

# WALKING BETWEEN WORLDS

Book Launch & Diaspora Dialogue

Remarks by

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Good afternoon.

Dr. Samuel Kifle, President of Addis Ababa University,

Representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs,

Representatives of the Office of Diaspora Affairs,

Distinguished guests, colleagues, friends, members of the diaspora, ladies and gentlemen:

## I. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you for joining us today.

It is a special privilege to appear here at Addis Ababa University—the institution that helped shape my intellectual journey—and to celebrate the publication of *Walking Between Worlds: Letters to the Next Generation of the Ethiopian Diaspora*.

Before I begin, I would like to express my sincere appreciation to Dr. Samuel Kifle.

Several days ago, despite the extraordinary demands on his schedule as President of Addis Ababa University, he graciously made time to meet with me one-on-one at very short notice. What I expected to be a brief courtesy visit became a thoughtful conversation about opportunities to strengthen relationships between Ethiopia and its global diaspora.

During that discussion, Dr. Samuel immediately recognized that the themes of *Walking Between Worlds* extended beyond a book launch. He saw an opportunity to initiate a broader conversation about diaspora engagement, partnership, and the future role of Addis Ababa University in connecting Ethiopia to its citizens abroad and their children.

It was during that meeting that he encouraged the Addis Ababa University Endowment Fund Office to reach out to the Office of Diaspora Affairs and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and explore the possibility of organizing a joint dialogue around these issues.

The gathering we are participating in today—and the broader engagement that follows tomorrow—is, in part, the result of that vision and leadership.

Dr. Samuel, thank you for your time, your encouragement, and your commitment to building bridges between Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia, and the global Ethiopian diaspora.

My relationship with this campus began long before I entered the university itself. I had just turned seventeen when I arrived at the Sidist Kilo campus as a twelfth-grade student at Prince Bedemariam Laboratory School. At that age, I could not have imagined that the same institution would later become part of my academic formation, shape my understanding of the world, and, decades later, publish the book we are celebrating today.

## **II. THE QUESTION AT THE HEART OF THE BOOK**

Today is not simply a book launch.

It is also an opportunity to reflect on a larger question:

*What does it mean to belong to more than one world at the same time?*

That question became the organizing idea of this book.

At one level, *Walking Between Worlds* is a memoir.

It begins in Nekemte, where my childhood was shaped by hardship, family struggles, friendship, resilience, and the transformative power of education.

It follows a path through Prince Bedemariam Laboratory School, Addis Ababa University, the Demographic Training and Research Center, graduate studies

abroad, life in the United Kingdom, immigration to the United States, and eventually a career in teaching, public health, demography, and public service.

But this book is not primarily about me.

The memoir portions occupy only about one quarter of the book.

The remaining three quarters consist of reflections, lessons, and what I call “fireside interludes” addressed to the next generation of the Ethiopian diaspora.

Those sections were written for young Ethiopians growing up in North America, Europe, Australia, the Middle East, and elsewhere—young people who may speak multiple languages, carry multiple identities, and often find themselves navigating multiple worlds simultaneously.

### **The Ethiopian diaspora today numbers in the millions.**

Its members serve as physicians, engineers, professors, entrepreneurs, artists, diplomats, researchers, and community leaders.

They contribute to Ethiopia through remittances, investments, philanthropy, advocacy, and expertise.

**But their most important contribution may be something less tangible.**

### **They serve as bridges.**

Bridges between cultures.

Bridges between institutions.

Bridges between generations.

### **The next generation of the Ethiopian diaspora differs from the first.**

Their experiences are different.

Their challenges are different.

Their relationship with Ethiopia is different.

Traditional models of engagement, built primarily on nostalgia, are no longer sufficient.

The next generation seeks participation.

They seek relevance.

They seek inclusion.

They seek opportunities to contribute.

**And that requires new ways of thinking about diaspora engagement.**

It requires leadership exchanges.

And opportunities to participate meaningfully in Ethiopia's future.

### **III. STORIES, FIRESIDE INTERLUDES, AND THE NEXT GENERATION**

Throughout the book, I return repeatedly to another theme:

The importance of storytelling.

*Stories preserve memory.*

Stories preserve identity.

Stories preserve belonging.

That is why the fireside interludes occupy such an important place in this book.

They are conversations across generations.

**Let me share a few passages from the book itself.**

As I mentioned earlier, *Walking Between Worlds* is structured differently from a traditional memoir.

The book unfolds in ten chapters, each ending with a Fireside Interlude – **conversations with the next-generation diaspora.**

That is why the subtitle reads *Letters to the Next Generation of the Ethiopian Diaspora*

The memoir begins with a boy trying to understand a world that often felt larger than he could interpret.

At one point I write:

**“I was not running away.** I was not going toward anything, either. I was suspended — between boyhood and manhood, between a family that was splintering and a world that demanded I stand upright.”

