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Condoms, Konso, and Colobus Monkeys

ADDIS ABABA, Ethiopia

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By Marc Michaelson

It was a hellish night in a hellish town. I'm certain Lucifer smiled as I tossed and turned, unable to ignore the ruckus and drift into sleep. My travel companions and I had arrived in Agere Maryam late in the afternoon, and discovering no vacancies in the more upscale dollar-a-night motels, we were condemned to pass the night in a seedy brothel.

The place had a certain liveliness to it, but it wasn't the type of establishment you'd want to take your family for a weekend excursion. The motel bar was packed with men and bar girls¹, waltzing the cat-and-mouse chase that serves as prelude to the sordid one-night-stand. Aster Aweke's recently released cassette blared in the background as it did in nearly every bar, restaurant, and music shop on our journey. Behind the bar, in the alleyway alongside the motel rooms, patrons chewed *khat* (a narcotic leaf) and drank beer, a noxious combination that suppressed the qualities of good citizenship and common consideration. Action was the name of the game — people moving about, in and out of rooms, yelling, laughing, and generally enjoying a rowdy Saturday night.

Tired from a long day of bumpy road travel, I yearned for a quiet, restful night of sleep. This desire was clearly misplaced. In this den of sin, there would be no peaceful hum of cicadas to lull me into a dream state. As I traversed the social wilderness *en route* to my room at 9:00 p.m., I sensed it would be a long night ahead.

The bed was surprisingly comfortable, but I had the unsavory feeling of microscopic insects and other unidentified creatures crawling between the sheets. I read for a half hour, and then turned off my light in a futile attempt at slumber, despite the loud music and cavorting just outside my door. Shortly thereafter, the crying began. A girl sobbed methodically for an hour, inter-

¹ Bar girls throughout Ethiopia double as commercial sex workers. These are not the hard-core prostitutes of the western world—working the streets in leather mini-skirts, with pimps and drug habits. Bar girls are more like the girl next door. This "soft prostitution" is driven by a lack of other economic opportunities, and the relatively lucrative nature of the sex trade in Ethiopia. Typically, these girls leave their hometowns (their families would forbid them to take such jobs were they living at home), and work in urban and peri-urban centers throughout the country (especially in towns frequented by travelers and truckers). One attractive young bar girl who recently arrived in Goba, Bale (from Shashemene) told me she has made 2,000 birr (\$150) in just 5 weeks. That's approximately the national average annual income. And she considers herself a novice, claiming that some of the other girls are making much more. According to one DKT staff member, these girls get a minimum of fifty birr (\$6) per night, much more than a manual laborer earns in a day (about 10-15 birr) and about the same as a domestic maid earns in a month.

rupted only briefly by a few desperate calls for the manager ("Hallawi!!!! Hallawi!!!!) and some heated arguments between drunk patrons and prostitutes. I couldn't catch the gist of their dispute, but assume they weren't quibbling over politics. Near 11:00 p.m., my friend Chris called quietly through the wall: "Marc, are you awake?" It was a rhetorical question. How could I possibly be sleeping?

"Do you wanna play Scrabble?"

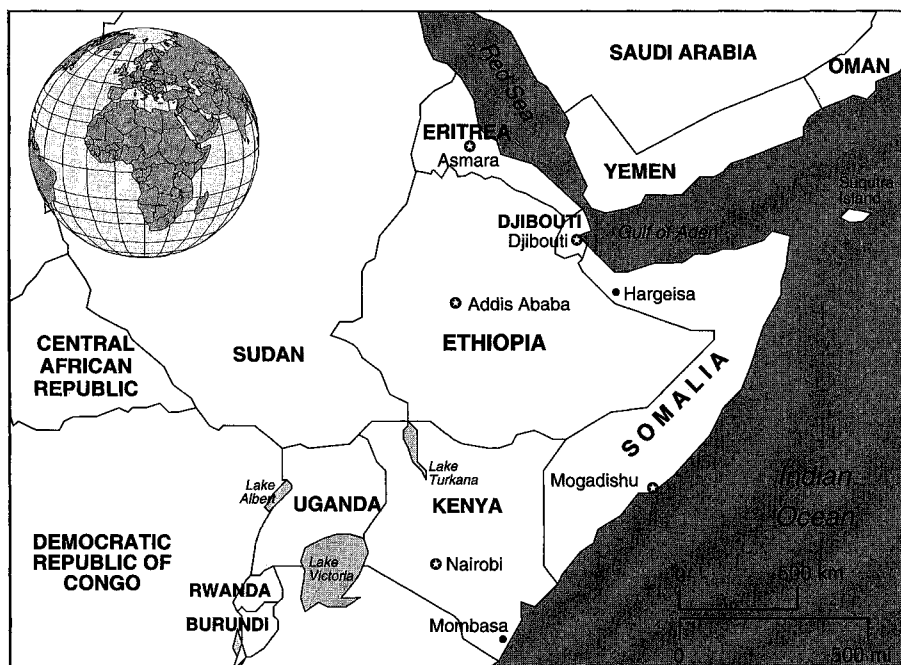
We met outside our rooms, curious to see what was happening. The girl was still crying through the metal window grate of the room next door. Her friend had locked her in the room for some reason or another. The

