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Value-Added Recycling

ADDIS ABABA, Ethiopia

June 1999

By Marc Michaelson

Trudging through the rain-soaked inner sanctum of *merkato* is like trekking an urban safari. The back roads of Addis Ababa's massive main market are wild, untamed terrain of a different sort. Harsh stimuli assault the senses — the sickly-sweet smell of urine and rotting vegetables invades nasal passages; a cacophony of clanging metal rattles the eardrums; cold, slimy muck oozes into shoes.

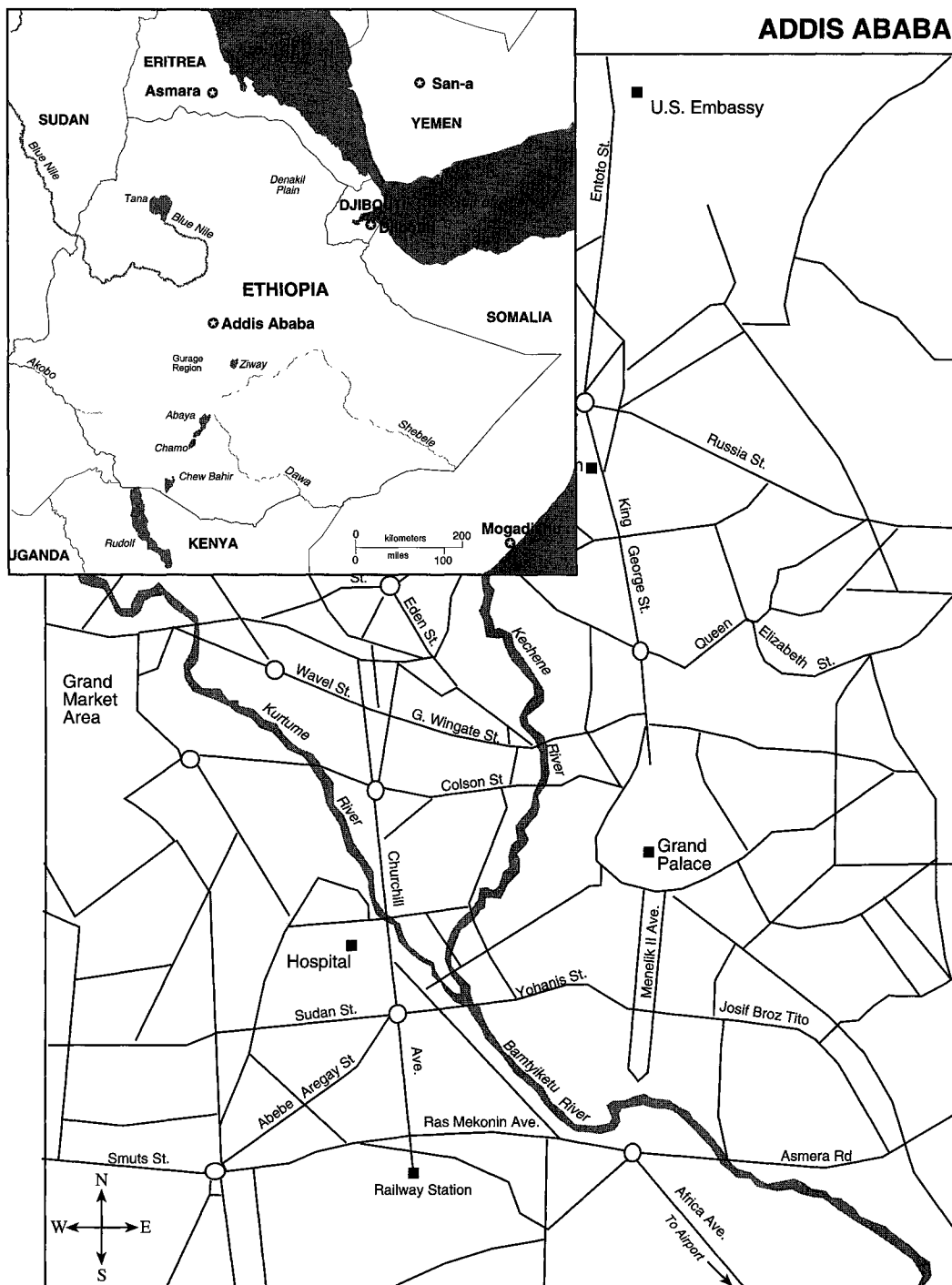
I tiptoed through this inhospitable pit, deep in the muddy bowels of *merkato*, and found Nursabo Hamdalla converting used tin cans into kerosene lamps. Nursabo provides a calm, warm, friendly counterpoint to the cruddy environment in which he works. He is a soft-spoken and light-hearted guy in his mid-thirties, and displayed a quiet air of authority as we talked in his spartan workshop. I breathed through my mouth, and we often had to yell or repeat questions that were lost in the chaotic metal symphony nearby, where large barrels were being banged, chopped and molded into new items for sale.

