

ICWA LETTERS

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Glimpses of a Fellow's Life

ADDIS ABABA, Ethiopia

March 1999

By Marc Michaelson

"Fatouye!!!!.....Fatouye!!!!..... Faaaatoooooyeeeeee!!!!!" Nearly every morning, like clockwork. I'm awakened by this human alarm clock. Baby, the three-year-old from the family next door, yelps for assistance from the maid after moving his bowels. He sits on his plastic throne and does his daily "business," same time, same place, day after day. I have to give the kid credit — his intestinal system is as regular as the rising sun. And he has got one booming set of lungs on him; Ethiopia doesn't yet have a national opera, but if they form one by the time he matures, this boy is a potential Pavarotti.

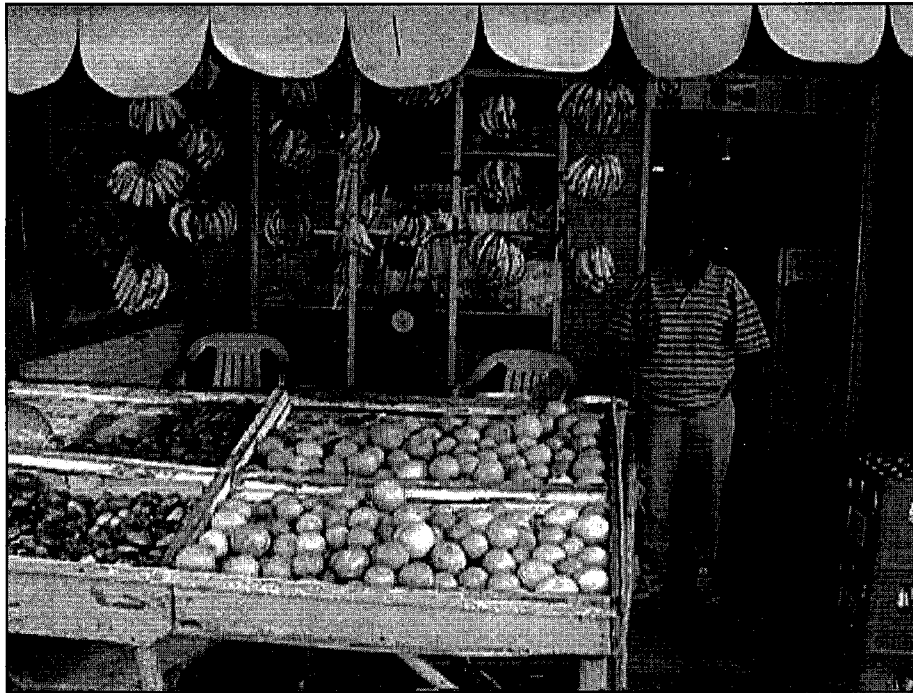
Baby doesn't come with a snooze button, so when he rattles me out of my dream state around 7:15 a.m., I don't fight it. I just get up. I tie on a towel and pull on a sweatshirt — Addis Ababa may be just nine degrees north of the



"Baby," my human alarm clock (right), and his brother Al-Azar perched on their plastic potties

equator, but the weather is hardly tropical. Due to the high altitude, it actually gets quite cold, especially at night.

[mini-meteorological digression] Recently, I hiked into the hills on the northern edge of Addis with my friend Jason and his ten-month-old baby Zan. Imposing thunderclouds rapidly engulfed us and a chilling rainstorm began. Minutes later the rain turned into M&M-sized hail pellets, and we were stranded for a half hour squatting under the meager cover of an indigenous Juniper



Adanetch and dangling bananas at Rose's Mini-Market

door. "Abiye! Abiye!" he cries out. This is his crude vocalization of the Amharic "Abebaye," or "Dad." Being the only regular male presence in the compound, I have unwittingly become Mikias' pseudo-father.

Mikias is one of twin boys, born last year to Roman, the wife of my landlady's brother from Awash (an area some 200 kms east of Addis Ababa). She had complications with the delivery, and the other twin, Nahum, was small and sickly for some time. Mikias was "given" to my landlady (and neighbor) Allemitu to take care of. He's been with us ever since.

I unlock the door, kneel down and plaster Mikias with two fat kisses, one on each cheek. I pick him up and hold

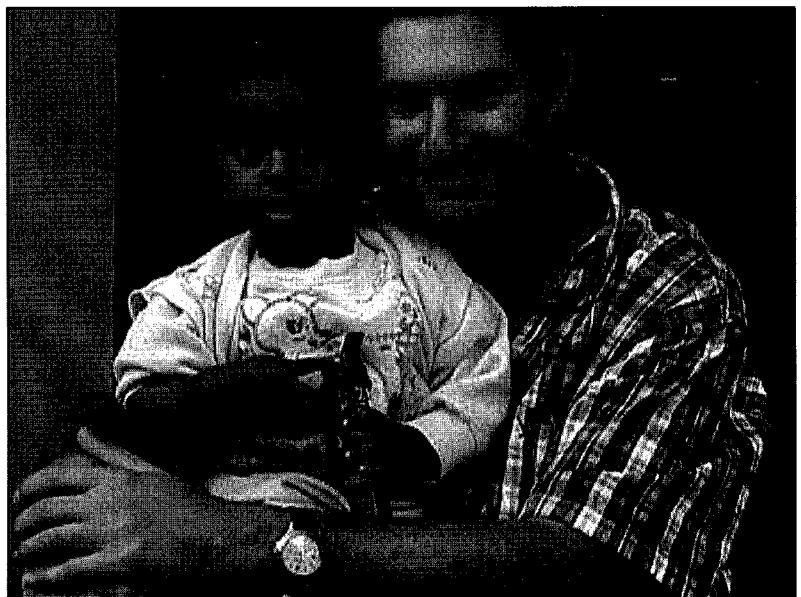
tree, a torrent of muddy water rushing under our feet, and poor little Zan feebly protected by a leaky umbrella and his dad's soggy rendition of a nursery song. Huddled together to keep warm in the downpour, it hardly felt like Africa. Addis is usually temperate but often downright chilly — it has neither the dry heat of the Sahara nor the muggy humidity of the rainforests. [end digression]

