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Memory, tizita and longing for place

Abstract:

The raw facts of memory, of longing for place, and the corresponding need to shape a narrative and to account for experience, create fundamental tensions in this piece of creative non-fiction. Childhood memories of the “Garden of Eden” underpin adult experiences as a researcher in what is now the UNESCO listed Kafa Biosphere Reserve in southwest Ethiopia. Research and writing about “saving” birthing women as an international development goal identified friction between visiting women in their homes, and remembering childhood encounters with women whose lives (and souls) needed to be “saved”. Struggling to find meaning, and writing about these experiences, offered a way to move on from other unhappy childhood memories. Drawing on descriptions of *Tizita* (Ethiopia’s anthem to nostalgia and longing) by Maaza Mengiste and Dagmawi Woubshet, and *fernweh* (longing for a place “far away from here”) by Teju Cole and Christiane Alsop, longing for home, ሃገሪ ናፈቄጽ (the Amharic term pronounced *hagere nafekegn*), guided more recent journeys accompanying women as they walked from home to the field, to collect water or firewood, to visit neighbours, to the market or to a health facility. Walking defines an approach to living whereby daily activities are framed by time and distance.

Biographical note:

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Keywords: Memory, homesickness, longing for place, non-fiction, gender

Longing for place (1967)

A mid-week afternoon.

First, a *sini* of coffee for my mother, and then one for me.
The tiny cup fits perfectly in my hand.

I sip the hot black slightly salty liquid.
It is sweeter than honey to my mouth.

“It was in my mouth as honey for sweetness,” as in one of the Psalms.

I had skipped, hopped and walked behind my mother for a couple of hours from the mission compound in Bonga to the tiny thatched round *tukul* of one of her former patients. My mother – a nurse midwife who ran a mission clinic – had been called out in the middle of the night to deliver Tigiste’s feet-first baby a week earlier. We meandered along the winding spirally path through the cool green rainforest, then along a smooth dirt path, packed down by bare feet and donkeys and mules and oxen and sheep and goats, around rows of maize as tall as my mother, and small fields of *tef* grain grass almost yellow or a yellow almost green as tall as my knees – I was a tall child for my seven years – and then finally to the *tukul* surrounded by dozens of *enset* up to ten metres tall with dark green leaves four or five metres long and a metre wide [1], real banana trees with the sweetest small bananas in the world, and *gomen* walking stick cabbage and coffee trees and sweet potato and onions and garlic and carrots.

Tigiste welcomes us with kisses on both cheeks – right, left, right – and asks us to sit on the wooden bench on the other side of the fireplace set with three stones around it. She sits on a tiny wooden three-legged stool, the baby wrapped in a *shamma* asleep on the bed. In front of her, a tiny wooden table with three handleless *sinis*, and in front of the table, long strips of papyrus grass lay on the floor for decoration with tiny flower petals on the grass. Nature had been brought into the ceremony, a beautiful display on this dirt floor that had been swept clean and smooth and was now being pecked by two hens and a rooster. The only other furniture is the wooden bed covered in flat dried cow skins and a wooden box for safe storage. On the other side of the *tukul*, a muddy area where the cow and ox are tied at night, safe from hyenas and *lebas* who might steal them in the dark. The ceiling inside this *tef* grass thatched *tukul*, is shiny black with tar from the smoke from the fire, sealed from the rain, and able to keep out mosquitoes and other insects at night.

Tigiste takes a large handful of olive-green coffee beans and puts them onto a thin metal *beerat metad*. She scrubs them together using water from a large earthenware pot; sets the *beerat metad* on the fire and soon we hear the coffee beans spitting and hissing. As she stirs the coffee beans, they turn from green to dark chocolate.

The smell from the eucalyptus wood smoke blends with the smell of roasting coffee beans.

When the coffee beans are almost black, Tigiste sprinkles small pieces of frankincense on red-hot pieces of charcoal from the fire on the *girgira* which is just a broken piece of pot that sits on the grass.

The smell of the eucalyptus wood smoke blends with the smell of the roasted coffee and the *ittan* smoke (of frankincense), like lemon rind.

Tigiste picks up the *beerat metad* and offers the smoke from the roasted coffee beans to my mother and then to me, showing us how to wave the wafting smoke towards ourselves as a gesture of hospitality and good tidings. *Āmeseginalehu*. Thank you. My heart is bursting with anticipation.