Originally from Silte village in Gurage Region, Nursabo moved to Addis Ababa about ten years ago. Shortly after his arrival in the capital, he began this business, buying used cans and shaping them into small kerosene lanterns. His workshop is a rickety structure, little more than a few dilapidated slabs of corrugated iron nailed into a three-sided shelter and a suspect roof. Nursabo works with his brother Ridwan and friend Abdillahi Ali, who came from the same village.

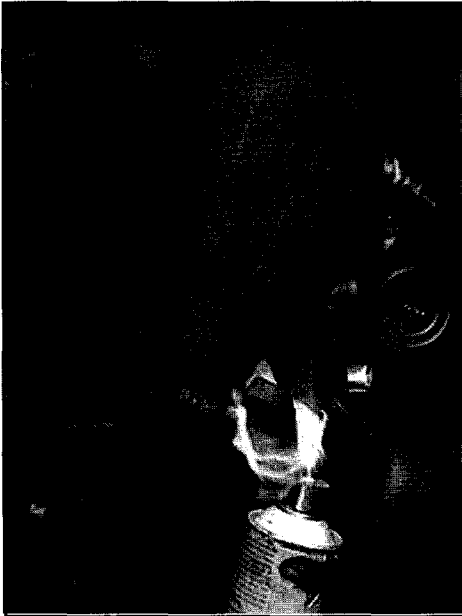
In the back of the workshop, piles of different types of used steel cans await puncture and beheading, the first steps in the lantern-making process. Abdillahi illustrates by taking an old Mobil insect-spray can and piercing the top with a sharp metal instrument. A fizz of leftover aerosol is released. He then cuts off the lid, placing it on a pile for later reattachment. In the meantime, Ridwan has started a similar process on an unlabeled can that once held army rations, and Nursabo begins heating a small manual blow torch for the final step of welding the wick-holder to the can.

A group of about 20 young boys and men have now gathered at the mouth of the workshop to watch me watch the construction of these lamps. One launches a snide remark, questioning why I would want to see this, and urging Nursabo to shoo me away. Instead, Nursabo shoos him away, and the others watch me silently, perplexed by both my digital camera and my interest in this obscure subculture of metalwork.

The cans being transformed into lanterns once held a diverse array of consumer goods — shaving gel, tomato juice, window cleaner, olive oil, insect



*At right, Abdillahi cuts a can to size
and below, welds the top of a lantern*



repellent, air freshener, dry yeast, instant coffee, spray paint, tuna, vegetable soup. The list goes on and on.

When all is said and done, these cans will have completed quite a journey. Nearly all were born in Europe and held complex liquids and chemicals for multinationals like Mobil and Gillette. Most were emptied in Addis Ababa, in the luxury villas of Bole and the modest middle-class dwellings of Kazanchis, Megennanya, Piazza, and Sidist Kilo. Now, the expensive imported stuff will be replaced by kerosene, and the makeshift lanterns will be sent off to serve in the farthest flung corners of the country, as simple purveyors of light.

That may seem a slight overdramatization of the life cycle of a tin. Still, the transformative pilgrimage of a can of Windolene glass cleaner from Hull, England to a local lantern in a tiny rural hamlet like Kokosa, Ethiopia, is quite impressive nonetheless.

The lantern construction process itself is less glamorous and actually quite mundane. Abdillahi carefully cuts the can in half and then re-attaches the lid to the bottom section (after popping off the plastic spray piece). The top half is then cut into pieces that are molded into

tubes, welded together and later attached as a wick-holder that can be removed to pour in the kerosene.