him for a few minutes (during which time he invariably decides it is time to pee), hand him back over to Imabeyt (the semi-retarded younger sister of Allemitu....and Miki's caretaker), and head for the shower.

* * *

I pour a glass of orange juice, freshly squeezed the previous day by my friends down the road at Rose's Mini-Market, a small neighborhood shop carrying basic necessities (toiletries, pasta, biscuits, soft drinks, a scant selection of fresh produce). I bring my liquid breakfast into my office, which in actuality is merely half of my kitchen table and a laptop computer, and try to log-on to the elusive server at Ethiopian telecom. Early morning and late evening are the only conceivable times to attempt logging on to the Internet here. I download my e-mails and check for news updates on the border war from the fine folks at CNN, BBC, and VOA (Voice of America). I also check for the latest propaganda from the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments. I gobble down the latest tough talk and the manure of official statements, and then wash it down with my orange juice.

When I first arrived in Addis Ababa, in January 1998, I had no intention of renting a house in the Ethiopian capital. I envisioned a rural existence, plunking myself down in the heart of Gojjam or Gondar, learning Amharic as I sipped coffee with elders, sitting leisurely under the



Mikias and Marc

By this point Mikias, the one-year-old from another adjacent family, has usually crawled up and is banging on my front

protective shade of a mango tree. I would pick up where my Peace Corps experience left off six years prior, gaining insight into Ethiopian culture and society from the periphery, learning proverbs from wise gray-bearded old men. As it turned out, there aren't many mango trees in Gojjam.

Nothing ever turns out as planned in Africa, and my ICWA fellowship has been no exception. I came to study post-conflict nation-building in Ethiopia and Eritrea, the region's two stable success stories. It only stands to reason that shortly after my arrival, the two countries decided to go to war, and began unravelling the progress of the past seven years.

After a few days in Addis Ababa, I realized it was not only the heart of Ethiopia's government and several regional UN organizations, but also the center of the Organization for African Unity (OAU) and most nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). I would need a base in Addis, even if I later decided to spend extended periods of time in the hinterland. I searched for an inexpensive house or apartment, asking everyone with whom I came in contact—the receptionists at the Central Shoa Hotel, taxi drivers, waiters. I looked at several places, all of which were either extremely expensive villas or rat-infested pits.

Eventually, I mentioned my housing quest to Dawit, one of my regular taxi drivers. His family had a house they were thinking of renting in the Aware area of town. I came, I looked, we negotiated, I rented. And here I am, 14 months later. Dawit's family live next door, and they have become my adopted Ethiopian family.

The house itself is a basic cement square, topped with corrugated iron sheets betrayed by only a few minor leaks. It has two bedrooms, a bathroom (that we upgraded with a new toilet and hot-water shower), a small kitchen, and a combined sitting room/dining room/office. It's a very decent place, in a quiet neighborhood, and it suits me just fine. My presence in this house is a direct reflection of the decline of my landlady Allemitu's family. Theirs is a riches to rags story of hard times and imperial decline.

* * *

The long gradual descent that ultimately landed me in Allemitu's house began in the 1930's. Allemitu's grandfather was Ras Hailu of Gojjam, traditional king of the

Amhara people. In Ethiopian feudal society, every region had a king (Ras), and the leader of greater Ethiopia was the "king of kings." Each Ras ruled his personal dominion, receiving tribute and taxes from his subjects and paying the same to his patron. As the king of Gojjam, one of the country's most prosperous agricultural centers, Ras Hailu was an extremely wealthy and powerful man. Ironically, these very characteristics helped seal his fate.

Haile Sellasie was formally crowned "emperor" at a lavish coronation in November 1930. The Emperor represented the hope of Africa. He was an internationally renowned and respected figure, representing the only country on the continent to have resisted European colonial domination. Haile Selassie was determined to build



My house

a modern nation-state from the diverse peoples and lands that composed the Ethiopian polity. However, simultaneously he sought to consolidate his power and eliminate rivals. Loyalty to the Emperor, whose power was said to be divinely-derived, was placed at a premium. Whilst regional leaders previously enjoyed considerable administrative autonomy, they now were expected to act primarily as loyal agents of the crown.

Emperor Haile Selassie perceived Ras Hailu as a potential threat. Hailu was said to have negotiated directly with the Italians, who still had territorial ambitions and were thus always eager to undermine Ethiopia's central government. Following the coronation ceremony, the Emperor had Hailu detained in the capital. Over the next two years Hailu's fortunes were all confiscated by the state. Many economic lawsuits from covetous Gojjamis emerged against Ras Hailu, and the Emperor was pleased to rule against him. The final fall occurred when Ras Hailu launched a foolhardy scheme to regain the Emperor's



*Pepsi, Marc, Mimi and Allemitu at Mimi's birthday party.
General Alemayu's photo sits atop the television.*

confidence. He would free Lijj Iyasu (Haile Selassie's primary rival) from prison in Fitcha and then inform the Emperor.¹ When this scheme failed miserably, the Emperor confiscated what remained of Ras Hailu's property and wealth.