arguing continued unabated and we complained heartily to the manager: "What kind of a place are you running here?" It was a tongue-in-cheek comment, but he was visibly embarrassed nonetheless. Just as we began our Scrabble game (the first two words on the board were "whore" and "blond"), the electricity was cut off, the music stopped and the craziness died down. My next-door neighbor continued her sobbing for the rest of the night, and I felt lucky to escape the next morning, bleary-eyed but relatively unscathed having caught one entire hour of non-R.E.M. sleep.

Our intended itinerary had not included Agere Maryam. On course from Jinka in southwestern Gamo-Gofa province to Goba in Bale province, we had planned to spend a night in Ya'abelo, a town in Sidamo province. Somewhere along the way we took a wrong turn and ended up in the inaptly named town of Agere Maryam (Mary's country). This place is nowhere the mother of the Saviour would want to hang out; merely associating her name with this rude and roughshod town reeks of sacrilege.

Shortly after our arrival in the late afternoon, and sore from ten hours of sitting and bouncing around in the back of the Toyota Landcruiser, Chris and I set off to explore the town on foot. We were immediately accosted by hordes of unruly children. This was not the typical innocent curiosity about the white man; it was more a verbal assault—rowdy ragamuffins aggressively following us and yelling "You!!! Ferenji!!!!!! (foreigner) Give money!!!!!"

Opportunistic begging is a national pastime in Ethiopia — children and adults will often test their luck, approaching with the mask of a sad face to see if they can pry a few cents from a *ferenji*. Most often it is an innocent request, followed by a smile and knowing shrug of the shoulders when refused. But in Agere Maryam, the kids were brash and insulting. Ignoring them didn't work. Chris picked up a big stick to scare them away; I foolishly yelled at them, deliv-





Roadside sign in Bale region

ering the negative attention they desperately craved.

Our casual stroll through town was thereby hijacked, and transformed into a stressful trudge through a mad-house of crazed youth. In the evening we ate *kai wot* (meat in pepper sauce) on *injera* (flat sourdough bread made from the grain *teff*) for the umpteenth consecutive meal.² Emotionally drained and gastronomically frustrated, we settled in for our sleepless night in the brothel.

Fortunately, Agere Maryam was merely a blip on an otherwise terrific trip through portions of southern Ethiopia. From April 12th to the 23rd we covered more than 3,000 kilometers through the Gamo-Gofa, Sidamo, Bale and Arsi provinces. In these remote areas, we found people to be warm, friendly, polite and welcoming, unlike the abusive street urchins of Agere Maryam.

My companions on this journey included Chris Purdy (country representative), Teshome Yilma (deputy sales manager), and Mekbib Tilahun (driver), all staff of DKT Ethiopia, an international non-governmental organization (NGO) that uses social-marketing strategies to promote the use of contraceptives. Their mission was

supervision—these regions of the country have some of the agency's lowest sales figures; Chris and Teshome wanted to visit the sales representatives and some remote towns to discover the reasons for this mediocre performance and make improvements.

DKT is unique among NGOs operating in Ethiopia. Unlike most of the "charity" NGOs, DKT strives to operate like a private company. It does not provide handouts, but rather uses the free market to encourage increased use of contraceptive methods like condoms and pills. This "social-marketing" strategy achieves family-welfare objectives³ by selling contraceptives at subsidized prices affordable by Ethiopian consumers. For example, a three-pack of Hiwot Trust condoms, manufactured in the USA and donated to DKT by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), is sold for 25 centimes (about U.S.3¢) in small kiosks around the country. A monthly cycle of Prudence-brand family-planning pills is sold by pharmacies and rural drug vendors for 1 birr (U.S.13¢).

DKT's marketing coverage of Ethiopia's vast 1.1 million km² territory (about twice the size of Texas) and sixty million people is quite remarkable. A team of seventy salespeople cover the country, and even in the most remote villages and towns, Hiwot Trust condoms are

² During the post-Lent period (after Easter), vegetables are virtually non-existent in the Ethiopian diet. Throughout our two-week stay in the south we only once found *yetsom migib* (vegetables – fasting food) on a restaurant menu.

³ More specifically, DKT's social marketing program seeks to reduce the prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and HIV/AIDS, and to improve maternal and child health. This effort is particularly urgent because there are approximately 2.6 million HIV/AIDS cases in Ethiopia, representing about 8.5% of the estimated 30.6 million HIV/AIDS cases in the world. (UN Report on the Global HIV/AIDS Epidemic, June 1998 (Annex HIV/AIDS estimates and indicators, end 1997)).

ubiquitous, stocked on the shelves of small stores, bars, hotels, and barber shops.

