

A Return to Ethiopia in 2009

Here we are back in Ethiopia after 45 years. Life is not exactly the rural scene in Emdebir - then with no running water hot or cold, no plumbing sanitation, no electricity, and vehicular transport only in the dry season.

We are living in a brand new two-bedroom two-bathroom apartment complete with satellite television, and a clothes washing machine no less. As to Addis itself, it is not the 450,000 population community we all used to know, but a sprawling city of 5+ million that is overloaded with highly polluting vehicles and vast new construction in road infrastructure (the "Ring Road" extends around Addis and while not yet complete, enables one to navigate some of the parts of the city with greater ease than before), a budding internet service (though not with the kind of speed I am executing here from the US embassy for the moment), a lively music and arts scene, and a Starbucks knock-off known as Kaldi's coffee. This said, the vast majority of Ethiopians still live the kind of existence many of us knew from years gone by, namely, grinding poverty in sub-standard housing or in the streets, and looking as much to fate as education as to what may determine their future.

Among the newer sites is a string of new universities in Ethiopia - I think I heard a number of around 24 operating or still being built, and in varying stages of completion. Addis Ababa University, the former HSIU, is slated to become an essentially postgraduate institution to produce the teachers and scholars who are destined to populate the new university campuses around the country. It is an ambitious goal, one that makes one wonder if the resources will be there to make it all happen, but few would deny the vision - it is, after all, education that will make much of the difference in what happens in this country in the future.

The general response of Ethiopians to the election of Obama has been nothing less than spectacular. Obama t-shirts are still on sale in many shops and the general climate for Americans over here is positive at the moment. There is some concern, however, that the Obama administration may place more emphasis on respecting human rights, which makes some uncomfortable, but the ironclad retort to all of this is: Guantanamo.

Classes don't start for me until March 9. I will be teaching a graduate course in natural resource economics, along with a doctoral course in international political economy in a new Ph.D. program in law at the Akaki campus. I also will be joining a Middle States accreditation team that is conducting a visit at the American University of Beirut from March 1 to March 6. So in the meantime, Danièle and I have been spending time getting to know parts of Addis and meeting lots of new friends.

This morning we met with Hubert Gordon, the deputy director of the International Community School (aka the "American School") in Addis, which is about a 25-minute walk from our apartment. It looks as though she will be able to do substitute teaching/volunteering at the school.

In terms of global trends, there is a large amount of construction going on in Addis. It is not just the expressways that are being built. It also is a raft of luxury homes and apartment buildings just about everywhere. Slowly they puncture the tin roof structures that for many pass as homes, and they reflect the widening gap between wealthier Ethiopians and those near the bottom.

Prices have risen so dramatically, particularly in the run-up to Ethiopia's millennium celebration last year, that one wonders how ordinary Ethiopians can cope. An example is that a 100kg sack of teff, the grain used in making Ethiopia's staple bread injera, costs around Eth 1,000 birr, which at the current rate of exchange is about U.S. \$100. A sack could feed a family of 4-7 persons for around two months, but given that Ethiopia's per capita income stands at about U.S. \$120, it is not difficult to imagine just how expensive the city has become for so many.

I have managed to update my website for the two courses I will teach, but also have made master cd's so that students can have copies, thus avoiding the relatively expensive texts that are available, if even in limited quantities. For those who remember the Giannopoulos bookstore, well it has since long gone and text materials are largely found in neighborhood small bookstores.

This weekend, there is a reasonable chance that we will be making a nostalgic trip to Emdebir to see how much things have changed since the last visit in January 1990. I am told that not only is there grid electricity in the town now but it also has a modern multi-story hotel. Wonders never cease, as they say...

Well, some of you have already received some pictures of our existence here. At the risk of some duplication, here are some more:



Lion of Judah Statue in front of the Ethiopia National Theater, 2009



Addis Emperor Menelik II (1889-1913) Monument, 2009
(Homeless men sleeping at the base)



Addis Street Scene, 2009



Economic Commission for Africa, Addis Ababa, 2009



Sidist Kilo Monument, Addis Ababa, 2009



DMD in Addis Ababa, 2009



PLB with Unity University Faculty and Staff, 2009