This long-forgotten footnote of history was, for my landlady Allemitu, the initial fall from grace. Allemitu was born in 1948, and she has no recollection of her grandfather, who died in 1951 when she was just three years old. Still, the internal political events of the 1930's pushed her family off the pedestal of Ethiopian imperial nobility. Allemitu would have been among the heiresses to one of Ethiopia's most impressive fortunes. Instead she is stuck with a small house and a modest life in Aware.

With royal blood, Allemitu was able to marry into a solid family. Her husband, Alemayu, was a Brigadier General in the army during communist dictatorship of the Derg (1974-1991). He loyally served the Ethiopian army, fighting the Eritrean separatist movement for 14 years — in Massawa, Algeina, Karora and Asmara. General Alemayu was a prominent military leader, and his family enjoyed both status and a decent standard of living throughout the poverty-plagued years of communist rule.

The family's next major setback came when the Derg fell in 1991. The new ruling party, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), was closely allied with the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF).

¹ Lijj Iyasu was Haile Selassie's major competitor to rule Ethiopia. Hailu and Lijj Iyasu had strong personal connections, not the least of which decided Hailu to marry off his daughter to Lijj Iyasu. These relations made Haile Selassie even more suspicious of Hailu, his intentions, his ambitions and his loyalty.

At the end of the war, many high ranking Derg military leaders, especially those who served in Eritrea, were imprisoned. Brigadier General Alemayu was one of them. He has spent eight years incarcerated at Karchally prison, and still no charges have been lodged against him. When relations with Eritrea soured in May 1998, some Derg military officials were released. General Alemayu was not so fortunate.

And so Allemitu runs her household on her own, with no steady source of income and an absentee husband to whom she remains extremely loyal. She receives occasional remittances from her daughter Coca, a laboratory technician living in Las Vegas, and infrequently from her son Abiy in Germany. Her three

other children live in the family compound in Addis Ababa. Pepsi, 26, works at a hotel, Dawit, 23, is a taxi driver, and Mimi, 15 is still in school.

The family had been living in the Aware house they bought in 1983, until last year when economic pressures forced them to consider renting it. I have lived there since January 1998, at which time they moved into the row houses in the backyard. While adversity and tough times caused them to vacate their home to gain a new source of income, they express no bitterness. Much to the contrary, they have looked out for me and treated me like a family member.

* * *

During the past year, I have ridden an emotional roller-coaster with Allemitu's family. There have been small celebrations—the birth of twins, Mikias and Nahum, to Allemitu's brother and his wife; Mimi's fifteenth birthday party; and some of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church holidays like Timket, the epiphany. At each of these events we drank *t'ala* (traditional barley beer), ate *doro wot* (spicy chicken stew) and broke *yehabesha dabo* (Ethiopian bread) together. Family, friends and neighbors gathered, music blared from an old cassette player and, cliché though it may be, a good time was had by all.

Day-to-day life in our compound also has its simple pleasures, daily rituals that bring us together to relax and

chat. At least twice a day, coffee is roasted, ground, boiled and shared in a traditional ceremony repeated in households around the country. The coffee itself is a sideshow, the central event is the process — chatting and gossiping and playing with Mikias, our resident toddler. We also often gather in the evenings, to watch the latest news (read “propaganda”) on Ethiopian TV, and chat some more.

Threaded within this slow-tempoed, simple existence have been numerous family stresses and strains. The accumulated angst of General Alemayu’s prison term has



Coffee ceremony in Allemitu’s house

been felt by all. On a few occasions, particularly since the outbreak of war with Eritrea, there was renewed hope that he would be released. These hopes never materialized. Four times per week, Allemitu rises at 4 am and prepares a hearty lunch for her husband, which she or one of her children drops off at the Karchally prison. Only on weekends are they allowed to visit with him in person.

Most of the other tensions are directly related to dad’s absence from the compound. A brief sampling of Allemitu’s current offspring-induced stress:

* *Dawit is off carousing on the town, squandering his taxi fares on recreation rather than helping to support the family. He fits the mold of a frustrated Ethiopian youth. His education stunted at the high-school level, he desperately desires independence, and the elusive opportunity of more schooling and a good job. Dawit, like many of his contemporaries, dreams of a visa to enter the United States, something he hoped I could help provide.*

* *Mimi’s grades have plummeted, partially a sign of re-*

bellion against the overprotectiveness of her mom that keeps her cooped up in the compound, protected from the evils that lurk in the city, but also preventing her from having friends. Mimi is a typical — although excessively innocent and naïve — teenage girl. She’s extremely sensitive and emotional, bursting into tears at the drop of a hat.

* *Pepsi has moved in with her boyfriend nearly a year before their planned marriage. Pepsi has an easy-going and bubbly personality, but this decision has caused a bit of family tension. Pre-marital cohabitation is almost unheard of in these parts, and Pepsi’s decision to do so has caused a hushed but not inaudible stir.*

Allemitu’s children personify some of the generational problems of the day. The dreams of disaffected youth to escape an opportunityless existence; the search for friendship and companionship in the face of well-meaning but overzealously protective parenting; the quest for love and independence in a conservative, family-dominated environment. These young people are rebelling in their own ways, asserting their identities and pushing the envelope of the culture that has raised them. For an unemployed single parent struggling to keep them fed, clothed and housed, all of these expressions measure up to a big headache.