The pressure-operated welding tool is now sufficiently hot, and a clear-blue flame blows out the top. Abdillahi completes the process, demonstrating the welding of the lid, and the wick assembly. The entire construction process takes just ten minutes. Nursabo says each of them can make about 5-6 dozen per day. The army cans are easier to work with as there is less cutting and assembly involved. They can each assemble 25 to 30 dozen of this type per day.

Nursabo buys the raw used cans in bulk for 2 birr per dozen (U.S.25 cents per dozen or about U.S.2 cents per can). The army food cans were previously more expensive, at 3.50 birr per dozen. However, in a strange spin-off of the Ethiopian-Eritrean border conflict, the supply of used army ration cans has skyrocketed, and their price has dropped. When I asked about this peculiar benefit to his business, Nursabo answered solemnly: "I'd rather pay more for the cans; our brothers are dying on the border and that is bad news."

Nursabo sells his final product to local shops and

distant traders from the countryside. They buy the insect spray-type for 10 birr per dozen and the army ration-type for 7 birr per dozen, reflecting the heavier workload involved in making the former. Factoring in labor, rent, tools and fuel for the blowtorch, the profit is modest. The lanterns then retail for 1.50-2 birr each.

Currently, business is slow. The rainy season has just begun and farmers have little money to spend on food and bare essentials, much less a slick new Gillette shaving-can lantern. The high season for Nursabo and many of the others involved in transforming garbage into goods is January and February — the end of the agricultural cycle. At that time farmers sell their produce and are, compared to other times of the year, relatively flush.

* * *

Nursabo's work is a form of recycling, motivated not by some distant philosophical environmental awareness,



Apile of lanterns ready for sale

but by the concrete imperatives of survival. It is an environmentalism born not of principle but of poverty.

In Ethiopia, economic innovation and ingenuity are driven by a combination of material scarcity and basic needs. This is not the progressive, forward-thinking, profit-driven capitalism of Europe, Asia and the United

States, where massive resources are invested to create something newer, better, faster, stronger. Here there is no competitive quest for developing expensive new medicines, internet portals and titanium tennis rackets. Rather, it is the need to bring light to a dark hut in a small settlement with no electricity. It is the need for cheap shoes in places where most people walk barefoot. It is the need for an inexpensive wash basin where there are no Maytag washers, and where even a Chinese-made plastic basin can be prohibitively expensive.

This is the poverty-driven capitalism of subsistence, where product lifecycles are indefinitely



200-liter barrels being banged into cooking pots and wash basins

extended, and the definition of “garbage” is exceedingly narrow. For example, many of the clunky old Lada taxis in Addis Ababa have seen more daylight than I; and keeping a communist-era Russian car on the road for more than 30 years is no mean feat.

Anything and everything in Ethiopia is used and reused. In West and East Africa I have had similar experiences with neighborly recycling. No sooner have I thrown out the garbage and scraps of my life does someone weed through the refuse and fish out items they deem useful. Old food containers, plastic shampoo dispensers, glass bottles, dead batteries, paper scraps, cardboard boxes—these are all taken and transformed into something.

For instance, Ethiopian kids, having little access to the new Luke Skywalker action figures, can make toys out of just about anything. Near my house, boys regularly race home-made metal wheels down the street, using stiff guide wires to keep them balanced and moving. Also in the neighborhood, roving recyclers hawk wares from door to door, howling in deep, operatic tones. “KorKoriahlewh!!!!” signals the chance to sell used “stuff” for a few centimes; “Lewach!!!!” is an offer to barter new goods for old.

In the more formal sector of economic trade at *merkato*, two broad categories of recycling are most common. The first entails merely reusing some type of post-consumer waste. An old dishwashing liquid dispenser assumes a new life as a water bottle. A 20-liter vegetable-oil drum is used for transporting extra diesel fuel on long road trips. In this type of recycling, the product is not altered in any way; there is no value added. The empty container is merely resold and reused for holding a different item. A mind-boggling varieties of used containers—of every shape, size, and substance—are bought and sold in the market.

