

The Yatreda Art Collective is Using Web3 to Honor Ethiopia's Past

We interviewed the Yatreda Art Collective group leader Kiya Tadele about the group's journey and their new NFT project "Strong Hair."

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Kiya Tadele and the Yatreda Art Collective is drawing the world's attention to Ethiopia. Photo Photo Credit: Yatreda Art Collective

Kiya Tadele has a lot of enthusiasm. After working in the modeling industry for seven years, she verged behind the camera with the need to explore more. Tadele is the leader of the [Yatreda Art Collective](#), a group resurrecting Ethiopia century-long legends and preserving them through the blockchain. She has worked with production teams all over Ethiopia, assisting photographers and documentarians on their projects. It was at that time Yatreda happened to her. Together with a team which comprised her two sisters, Roman and Suzy Tadele; her husband, Joey Lawrence; and friends, Tigist and Abiy – they formed the Yatreda Art Collective.

In 2021, Yatreda, which consists of the two Amharic words "fence and debt," championed their first ever NFT project "Kingdoms of Ethiopia" which was a series of motion portraits that deeply captures the Ethiopian old classic tales of kings, warriors and kingdoms. The art collective also just launched a new NFT project titled "Strong Hair" – a collection of 100 looping motion portraits that celebrates the eccentricity and vividness of Ethiopian hairstyles that have lived for centuries, thus exposing Ethiopian subtle diversity and cultural reputation through blockchain technology. The Yatreda Art Collective is indeed drawing the world's attention to Ethiopia.

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OkayAfrica has scoured the Internet for today's major news stories, so you don't have to. On June 18, coverage includes: fresh concerns over stability in northern Ethiopia as tensions between the federal government and the TPLF continue to rise; growing scrutiny of the Côte d'Ivoire forward linked to a French sports corruption investigation; and more.

We spoke with Tadele about the art collective family, their journey and their new NFT project *Strong Hair*.



Kiya Tadele has worked with production teams all over Ethiopia, assisting photographers and documentarians on their projects. Photo Credit: Yatreda Art Collective

Tell me what was the inspiration behind the Yatreda art collective, how did the group breathe into existence?

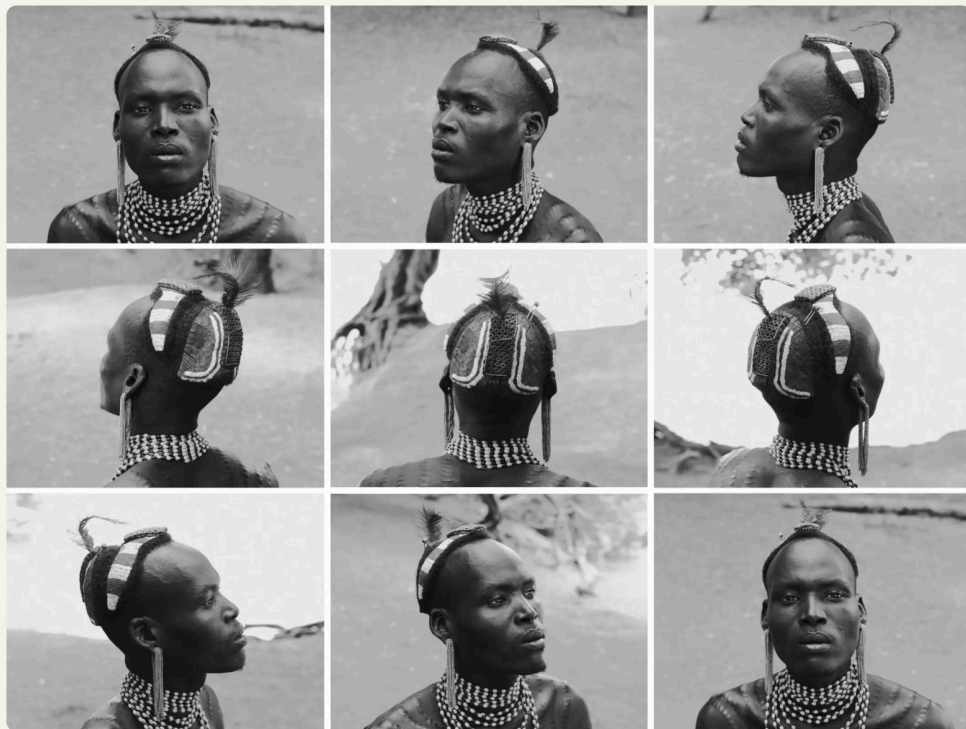
Yatreda is the collective name for our family in Ethiopia making art in the style of "tizita", which means nostalgia or a longing for the past. Our artistry ranges from hand-sewn historical costumes to leading musicians to capture their performance, attaching some background to our homemade metal stage.

Does the family have a leader?