Of late, Allemitu’s woes seem to be worsening. Within the course of a week, one of her brothers died after a long bout with diabetes and another brother, a policeman living in Gojjam, was in a serious car accident. Then, Allemitu herself had stomach pains and found out she has gallstones. Then the electric company showed up to tell her she would have to buy an expensive new transformer. Pepsi is being sexually harassed and unjustly accused of stealing at work, so she has decided to quit. Then the 18-year-old live-in maid Tsehay unexpectedly gave birth to a baby boy. And on and on and on. These days, Allemitu wears a dazed, overwhelmed, exhausted expression. In the face of these trials, she still maintains a sharp sense of humor. With ill relatives and unplanned newborns squatting in her house, one day she shrugged her shoulders, smiled, and said “I’ve got my own refugee camp here!” Jokes notwithstanding, Allemitu is at her wits’ end, and longs for the day that her husband will return and restore order to their difficult lives.

I also would love to see that day. Allemitu has on many occasions conveyed General Alemayu’s greetings and desire to meet me. They urged me to visit him in prison, but I politely refused, fearing that local authori-

ties probably wouldn't perceive it as a family reunion, but rather a troublesome foreigner meddling in affairs between the state and one of its political prisoners.

Someday, before I depart this country, I hope to be at General Alemayu's homecoming. If he were here in his house, I most likely wouldn't be. He would likely be able to procure some work to relieve the family's serious financial strains. My presence in his house, and my rich



Two of my neighborhood buddies pose on the road from my house.

Ethiopian family experience, is sadly due to General Alemayu's misfortunes. Now his family has effectively adopted me, and it would be gratifying if I could exit with the family made whole. That would indicate a change in the stars, new luck, and the promise of a future sunnier than the present overcast.

* * *

After morning greetings with the family, I head out of the compound to start my workday. The walk through the neighborhood is filled with formal niceties and subtle head bows: "*tena yistilling*" (good health), "*ndemin adderu*" (good morning), "*ndemin nachu?*" (how are you?). A hundred meters down our bumpy street I meet my "gang" of cute little squirts, the girls aged three to six that mob me every time I pass. One kisses my hand and offers a "*salaam aleekum*;" I'm certain she thinks I'm an Arab, so she offers her best Arabic greetings. The others grab my hands and slap me five.

I mosey down the main paved road of Aware and quickly arrive at the Gedera Hotel, a semi-fancy new establishment where I often drink my morning *machiato* (espresso with milk) and watch CNN to touch base with the rest of the world's bad news — the bombing of Kosovo, violent demonstrations in Indonesia, financial turmoil in Bra-

zil, a train crash in the U.S. CNN has the magical power of making the world a smaller place, and misery loves company. The globe's other tragedies in no way ameliorate our local disaster, the ongoing Ethio-Eritrean border slaughter, but CNN does show us that we are not alone — others are suffering too.

After coffee and a brief chat with friends at the hotel, I head out to find a taxi. I don't have a car, so I rely on public transportation. Depending on my destination I either take a communal taxi/minibus for 75 centimes (U.S.10¢) or privately contract a taxi. Riding public transportation in Addis Ababa is like playing Russian Roulette. I consider it an act of God that I have thus far escaped the automotive equivalent of a bullet in the head. Addis drivers do not go particularly fast; their old Russian-made Ladas aren't capable of high speeds. Actually, most of the beat-up taxis I've hired seem to sigh a breath of relief when our route takes us downhill; they welcome the assistance of gravity. The problem with Addis drivers is they are reckless, and they are operating in a system seemingly governed by chaos theory.

For example, take the crucial question of who has the "right of way." To the best of my understanding, in Addis the vehicle that gets there first has the right of way. This makes for a perpetual game of "chicken" in intersections throughout the city. Often I pass two cars rammed together in an intersection as the drivers ponder how some mysterious magnetic force could have possibly caused their well-behaved vehicles to crash. I am equally bewildered, not by all of the accidents I see, but that there aren't more.

Many Ethiopian drivers act as if they are the only person on the road. They pull onto the street without looking to see if there are any oncoming cars or they straddle two lanes on traffic-plagued Bole road like an oblivious



Chaos theory: traffic at an intersection in the Kazanchis neighborhood.

couple out for a Sunday crawl and bird-watching session. Whenever one confronts these drivers, an authentic baffled expression is returned. Addis drivers are living in their own little worlds, unfazed by the irrelevant details of other drivers and the externalities of the environment around them.

* * *

These dangerous taxis facilitate my movement around the city. My typical workday is a hodgepodge of meetings, logistics, errands, reading and writing. I keep in touch with a broad range of contacts — friends and colleagues working at NGOs, UN agencies and government. I periodically stop in to see Selome Tadesse, the Ethiopian government spokesperson, to get the latest official information from the government. I meet with leaders in the ruling EPRDF party to gain insight into the government's thinking. I talk with old friends at Save the Children and new friends at PACT and DKT (a contraceptive social-marketing agency) and CRS (Catholic Relief Services) and some of the local peace and development NGOs to stay in touch with their issues. I know a few private businessmen and some university people. And I talk to my taxi drivers, cafe waitresses, street kids and beggars — to keep a finger on the pulse of the city. All of these are the contacts of my daily life in Addis, and they help me to draw a picture of personal experience in the capital.