She pounds the coffee beans in the *mukecha* and *zenzena*, the mortar and pestle. Using her hand as a funnel, she pours the finely pounded coffee powder into top of her Bonga style clay coffee pot *jebena*, a round-bottomed *jebena* with a curved neck and perfectly balanced handle on one side and spout on the other. Then she fills the *jebena* with water and sits it over the fire. When the water boils, she takes the *jebena* off the fire, tips it on its side and sits it on the *matot*, a woven straw ring, so the grounds could settle.

Tigiste then puts her black clay *metad* that was normally used to bake *injera* – the sour, crumpet-holed flat bread made from *tef* eaten with doro or chicken *wot*, *wot* so hot, tears ran down my cheeks from the hot *berberé* spices, or vegetable *wot* without *berberé* – on the fire. She takes three handfuls of wheat from a bag in the wooden box, spreads it out on a woven mat, thrusts it up and down blowing away small stones, then tips the wheat on to the *metad* to toast.

Three handfuls of nutty golden toasting wheat, sweet roasted brewed coffee, frankincense *ittan* and eucalyptus smoke.

We speak quietly. Tigiste's hushed tones sound to me like she was showing respect, but I sense my mother wasn't quite sure what was happening or what to do next. This was the first coffee ceremony she had been to. It was my first coffee ceremony too.

As I sit next to my mother on the wooden bench watching and waiting to see what will happen, it seems that my mother's role is to sit and talk and enjoy the coffee ceremony that is being prepared specially for her.

Why did my mother decide I could go with her to visit Tigiste?

When did my mother decide I could go with her to visit Tigiste?

I wasn't surprised that my mother had helped this woman and her baby. What surprised me was that my mother let me go with her to visit Tigiste.

Tigiste adds a tiny pinch of salt to each *sini* and extends her arm, tilts the *jebena* as she pours

the coffee like a miniature waterfall into each of the *sinis* and fills them to the brim. First, a *sini* for my mother and then one for me.

After the first *sini* of coffee, *abol*, for pleasure, more water is added to the *jebena*, and it is boiled again. The second round, *tona*, is for thinking and contemplation, and then the third, *baraka*, for blessing or praise.

Blessedness. I felt blessed and my soul was filled with goodness. I felt I would never fear evil again.

Darkest Africa was as dark as this black coffee.

Who was the heathen?

Maybe the heathen was us.

I was my mother for a moment when I thought of that, then I felt I was not my mother. Why should I be my mother and not be me? Then I was here in this *tukul*, and my mother had allowed me to drink my first *sini* of coffee and then I felt that I was Tigiste making the coffee. I watched my mother and thought she was unable to see the woman in front of her, unable to see that she was not a woman who needed saving.

Maybe it was my mother who needed saving; years later she has become a fearful woman who always does what she is expected to do.

I wanted to be Tigiste, my mother's former patient, with her new baby and her coffee and her *tukul* with the blackened tar ceiling and all the trees and vegetables and fruits around it. But I was me – a seven-year-old girl – and next week I had to go back to the School for Missionary Children.

Aspects of modernity in Ethiopia (1960s to 1970s)

My parents were Australian missionaries who spent part of their working life in Ethiopia in the 1960s and 1970s with what was then the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM). The mission sought to bring evangelical Christianity into the African “unoccupied regions” (Bingham, as cited in Donham, 1999, p. 85), firstly in Nigeria, and by the 1930s, in Ethiopia. Missionaries used aspects of modernity, particularly technology and medicine to propagate their Christianity (Donham, 1999):

the missionaries' principal appeal to Ethiopians came to rest precisely on their ability to offer an entrance to modernity, as it was locally constructed. Imbued with a progressive sense of time and increasingly impatient with “tradition,” mission converts dreamed of a better day. (Donham, 1999, p. 83)

Like the religious fundamentalist knowing how to live so that life has meaning, it was not until

I started studying international development decades later that I began to understand what was going on in the world – outside the circumscribed way I had been brought up – why things happened, and how I could find a way to live; as a consequence, doing research in Ethiopia was inevitable (Jackson, 2010). And like the language of religious fundamentalism set within a framework of polarities of “right and wrong, good and evil, light and darkness, mammon and God, flesh and spirit, demons and angels, world temptations and heavenly salvation” (Wuthnow & Lawson, 1994, p. 40), I soon learned that international development has its own polarities; undeveloped and developed, traditional and modern, unsafe and safe, untrained and trained, illiterate and literate:

[H]istory, overall and in all of its stages [is] irreversibly regressive, precisely because human beings are by nature sinful ... modern men and women become historical objects whose behavior requires study and explanation ... Dispensational premillennialism is a wilfully “mad rhetoric” and speaking it (being spoken by it) is a political act, a constant dissent, disruption, and critique of modern thought, and specifically of modern historical discourses that constitute hegemonic knowledge about world events, past and present. (Harding, 1994, p. 63)

Escaping memory

I’m over sixty now and my mother is ninety. When I ask, my mother does not remember the first time we drank coffee with Tigiste, her former patient. What she does remember: I was an “independent” child – her tone intends this as a criticism, not a compliment – even though I was described as “pretty”, I was also a “wilful, naughty child”.

In memory, my childhood was polarised between living at an authoritarian boarding school for missionary children, and at home with my parents during holidays. The despair of my six-year-old abandonment at the boarding school still burns inside me some days. I can see a single child sitting in the dining room every morning and every night, looking at the half cup of grey-white milk in a thick sick-pink melamine cup trying to decide whether sipping it would be best, or if holding her nose and drinking it down all at once would be better.

The smell of the rancid grey-white dishwater milk made from milk powder that came in fifty-pound cement bags that must have sat for months on the wharf in the sun in Djibouti before being trucked to Addis Ababa where it was mixed with twenty-minute boiled water in forty-four-gallon drums, and the rancid greyish-white mucous-like lumpy wheat porridge were the most remarkable.

In this heathen country – in Darkest Africa – one thing I associate with the School for Missionary Children was that good children do not question.

Every morning – after Devotions, before breakfast – we memorised Scripture.

And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And

whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire. (*King James Bible Online*, 1769/2022. Revelation 20:14-15)

And even though Ethiopia held a special place in the West's heart because of its political independence and its proximity to the Middle East [2], in Geography we were taught about the discovery of *Ertä 'Ale*, the Gateway to Hell, the most active of a range of six volcanoes, as it shot out vapour and pulled apart at the junction of the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden rift and the East African rift systems. *Ertä 'Ale*, with its intense, fuming lava lakes and lava erupting from rift-parallel fissures at any moment, and its people who were described as hostile, treacherous, murderous nomads who fought over salt, had never heard about the struggles between Christ and the Devil.

Would I be thrown into *Ertä 'Ale* the Lake of Fire burning with brimstone?
Most nights I wet the bed.

Miss Watson, the dormitory supervisor, wrote to my father and mother saying she had tried *absolutely everything* from strappings to rubbing my nose in the wet sheets, but *nothing* had stopped it. Miss Watson *did not know* I was too terrified to get out of bed because I could see Satan in the Dark, conspicuous as the Devil with horns in the Lake of Fire and Brimstone or hissing like the Evil Serpent.

To counter these memories, my daytime dream life was set in the place I thought of as my Garden of Eden in what was then Kafa Province in southwest Ethiopia. Every time I return to Ethiopia I go and stay in the guest house on the side of the hill not far from my childhood school holiday home in Bonga, now the capital of Kafa Zone. One day I opened the gates of the mission compound and walked down the hill to find our house had been destroyed by soldiers during the Derg era [3]. There was no sign of our extensive vegetable garden, the rows and rows of pineapples, the huge avocado tree or the banana plantation.

***Tizita*, Ethiopia's anthem to nostalgia and longing**

Ethiopia's anthem to nostalgia and longing ትዝታ (*Tizita*) – memory – is a song recorded by most Ethiopian singers. Maaza Mengiste imagines that in every version of *Tizita*, the singer gives the song back and extends a hand to the next musician (Maaza Mengiste, 2011). *Tizita* conveys a profound sense of lost memories, but also a sense that through

loss of the object of love the very art of memory can also be lost. Not only does the song lament the loss of content, the very polysemy of the word and the song form laments the loss of a structure of feeling. Without the action of love, both form and content have the potential to disappear. In essence, then, *Tizita* conveys a feeling of time as being out of joint with itself: social life in transition. (Elleni Zeleke, n.d.)