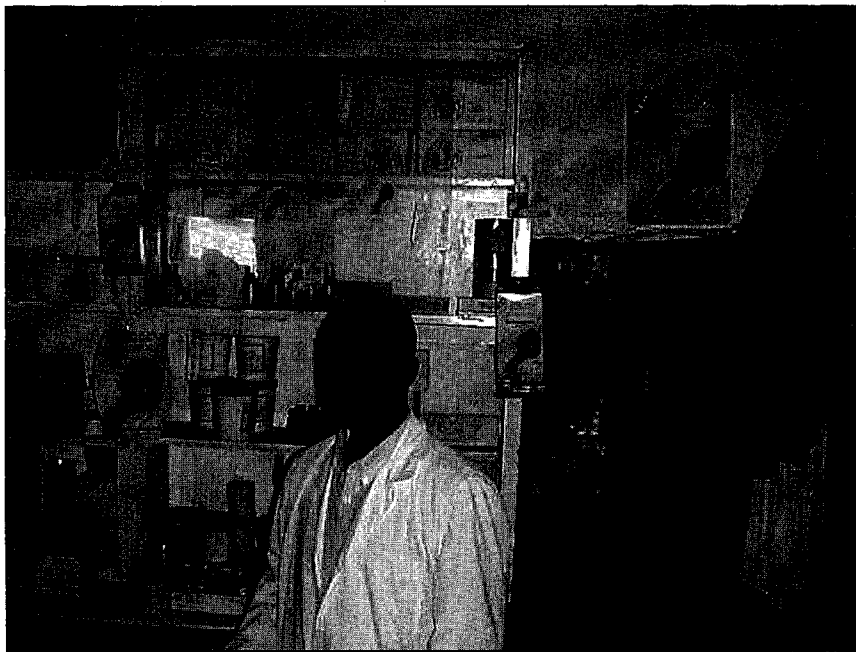
DKT sells about three million condoms a month in Ethiopia. The only other condoms available here are Durex brand, and they are exclusively sold in Addis Ababa and a few upper-scale places in other major towns. Durex condoms come in a variety of exotic colors and styles, but their price tag of 10 birr per three-pack is far beyond the financial means of most Ethiopians. Durex condoms are a luxury item, a status symbol targeted at Ethiopia's small wealthy class and foreign expatriates.⁴

Throughout Ethiopia, everyone knows Hiwot Trust condoms. More surprising on this trip was the newfound popularity of Prudence pills. A recent marketing campaign has made Prudence famous and doubled sales. Prudence's rise to stardom began with colorful, slick and sexy new packaging. The old puke-pink and green dispensers were traded for a rainbow of bright yellows and greens. The new package is also graced by a sexy photo of Hanna Nebiyou, Miss Ethiopia 1997, holding a rose, her head thrown back, eyes closed in a pose that oozes ecstasy. Everywhere we went, a plethora of marketing materials — posters, bumper stickers, wobblers, dangles and dispensers — were prominently displayed in drug outlets. The Prudence image has become so popular that the posters are being stolen from the walls of health clinics, and people everywhere begged us for copies.

In Arba Minch we called on several pharmacies. Samuel, DKT's district sales supervisor, had frugally distributed the Prudence promotional materials. Chris and Teshome wanted every drug outlet to look like a big Prudence advertisement, plastered with several posters and other assorted paraphernalia. In each of the pharmacies and clinics we visited, they then proceeded to hammer, stick and tape Prudence stuff in every nook and cranny. The proprietors watched this rapid-fire marketing blitzard in dazed amazement; many were thrilled to have Hanna Nebiyou's image tattooed throughout their stores, while some looked on confused or indifferent.

The other side of the Prudence marketing blitz has been over the airwaves, on television and radio. DKT

devised a catchy jingle that is regularly broadcast on Ethiopia's state radio. Even in the farthest reaches of the country, kids sang the Prudence song as our vehicle entered town. The Prudence campaign has been incredibly successful at raising product awareness and boosting sales. However, it also raises certain ethical questions for marketing such products in countries with poor, illiterate populations. Contraceptive pills



Prudence marketing materials on display in a local pharmacy

are not the same as laundry detergent. Consumer choice regarding medical products like Prudence should be based on informed, educated decisions. Women should not begin using Prudence contraceptive pills merely because there is a pretty face on the package (and hopefully they aren't). On the other hand, if the campaign increases product awareness and makes it more attractive (or less taboo) to use contraceptives, the end may well justify the means. Nevertheless, it remains difficult to envision a day when the Prudence pill will ever be as popular as the Prudence poster.

