says that if you put many spiderwebs together, they could tie up a lion. It is, in the beginning and the end, a matter of unity. The latter can be considered part of the essence of Ethiopian filmmaker Sewmehon Yismaw's work. In this brief essay, we adopt a business storytelling perspective to explore how Yismaw's work has built a path of cultural brand building that was born in traditional storytelling in the heart of Africa.

Born in the ancient city of Gonder in Ethiopia, Yismaw started out as a photographer and went on to become a renowned film director in his home country. Films such as *Ewir Amora Kelabi* (2016) and *Adey* (2022) reflect his



Figure 7.1: Sewmehon Yismaw on the set of “Fiker Eske Mekabir”

Source: Sewmehon Yismaw, personal archive.

background in traditional storytelling. They are based on circular plots and use silence to present realities of Ethiopian families. Instead of focusing on landscapes and costumes, the films are more about values and everyday situations of “normal” people (How do they talk? Why is silence so important? What is the meaning of gestures?).

The fame he has gathered has turned him into a brand or, perhaps better, a branded storyteller that uses the power of film to explore culture while driving change. It is common to hear that he doesn’t simply tell stories but instead reminds viewers of who they are and even could be. This takes us back to Bruner,¹ who saw narrative as a reflection of thought well beyond

1. Jerome Bruner, “The Narrative Construction of Reality” *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 1 (Autumn 1991): 1–21, <https://doi.org/10.1086/448619>.



Figure 7.2: Sewmehon Yismaw on the set of *Fiker Eske Mekabir*.

Source: Sewmehon Yismaw, personal archive.

logic. Narratives would appear as sensemaking devices that help us understand the world, something akin to what psychologists call “schemata.” The sensemaking process becomes stronger when narratives have authenticity—that is, that they appear plausible and true to those exposed to them. For Yismaw, preserving Ethiopian language is also paramount in this context. In a way, it is a form of cultural archiving where not only language but also silence appears as an important part of daily interaction.

When looking into his work from the strategic perspective of storytelling advanced by Denning,² stories—in this case, film—are a catalyst of

2. Stephen Denning, *The Leader’s Guide to Storytelling: Mastering the Art and Discipline of Business Narrative* (Jossey-Bass, 2011).

change. He refers to his “springboard story” as a powerful short narrative that helps us imagine change. The idea is that this is eventually followed by action. Sawmehon’s films often uses this idea. A production like *Love Unto Grave* (*Fiker Eske Mekaber*), inspired by the 1968 novel with the same name, is an example of this. It is not only about drama but also about generational conflict, modernity, and a necessary conversation on social change.

Denning also argues that leaders can use storytelling to build an integrated organizational identity.³ Sawmehon has become a type of growing cultural leader who is using film to build new identities and shape the creative industries of his country. He uses his cultural knowledge as a strategic resource to build a brand anchored around a national identity.

The work of Yismaw brings together Bruner’s view of the world through a narrative lens with the strategic approach of Denning toward action.⁴ It does so by capturing cultural meaning through film as it inevitably builds identity through the projection of real-life stories. In them, silence in conversations is a fundamental part of human interaction, one that paradoxically can even bring people closer together than words.

3. Denning, *The Leader’s Guide to Storytelling*.

4. Bruner, “The Narrative Construction of Reality”; Denning.