I also collect a broad ranges of documents, books, and local newspapers, and use them in my research. I sit down, organize and synthesize my thoughts, feelings, ideas, and then I sit down at the computer and begin to purge my experiences. Such is the making of an ICWA newsletter.

Coming from the NGO sector, one of the profound changes for me is handling the minutiae of everyday life and logistics in an African country. As an ICWA fellow, I am running a research operation with a staff of one. I am simultaneously the boss with the vision and the grunt that does the dirty work. As a manager for Save the Children in The Gambia, I rarely visited the post office or customs or immigration office. I just sent the host-country national logistician, whose brother or cousin inevitably worked there, and he took care of things. I had a secretary to make appointments and plane reservations, a driver to pick up or deliver documents, a storekeeper to make sure we didn't run out of rubber bands or paper clips. As an ICWA fellow, my life is filled with these little tasks, and I've learned, sometimes painfully, how time-consuming and frustrating such simple chores can be here.

Take for example the seemingly benign desire I had to send a small package of coffee to a friend back home. I joined the throngs at the post-office counter and navigated the circuitous bureaucracy for two hours. Two hours to send a half kilo of coffee to the U.S.! That's nearly seven min-

utes per ounce. Insane. All the more frustrating was that only one counter was handling packages while no less than ten other staff members at other counters sat idly with nothing to do. "Small Packages" apparently wasn't their job; their areas of expertise lay in different realms. My journey to mail a box of coffee brought to mind stupid jokes like "how many Ethiopians does it take to mail a box of coffee?" Well, one guy had to sell the box, one had to check the contents and seal it, another had to sell the postage, and another had to stamp it. This division of labor gone awry would sound like a racist or condescending joke — if it wasn't a daily reality.

Not everything in Addis works so inefficiently. Photos can be developed in a few hours, money can be exchanged in fifteen minutes, and a decent hamburger or plate of *injera* (flat fermented bread) with tibs (sautéed meat) can be had in true fast-food mode. Actually, many private enterprises operate with relative efficiency. Still, it is the little things, the logistics of transportation, the arrangements, etc... that take up an inordinate amount of the day in Addis Ababa.

* * *

On most days, I eat lunch at home, prepared by my *mamitay* (little mom) Alem. Alem cooks up some mean *shiro* (crushed bean/chickpea sauce), *missir* (lentils), and *gomen* (spinach), which I sop up with *injera*. Or she makes rice or pasta in one of many different forms. I eat with my friend Tigist or alone or sometimes with a member of my adopted family.

After more meetings, errands or writing, in the late afternoon I used to head to the Greek Club for my daily dosage of exercise — usually tennis or basketball. That was until I tore ligaments in my foot during a futile and clumsy attempt to block my friend Chris Purdy's jump shot. Chris stands about 8 feet tall (or at least he seems so to this 5'10" shrimp). It took every effort I had to leap up and tear those ligaments, and Chris was generous enough to inform me that his game-winning shot went in with a swish as I rolled on the ground in agony. Chris is a nice guy though — after he told me of his glorious victory he did run off and get me ice.

* * *

Many evenings are quiet — settling in with a book, catching up on letters, or relaxing with the family. But, Addis Ababa nights can also be filled with action, and I like to go out and cause a ruckus when I have the chance. There are some tasty restaurants, fun night clubs, and local *azmari beyts* (traditional dance bars). The *azmari beyts* are my personal favorite as they bring together the modern and traditional in a lively setting of music, dancing, drinking and fun.

Fandika, an *azmari beyt* in the Kazanchis neighbor-

hood, is among the most rocking. It is hidden from the road, set back in a dark alley. The square building is capped by a grass roof, and the corrugate door is covered by a hanging piece of colored fabric. The lights are dim, and the atmosphere is earthy.

Having just descended from the streets of the nation's capital, entering Fandika is like stepping into a rural village. Long strands of grass are scattered on the cement floor, the walls are painted with dance scenes, lions and other icons of Ethiopian life. Along one wall sit two musicians, a drummer and *masinko* (traditional one-string violin) player. They are flanked by two dancers, taking a break. In a small nook in the opposite corner of the room a woman prepares coffee in a traditional coffee ceremony. Rarely, if ever, have I seen anyone actually drink coffee in an *azmari beyt*. White Horse whiskey is the drink of choice; the coffee ceremony is more a prop than anything integrally functional.

Fandika's clientele, mostly modern city-dwellers in western sportcoats and dresses, sit on benches along the perimeter of the room, or in circles on low-lying round wooden stools. They chat, drink beer and whiskey, and dance with the roving entertainers.

Azmari beyt dancers are truly something special. Ethiopian dance is an upper body event, punctuated by shoulder pumping and breast flapping. All the while the waist and below remain essentially immobile. The dances are energetic, and one exceptional, tall thin male dancer sweats profusely from the effort. The dancers flirt with the crowd, and taunt them to join in the fun, which many do. This interaction between the traditionally-clad dancers and westernized patrons brings together the modern and traditional in a spirited celebration of Ethiopian culture and diversity. For many of the urban bureaucrats and businessmen who frequent Fandika and similar establishments, this is an opportunity to escape the sterility of modern life and travel back to a time and place of their parents and grandparents. On other occasions I have seen entire families, Ethiopian-Americans and others visiting from the diaspora, dancing and laughing as they enjoy the chance to revisit their birth-culture.