ትዝታዬ ኢንተው ነህ ትዝታዎ የስብኝ
ትዝታዬ ኢንተው ነህ ትዝታዎ የስብኝ

መጣህ እያስክ እየቀረሁብኝ።

My *tizita* is you, I don't have *tizita*

My *tizita* is you, I don't have *tizita*

You say you're coming, yet you never do. (Dagmawi Woubshet, 2009, p. 630)

The Amharic *tizita* 'ye, my *tizita*, refers to the singer's melancholy memory, to the absent lover. In his interpretation, Dagmawi Woubshet identifies three related meanings of *Tizita*: first, memory and the act of memory, sometimes translated as nostalgia in English; second, the scale or mode of Ethiopian music; and third, by incorporating both meanings into the song, *Tizita*, which captures both collective and individual experience (Dagmawi Woubshet, 2009). It is also a formal musical style "which positions lack and longing as the song's spatial and temporal coordinates (lack is 'here', longing is 'then')" (p. 630). This implies that the structure of memory can betray the present as much as the lover does, if not more: "My *tizita* [memory] is you, I don't have *tizita* [memory]" (p. 630). At the same time, as a popular idiom, *Tizita* shows that lived memory has a way of usurping formalised styles. Thus:

ትናትናን ጥሶ ዛሬን ተንተርሶ

ክንገም ተሙሶ አምናንም አድሶ

ደመጣል ትዝታ ንዙታ አግበስብሶ።

Outdoing yesterday, shouldering on today

Borrowing from tomorrow, renewing yesteryears

Comes *tizita* (memory) hauling possessions. (Dagmawi Woubshet, 2009, p. 629)

Even if I had to go back to Ethiopia to research things I didn't understand about my earlier life, I'm the only one in my family who has returned. In addition to the eight years of my childhood and my doctoral fieldwork in 2007, I've spent many months at different times in Ethiopia since then: two small research projects, conferences, an internship with UNICEF and a second research project that took me to numerous districts in Kafa Zone, to Afar Region, Tigray Region and Sidama Zone each place three or four times. And every time I return to Ethiopia I stay for long periods of time in Addis Ababa, a city I walk to get around.

When I'm in Australia and I think about returning to Ethiopia, I remind myself how easy it is to take a taxi from Bole International Airport to the guesthouse, to make a cup of Ethiopian green tea, to walk the streets until dinner time, sleep, and to plan my travel to Bonga after I've had time to acclimatise to the altitude. But it's been three years since I was in Ethiopia now. Would everything still be as I remember?

Remembering (2007)

A mid-week afternoon.

Walking in Kafa is especially difficult in the rainy season. Walking to Muti, a rural *kebele* (neighbourhood), was tortuous because it had rained in the night; it was grey and foggy, and walking in the mud meant compensating all the time to try and keep balanced. Unpredictability all the way. Up and down. Slipping on the top of the corrugations like on a horizontal ladder in the mud and trying not to slide in between the rungs. Still, it wasn't as bad as the walk to Deckia where the corrugations were twice as deep and on a fifty-degree angle. There even the mules struggled to find their way. Today we were walking to Sheyka. We – Azeb, my interpreter, her sister Genet, and me – planned to spend the day interviewing women about their experiences giving birth at home or in a health facility. We walked up steep hills. Very steep. I was grateful it hadn't rained for a few days, so we didn't slip on the path.

Halfway through the day we met an elderly mother who had had 11 children, her daughter Birke who had given birth to ten children, and the elderly mother's daughter-in-law with her first baby. We were taken into their *tukul* that was still in the final stages of construction, the older woman apologising that they had just finished coffee. With chickens running in and out and continually squawking, and the baby crying I strained to hear as Birke spoke slowly and made no effort to speak over the noise. She told us how she had been in labour for three or four days in Sherada in a rural part of Kafa Zone. They kept hoping the baby would be born but the labour continued. There was no nurse, so Birke was carried by stretcher for five hours to the road at Gojeb. Eventually she was taken by bus to Bonga. In Bonga Hospital she was in labour for another two days. The baby died but they didn't remove it as she needed a blood transfusion which could not be done in Bonga Hospital. Her husband went home, sold their cow and borrowed extra money for her treatment and the cost of transportation. Finally, Birke was taken to Jimma Hospital (four or five-hours' drive away before the new road was built) where the dead baby was removed by Caesarean section.

Birke left her husband because of ongoing ill health and now lives in Sheyka with her elderly mother and other relatives.

