

Born Free, Created Poor: Coming of Age in Ethiopia

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Poverty is not the lack of food or shelter. That is destitution. Poverty is a concept that creates you as a different person, a different being. Through knowledge, you come to know you are poor.

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I was born in Lalibela, an ancient holy town in rural Ethiopia. I was born at a time when the traditional monarchical system was overthrown by a military power—the Derg. I was called Yirga, which means ‘let it be’. My name was a wish of stability, a hope that the world would settle around us. But I never knew stability was needed. The world was beautiful and I was free.

So little of Lalibela is level. Even the fields slope up and down like waves in the earth. It seems that long ago, rock sprung out of the ground and mountains erupted from parallel plains, carrying greenery and life. From this rock, my people sliced into the earth and carved eleven churches, mighty feats of architecture and faith cut from single pieces of stone. Ethiopia adopted Christianity around 300 AD, long before Europe, and these churches were crafted in the 12th century as testaments to our long-held faith.

I grew up on the body of mountains. Our house, a circular hut made entirely by my father's hands, nestled at the foot of *Zayit Woyira*¹, Mount Olive. It was a very simple house of wood, grass and mud. Ethiopia imported one thing from Australia: eucalyptus. My father used the heady-smelling wood to build our home. The roof he made from a long, strong grass called *sembalet*. Sometimes, the inside of the house was painted with *ebet*, cow dung. The excreta of cows were not regarded as something dirty. Before I can even remember, I learnt how to collect it, dry it in the sun and use it as a fuel.

We kept animals, first ten sheep and later two cows. Our most beloved cow, Maskala, was named for the beautiful cross on her forehead. She

loved my mother, the only person she allowed to milk her. Whenever she heard my mother's voice, she came running. She was affectionate to me, too. Whenever I scratched her neck, she licked my frizzy hair like a cat grooming its kitten. I took her and the other cattle to the fields and as they grazed, I played games with my friends.

The mountains, the churches, the fields and the grass: they were all mine. I could run to any house, go to any person, and be given food. I learnt to cultivate the land from my father. In the cool rock churches and out in the fields, monks taught me stories of creation, history, philosophy, poetry and over 200 characters from the ancient Ge'ez Fidel alphabet still used today. I began to play with my native language of Amharic, twisting sentences into rhymes.

Everything I learnt, I passed on. I picked up songs, riddles and dances from neighbours, snatching them and adding them to my collection to share with whoever crossed my path. I stood on a rock above my friends, reciting songs I'd heard from church leaders:

*'Nitfaker eskenimewut hale hale luya!
Nitfaker eskenimewut hale hale luya!
Alem halafi nat kemetselalot.'*

'Let us love each other till we die. Halle-Hallelujah!
Let us love each other till we die. Halle-Hallelujah!
For the earth will pass like shadow.'

In the same breath, I chanted communist slogans I'd heard from the Derg:

*'Esey esey dess maletu!
Keminged laay tezergito metayetu
Ya mindegna ye'ehapa kitregna
Bekey shibir temetito sitegna
Esey esey dess maletu!
Keminged laay tezergito metayetu.'*

'Victory victory how sweet!
The sight of a body razed on the street
That sly treacherous rebel
Hit by 'Red Terror'² and sent to the devil
Victory victory how sweet!
The sight of a body razed on the street.'

I never felt the discord between the two messages. I only wanted to share what I knew.

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There was a western elementary school very close to our house. It was a collection of small rooms made of wood, with corrugated iron sheets for a roof. I would walk past the school and see all my friends collected in one room, sitting quietly and paying attention to the teacher. I was not allowed to attend the school, I was only five, but to me this was no barrier. I would run to the school and *bang bang bang* on the great metal gate with my tiny fists until they let me in. All the students rushed out, chanting and shouting.

‘*Yirga metta!* Yirga is here!’

The teachers quickly learnt that just as I wouldn’t stop banging on the gate until it opened, I would not go away until they let me take over their class.

‘It’s my turn! I want to teach!’ I shouted, stamping my feet. ‘I want to teach them now!’