The second type of recycling is value-added. Here an old can is transformed into a kerosene lantern. Colorful strips of plastic packing material are woven into shopping bags. Small, used tomato-paste cans are cut and welded to metal sticks to make oil dippers. Used



Used plastic, glass and tin containers overflow from storefronts



Shopping bags, woven from plastic packing material



Gebre Egziabehr hammering a sandal strap; the raw truck tires lay in the background

aluminum is metamorphosed into flour sifters, tea strainers, funnels and piggy banks. Old rice sacks are sliced into strips and twisted into rope. Linoleum and carpet scraps are cut to foot size and sold as shoe inserts. The list is long. The thread connecting these items is their active transformation from garbage to something new and useful.

These products are targeted at the poorest segments of Ethiopia's population—rural farmers. The vast majority of people living in the Ethiopian countryside are excluded from trade within the formal, prefab, import economy. They cannot afford Chinese-made kerosene lanterns or expensive imported (or even domestically-produced) leather shoes. Thus, these value-added recycled products give rural folk a chance to participate more fully in the economy, and procure some basic items at reasonable prices. A major example is the *barabaso*.

Barabaso are rubber sandals made from old car and truck tires. I watched the production of this footwear in *merkato* and at the main market in Gondar town in Amhara Region.

Ato Gebre Egziabehr sits among his friends on a squat wooden bench set against the wall of a kiosk near the Gondar market. This set of sixty-somethings are clad in the typical conservative fashion of their generation—worn-out sport jackets, open dress shirts and aged leather shoes. They pass their time chatting and gossiping at



Ahmed trimming rubber off a truck tire



Wrapping strips of rubber for sale as horse reins

Gebre Egziabehn's side, diluting the rigor and monotony of the tough work of carving tires into sandals.

Gebre Egziabehn buys worn-out truck tires for 20 to 30 birr each. From each tire he can make 20 pairs of sandals that wholesale for 3 birr each. Shop-owners resell them for 4 to 5 birr each. The profits are good, but this is grueling work, especially slicing the old tires into smaller slabs of rubber. Just 100 meters down the road, Ahmed, a much younger and stronger sandal-maker, uses a sickle-shaped knife to trim pieces off a large truck tire. After shaving down and evening out the raw rubber, Ahmed will trace and cut out foot-shaped pieces. Sandal straps are then fashioned from thinner strips of tire rubber. These are crudely attached using metal tacks, and later permanently hammered to size after custom-fitting to the buyer's liking.

Only tires with cord (non-metal) radial edges are used for making *barabaso*. Tire recyclers use steel radials for other products. They trim out the thin metal wires, and sell them in loops for 2 birr. The wires are used in construction—to fasten roofing materials to wood beams, or for making chicken coops. Absolutely nothing from the tire goes to waste. Longer tire strips are formed into horse reins (4 birr for 12 meters), and shorter, wider pieces (3 birr per bundle) are used as springs in the construction of chairs and sofas.

Sintayo Gezahayne sold four bunches of horse-rein rubber strips during our half-hour interview at his roadside workspace in *merkato*. Still, he says business has

plummeted of late. During the high season, he receives orders for 100-200 sandals from various merchants visiting Addis Ababa from the far reaches of the country. They buy the shoes in bulk and then sell them in rural kiosks. The high season for *barabaso* — January and February — mimics that of kerosene lanterns, and is again tied to the end of the agricultural cycle.

* * *

As I spoke with Sintayo, a peculiar drama unfolded on the street just in front of us. A mauve-uniformed government patrolman darted into action, chasing a small raggedly-dressed boy down the street. After catching the unlucky minor, he confiscated his stock, a small carton of match boxes. The boy pleaded with his captor, who still held him tightly by the arm, but to no avail. His "contraband" matches were now government property; the boy's shoulders slumped, and he broke into tears.

The boy, who looked to be about 10 years old, is one of thousands of unlicensed vendors who ply the streets with all manner of sundries, knickknacks and tchotchkes. How would he explain this turn of bad luck to his mom (or whom ever he was selling for)? Their meager income, based precariously on tiny stocks of matches, had just been ripped away.