When I remember meeting Birke, I don't feel nostalgia. Sadness, yes. And deep empathy. Of course, there's much more to research than questioning our "internal ethical urge" as Nigerian-American author and photographer Teju Cole (2012) argues, when "Africa serves as a backdrop for white fantasies of conquest and heroism". "The White-Savior Industrial Complex" (2012) is not about justice, he writes, but about big emotional experiences that validate privilege. I know I don't want to be a "White Saviour", but my research was about "saving" women's lives. "Saving" a birthing woman's life depends on access to health facilities: there are countless delays for women to be referred "on time" if they experience obstetric complications.

For months I had wrestled with questions about the nature and purpose of research, and then for months I spent most of my time walking, occasionally riding a mule or travelling by bus or four-wheeled drive, to visit women and to see health facilities so I could learn how travel was possible from the remote neighbourhoods (*kebeles*) to the district (*woreda*) health centres, or the hospital in Bonga. To understand what it meant to "go to a health facility" and what shaped

decision-making when women faced with emergencies during childbirth, meant listening to the voices of women whose views were at odds with biomedical health: birth at home was “safe” because they were supported by close relatives and neighbours. “Unsafe” childbirth meant going to a health facility because of the real possibility they would die on the way (Jackson, 2010; 2018).

***Fernweh* (far away from here)**

Teju Cole travels to Switzerland every year, but never wants to belong there. The term for longing he grasps for in *Fernweh* (far away from here) (Cole, 2020) is for the longing, the elsewhere, that is not Switzerland, but the feeling of homesickness of being far away that Switzerland elicits in him: “*Fernweh* is the silver lining of melancholia around the cloud of happiness about being far from home” (Cole, as cited in McDonald, 2016):

It is the place that, when I’m not there, I long to be there. But it is also a conceptual container for such longing. It is the object of the longing, but it’s a theoretical shape that I can use to think through the question of longing. I’m also thinking about farness in general, as a desirable, as a restorative. And that’s a farness that could, in theory, happen elsewhere as well. My years of revisiting Switzerland have been, I’d say, a lucky instance of putting that theory into practice. And now that I’ve put it into a book, who knows what will happen? (Cole, as cited in Granta, 2020)

Fernweh is not easy to translate:

Wanderlust expresses the longing to leave but it emphasizes the tourist’s longing for a week or two of adventure ... [and] entails a horizon narrowing down on us to a point where home becomes almost suffocating and we wander off ... leave the desert of the familiar ... [to] meet the new environment with enthusiasm, experience the widening of our horizon as empowering, and explore aspects of our identity that were buried at home. (Alsop, 2002)

Alsop’s paper on love and life away from home also refers to Freud’s understanding of mourning and melancholia and losing a significant relationship – like when I felt “abandoned” at the School for Missionary Children – as the loss of an important relationship produces pain and then “intense longing” for that relationship – even if it is just a fantasy – resulting in loss of interest in the world and other people. Even if the loved object, person or place doesn’t exist anymore, it demands “that all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that object” (Freud, as cited in Alsop, 2002).

The experiences of the person in mourning – experiences of “an impoverished and empty world” – can mean that the person does not know “what makes her sad”. So, if homesickness is both mourning and melancholia, then *heimweh*, “an accusation against home”, forces one to search for a future abroad, or elsewhere. Homesickness “replaces the original meaning of home” with nostalgia that covers up home’s failure to provide security, hence the need “to find

stability in the unknown environment” (Alsop, 2002).

I was not like all the other girls at the School for Missionary Children.

One girl injected herself in the arm with shampoo – “to see what would happen”. Another time she put her arm through a plate glass window. Another girl designed a table with rows and columns and words listing her entire term’s Saturday afternoon candy quota to ensure she would still have candy at the end of term – she was the only one who did. And the class bully cornered her older brother to beat me up – for no reason it seemed – it gave her something to do after school.

If these experiences define me, it was because I was always observing, standing on the sidelines, outlining what I thought was going on.

And if those years define me – the missionary paradigm whereby I spent much of my childhood at that School for Missionary Children, longing to be “home” in the Garden of Eden during school holidays – so do the expeditionary paradigm and the researcher paradigm. Both gave me the capacity to think about why we were in Ethiopia in the 1960s and 1970s while I examined the theoretical and practical problems of doing social research years later. Two canons, two different endings, a dialectic of purpose as well as challenge as ethnographer or boundary walkers, as Alsop writes, who set themselves the task of crisscrossing between the boundaries of being home and away, of being insider and outsider, of being personal and cultural selves. There is nothing more difficult than this back and forth between ways of living, speaking, thinking and feeling. There is nothing more risky than switching between various identities and practices of estrangement. We expose ourselves, we make ourselves vulnerable and we are constantly in danger of remaining on one side of the border. (Alsop, 2002)

Longing for home

There are many ways to be *Tizita*, to be longing. But perhaps a better Amharic term to use is ሃገሬ ፍፈቃኝ, longing for home: ሃገሬ (pronounced *hagere*), refers to a country, village, town or city and ፍፈቃኝ (*nafekegn*), means longing.