And the teacher let me. I took the chalk and wrote on the board, all nonsense scribbles as I was too young to know how to write. I said a few words, turned to the students and pointed at what I had scrawled. They laughed and repeated what I said. Then, when I had finished, I would run home, leaving the teacher with a room of giggling children.

In a town where every house was my house, where every classroom was a pulpit for me to preach or teach or tell stories, I never knew that we lacked anything. Late at night, we would be sent to cut grass or fetch water. We didn’t have pipes in the house back then. Water was collected from small springs across the mountains. As time went on, the climate changed and the water started to disappear. We were asked to fetch water from further and further away. We carried water in plastic bottles, big ones that came to the country in 1984 when there was famine. Aid workers brought oil in these large plastic jugs and we continued to use them long after they had gone. As we went about our errand, the bottles became drums. We beat them as we sang and danced. We picked freshly sprouted seeds from fledgling crops—wheat, beans, chickpeas—snacking as we went. Depending on where we’d go, the grass tickled our toes or the dust of the earth turned our brown feet red.

We never questioned the distance to fetch water. The lack of water in the neighbourhood, I never saw it as poverty. It was simply just that ‘there was no water’. As children, it was an opportunity for another adventure.

‘Oh, today there is no water. So what are we going to do?’

‘Let’s go and get water from that *far far* place!’

We saw it as a simple fact of life, a mere inconvenience at most.

It was only when I became a student in the modern western school, the one I had so eagerly demanded to be let in to teach, that my world began to change.

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My father knew many things. He knew how to cultivate the land, build houses, make furniture. Just as I enjoyed teaching, my father loved to learn, and accumulated many skills by acting as an informal apprentice to many builders and carpenters in the area. When the Derg came, they started opening government offices and were looking for recruits. My father was eager to find a job.

‘Have you been to school at all?’

‘No.’

‘Have you received any certificates?’

‘No, but I can farm, I can make furniture, I can build—’

‘You may have many abilities but the only thing you can really become is a security guard. We cannot employ you for anything else.’

Because he didn’t go to school, all the things my father knew were reduced to nothing. The man who built my family home, grew every grain and vegetable and raised every animal that would grace our plates, he knew nothing in the eyes of this new system. He became a guard, but he was so wounded by his newly discovered ignorance that he decided to go



Me as a child (front row centre). My father stands directly behind, looking off into the distance (back row centre). The sign on the door is a poster from the Derg. It is a revolutionary call to defend the motherland. Image provided by the authors.

to school. So when I went to the modern school with all the other children, I went with my father. He studied up to Grade Nine until he became too busy with the four brothers and one sister that came after me. I went all the way to high school and beyond.

In Ethiopia, all high schools and universities teach in English. It is not a matter of simply learning English, we are expected to learn, to be instructed and assessed in a language that is not ours. When I asked why I had to learn in English, I was offered a simple explanation: it offers us an escape from poverty. If we can communicate in English, we can attract foreign investors or receive aid funding. But this policy was, and continues to be, one of the strongest creators of poverty. When I was made to study in a foreign language, I became a child again. I started by simply repeating everything that was said to me. We call it *shimdeda*, mindlessly parroting foreign words without knowing their meaning. Suddenly my friends and I, we who had already mastered a language, mastered philosophy, mastered songs and games and dances, mastered the best way to carry water or create fuel from cow dung, were told to stop, go back, and start again.

Our minds became impoverished.

So we started again, and we were taught the history of far away places. We learnt about the west, a place where paradise seemed to be. We were told of all the glorious things the west has—machines, industry, science—and were made to notice the lack of such things in Ethiopia. More insidiously, we were made to see the wonders of our own land, our very existence, in a new light. We started to forget that we never needed those things to carve churches out of mountains, to make food or warm shelter, to defeat western attempts to take the only soil never colonised in Africa. And in this process of forgetting, slowly we were remade as new beings, poor beings. I learnt poverty through education.