My friend Chris (of dubious hoop

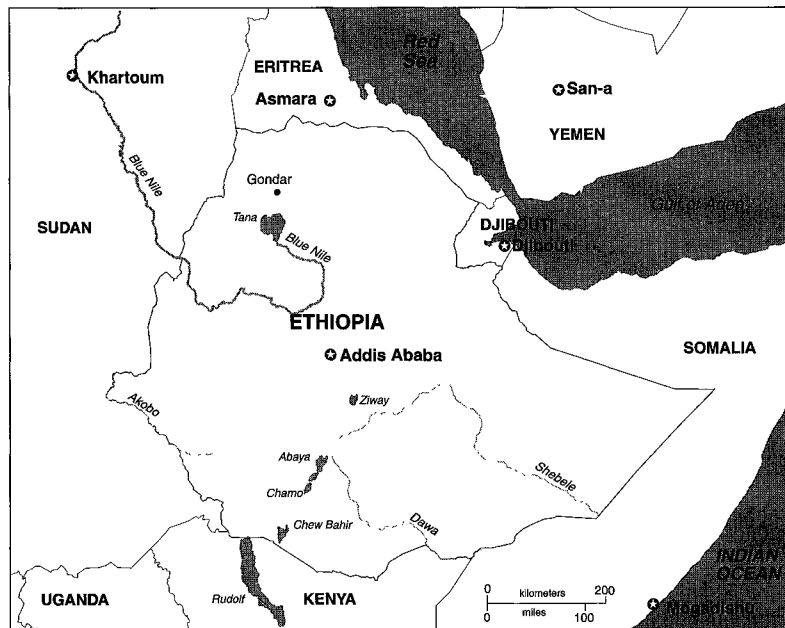
fame) gets up and thrusts his shoulders back and forth with surprising agility — not at all bad for a white boy from New York City, and considerably more graceful than my own strained effort. We have a few beers, take in the atmosphere, watch the crowd play, and comment on how the border war in the north seems to have effected Fandika's business. We place ten-*birr* notes in the headbands of our two favorite dancers, and head for the door.

And so the day comes to a close. When I get home, I settle into bed with a book, and drift off into sleep confident that Baby, my human alarm clock, will soon alert me to the dawning of a new Addis Ababa day.



Shoulder struttin' scenes from Fandika





INDEX

A

A History of Ethiopia 5.2
 Abebaye (Dad) 10.2
 Abraham, Kinfe 6.2
 Addis Ababa 1.3, 1.4, 8.1
 Addis Pharmaceutical Factory 4.4
 Adi-Murug (Bada) 4.2
 Adigrat 3.2, 4.4
 Adua 5.4
 Aeroflot 6.3
 Afar 4.2, 5.6, 8.9
 "African Renaissance" 4.5, 4.8, 5.2, 9.2
 Afwerki, Isaias 3.4, 4.1, 4.5, 5.1, 5.4, 5.8, 6.2, 6.6, 9.2, 9.5
 Agew 5.2
 aid dependency 6.7
 Aideed, Mohamed Farah 7.6
 Air Tajikistan 6.3
 Al-Ittihad 5.3
 Alemayu 10.4
 ALF (Afar Liberation Front) 5.9
 Alga-Aliteina 4.3, 5.5, 5.6
 Aliteina 4.1, 4.3, 9.1
 Allemitu 10.4
 Ambesete Geleba 4.3
 Andemichael, Wereda 8.9
 Annan, Kofi 9.1
 Arab oil-producing countries 8.6
 Arap Moi, Daniel 4.8
 Ark of the Covenant 1.6
 Asmara 3.2, 5.9, 6.3, 6.4, 6.5, 8.1
 Asmara airport 4.4
 Asmara airport bombing 6.1
 Asmerom, Girma 9.10
 Assab 4.4, 5.7, 5.8, 6.3, 8.1
 Assab economy 8.6
 Assab Oil Refinery 8.1, 8.6
 Assab Port 8.7
 Assab Salt Works 8.1, 8.8, 8.9
 Aweke, Aster 1.5
 Axumite empire 5.2
 Ayder Primary School 4.4

azmari beys (traditional dance bars) 10.7

B

Bada. *See also* Adi-Murug
 Badime 3.4, 3.7, 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 4.8, 5.4, 5.5, 5.6, 5.10, 9.1, 9.10
 Bagoweini 3.6
 Bahir Dar (Gojjam Region) 5.9
 "barefoot doctors" 6.4
 Barentu 3.5
 Barre, Mohamed Siad 7.3, 7.4, 7.6
 Belgium 9.9
 Berbera 8.8
birr 5.7, 8.8
 "blood price" 7.7
 BM-21 rocket launchers 9.9
 Bole airport 1.1, 1.3
 Borama 7.5
 Britain 5.4
 British Council library 6.6
 Bulgaria 9.9
 Burao 7.3, 7.5, 7.6, 7.7
 Burie 3.4, 4.3, 5.8, 8.2, 8.3, 8.9
 Burkina Faso 4.8, 9.1

C

casualties, battle 4.3
 casualty reports 9.10
 China 9.9
 Citizens for Peace in Eritrea (CPE) 9.8
 Clinton, Bill 4.5, 4.8, 6.1, 9.1, 9.3
 CNN 10.6
 coffee 5.8
 coffee ceremony 1.7
 colonial rule 4.2
 COMESA (Economic Community of East and Southern African States) 8.8
 communications 8.5
 conspiracy theories 5.9
 Constitution 6.7
 corruption 7.8, 8.8
 counterfeit-currency detector 6.3