Everywhere in *merkato* the much-feared mauve-clad monitors patrol, wielding stubby billy clubs that seem

more prop than weapon. Just before the patrolmen pass by, informal vendors with potatoes or green peppers or polyester scarves laid out on canvas displays, quickly grab the four corners of their mobile shops. Picking up their goods in a fluid motion, they begin strolling casually down the street, their mobile shop slung over a shoulder.

I watched this cat-and-mouse chase between the mauve crew and illegal vendors play out several times during my few days in *merkato*. Quick, young boys often outfoxed their pursuers by slipping into an alley or other narrow nook of the labyrinthine market. But when they were caught, the same four-act tragedy repeated with little variation — Act I - Unconvincing Explanation; Act II - Confiscation; Act III - Argument and Pleading; Act IV - Crying.

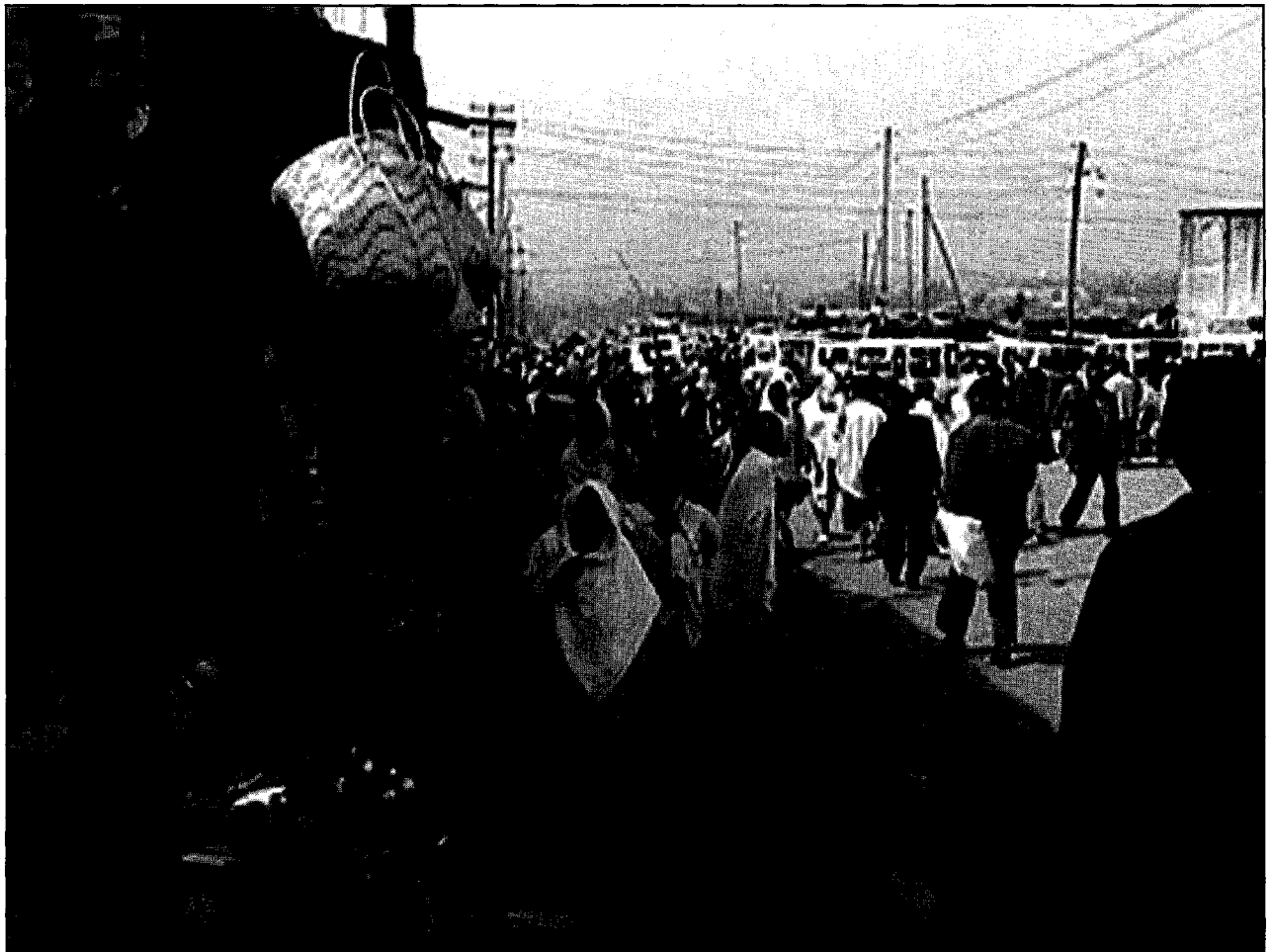
I felt for the vendors. These informal sellers are the poorest link on the *merkato* totem pole. Many are dressed in tattered, dirty clothes; some appear to have ventured in from the countryside, expressly to sell a little excess produce to make a few birr. However, from the government perspective these are free-loaders, out to make a quick birr without paying up to the Ethiopia version of