The Prudence marketing campaign is heavily stacked with attractive pictures and catchy tunes. A seemingly wanting part of the strategy is education and outreach. In a country like Ethiopia, where most of the population is poor and illiterate, explaining contraception — why it is important and what products are available — would appear to be an important part of the equation. This goes for condoms as well as pills and other methods. DKT has trained 2,000 health providers, and produces a national radio program entitled "Ask Your Doctor." Still it appears

⁴ Within the next few months, DKT intends to introduce a new "premium" condom called Sensation. This condom will be marketed to compete with Durex. Sensation's sleek new packaging will feature a photo of a *ferenji* (foreign) couple, and the price will be slightly higher than that of Hiwot Trust, but still much lower than that of Durex.

that more intensive outreach and education activities, targeted at potential users, could prove a useful complement to the colorful advertising blitz.

* * *

Internally, DKT operates much like a business. Increasing sales levels represents the driving force behind campaigns like the one described above. Salespeople are given incentives, including commissions on each condom and pill dispenser sold.⁵ In some regions this has energized staff to work hard and sell aggressively. In other areas, like the southern regions we visited, sales have stagnated.

One of the problems seems to be that some sales staff members are not hungry and assertive; they rarely pursue shops off the main road or try to sell in remote, out-of-the-way towns. For example, in Konso town Chris was approached by a rural drug vendor from Kolmay village, approximately 17 kilometers off the main road. The man

wanted to buy condoms and pills, but had never been visited by the DKT salesman in the area. The following day we visited Kolmay and found it to be a large community with several kiosks. One shop already had Hiwot Trust condoms — the storeowner had bought them retail while in Arba Minch (more than 100 kilometers up the road). We stumbled upon a similar situation when we got lost later in the trip and ended up in a town called Soyama. It was market day and we found hundreds of people trading their goods. Chris and Teshome were disappointed to find that this town had also never been visited by DKT sales staff.

Chris has been with DKT Ethiopia for 15 months, prior to which he had worked as a marketing specialist for the same agency in Indonesia. While DKT's annual sales of 36 million condoms is impressive, Chris believes the figure can be greatly increased. Part of the challenge is to transform the organizational culture into one based on achievement and merit. This will entail overcoming some cultural and historical legacies, especially those of

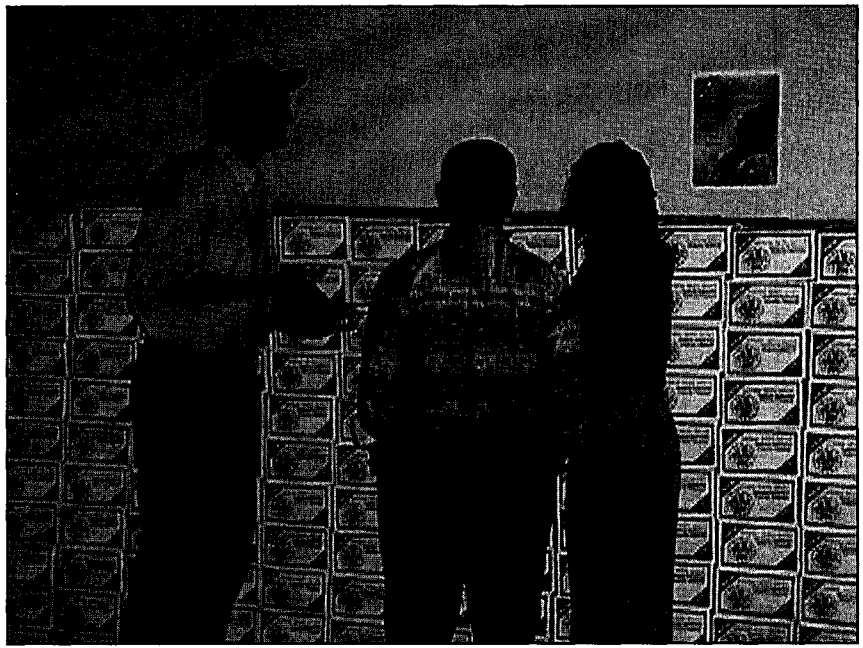


A Hanna Nebiyou fan in Dolo Mena. He showed us his copy of the Prudence image, and says he always carries it with him.

⁵ DKT sales staff members receive 1 birr for every 100 condoms they sell and 2 birr for every 30 cycles of pills. They are also rewarded for reaching certain monthly sales milestones, receiving cash bonuses for selling 45,000, 65,000 or 85,000 condoms. Other incentives are provided to store owners to encourage them to sell condoms in their kiosks. A condom dispenser (containing 48 three-packs) is sold wholesale for 4 birr, and then retailed for 12 birr (an 8-birr profit). Store owners are also given five plastic bags with each condom dispenser purchased. They then sell these plastic bags for 50 cents each, an additional 2.50 birr profit.

the communist era (1974-91). Throughout that period, capitalism and its derivatives (profit motive, advertising, incentives) were forbidden evils. The communist legacy is slowly unraveling, but most Ethiopian companies still lack entrepreneurial zest, and their sales staff rarely bust their chops to maximize personal gain.

