

Chapter Ten — Subsection 10.1: Most Recent Ethiopia Trip

The wheels of the Ethiopian Airlines jet screeched against the tarmac at Bole International Airport, and in that moment I felt a wave of conflicting emotions—relief, anticipation, and something deeper, almost primal, as if the soil of Ethiopia itself was reaching out to reclaim me the fifth time after years away. I had returned first in 2008 having been away for over two decades since I left as a young man, with dreams that stretched across oceans, and now I was returning for a fifth time with a mind shaped by new worlds and experiences, but a heart still rooted in this land.

The air that greeted me when I stepped out of the plane was heavy, warmer than the crisp Californian mornings I had grown accustomed to. There was a faint scent of roasted coffee mixed with the dry dust of Addis Ababa streets, an aroma I had carried in memory more than in experience. It was both familiar and strange. At first glance, the city seemed transformed further since my first return in 2008—modern glass buildings climbing into the skyline, new roads, new traffic—but beneath the surface, I could still trace the contours of the Ethiopia I had known as a boy. The same minibus taxis darted dangerously across crowded avenues. The same mixture of laughter and exhaustion etched itself on people's faces. The same resilience hummed in the air.

What struck me most, however, was how easily time folded in on itself. Memories that had lain dormant came rushing back with alarming clarity. The smell of injera wafting through open doorways reminded me of evenings spent in Nekemt, when my aunt would feed us frugally but with love. The sight of children chasing a battered ball on the side of the road brought back the sting of playing soccer barefoot, the broken toenail, the scars, and yet also the laughter that momentarily freed us from hardship. Ethiopia had always been that paradox—pain braided with joy, loss woven with resilience.

But this return was not just about nostalgia. It was about taking stock. As I stood in line at immigration, my American passport in hand, I wondered how those behind me—many of them young Ethiopians leaving for the first time—saw their country. Did they feel hope? Or were they like me, leaving decades ago, carrying with them both pride and a deep ache of disillusionment? I wanted to ask them: Will you come back? And if you do, what kind of Ethiopia will you find?

In the taxi ride into the city, I tried to absorb everything. The driver was quick to talk politics, as drivers in Addis always are. He complained about inflation, about the rising cost of teff, about how hard it was to send his children to a decent school. His words spilled out fast, each complaint anchored in lived reality, but his tone wasn't just despair—it carried the resilience of someone who refuses to stop fighting for daily survival. In him I heard echoes of my father's generation, men who had endured wars and famines yet still found ways to push forward.

Arriving in the neighborhood where some of my extended family still lived was like stepping into a living museum of contrasts. The new condominiums towered awkwardly over clusters of tin-roofed homes. Satellite dishes sprouted like weeds from crumbling walls. Women sold roasted barley on the roadside, right next to a smartphone repair shop run by a teenager. It was a city straddling eras, the old and the new in uneasy conversation.

And then, there were the reunions. The embraces were long and unrestrained, the kind you can only share after decades of separation. Faces had aged, bodies had bent, but the spirit—the deep bond of kinship—remained unshaken. My mother’s sister, Maritu, stood before me, her presence stirring memories of university days when I first came to know her. She had buried a husband, lost a son to COVID, yet she welcomed me with words that carried neither complaint nor bitterness. Only welcome. Only love.

That night, as I lay in my hotel room bed listening to the muffled hum of the city outside, I felt Ethiopia pressing against me from all sides. It was not an embrace of comfort—it was an embrace of responsibility. This land had not forgotten me, and I could not forget it. The children I had seen running barefoot that afternoon could easily have been me decades earlier. Their futures were not guaranteed, and perhaps my return, however symbolic, was part of the ongoing duty we all carried—to ensure that Ethiopia’s next fifty years would not repeat the wounds of the past.

In the quiet of that first night back, I whispered a silent vow. This was not a tourist’s return. It was a return to responsibility, to memory, to unfinished work. Ethiopia had given me my first soil, my first language, my first scars, and my first dreams. Now, standing again on her soil, I promised to give back in whatever way I could.