Uncle Sam (in this case Uncle Meles). Store and workshop owners in *merkato* pay rent to the *kebele* (local government). Unlicensed mobile sellers escape such fees and are perceived as a drain on city revenue.

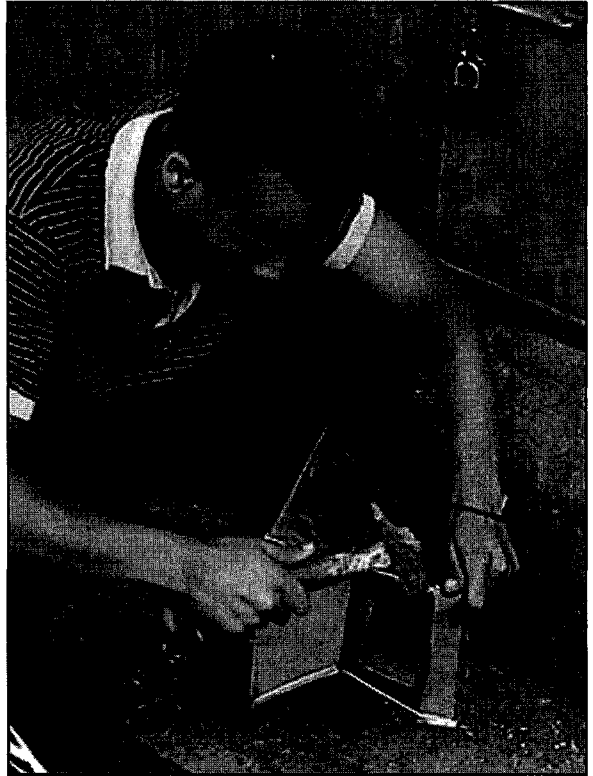
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In other nooks and crannies of the market, tailors make shopping bags, complete with zippers and handles, from used food-aid grain sacks donated by USAID (United States Agency for International Development) and the European Union. Large 200-liter barrels are cut in half and outfitted with metal handles for use as cooking pots at weddings and in hotels. Other barrels are cut in thirds and hammered into wash basins. But perhaps the most impressive display of workmanship I saw was exhibited by Aboosh Mituku as he assembled a charcoal stove from flattened USAID vegetable-oil cans.