Just like my father, I sought out foreign knowledge to address this newly acquired realisation. My two worlds began to merge. When I would go to the fields with the cattle, I would take my exercise book and practice my English. I always loved reading *loud*. I started to talk to the cows and the trees, trying to teach them.

‘How are you, Mr Tree? Hey, Maskala, what are you doing?’

I would sing so many songs, but now I added English ones.

‘Listen to the cock, *coo coo*!

Listen to the dog, *woo woo*!

Listen to the cow, *moo moo*!

Listen to the cat, *mew mew*!

Listen, listen, listen!’

As the years went on, play in the field fell away. Even adults yelled at us for singing our local songs. When we dug play churches out of sand and took turns as the wise old priests, adults now loyal to the Derg screamed at us for practicing the backward religion that they had once so proudly taught us. Lalibela had been such a very big school to me. But now my time was consumed by a small room and a teacher who kept pressing on us to repeat foreign words and concepts that had no reference to the reality we lived. We were no longer teachers to one another. We were all just students, permitted to move from one grade to another through tests, shut out completely from the entire community.

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The realisation that I was poor—that my country was poor—didn't just happen at the individual level. Before I was born, our last Emperor, Haile Selassie, became friendly to the west and brought western knowledge and institutions to a people who would later use such tools to overthrow him. Ethiopia went through a re-education process that saw not only education but government and law all replaced by cut-and-pasted foreign imitations. University students, as the first bearers of western education, became aware that they were poor in the eyes of the world. It's like somebody makes your clothes and then you have to find a way to fit into them. The elders became old fools, the farmers mere tenants, the old leaders feudals, and the church scholars reactionaries.

The students viewed their people as slaves of an old monarchical system and decided to abolish it through violence. Yet, even when the military took over, slaughtering the students and taking over their cause, the Derg never had complete control. Civil war raged in the country, quietly in Eritrea at first, and then in a great climax where a group of rebels known as the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) started taking large parts of the country. In 1989, Lalibela fell into the hands of the rebels and my father's position as a guard for the Derg became perilous. The Derg withdrew from the town and my father went with them, all the way to Dessie, some 240 kilometres away.

At this time, classes made way for weapons as the modern school became a storeroom for rebel arms. I committed myself to the wisdom of the traditional education system and became a preacher at Sunday School. I was a scrawny teenager, short for my age, but I spoke with authority at the church, encouraging young men not to give in to violence during this time of war. The rebels began to notice me, questioning why this little boy had the ear of men who could become soldiers in their army.

The rebels were not brutal like the Derg and tolerated my numerous lectures about God, but every time I turned a potential recruit away from them, my mother became afraid that they might come for me. The laxity I was granted as virtue of being a child was starting to fade. I was sent to Dessie to join my father and resume my education.

I went to Dessie on foot. It took four long days over those rolling mountains of my country. I could not possibly take a car, for the rebels controlled all the vehicles in the area. Even if I was offered a ride, I would not take it. The Derg screamed overhead in their jets, bombing any car that came towards their stronghold. Slick fighter jets—*migs*—filled the air with fire. In Lalibela, I had hidden under the bed like a child hiding from monsters. On the way to Dessie, the squeal of the jets was constant. Every time, I dropped to the ground.

When I finally made it to Dessie, I found the town crowded, full of people who had fled the rebels who now occupied Eritrea, Tigray, Woldia, Lalibela, and much of northern Ethiopia. I started my final years of high school there, among thousands of displaced students. In 1991, just as we finished our Year 10 exam, the rebels took control of the entire country. The EPRDF formed government but the western systems of education, law and governance remained. I passed the national entrance exam and secured a position studying law at Addis Ababa University. In the same year, I had children of my own, beautiful twin girls. I supported my family by working as a health assistant, but with two babies we struggled so much. The girls' mother encouraged me to go to university. Western education, once again, was seen as the escape from poverty.

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I studied Law in English, despite the fact that law in Ethiopia is written and practiced in Amharic. My lecturers all taught in a language that was not theirs. I began to notice how utterly irrelevant my education was to my world. To learn laws and legislation in a language in which I would never practice law; this seemed to be the height of pointlessness.