Is it longing I feel? Homesickness? *Fernweh*? *Tizita*? Or perhaps it is no more than the expeditionary paradigm – ethnographic fieldwork – based on peerings and prying into people’s lives [4]? Ethnography is about taking part in daily activities and getting to know people, and secondly, writing down what is observed and learnt. To describe the friction – or reflexivity – that develops between when to focus on observation and when to focus on research and writing about how others construct a meaningful world. Or perhaps it is just self-reflexivity: taking a “closer look at one’s own longings and belongings, with the familiarity that – when viewed from a distance – it can change one’s perspective considerably” (Alsop, 2002).

Research – especially feminist ethnography – is about understanding process across time and place (Skeggs, 2001). But instead of focusing on myself and the “other” and all the ethical problems that this can cause, I find that the process of questioning continues. Observation is not enough, but it is the beginning of the process of recognising one’s limits. Even if I wanted to honour that duty by showing how shocking it is that women and newborns still die during childbirth for example, by speaking and writing on behalf of women there is the potential of appropriation or ethnocentrism. In the end, I feel all I can do is to continue questioning my position and how I write about what I have witnessed and heard.

Research forced me to think, to pay attention, and to remember my childhood in Ethiopia, but it is only now – juxtaposing my mother’s visit to a woman in her *tukul* (with me, in 1967) and my many visits to women in their *tukuls* (since 2007) – that I am re-examining the ethical limits of “saving” women again. My mother was in Ethiopia to “save” women’s lives (ostensibly to “save” their lives during childbirth, although the real reason was to “save” their souls). When I returned to Ethiopia as a doctoral student, it was to research how birthing women could be “saved” from death or disability. Unlike my mother, I was outside the health system and outside any religious system; I listened as an outsider, from a distance very much aware of the ethical problems of me being there. And yet, over time as I created relationships and friendships with people I met, I felt I was – at least partly – becoming an insider as a witness to their stories [5].

Conclusion

When my family left Ethiopia in 1975, I did not think we would ever return. I had only known life as a child of missionary parents in an era when “children should be seen and not heard”. For years, my longing to be back in Kafa was just longing – nostalgia and homesickness – for the home I remembered and imagined, the home I lacked, the place I longed for, the place I wanted to be, the place of my imagined happiness, the place I remembered to counter the place of unhappiness – boarding school – and the place I always wanted to return to.

I went back to Ethiopia thinking about my (individual) childhood memories, going through the detritus of the past, to research and write about Ethiopia in the present. In the end, the way memory works is that the opposite of it – for me at least – has (finally) become less like *Tizita*, an action of love and remembering because in *Tizita*, as in the blues, longing is kept alive and there is no resolution as “the possibility of return is always thwarted” (Dagmawi Woubshet, 2009, p. 630).

I could continue going back and forth about being and insider and an outsider and how I kept negotiating and renegotiating, trying to understand. But I am no longer “looking back” to my childhood and the epic struggles between Satan and Christ. When I was “doing ethnography”, moving back and forth questioning assumptions and how things are connected to each other, invoking the sociological imagination with each woman I met within her social context and culture, I was always an outsider creating a narrative in English (and my less than perfect Amharic).

What changed? If you google Kafa Biosphere Reserve, images show it is still a place of beauty and wonder [6], but I know, from all the walking I’ve done, that the roads and paths are in

mountainous terrain. In the rainy season, it's muddy and slippery. Sometimes there are rivers that are impossible to cross. For birthing women being carried on a stretcher, the topography and lack of transportation contributes to delays in reaching health facilities, and some women and newborns still die on the way.

Each time I return to Ethiopia I try to reflect on what I see and to bear witness on the limits of what I have seen and felt. Wherever I stay, I walk every morning and every afternoon: on main roads and back streets, on bitumen roads and dirt paths. I take less and less for granted. Even if the lives of the women I meet is slowed to a walking pace, it is walking that links our activities between home, the field, water and firewood collection, visiting neighbours, going to church and going to the market. When I walk with women, it's obvious that walking together is also a way to create social networks as it gives women time to gossip and catch up with friends and neighbours (Jackson, 2019). Moving back and forth between personal experiences of walking, and critically thinking about women's experiences of birth at home or in a health facility, I too found that walking is a way to explore "the mystery of presence" as Frédéric Gros explains, "to the world, to others and to yourself" (as cited in Cadwalladr, 2014).