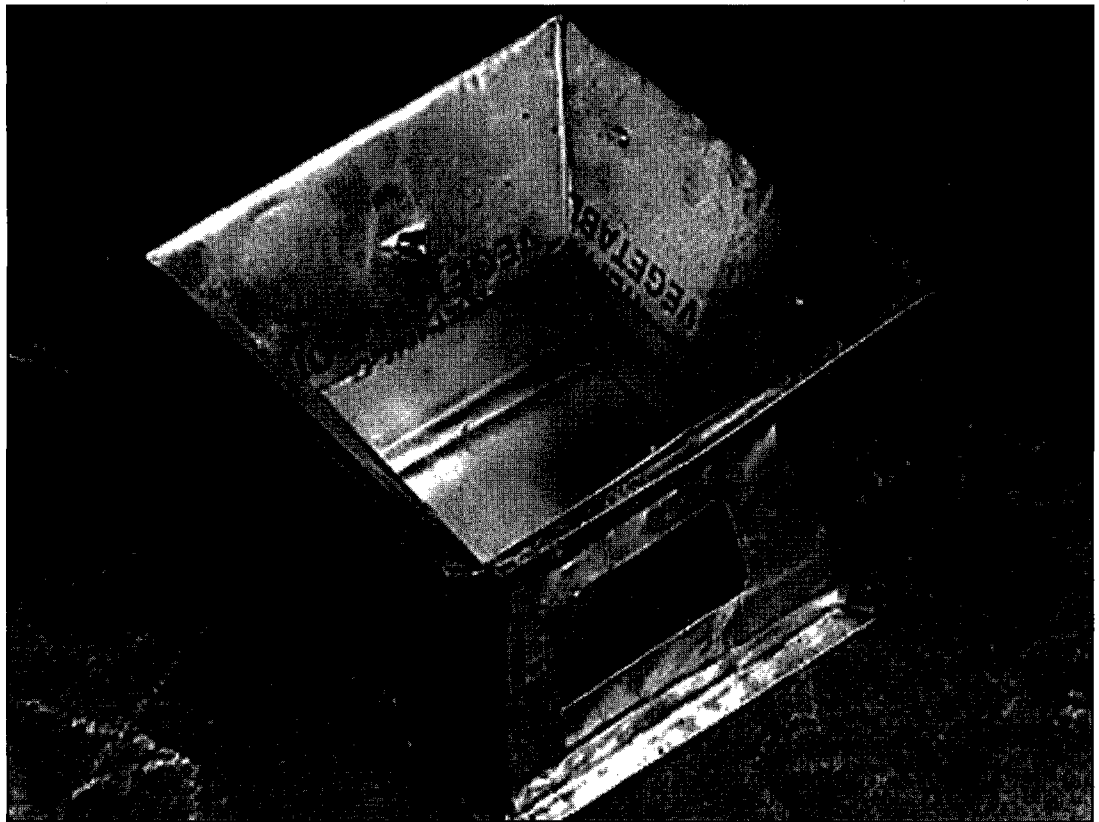
Aboosh worked deftly and urgently, as if racing an invisible clock. In his early twenties, Aboosh has the compact, muscular build of an athlete, and his biceps bulged as the steel yielded to his touch. Again a small crowd gathered, not to watch him magically mold waste into a new stove, but to watch me watching him. I was mes-



A crowded street scene from merkato



Aboosh cutting old USAID oil cans (left) and hammering them into a charcoal furnace (right)



Aboosh's finished product



Cutting USAID oil cans into aluminum sheets

merized by Aboosh's skill and agility, and the rest of the crowd was mesmerized by me, a *ferenji* (foreigner) doing absolutely nothing.

In just 25 minutes, Aboosh traced out the proper shapes from raw steel, cut the pieces, banged and twisted them into shape, assembled the sections, and riveted on a base and handles. Not bad for a self-taught artisan. Aboosh was born in Addis Ababa and completed sixth grade. He wanted to apprentice with some of the other producers of these charcoal stoves, but they refused to train him. Undeterred, he and his two friends bought one of the stoves, disassembled it, and then put it back together. In the process, they figured out what pieces to cut and the how-to's of construction.

These open stoves are used by Ethiopians for roasting and boiling coffee, grilling maize and for heat. They are also used for cooking, especially during natural-gas cylinder shortages like the one currently plaguing Addis. The USAID steel cans are thinner and make less durable stoves than their heavier corrugated-iron counterparts. But they are also less expensive, and price, not quality, is often the primary concern of Ethiopian consumers. Aboosh's stoves retail (painted) for 7 birr, while the cor-

rugated iron models sell for 30 birr and up.

The mini-stove construction business entails several steps, and a division of labor keeps a dozen young men employed in a small radius surrounding Aboosh's workshop. The first group buy the five-liter oil cans, cut off the tops and bottoms, and hammer the cans into flat sheets. They sell these raw pieces to stove makers and other metal workers. After the stoves are constructed, they are sold to a painter. Many stoves now include a clay insert, for holding the charcoal. Thus, unlike the little kerosene lanterns that can be quickly built by one worker, the stoves pass through numerous stages, each of which adds some value, from 25 cents for the cutters to 1.50 birr for the constructors.