Chris and Teshome like to teach by example, demonstrating good sales techniques and strategies, and clarifying performance expectations. In Bale, they brought Girma (the DKT district sales supervisor) along with us for a brief sales trip. We left Goba for Ginir town with eight cartons of condoms. Each carton had approximately 2,750 pieces, and since monthly sales in Bale hover around 80,000 pieces, we figured it unlikely that we would be able to sell a quarter of that monthly total in just two days. In the first two towns we reached, Ali and Agarfa, we sold five cartons (13,000 condoms), all before lunchtime. We decided to visit just one more town, and abort our journey to Ginir, lest we show up empty-handed. Girma was embarrassed and somewhat shaken by the experience. He complained that his sales staff was slacking (even though it is his responsibility as a supervisor to ensure it doesn't). According to Teshome, some sales staff members are happy to sell just a few stores in each



Chris, Teshome, and Meseret counting stock at DKT's office in Nazret

town, for fear that if they saturate the market, they will have nothing to sell next month.

Debriefing Girma at the end of our visit, Chris and Teshome set new sales goals for the Bale area. Girma understood that he would now be expected to work harder to boost sales levels. A concerted push in the south and the rest of the country will be necessary if DKT is to meet its target of forty-two million condoms in 1999. This supervisory trip confirmed for Teshome and Chris that these goals are certainly attainable.

* * *

Prior to this excursion south, my image and understanding of Ethiopia — its people and its landscape — was dominated by a central-highlands perspective. The areas around Addis Ababa, and northern regions of Sewa, Gojjam, Gonder, Welo, Tigray all share many common features.

Entering Gamo-Gofa is like being transported to a long-forgotten era in a faroff place. The thin, high cheek bones, mocha skin and almond eyes of the central Ethiopian highlands deepen, darken and broaden into



Girma, Chris and Teshome unload condoms in Bale



Southern peoples: a Karo teenager (left) and two Hamar women (below) at the Key Afer market



fuller, more sub-Saharan African features. The western-style pants, suits and shirts, and the traditional bright white cotton *gabi* wraps of the center give way to a broad range of primal dress — goat-skin skirts, colorful bead adornments, bronze armlets, feathers jutting out of variations on mohawks and afro hairstyles.

This is precisely what we saw when we stumbled upon market day at Key Afer, on the road between Konso and Jinka. It was early afternoon, and I was catching a few bumpy moments of shuteye in the back of the vehicle when Chris called out from the front: "Get up buddy, you have got to see THIS!" He was right. We had entered another world.

Husky Hamar men and women, scantily clad in earth-tone fabrics and animal skins, heads topped with short, reddish-brown dreadlocks (formed with a mixture

of butter and clay), walked up the main road en route to the market. Some wore large half-gourds as helmets, and they carried their goods in large and small calabash containers and old grain sacks. The scene looked like a convention of indigenous cultures. This was the Africa explored by James Bruce, Sir Richard Burton and Dr. David Livingstone, the Africa of exotic tribes.

On the cusp of the twenty-first century, it was amazing and gratifying to see these people dressing and living just as they had hundreds and hundreds of years ago. My pleasure was not a case of romantic nostalgia, nor glorification of the so-called "primitive." To me, the continued existence of these cultures, and their resistance to homogenizing effects of globalization is an indication that some richness and true diversity on our planet have thus far survived. I wondered if these groups will still be living



Banana sellers at Key Afer market

in the manner of their forefathers a hundred years henceforth, or will they too be wearing Levis jeans, eating Big Macs and surfing the World Wide Web?

As I slowly perused the market, eyes bulging, I noticed a few of the Hamar and Karo people looking at me with a similar expression of disbelief. I realized I must be pretty darn strange and exotic-looking as well. A few kids sheepishly approached me, staring. One touched the hair on my arm; another tried to rub off the white color (that must have been painted) on my skin. However, most of the marketgoers had an air of dignity and purpose about them. Hamar are strong, bulky, solid people, their walk heavy and deliberate. The majority went about their business without a hitch, paying me little more attention than a casual, curious glance.

Aside from the interesting cast of characters trading their wares, this open market looked much like others I'd seen throughout the country. Vendors sat, their bananas, maize, rancid butter and other knickknacks, displayed for sale on a sheet of plastic or canvas in front of them. A crowd jockeyed for position around one man selling maize grain, probably at a good price. Others greeted with hugs and chatted with old friends. The atmosphere was warm and social, and many people loitered along a wooden fence, having completed their

weekly trade. A few uniformed Ethiopian policeman casually patrolled the market area. I asked if there were any problems, and they replied "No"; this was just their weekly routine, monitoring the market beat.