And then there was a big gathering of almost thirty individuals – Solomon’s mom (now Emahoy) and his siblings with their children and grand children, We met at Mama’s Kitchen restaurant near Mekenagna.

Chapter Ten — Subsection 10.4: The Pull of Ancestral Roots

The air in Ethiopia has always carried with it a sense of gravity for me, but nothing compared to the sensation that coursed through me when I stood on the soil of my ancestral homeland. For decades, I had lived abroad, weaving a life in California, raising children, and carving out a career. Yet in the quietest moments, I always felt a subtle tug, as if invisible threads were pulling me back toward the land that had shaped the first half of my life. This was more than nostalgia; it was an existential gravity that no distance could dissolve.

When I returned during those transformative years, I was not just a visitor. I felt like a son stepping back into a home that had never fully released him. The contours of the land, the bends in the roads, the cadence of voices—all resonated in a way that neither time nor migration could erase. Addis Ababa was bustling with a modern rhythm, but beneath its newer layers, I could still glimpse echoes of the Ethiopia I had known as a boy.

It was not only about the land or the city. It was about the lives intertwined with mine by blood and history. Returning brought me face-to-face with extended family members whose faces were marked by the same features that I saw in the mirror each morning. Some welcomed me with embraces that seemed to bridge the chasm of decades. Others regarded me more cautiously, as though my years abroad had turned me into someone foreign, less Ethiopian, less of them. These moments reminded me that belonging is never automatic; it must be continually negotiated and reaffirmed.

The pull of ancestral roots was also deeply spiritual. I found myself walking among eucalyptus groves and recalling the long afternoons of my childhood when I planted trees with my father. Those trees had been taken during the Derg's nationalization policies, but in memory they still stood tall. To be back was to confront both the losses and the legacies—the things taken, the things endured, and the things that remained eternal in memory. It reminded me that even as regimes change, and even as land is confiscated, the relationship between people and place cannot be fully severed.

Visiting the graves of ancestors carried its own weight. I stood over stones worn smooth by time and weather, and I whispered silent prayers that stitched together past, present, and future. I thought of the generations before me who had struggled, survived, and persevered on this soil, leaving behind fragments of resilience that I carried within me without even realizing. In their sacrifices, I saw the blueprint of my own resilience abroad—the ability to survive displacement, adapt to new worlds, and yet never lose sight of the homeland.

These visits were not simply emotional—they were instructive. They reminded me of the

importance of continuity, of cultural heritage, and of passing down to the next generation a sense of where they come from. My children, born in America, grew up amid the narratives of diaspora. They knew about Ethiopia through my words, through family stories, and through brief visits. But standing on ancestral land myself, I felt a stronger obligation: to help them not only know but also feel Ethiopia. To understand it not as a distant concept but as part of their own identity, even if their lives are lived far from its soil.

In many ways, this pull was also a reckoning. For years, I had carried with me unresolved feelings about the choices my parents made, the fractures in my family, and the pain of separations. Returning was not about erasing those scars, but about acknowledging them while still claiming my roots with dignity. Ethiopia was not a perfect homeland, but it was my homeland. It was the place of both wounds and healing.

For those in the diaspora, especially the children of immigrants, I offer this reflection: never underestimate the power of your ancestral roots. They will call you in ways you may not expect—sometimes through memory, sometimes through dreams, sometimes through the yearning in your parents' eyes. And when you heed that call, you may find that it changes how you see yourself, how you see your adopted homeland, and how you define your role in shaping the future of Ethiopia. The pull of ancestral roots is not just about looking back—it is about anchoring yourself so that you can move forward with strength, clarity, and purpose.

As I left that visit, I felt both heavy and light. Heavy with the weight of history and memory, yet light with a renewed sense of belonging. Ethiopia, in all its contradictions, was still mine. And I, in all my diasporic complexity, was still hers.