In many ways, that sentence became the emotional foundation of the entire book.

Because when I look back now, I realize that much of life is lived in those in-between spaces.

Between countries.

Between languages.

Between generations.

Between certainty and doubt.

Between the world we inherited and the world we hope to create.

**Perhaps that is why the title *Walking Between Worlds* felt so natural.** It was not only describing immigration. It was describing the human condition itself.

**One lesson that emerged from those early experiences concerns how we judge people.**

**The easiest thing in life is to divide the world into heroes and villains.**

**The hardest thing is to accept complexity.**

In the book I write:

“When people hear pieces of my childhood, they sometimes expect to meet a man armored against the world—someone who learned early to read danger, to brace for disappointment, to keep a tight circle and a tighter jaw. That’s a fair hypothesis. Adverse Childhood Experiences, the researchers tell us, tend to echo. What happens to you when you’re small tries very hard to become your future tense.

**And yet, that was not my sentence.”**

**The Fireside Interludes then shift from reflection to direct conversation with younger generations.**

At one point I write to my own children:

“To my four: you live far from the eucalyptus roads of my childhood, but the same truths hum under your city streets. If school feels too big, make it small: one friend, one hour, one problem set, repeated. If you feel invisible, speak in any good language you have—Amharic, English, code, music, prayer. Someone needs your voice. **If a place asks you to harm yourself to belong, you do not owe that place your presence.**”

**Those passages speak directly to young people growing up between cultures.**

**The book also contains a message to immigrant parents.**

Because diaspora life creates pressures that children often do not fully see.

In one Fireside Interlude, I write:

“Many immigrant parents, myself included, often carry such heavy memories of home that we fail to live fully in the present. We get lost in the past—what we left behind, who we lost, what could have been—and in that fog we sometimes fail to live up to our parental responsibilities of being truly present for you.”

I then challenge the diaspora:

**“Too often, Ethiopian voices abroad grow louder in criticism than in contribution.”**

That statement is not intended as condemnation.

It is intended as an invitation.

An invitation to move beyond commentary toward participation.

**Beyond outrage toward service.**

Beyond spectatorship toward nation-building.

## IV. THE HARVEST I BRING

**The final chapter of the book has sections titled "The Harvest I Bring."**

The title reflects a simple question that many Ethiopians ask when someone returns home after a long journey:

**What did you bring back?**

Across Ethiopia, thousands of scholars, professionals, and members of the diaspora have quietly transformed education into service. Some have built schools. Others have established libraries, funded scholarships, supported health centers, supplied clean water, sponsored students, constructed roads, or helped communities gain access to opportunities that would otherwise have remained beyond reach.

Their names rarely appear in headlines.

Yet their work lives on in the daily lives of ordinary people.

**I wanted the final harvest to honor that tradition.**

**And then I turn to a small contribution that became deeply meaningful to my own family.**

Through the Buraka Foundation, and with the generous partnership of my cousin Kidiste Kebebew—the daughter of my late uncle, Gash Kebebew Daka—we helped finance several community development projects starting in the year 2000 (a quarter century in the making); the latest accomplishment **just completed last week** being the construction of a bridge across the Ede River in Arya Jawi Kebele.

**For years, the river posed a danger to children walking to school, families moving between communities, worshippers traveling to church, and livestock crossing during periods of high water.** What appeared on a map as a narrow river represented something entirely different in the daily lives of local residents: uncertainty, danger, and limitation.

Then, after extensive planning, coordination, **some setbacks, and persistence,** the bridge was completed.

**Only last week, I received a Telegram message informing me that the bridge project had been successfully finished.**

The message reported that community members, church leaders, and local government officials gathered to express their gratitude. It included a statement that moved me deeply:

**“Hereafter no child shall be hurt or taken by this river.”**

The many scientific publications described in **chapter ten** sought to generate evidence.

**The Arya Jawi bridge represents something different.**

**It represents evidence put to work.**

For me, that bridge is not separate from the research.

It is the continuation of the research.

**Because the purpose of knowledge is not merely understanding.**

**The purpose of knowledge is service.**

And if there is a single image I would choose to represent the final harvest of this book, it would not be a journal article, a dataset, or a university diploma.

*It would be a child crossing a bridge safely on the way to school.*

## **V. FRIENDSHIP, FAMILY, AND CONNECTION**

As I look around this room today, I am reminded that no life is built alone.

One of the great gifts of this gathering is that several people whose stories appear in the book are actually here with us.

Among them is my lifelong friend, Dr. Solomon Ali.

Solomon and I have been friends since the seventh grade.

Long before either of us knew where life would take us, we were simply two boys trying to navigate school, family expectations, and a changing Ethiopia.

**The book also pays tribute to Solomon's father, Gash Ali, a remarkable man.**

He was a tailor, a soccer referee, a community builder, and a man whose influence extended far beyond his modest workshop.