With each step forward I want to be seen and not seen, walking towards whatever it is that I long for: acknowledgement, love, recognition, or whatever it might be. Is it enough to remember and to reconcile the memories with how things are in the present? As someone who was an outsider as a child, someone whose constructed memories of that childhood have detached to become their antonym in adulthood, as I try to derive meaning from my experiences, remembering the names and faces of the women I've met and still feeling the weight of responsibility – and the possibility of redemption through remembering.

Once, I stayed in the guest house in Bonga not far from my childhood home for many weeks, to take time out from the rest of the world after a relationship ended. Walking into town every morning, keeping pace with others on the rocky dirt road, I passed children chanting *fereng fereng fereng* and responded with jocularly by asking *Yet? Yet? Yet?* Where? Where? Where? implying that I couldn't see any *ferengi* or foreigner anywhere. I walked to Agerenesh's coffee shop outside the bank – a couple of wooden benches and a table under a piece of blue tarpaulin – with the best (strongest) coffee in Bonga. It was the first or second coffee break for bank workers, office workers, shop assistants, drivers, and anyone walking past who wanted to pay two *birr* for a *sini* of coffee that was poured from one of the three plastic thermoses sitting on the table as the *jebena* – the largest I'd ever seen – was back on the charcoal brazier for the next round. On the table, a glass jar with sugar – Ethiopian plantation sugar coloured with copper, iron and lead – for those who wanted it, and a chipped *sini* holding small sprigs of *tena'adam* (rue), to remove any bitterness.

Notes

[1] *Ensete ventricosum*, also known as false banana, is a large, thick, single-stemmed banana plant used for food and fibre in southwest Ethiopia.

[2] In the context of the Cold War and Ethiopia's pro-Western stance, the US built a listening post in Asmara – after the federation of Eritrea with Ethiopia – and directed more than half of US military assistance for Africa to Ethiopia from 1950–1976 (Donham, 1999; Reid, 2001).

[3] The Derg was the military council that ruled Ethiopia as a Marxist–Leninist state from 1974–1991.

[4] As an academic discipline, much of anthropology has moved away from approaches such as that of American anthropologist Carleton S. Coon (1935) who went to Ethiopia “to measure the heads and bodies of the inhabitants” (p. 6) and proudly persuaded people “against their will, principles, and better judgment that they should submit their bodies to measurement and to peerings, prying, and mouth openings which go with our nonmetrical observations” (p. 6) using a collapsible metal measuring rod called an anthropometer; two pairs of callipers, one to encompass the head, the other, the face, a steel tape for head circumference, a Leica camera, a porcelain skin chart to match exposed and unexposed skin colours and so on. Coon managed to measure some people in Addis Ababa but failed to get permission to go outside the capital and was expelled from Ethiopia. On the flyleaf the author concludes that at least we gained “knowledge of Ethiopian psychology which will help to warn other explorers of that strange land and to enlighten many who will never go there” (1935).

[5] One aspect of another research project was to apply a gender lens – for the first time – to Ethiopia's Health Extension Program and the role of its female Health Extension Workers (HEWs). Through their participation in the research many of the HEWs heard – some for the first time – the benefits their work brings to their local communities. Recognition from the community gave HEWs a greater sense of reward for their work. HEWs learnt they were appreciated and respected. Women told them that they trusted them like sisters. The research found significant gender inequalities that reinforced gender stereotypes including “an assumption women are ‘naturally’ caring and self-sacrificing and willing to serve the community through poorly paid or unpaid community health roles” (Jackson, et al., 2019, p. 314).

[6] In 2010, UNESCO added the Kafa Biosphere Reserve – an area covering 760,000 hectares – into the World Network of Biosphere Reserves (Nature and Biodiversity Conservation Union 2011; 2020). As Ethiopia is the main storehouse of genetic diversity for *Coffea arabica*, it is clear that climate change will negatively impact much of the current coffee farming landscape of the country (Davis & Moat, 2017).

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Note: All Ethiopian names are entered, as is traditional practice, in alphabetical order of the author's first name followed by the father's name.

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