CRS (Catholic Relief Services) 10.7
 culture 1.7
 currency 5.8
 customary law (*xeer*) 7.6

D

Dadda Airlines 6.3
 Debre Zeyit 1.4
 Decamhare 3.2
 Dembe Jefecke village 3.7
 Denakil Desert 5.4, 8.1
 deportation 3.2, 4.5, 8.3, 9.7, 9.8
 Derg dictatorship 6.5
 Derg government 3.5, 4.4
 the Derg 3.4, 5.3, 5.5, 10.4
 Dhu Nwas 5.2
 diplomatic recognition 7.11
 Director General of the Marine Department of the Ministry of Transportation and Communication 8.7
 Djibouti 4.4, 4.8, 5.1, 5.3, 5.5, 6.2, 7.3, 9.1
 DKT 10.7
doro wat (spicy chicken stew) 1.7, 10.4
 Dubai 7.9

E

EC (European Community) 4.7, 9.2
 economic development 6.8
 economy 5.7, 5.8
 Egal, Mohamed Ibrahim 7.5, 7.8
 Egypt 5.9, 9.1
 Ephrem, Isaac 9.1
 Ephrem, Sebbat 4.3
 EPLF (Eritrean People's Liberation Front) 3.4, 4.5, 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 5.4, 5.7, 6.4, 6.6, 6.7, 7.3, 9.5, 9.8, 10.4
 EPRDF (Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front) 5.2, 10.4, 10.7
 Erde Mattios 4.3
 Eritrea 3.1, 4.1, 6.1
Eritrea Profile 3.8, 6.6
 Eritrean Defense Force 4.2

Entries refer to ICWA Letters (MM-1, etc.) and page, with Letter number given before each page entry.

Eritrean Pride 9.3
Eritrean Public Health Program 6.4
Eritrean women 6.6
Eritrean Women's Association 6.7
Eritrean Youth Association 6.7
ERREC (Eritrean Relief and Refugee Commission) 3.6, 8.6
Ethiopia 5.4
Ethiopia-Eritrea border conflict 3.3, 4.1, 5.1, 5.2, 6.1, 8.2, 9.1
Ethiopian Airlines 4.5, 5.10
Ethiopian Enterprise Petroleum, 8.6
Ethiopian mobilization 9.8, 9.9
Ethiopian Orthodox Church 1.4
Ethiopian Telecommunications Authority 4.5
"ethnic cleansing" 9.5
ethnic groups 3.5
 Amhara, Oromo 3.5
Expo '98 6.8

F

Fatzi 3.2
Fessehai, Habteab 3.7
fish, Yemeni-style 6.2
Follina 3.7
France 9.9
Freemen of Montana 7.1

G

Gash-Barka Region 3.5
Ghebray, Tekeste 4.8, 6.2
Ghebrensaie, Woldemichael 3.6
 gomen (spinach) 10.7
Gondar Province 5.6
Gouled Aptidon, Hassan 4.8, 6.3
Grassroots International 6.4
Greater Hanish 5.5
"Greater Tigray" 5.6
"green line" 7.6
Guinea Bissau 5.2
 guurti (elders' conferences) 7.5, 7.8
 Guurti (House of Elders) 7.5

H

Habtekere, Gebrenguse 3.6
Hanish Islands 5.3, 5.5
Hargeisa 7.3, 7.5, 7.10
Heret village 3.7
hydroelectric power 5.9

I

ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross) 4.6, 8.3
injera (flat bread made from fermented batter) 1.3, 5.7, 6.9, 10.7
Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) 3.4, 4.7, 5.1, 6.2
intermarriage 5.4
International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) 8.3
International Court of Justice 9.4
Italian colonization 5.3
Italy 5.4, 9.1
Iyasu, Lijj 10.4

J

Janmeda 1.6, 3.1
Japan 9.1

K

Kagame, Paul 4.7, 9.2
Karchally prison 10.4, 10.5

Kenya 5.2, 9.1
Khartoum 5.10
khat 1.8, 6.2, 7.6, 7.7, 7.8, 7.10
kickbacks 7.8
King Caleb 5.2
King Ezana 5.2
kitfo (ground beef with spiced butter) 1.9
Kombolcha 3.1

L

labor supply 8.9
Lake, Anthony 4.8, 9.1, 9.3
lakes 1.4
 Bishoftu 1.4
Latvia 9.9
Legesse, Asmarom 3.8, 9.8
Libya 9.1, 9.9
livestock 7.9

M

machiato (espresso and milk) 6.4
Mahdi, Ali 7.3, 7.4
mamitay (little mom) 10.7
Marcus, Harold 5.2
Mariam, Mengistu Haile 3.4, 4.4, 5.1, 7.3, 9.7
masinko (traditional one string violin) 10.8
Massawa 5.7
media 3.3, 6.8
Mehare, Zait 3.7
Mekelle 3.1, 4.4
Mekonnen, Yigzaw 8.6
Menelik 1.6, 7.2
Mengisteab, Dawit 8.7
Mereb River 3.7, 5.4
Mig-24 helicopters 9.9
Mig-29 interceptors 9.9
Ministry of Defense 8.6
Ministry of Information 8.6
missir (lentils) 10.7
Mitchell, Leslie 8.8
Mogadishu 7.6
Mombasa 8.8, 8.9
Mubarak, Hosni 4.8
Mulki 3.7
Museveni, Yoweri 4.8