A way up the road, we stopped at a small Konso village to look at their interesting funeral statues. In Konso tradition, when a person dies a caricatured wooden statue resembling the deceased is carved and placed alongside statues of other dead relatives. The people of this small village had learned to exploit their traditions, and immediately began plying us with all manner of touristy schlock — statue replicas, mini *kerrars* (violins), spears and beetle wings. As we negotiated for this array of crude cultural memorabilia, several teenage girls jockeyed for position around the vehicle's sideview mirrors, smiling and admiring their beauty.

I pulled out my camera and was immediately forbidden to snap shots of the funeral statues. That is, unless I was willing to pay ten birr a shot. There was no societal taboo against photographing such icons; they were merely trying to make a quick buck. Our haggling was mildly annoying, but I could hardly blame them. These Konso folk had learned how to use their cultural resources as a means of wealth redistribution

in their little corner of the world. Kudos to them.

* * *

A vast number of Ethiopian ethnicities — Gamo, Gofa, Konso, Gedeo, Guji, Karo, Hamar, Mursi, Banar and Sidama (to name just a few) — inhabit the areas that compose the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region (SNNPR). This awkward, politically-correct title was meant as a catchall phrase to give some measure of collective political identity to the most disparate and diverse section of Ethiopia.

Following the victory of the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) over the communist Derg in 1991, new political formulations were devised. The EPRDF was dominated by the Tigray Peoples' Liberation Front (TPLF), but was also composed of other Amhara and Oromo ethnic-based organizations. The new Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia was politically reorganized into 14 marginally ethnic-based regions. The boundaries of these regions were designed to maximize their ethnic homogeneity. For example, Amhara region would include the major areas inhabited by the Amhara people. The more populous groups — Oromo, Amhara, Tigray, Afar, Benishangul and Somali — all were given their own political units. The southern sections of the country, shared by more than 30 smaller, more numerous and extremely diverse groupings, were lumped into the strange conglomeration of Southern Nations Nationalities, and Peoples' Region.

Ethiopia's system of ethnic federalism seeks to de-

volve considerable power and responsibility for development to the regions. While national development priorities emerge from the capital Addis Ababa, the onus for managing regional development is placed with each regional government. Thus far, the performance of this system has been mixed. Certain areas, especially Tigray, have received a disproportionate amount of new investment, while other regions have been relatively neglected. This is partially the result of power politics and partially due to variations in regional capacity.

Tigray has a highly motivated and talented group of government administrators, and the people of Tigray are known for their strong work ethic. Yet, the success of Tigray's economy over the past several years is also the result of a Tigray-dominated administration in Addis Ababa, which has rewarded its supporters from the 17-year liberation struggle with considerable infrastructural investment projects (electricity, roads) and a host of new enterprises (a pharmaceutical plant, textile/garment factory, mining operations, etc...). To be fair, Tigray was previously among the poorest, most neglected regions of the country. Tigray was devastated by the civil war (1974-1991) and it is dry, rugged terrain where drought is endemic. However, much of Ethiopia is poor, and deserves a fair distribution of scarce development inputs.

The poverty of the south is something of a quandary. The areas through which we traveled — Gamo-Gofa, Sidamo, Bale — were blessed with plenty of rain, fertile land and generally excellent farming conditions. Many of these areas are green, lush and dotted with banana plants growing wildy. Bananas, kocho (fake banana),

pineapples, mangoes, coffee and wheat all grow beautifully in various parts of the south. The south should be the breadbasket of Ethiopia, so why does it seem nearly as poor as some of the arid, infertile, harsh climates like that of the Somali region?

I have heard a number of explanations for southern poverty — the people are lazy, content to eke out an easy subsistence from their rich natural endowments; they are disorganized and lack entrepreneurial panache, unable to effectively harness their resources into large, profitable commercial ventures; they are ethnically diverse, lacking the ability and political will to work together to improve their common lot; they are



Konso man with small funeral statue replicas

neglected by the authorities in the regional capital of Awasa, who invest most resources in the regional center rather than in the periphery.

In Arba Minch (the capital of Gamo-Gofa) and Goba (the capital of Bale), there has been little economic growth during the past seven years of EPRDF rule. Both of these district capitals look more like sprawling villages than booming urban centers. Neither town has an asphalt road (although one is under construction for Arba Minch); in fact, there is not one paved road in the entire Bale district. Commenting on the lack of investment in Goba, one hotel owner joked: "We don't even know where our regional government is, much less get any assistance from them." This was a pot shot at the Oromo Regional government, strangely headquartered in Addis Ababa (which is also the seat of the national government and the Addis Ababa Region-14 government). He believes the Oromo Regional government has forgotten them: "they [regional government] are irrelevant to the lives of our people."