Among these young men I noticed a light atmosphere of fun and camaraderie. They joke and chat with each other without a hitch in their work. They work hard, and earn a decent living for their efforts, which is all the more commendable in a society where idleness and begging are commonplace and socially acceptable. To be fair, *merkato* is one area of Addis Ababa that is jam-packed with industrious folk. Excepting the usual parade of maimed, diseased and otherwise disabled beggars, most

people in *merkato* are actively hustling to earn their keep. On the main street, I even saw several legless vendors pulling themselves around on carts laden with socks and underwear. Likewise, a couple of blind men stood on the sidewalk selling lottery tickets. Economically, these are rough times for Ethiopia, but *merkato* remains abuzz with activity.

* * *

Value-added recycling represents an interesting informal sector of the Ethiopian economy, and one that holds additional potential. The only limitations on this sector are the artificial boundaries of creativity and the real limits on the types and amounts of locally-available rubbish.

In a poor country where the vast majority can scarcely afford expensive, imported- or domestic-manufactured goods, the creative transformation of waste into wares benefits both buyer and seller. It is the rare realm where ingenuity and innovation are accessible and rewarded, albeit with the typically minuscule profit margins normal in these parts.

This recycled rubbish — converted into stoves, lanterns, wash basins, shopping bags, and sandals — represent appropriate technology for the masses. This is not

like the high-tech solar-powered panels constructed for Africa by cutting-edge Scandinavian design teams. It is a group of pavement-pounding youngsters combining their own ideas, sweat and locally-available resources to make something their neighbors need. Small-scale, certainly, and not the type of big-league manufacturing oft-envisioned for lifting Africa out of its economic doldrums. However, it is similar to the home-grown entrepreneurship that preceded industrialization in the United States and Europe. And, innovation born at home, even in such seemingly minor forms, may hold more durable economic promise than the importation of large, complex textile or pharmaceutical machinery from Europe.

Value-added recycling is not primarily connected with a broader vision of economic growth, much less environmental protection. It is at base-level, about survival. It is about making a modest living; putting an inch or two of rubber between callused feet and rocky roads; and lighting a dark hut. All seemingly small steps forward, but quite concrete living condition improvements. And, if a budding young student in Kokosa or some other rural village can now study her science, math and English at night, thanks to the light of a Windolene kerosene lantern, then Nursabo and the other metalworkers in *merkato* may be contributing more to Ethiopia's future than they ever could imagine. □

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INSTITUTE FELLOWS AND THEIR ACTIVITIES

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Shelly Renae Browning. A surgeon specializing in ears and hearing, Dr. Browning is studying the approaches of traditional healers among the Aborigines of Australia and the indigenous peoples of Vanuatu to hearing loss and ear problems. She won her B.S. in Chemistry at the University of the South, studied physician/patient relationships in China and Australia on a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship and won her M.D. at Emory University in Atlanta. Before her ICWA fellowship, she was a Fellow in Skull-Base Surgery in Montreal at McGill University's Department of Otolaryngology. [SOUTH ASIA]

Chenoa Egawa. An enrolled member of the Lummi Indian Nation, Chenoa is spending two years living among mesoAmerican Indians, studying successful and not-so-successful cooperative organizations designed to help the Indians market their manufactures, agricultural products and crafts without relying on middlemen. A former trade specialist for the American Indian Trade and Development Council of the Pacific Northwest, Chenoa's B.A. is in International Business and Spanish from the University of Washington in Seattle. [THE AMERICAS]

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Whitney Mason. A freelance print and television journalist, Whit began his career by founding a newspaper called *The Siberian Review* in Novosibirsk in 1991, then worked as an editor of the *Vladivostok News* and wrote for *Asiaweek* magazine in Hong Kong. In 1995 he switched to radio- and video-journalism, working in Bosnia and Korea for CBS. As an ICWA Fellow, he is studying and writing about Turkey's role as nexus between East and West, and between traditional and secular Islam. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Marc Michaelson. A program manager for Save the Children in The Gambia, Marc has moved across Africa to the Horn, there to assess nation-building in Eritrea and Ethiopia, and (conditions permitting) availing and unavailing humanitarian efforts in northern Somalia and southern Sudan. With a B.A. in political science from Tufts, a year of non-degree study at the London School of Economics and a Master's in International Peace Studies from Notre Dame, he describes his postgraduate years as "seven years' experience in international development programming and peace research." [sub-SAHARA]

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