As I reflected on my friendship with Solomon, I found myself thinking not only about the two of us, but also about our fathers—**two men whose lives traveled in opposite directions and whose choices shaped the boys we became.**

In the book, I write:

“Solomon’s father, Gash Ali, Eritrean-born and Nekemt-rooted, was the town’s best tailor, a soccer referee, **a community spark plug.** He died young, but not before stitching pride into the fabric of a town. My own father **worked far, dissolved marriages, and left traces that were mostly absences.**

**Two fathers, two legacies. Two roofs, two rooms in my heart.**

We used to joke that the map folded in on itself: **one father leaving Eritrea for Nekemt, the other leaving Nekemt for Eritrea,** the two missing each other like trains that pass at night—one with lights dimmed; the other with windows full of faces looking for their stop.

*Two fathers moving in opposite directions.*

*Two sons moving toward the same friendship.*

And decades later, here we are, still sharing the journey.

**I am also delighted that two of my cousins, Dr. Hirut Terefe and Dereje Terefe, are with us today.**

Hirut appears in one of the most unexpected stories in the book.

When I was a sixth-grade boy wandering through a crowded Thursday market in Nekemte, I saw something I had never seen before.

A young woman rode through the market on horseback.

Someone whispered that she had just returned from America.

At the time, America existed in my imagination more as myth than reality.

Looking back now, writing these words from California half a century later, I sometimes wonder whether that brief encounter planted a seed I did not yet know existed.

**The second story belongs to her brother, Dereje.**

## **VI. ADDIS ABABA UNIVERSITY, GRATITUDE, AND GIVING BACK**

As we celebrate this publication, I would like to congratulate Addis Ababa University on its newfound independence.

This institution occupies a unique place in Ethiopia's intellectual history.

Today it enters a new chapter as the country's first fully autonomous and self-governing university.

**That achievement brings both opportunity and responsibility.**

For that reason, it was important to me that this book be published by **Addis Ababa University Press**.

It was equally important that all proceeds from the book be committed to supporting the University.

I view this not as charity but as gratitude.

Whatever I have accomplished professionally has been built on foundations laid by teachers, mentors, institutions, friends, and communities.

This book is one small way of giving back.

**Let me close with the audience for whom this book was ultimately written.**

To the young Ethiopians of the diaspora:

You inherit more than a nationality.

You inherit a history.

You inherit a culture.

You inherit stories of resilience, sacrifice, struggle, and hope.

Do not feel compelled to choose between identities.

Carry both.

Learn both.

Honor both.

## VII. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

**Last but certainly not least**, I would like to acknowledge three individuals whose contributions were instrumental in bringing this book into the world.

First, my heartfelt gratitude goes to Ato Yikuno Amlak Mezgebu, currently on a study-abroad program to complete a PhD, and former Editor-in-Chief of Addis Ababa University Press. His early confidence in the manuscript, his encouragement, and his vision helped transform an idea into a published book. For that, I will always be grateful.

I would also like to express my sincere appreciation to Professor Solomon Mulugeta, one of the manuscript's reviewers. As a son of Nekemte and Wollega himself, he brought not only scholarly rigor but also thoughtful suggestions and corrections of factual details that strengthened the book immeasurably. Every author hopes for a reviewer who combines intellectual honesty with genuine care for the work. I was fortunate to find such a reviewer in Professor Solomon.

I would also like to thank Gashe Meseret Abeje—teacher, artist, literary thinker, and one of Ethiopia's gifted cultural voices. His review went beyond evaluation. He understood the spirit of the book: its attempt to connect memory with responsibility, identity with service, and personal experience with a larger national conversation. His thoughtful encouragement and generous assessment gave me confidence that the book's message could resonate with readers far beyond my own generation.

**To all three of you, thank you for helping this manuscript become a better book and for helping it find its way into readers' hands.**

**Before I conclude, I would like to express my deepest appreciation to two individuals** whose leadership and hard work made today's gathering possible.

**First, my sincere thanks to Miss Semayawit Bahru, Director of the Addis Ababa University Endowment Fund Office and the lead organizer of this event.**

The quality of today's program speaks for itself. As I reviewed the Concept Note, I was struck not only by its professionalism but also by the clarity of its vision. It successfully transformed what could have been a routine book launch into something much larger: a dialogue on diaspora identity, next-generation engagement, storytelling as nation-building, trust and partnership, and the role of endowment-building in supporting Addis Ababa University's future.

That kind of thoughtful design does not happen by accident. It reflects careful planning, strategic thinking, and exceptional organizational leadership. **Miss Semayawit, thank you for your professionalism, your dedication, and for guiding this effort from concept to reality.**

I would also like to extend special thanks to Dr. Derib Ado, Head of Addis Ababa University Press and co-organizer of today's engagements.

**Ameseginalehu.**