Yes. I am inspired to lead this collective and preserve these Ethiopian things because this is the only chance we got. Our world is changing fast with modern imported things. We want to show the world that they can love the classic and local, cultural things.

What work is the Yatredda art collective known for?

Yatredda is all about nostalgia. Our inspiration was always to balance something new – like blockchain technology – to preserve and present something old, such as classic legends of the past. This mix of old and new is to say the timeline of our history doesn't end, these stories are not finished. They belong to the past but also belong to us today- the art is about rediscovering our original selves once again.



The art collective launched a NFT project titled "Strong Hair" – a collection of 100 looping motion portraits that celebrates the eccentricity and vividness of Ethiopian hairstyles that have lived for centuries. Photo Credit: Yatredda Art Collective

As a country full of history did you feel you owed your country the need to illuminate these hidden stories?

Ethiopia is one of the oldest and deepest civilizations in all of Africa. But one thing we want to show is that history can be living. What I mean is, those scenes from the past shaped who we are today. So our young generation should preserve and tell these stories but also continue to make new ones.

We are a growing country, local artists here are trying so hard to express their creativity. Even though we don't have access to every material, or luxury things to begin our art, sometimes that can actually make you more creative. Because when you use only what you have around you, you can develop something unexpected or new. There are artists here who are digging deep to stand on their own two feet.

Let me give you one example – the incredible new musician Kassmasse. He is reviving some elements of the classic Ethiopian tradition and mixing them with modern styles. When you listen to Kassmasse, he sounds cool, but sometimes he sounds like he has the wisdom of your grandfather. I love that about his music. Perhaps Yatredda is like a visual version of that concept.

Apart from being members and patriots of this group, do you guys work in other industries or have other jobs individually?

All of us started somewhere else, and we ended up here making this art when we are together. For example, my sister is a medical doctor but got into art by falling in love with painting. She may do something on her own one day, but would never give up being a doctor. My husband works every day to finish his photography book which is also about Ethiopia.



The Yatrede Art Collective is resurrecting Ethiopia legends and preserving them through the blockchain. Photo Photo Credit: Yatrede Art Collective

Was there a necessity to mint all your projects as NFT?

Yatrede's work is native to the crypto world. Without NFTs, none of this work has a real home. Why do I say this? Because if we simply uploaded it to Youtube, or Instagram, maybe it would be appreciated with likes. Those likes benefit only large companies, who give very little back to the actual creators who are the soil of their platform. Using web3, our audience is much smaller, but we are more direct. Our thousands of deep followers have more of a meaningful impact versus so-called millions of followers on the established platforms that are just endlessly scrolling, not involved. Our art is free for the whole world to enjoy, but with NFTs there can also be one owner of the artwork. This is what we believe.

What inspired your latest NFT project "Strong hair?"

My beautiful ladies in Africa who have strong hair! Did you know that some bosses of major companies, even in Ethiopia, force female employees to straighten their hair in order to present an "international image?"

It's disturbing.

Exactly. But sometimes I like to go with straight hair too, not just by regulation. We all know this thinking is totally wrong, because Africa too is part of the international community, and so is our natural hair. I wanted to spread that we have to be confident and embrace our natural hair. The second part is to visually represent our hair, which is a vessel of culture, as a true art form. There are so many hairstyles in Ethiopia that represent identity, phases of life or unique expressions.

The creative process of “strong hair” must have been exhausting, tell me about it?

You're right, everything has a challenge! But challenges are for the good. We travelled all around Ethiopia to some of the most remote regions, or called upon our friends and family to show us their most expressive hairstyles. It took many months but we wanted to be inclusive of everybody. The power of the series comes from the diversity and selection of each unique style.

Strong hair conveys a message. What do you want viewers to make of that message?

For my ladies– “love your natural hair”. For my artists– “look at the world around you and get inspired.”

Essentially powerful! What has influenced your works immensely over the years?

My influences are not vast like someone who went and studied every art history. They are simple, drawn from the few talented artists who I assisted, and shaped the world around me... African history, Ethiopian culture. I am influenced by artists whose work is international but maintains an unbreakable connection to our homeland like Mulatu Astatke and Gigi Shibabaw. Mulatu and Gigi are both living artists. But when you hear them, they are carrying the style and legends of our ancestors into the future. It doesn't matter that this is audio, the characteristics are the same. That is how they influence my work.

As an art collective group, how do you wish to impact the world?

We started so simple and have been overwhelmed with the level of attention and kind words from around the world. So if I can get to this place, it is proof that anybody with talent and the right work ethic can reach here too.

All of our Yatreda projects have handmade tools, like the 360° rig, or the metal stage. I designed those things on purpose so we could inspire people who want to start with nothing.

How do you as an art collective imagine your work's legacy?

It became our duty to inspire the next generation. We don't say “someone should do this or that” we try to do it ourselves.

Should we anticipate more projects in the future?

Oh yeah. We are just getting started.