In certain respects, living conditions in the south are not all that bad. The people are well-fed, actually chubby and fat in some places. At first it seemed as if most of the women were pregnant, but I soon realized they were just pleasantly plump. Southern farmlands are naturally prosperous, but curiously remain small-scale subsistence op-



Konso girl displaying her bulbous belly

erations. With a bit of ingenuity, planning and a small infusion of capital, these farmers should be able to make enough money to scale up their grass huts, pay for better health care and improve their family's well-being.

One reason for southern economic stagnation is the poor state of roads and local transportation. Produce cannot be easily transported to or from distant markets, either within Ethiopia or neighboring countries like Kenya. As such, the economy remains isolated and localized, unable to take advantage of economies of scale and potential markets further afield.



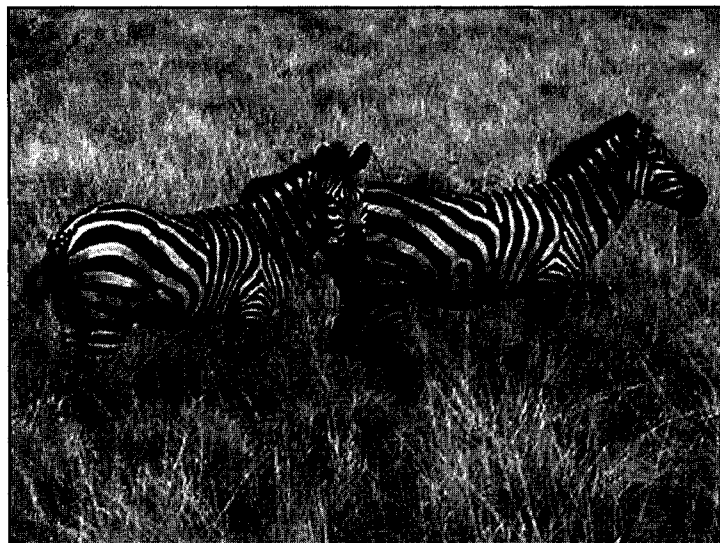
Terraced hillsides flush with young maize plants near Kolmay

Most of the major asphalt roads connect Addis Ababa with its import-export trade routes (Assab, Eritrea; Djibouti; and Moyale, Kenya). Internal roads within and between the different Ethiopian regions are sadly lacking. This was one of the logistical reasons (compounding the political reasons) for the infamous famine of 1983-84. Parts of Ethiopia were producing plenty of food, but internal trade and communication were so poorly developed that food remained primarily where it was produced, leaving drought-plagued food-deficit areas in dire straits.

To the credit of the current Ethiopian government,

infrastructural development has been placed as the highest developmental priority. The EPRDF recognizes that economic growth and development could only be feasible with a solid foundation of good roads, electricity and telecommunications. This strategy shows considerable foresight. Most African governments prioritize social development and basic needs such as education and health care. However, they do so without adequate resources to support the ongoing costs of such services. Ethiopia wants to build a solid economic base from which it can effectively and sustainably focus on the improvement of basic living conditions and social services.

There are numerous road-construction projects underway throughout the country, and we saw some of those in the south. For example, a new road from Konso to Ya'abelo will link the farthest reaches of Gamo-Gofa (like Jinka town) with the Addis Ababa-Moyale road. This will enable traders to penetrate new areas. On that uncompleted road, we bought 10 pineapples roadside from



A pair of zebras at Nechisar National Park

a young boy for 8 birr (U.S.\$1). Those sweet pineapples could fetch much larger amounts if transported en masse to Kenya, Addis Ababa or even other urban centers like Bahir Dar, Harer and Mekelle.

* * *

The reality of the south, with all of its provincialism, is far removed from the reality of Ethiopia's center. Addis Ababa is physically remote (hundreds of kilometers) from Arba Minch, Konso and Jinka, but it is also psychologically distant. The pressing concerns of highland Ethiopia are all but absent, irrelevant down in Gamo-Gofa.

For example, the ongoing war between Ethiopia and Eritrea is generally absent from the radar screen of most southerners. It does affect them—schoolteachers and government employees are obligated to donate a set per-

centage (10-15%) of their meager monthly salaries to the war effort. And farmers are also heavily pressured by local authorities and peers to demonstrate their patriotism by donating the odd sheep or some grain or anything else they can muster to feed the boys struggling against the evil force in the north. Likewise, some unemployed youth volunteered to fight, but seemingly in smaller numbers than in other parts of the country.