I started to search for meaning again. I set up a club called Afroflag, where students could come together and discuss social and political issues. I stumbled across US President Harry Truman's 'Fair Deal'. He spoke of such seemingly noble things:

'We must embark on a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas. More than half the people of the world are living in

conditions approaching misery. Their food is inadequate. They are victims of disease. Their economic life is primitive and stagnant... For the first time in history, humanity possesses the knowledge and skill to relieve the suffering of these people.’³

Suddenly, we had become an ‘underdeveloped area’. So much of Africa had been ravaged by colonisation, but Ethiopia had not. We had escaped the ‘underdevelopment’ that occurs when a country and culture experiences genocide. And yet, my lecturers and fellow students believed in this Truman-esque vision of development for the country. None of them ever realised that their definition of poverty was not about lacking food, water, shelter, education or the ability to access all these things; it was about the lack of industrial agriculture, the lack of foreign investment, or the lack of western-defined benchmarks like certificates or degrees.

After my studies, I passed up the opportunity to become an assistant judge at Ethiopia’s Supreme Court so I could to develop Afroflag from a student club into a national NGO. We conducted programs which sought to bridge the gap between the traditional elders who held so much of the country’s local knowledge and the young people who had been educated in the new western system. Though I valued the work, I also felt a growing sense of responsibility to my children, who had moved to Australia with their mother a few years before.

The following year, when I left Ethiopia to come to Australia, I was not destitute. I was a well-educated director of a respected NGO. Yet the label ‘Ethiopian’ made me poor in the eyes of almost every Australian I ever met. Despite having western qualifications and experience, I was still not western enough. Like my father, my knowledge and experience was reduced to nothing. Like my father, I became a security guard.

Years later, I again chased education as a solution to my poverty. I am a lecturer now, back as a teacher scribbling on the board. Though I know I am blessed in so many ways, I often reflect on what I have become and how I was made. Lalibela has changed with me. It is still beautiful, but it has been modernised, and behind all modernisation is something that has been murdered. The traditional teachers and priests are looked upon as custodians of a dying knowledge, good only for tourists. The land itself is scarred, the springs and rivers dried up, cleared for new hotels. Satellite dishes swivel upon rooftops, transmitting to youth whose play in the fields have been replaced by Hollywood movies. The menus in local restaurants are often exclusively in English. My parents cannot read them. The modest houses and rich traditions, the fruits and vegetables we would gather and eat: all of these things disappeared in the name of development.

As a child who did not own shoes, who fetched water in plastic bottles left by aid workers, I was never poor. When my white fiancée tells someone that her future husband is Ethiopian, they furrow their brow in sympathy and mutter heartfelt condolences for some unspoken perceived struggle. Others are more direct.

‘Oh, was he a refugee?’ they ask. ‘He must love being here.’

I cannot blame them. Their knowledge of Ethiopia was informed by the very same thing that was once my fiancée’s only reference to the country—a simple thing, that common phrase said to stubborn children at the dinner table: ‘Think of the starving Ethiopians.’

As a child who thought nothing of hunger, I was taught the very same thing.

Notes

- 1 The Amharic and Ge’ez words through this piece are written here using the English Latin Alphabet. They would normally be written using Ge’ez *Fidel* (ፊደል), but the authors have used English characters so that non-Ethiopian readers may get a sense of how the Amharic and Ge’ez languages sound. Using English characters has become more common among Ethiopians who are educated in the western school system, but they may spell the same word differently. For example, the word ከጎጂራ (a staple bread used to eat stew) may be written as injera or enjera, depending on the individual. The reader should therefore note that the use of English characters has been approximated. The true sounds of Amharic and Ge’ez are also difficult to replicate, given that *Fidel* has so many characters with pronunciations that do not appear in English.
- 2 The Red Terror was the name given to a Derg campaign that involved the mass killing of political opponents.
- 3 Truman’s Inaugural Address, 20 January 1949. Text accessible at https://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/soyr_archive/inagural20jan1949.htm