

Born Free, Created Poor: Coming of Age in Ethiopia

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.

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 and replaced 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 upon the earth. It seems that long ago, rock sprung out of the ground and mountains erupted from parallel plains, carrying diverse greenery and life. From this red 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*ⁱ, Mount Olive. It was a very simple house of wood, grass and mud. Ethiopia imported one thing from Australia: eucalyptus. The trees grew at a rural village where my grandparents used to live and 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. For special occasions, we mixed it with water and painted the entire inside of our house. It sparked much excitement. I knew that if we painted the house with *ebet* in the morning, by the time it had dried that evening, we would have a big feast and many guests would come. It made the house so pretty.

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 ate, I played games with my friends.

The mountains, the churches, the fields and the grass: they were all mine. Every house was my house. As long as my legs would take me, I could run to any house, go to any person, and be given food. I saw no difference between adults and children. I took the things of adults, like teaching or preaching, and brought them down to the level of play. Every person was my teacher, and I was theirs. 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’ⁱⁱ 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. I went to political rallies, the only child among a sea of men and rifles, and performed like a leader. Once, a great beast of a man hoisted me up onto his shoulders and I shouted what I'd heard the day before, delighting when the crowd shouted my words back to me.

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, and saw it as a great opportunity. I was not allowed to attend the school as 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!”

All the children loved me. I started to like that, the way they ran to me, the way they gathered to hear what I had to say.

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 ran home merrily, leaving the teacher with a room of giggling children.

Though the teachers knew the quickest way to get rid of me was to let me teach, my self-appointed role as teacher, preacher and mini-adult was accepted by everyone in the town. No other child did this. Looking back, I don't know why I wasn't disciplined. Some elders expressed concern to my mother, but others blessed me, calling me *yelij awakie*, an old soul.

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



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.

Ethiopia, 1980.

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. It was an hour there, and an hour back, singing and playing the whole way. When the springs dried up, we went to the river with our friends or brothers. A whole day could be whiled away at the river. We took the cows and let them drink as we filled our bottles, washed our clothes, splashed about and played in the water.

We never questioned the lack of clothes, the lack of shoes, the distance to fetch water. The lack of water in the neighbourhood, I never saw it as poverty. It was simply just “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.

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 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 9 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, be instructed and be 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 be of an "international standard". We can communicate to 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 when I could already speak fluently in my own, 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. All the books we had reflected this: the righteous revolutions, the Enlightenment, the scientists, the gallant explorers. We learnt about European discoverers who came and discovered *us*. Even our own history was taught to us as accounts from visiting foreigners. We no longer had our own history – we saw ourselves through the eyes of others. 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 never knew that I was poor through my experience. I learnt it through education.

Just like my father, whose many skills rendered him useless in the new economy, I sought out foreign knowledge to address this newly acquired realisation that I was poor. 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, trying to teach them. I always felt I was some kind of journalist, reading to the world. That's how I studied English. There was no chance that I could have practiced English had it not been for the audience that was given to me by the cows, the trees and the grass. So I would talk with anything.

“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 slowly it disappeared as my time was consumed by a 4x4 room in front of 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 a test, shut out completely from the entire community. That was progress. That was modernisation.

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. The elite, who were the first bearers of western education, became aware that they were poor in the eyes of the world. Ethiopia went through a re-education process that saw not only education, but government and law, replaced by cut-and-pasted foreign imitations. 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 elite viewed their people as slaves of an old monarchical system and decided to abolish it through violence. Before I was born, three priests approached the Derg officials in Lalibela and said they would rather be martyred than worship these new Gods. The officials happily obliged, shooting them on the spot for their ignorance.

Yet 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. When members of the school went to join the rebels, I would chase them down, pleading with them not to go.

"Please, my brother, think of your mother," I begged. "You are killing your own flesh. We are all the same people. We are all children of God."

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. Back in Lalibela, I hid under the bed like a child hiding from monsters. On the way to Dessie, the squeal of the jets was constant but I never got used to it. 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. Though my schooling was interrupted for a while, I eventually 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, stitching wounds, circumcising young men and assisting women give birth. Friends and family helped us, 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.

I studied Law in English. I learnt statutes and regulations in a foreign language, despite the fact that law in Ethiopia is written and practiced in Amharic. My lecturers all taught in a language that was not theirs. We studied legal systems, philosophers and theorists from Europe. 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 Youth Vision, where students like myself could come together and discuss social and political issues through poetry and debate. At this time, I stumbled across US President Harry Truman's 1949 inaugural address, where he proposed his "Fair Deal" for America and the world. 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."ⁱⁱⁱ

Suddenly, we became 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 undergoes genocide. And yet, at university, my lecturers and fellow students believed in this Truman-esque vision of development for the country. This

belief, this well-meaning hope that western education was a way for them to help their parents escape poverty, never came with any awareness that poverty was a concept brought in from the west. 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.

My frustration came out in the mischievousness that fuelled me as a child. I continued to work as a health assistant on campus, but my disenchantment with my studies saw me branch out in other areas. Afroflag became more active, and I became the chairman of the university's literature club. In the year 2000, I won a national writing competition for the 50th anniversary of Addis Ababa University. As the winner, I was to present my poem in front of the highest officials in the university and the country. The night before, I changed several verses. I stood in front of the Speaker of the Parliament, the Minister of Education, the President of the University, and hundreds of graduates and their parents, wearing ostentatiously traditional dress, and chanted into the great hall. My voice echoed off their stunned silence, as I spoke of how in times of famine, vultures were the happiest of creatures, for they could happily gorge on the flesh of those who had fallen. I often wonder if they realised I was referring to the dying knowledge that lay in the villages and mountains, picked at, devoured and silenced in this grand celebration to 50 years of western education.

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 youth civic education programs and conferences 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 started to feel that we were re-establishing a link between young and old in Ethiopia, 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. I only came to the country to help raise my children. Yet the colour of my skin and the label "Ethiopian" made me poor in the eyes of almost every Australian I ever met. Just as my mind was made to feel poor in Ethiopia, my very existence became poor in Australia. 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, and studied a Masters and then a PhD in Human Rights Education. 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 great elders, traditional teachers and priests are looked upon as mere custodians of a dying knowledge, good only for tourists. The land itself is scarred; the springs and rivers dried up, the land 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 and my parents cannot read them. The fun once had by children, the many games and adventures over the mountains, the modest houses and rich traditions, the beautiful fruits and vegetables we would gather and eat: all of these things disappeared in the process 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, for their knowledge of Ethiopia was informed by the very same thing that was once my fiancée’s only reference to the country. Just 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.

ⁱ The Amharic and Ge’ez words and passages through this piece are written here using the English Latin Alphabet. They would normally be written using Ge’ez *Fidel* (ፊደል) and their English spellings have been approximated.

ⁱⁱ The Red Terror was the name given to a Derg campaign that involved the mass killing of political opponents, mainly members of the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party (EPRP). These rebels are not to be confused with the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF).

ⁱⁱⁱ Truman’s Inaugural Address, 20 January 1949. Text accessible at https://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/50yr_archive/inagural20jan1949.htm