Thus has the Ethio-Eritrean conflict marginally affected Gamo-Gofa and other southern districts. This war is not the visceral test of pride and patriotism nor does it have the deep emotional content found in the central highlands. This war is just another case of the pathetic political infighting and self-destruction the northern folks have engaged in for decades, with just a brief seven-year pause between the two latest rounds. The people of the south are well-removed from such events, and they'd just as soon remain aloof. When I traveled through areas north of Addis Ababa (Gojjam, Gonder, Welo, Tigray), I saw many old tanks and military trucks rusting on the side of the road, testaments to the heated battles of the last civil war. Nowhere in the south did I see even one such war remnant. That's because there was no major fighting in the south, nor is there today.

* * *

Taking a break from condom sales, Chris, Teshome and I visited some of the wonderful national parks in the south. Late one afternoon we visited Nechisar National Park, just outside Arba Minch, racing the setting sun and an incoming rainstorm in a quest to catch a few glimpses of wildlife. The road to the park threads for 30 kilometers between Lakes Chamo and Abaya, offering glorious views down to their crocodile-infested waters. Then the park opens onto a grassy plain where a variety of animals feed undisturbed by the Guji people with whom they share these lands. In scenic Nechisar we watched grazing herds of zebra and hartebeest, some darting dik-diks and several clans of baboons.

Also near Arba Minch is a government-owned crocodile farm. This is a famous destination for visitors to the area; every time I mentioned my upcoming trip to Arba Minch, the first question was whether I aimed to visit the croc farm. The swampy site of the farm can only be traversed in a small dinghy, the encroaching lake waters having in the past two years submerged the area surrounding the crocodile pens. The crocs lay atop one another in crowded pens, looking lazy, withdrawn and unstimulated. A worker entered each pen and prodded the crocs into the dirty pools of water to keep their valuable skins moist.

While we were posing with the baby crocs, enjoying

a brief photo op, the main feature film began to roll in an adjacent pen. There was thrashing, and it appeared that one croc was killing another, holding its head below water. After the drowning a massive struggle ensued. The crocs fought viciously over the fresh pink meat of their cousin, wrestling with the carcass and swallowing large chunks whole in a brutish display of lizard cannibalism.

In Jinka we tried to visit the Mursi people, renowned for their large lip plates, but a light dusting of rain in Mago National Park made the muddy road just slick enough to give our driver Mekbib the willies. He feared we might slide off the road, get stuck and be dangerously stranded in the middle of nowhere as nightfall approached. It was difficult to tell whether Mekbib himself feared that scenario, or whether he merely wanted to protect Chris (and thereby protect his job security). Regardless of the reason, we turned back, abandoning our quest to see a bit more wildlife and one of the more heavily touristed cultural oddities of the south.

Finally, after passing through Sidamo, we visited Bale



A rare Simien fox atop the foggy Saneti plateau

National Park, named simply after the district in which it lies. Bale National Park can be toured on horseback (the predominant mode of transportation in that highland area), on foot or in one section by motor vehicle. With more Hiwot Trust condoms and Prudence pills to sell, we loaded up the Landcruiser and set out from Goba to Dolo Mena on a 110-kilometer dirt road that cuts through the park.

Goba, the capital of Bale, is a large, chilly village lying at the base of the 4,300-meter-high Saneti Plateau. We set out at 6 a.m., the vehicle well-stocked with unap-



Arba Minch crocodile farm

petizing dry cakes to check our hunger for the day. We quickly reached the top of the plateau, a surrealistic moonscape, flat and coated in miniature gray scrub-brush. Then came a great surprise — from out of the thick fog emerged two pairs of rare Simien fox. They trod along the roadside, quite close to our vehicle, searching for food. Later, on the return trip in the afternoon, we saw another fox eating a mole-rat. Unsated, she then began digging for additional courses, but to no immediate avail.

To the south, the plateau plunged in elevation, the switchbacks offering spectacular views of surrounding mountains and the forest below, still partially masked in the veil of morning mist. Dropping down into the forest, we saw several groups of baboons, some majestic black-



Colobus monkey in Awassa

and-white Colobus monkeys and a bush pig that hustled across the road just a few feet in front of us. There were also a few unidentified deer-like game, most likely bush-buck, which fled into the dense undergrowth before we were able to get a closer look.

* * *

From Bale we headed back toward Addis Ababa, stopping briefly in DKT's Asela and Nazret offices on the way. Our trip had been productive and fun, but long and exhausting. Our bodies were battered from hours of bumping around in the back of the Landcruiser, and our digestive tracts (at least Chris' and mine) were equally

distressed from the monotony of two consecutive weeks of *kai wot*.

As we reached the outskirts of Addis Ababa — signified by heavy traffic, noxious exhaust and throngs of people — we could see we had nearly arrived. Back to the hectic pace and craziness of the capital city. I would miss the quiet, calm, fresh air and starry nights of small rural towns; the beautiful and vast green countryside and the diverse peoples inhabiting them; and even the many many hours of selling condoms and searching for just one more clinic to "Prudencize." But as we turned up the music and fought our way through the irritating Addis Ababa traffic, it felt good to be home. □

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