N

nakfa 5.7, 6.3, 8.7, 8.8
ndemin adderu (good morning) 10.6
ndemin nachu (how are you?) 10.6
nepotism 7.8
NGOs (non-governmental organizations) 6.7, 7.9
Nigeria 5.2
Nile River 5.9

O

EAU (Organization for African Unity) 3.4, 4.7, 4.8, 5.5, 9.1, 9.2, 9.4, 10.3
EAU initiative 9.5
EAU peace plan 9.10
Ogaden Region 7.3
Ogaden War 7.3
OLF (Oromo Liberation Front) 5.9
"Operation Restore Hope" 7.3
Operation Sunset 9.10

P

PACT 8.8, 10.7
Petros, Col. Bezabieh 4.4
PFDJ (People's Front for Democracy and Justice) 5.2, 6.6
pickpockets 1.7

police 1.7
port of Djibouti 6.3
press 6.8
propaganda 9.5

Q

Qaddafi, Muammar 3.4, 4.8
Qatar 9.9

R

Ras Hailu of Gojjam 10.3
Ras Mikhael Seul 5.3
Red Sea 4.8, 5.8, 8.6
Red Sea Airline 8.5
refugee repatriation 6.8
religion 1.4
Republic of Somaliland 7.3
Resolution 1177 4.8
Rice, Susan 4.7, 9.2
Rift Valley Fever 7.9
Robinson, Mary 4.5
Romania 9.9
Rubattino Shipping Company 8.1
Russia 9.9
Rwanda 4.7

S

Sahnoun, Mohammed 9.1
Save the Children 10.7
Sawa national military training camp 4.6, 5.5, 9.8
Selassie, Haile 5.2, 5.4, 10.3
Setit 4.3
Shabiya 9.5, 9.7
Shambuco 3.6, 9.10
Sheba 1.6
Shewa 8.3
shir (traditional Somali congress) 7.4
shiro (crushed bean/chickpea sauce) 10.7
Sierra Leone 5.2
Sifreye Genet 3.7
Solomon 1.6
Solomonic Dynasty 5.2
Somali clans
 Abgal 7.3
 Dulbahante 7.4
 Gadabursi 7.4
 Habr Awal 7.5, 7.8
 Habr Ja'allo 7.6, 7.7
 Habr Yonis 7.6, 7.7
 Hawiye 7.3
 Isaaq 7.3, 7.5, 7.6
Somali National Movement (SNM) 7.3, 7.4, 7.5
Somali oratory 7.7
Somali Salvation Democratic Front (SSDF) 7.3
Somalia 5.2, 7.1
Somaliland 8.8
Somaliland, Republic of 7.1, 8.1, 9.1, 10.1
 constitution 7.8
 elections 7.8
 government 7.8, 7.9
 history 7.2
 independence 7.2
 NGO's 7.9
 private sector 7.10
 Protectorate 7.2
 secession 7.5
Sudan 5.2, 5.9
Sukhoi SU-27 fighter planes 9.9

T

tabot (holy slab) 1.6

tala (barley beer) 1.8
t'ala (traditional barley beer) 10.4
teff 5.7
tej (honey wine) 1.8
 telecommunications 7.10
tena yistilling (good health) 10.6
 Tesfaye-Mikael, Worku 3.6
 Tesfazion, Afeworki 8.6
tibs (sautéed meat) 1.4, 10.7
 Tigray Province 3.2, 4.2, 4.4, 5.3
 Tigrayan nationalism 5.6
 Tigrinya 3.8
 Timket, the epiphany 10.4
 Timket, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church's
 celebration 1.6
 Togdheer Region 7.7
 TPLF (Tigray People's Liberation Front) 3.4,
 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 5.4, 5.5, 5.6, 5.7, 9.3, 9.5,
 9.8
 tradition 1.8
 transportation 1.4
 Tsorona 9.10
 "Tuur," Abdurahman 7.5, 7.6

U

U.S. Embassy travel warning 6.1
 U.S. Marines 7.3
 U.S.-Rwanda facilitation process 9.1, 9.2
 U.S.-Rwanda initiative 9.5
 U.S.-Rwanda Peace Plan 4.7
 U.S./U.N. interventions 7.3
 Uganda 5.2, 5.9, 9.1
 Ukraine 9.9
 UN Cartographic Office 4.7
 UN Cartographic Unit 9.4
 UN Commissioner on Human Rights. *See*
 Robinson, Mary
 UNICEF 3.7
 United Nations 4.7, 5.5, 9.2, 9.4
 United Nations OCHA (Office for the Coordina-
 tion of Humanitarian Assistance) 3.6
 United Nations Security Council 4.8
 United Nations Task Force (UNITAF) 7.3
 United Somali Congress (USC) 7.3
 United States 9.4
 USAID OFDA (Office of Foreign Disaster
 Assistance) 3.6

W

Warsama, Abdi Ibrahim 7.7
 Welo Province 5.2, 5.6, 8.3
 Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF) 7.3
 White Horse Whiskey 1.8
 Woyane 9.5, 9.7

Y

yehabesha dabo (Ethiopian bread) 10.4
 Yemen 5.3, 7.9
 Yirga triangle 5.6
 Yohannes IV 5.3

Z

Zagwe dynasty 5.2
 Zaire (now Congo) 5.2
 Zalanbessa 3.2, 3.4, 4.2, 4.3, 5.5, 9.10
 Zenawi, Meles 3.4, 4.2, 4.5, 5.1, 5.4, 6.2, 9.2,
 9.5
 Zimbabwe 4.8, 9.1

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