

A Visit to Dire Dawa, Haramaya University, and Harar (April 9-11, 2009)

This is a report on a trip that Danièle and I took last week. The occasion for this visit was an invited lecture on the global recession and its implications for developing economies that I gave last Thursday afternoon at Haramaya University, just outside of Harar.

Haramaya University used to be called Alemaya College of Agricultural Sciences, and started originally as a collaborative project between the then Haile Selassie I University (now Addis Ababa University) and the University of Oklahoma. The invitation came about as a result of my teaching a course on political economy in the Ph.D. program in law at the AAU Akaki campus back at the end of March, one of whose students is Abdulmalik Abubeker, a former dean of the faculty of law at Haramaya.



Abdulmalik Abubeker, DMD, Rimbaud Center, Harar, Ethiopia, 2009

Abdulmalik suggested the tour and got approval through the President of Haramaya University. As our travel and lodging were arranged through the sponsorship of Haramaya University, we were given a grand tour, details of which are recounted below.



Ethiopia Map with Railway Line Indicated, 2009

Dire Dawa is some 530 km east of Addis Ababa, and the Ethiopian Airlines flight takes less than an hour. Once there, the distance from Dire Dawa to Djibouti is about 300 km, and Djibouti Airlines as well as Ethiopian Airlines make regular flights between the two locations. In turn, Harar has no airport, and is about an hour drive east of Dire Dawa. Just beyond Harar is the town of Jig Jiga, which is the capital of Ethiopia's eastern Somali-speaking population. The attached map provides an idea of the geography. As these sites are well inland of the Somali coast, piracy is not the top point of discussion for the most part, even though it has been very much a pre-occupation of both Somalis and various countries affected by shipping interruptions along the Horn.



Dire Dawa City Gate, 2009

Although this was a first time visit for Danièle, I had been to Dire Dawa and Harar back in 1966 while in the Peace Corps. A group of us made the flight from Addis, staying in local hotels and managing to do much of what Danièle and I did this time around. Although we did not find the wonderful Greek ice cream parlor from years ago, there is a lingering presence of France in the town, the reasons for which relate to the historic role of the town in the Ethio-Djibouti railway. Dire Dawa

Dire Dawa is a way station for the Ethio-Djibouti railroad that was built by the French from 1894 to 1917 to connect Djibouti to Addis Ababa. It is at a much lower elevation than Addis or neighboring Harar, and has an abundance of tropical trees and flowers around town. In addition, Dire Dawa, along with Harar, has a near exclusive concentration of Peugeot 404 blue and white taxis, no doubt because they work so well in warmer climates and because the spare parts distribution system from Djibouti has been fairly accessible.



Peugeot 404 Taxi on Harar Street, 2009

For some time there was a sizeable French community in Dire Dawa, complete with a local lycée. The style of streets and homes in town resembles that of many towns in southern France. France has had long-standing ties to Ethiopia that date back to the 17th century. What prompted the railroad project was the prospect of stronger commercial ties during the latter 19th century.

This interest expanded during the Scramble for Africa that began with the Berlin Congress of 1885. The scramble posed a risk that Ethiopia would fall to some conquering external power, the three principal ones in the region being Italy, France, and England. Italy already had moved to establish a colony in what is now the independent country of Eritrea. During that time they constructed a railway from the port of Massawa to Asmara, a shorter distance than that between Djibouti and Addis, but nevertheless not without the same commercial interests.

What checked all of this expansion was the Fashoda incident of 1898. At that time the British sent Lord Kitchener south from Egypt to stall the eastward expansion of a French military force led by General Marchand. All of this is recounted in considerable detail in David Levering Lewis' book, *Fashoda*. However, while France did not proceed to establish a francophone colonial buffer that would extend from Dakar in the West to Djibouti in the east, the railroad project continued apace. And all the while, England, France, and Italy jockeyed for influence, and always checked by the strategic moves of Emperor Menelik (1889-1913) in a regional balance of power process that Metternich would have appreciated.



Djibouti-Addis Ababa Chemin de Fer Line, La Gare in Dire Dawa, 2009



Djibouti-Addis Ababa Chem de Fer, La Gare in Addis Ababa, 2009

Two photos above show the historic railway stations in Dire Dawa and Addis as they appear today and they evoke an almost cinematic image of time gone by. And Ethiopians recently staged a rare protest to preserve the Addis Gare as part of the monumental heritage of the city.

The importance of the railway to Ethiopia today cannot be underestimated. Since Eritrea became independent in 1993, Ethiopia has lost all direct access to the Red Sea ports. Ironically, while Dire Dawa was losing some of its commercial luster while the now Eritrean port of Assab provided a once steady flow of goods, the near economic isolation between Ethiopia and Eritrea has given new life to the town. This said, the railway itself has fallen into disrepair and there is regular train service only between Djibouti and Dire Dawa while a European Union renovation project restores service between Dire Dawa and Addis. Some of the rising cost of living in places like Addis these days can be traced to the transport cost dislocations produced by the neglect of the railway and the continued isolation of Ethiopia from a direct port on the Red Sea. Today, virtually all of Ethiopia's major exports - coffee, hides and skins, tchat, flowers, and gold, among others, pass through the port of Djibouti, as do all major imports into the country.

Abdulmalik accompanied us on our flight to Dire Dawa, where we were then taken by Abdul, a driver from Haramaya University. We had a brief lunch at a new hotel, the Samrat, built by an Indian entrepreneur, after which we drove on east to Haramaya and then to the campus where we undertook a tour and settled in our baggage for our stay.



Haramaya University Entrance Gate, 2009

Haramaya is now a major university in Ethiopia. It has some 31,000 students, and several Ph.D. programs, mostly in agricultural sciences. Where it once operated under the direct tutelage of Addis, it now is largely autonomous, and has an ambitious program of expansion, including, as it may turn out from a conversation I had on Friday, graduate education in business and economics. I have offered to help the administration with the crafting of a strategic plan for their graduate program.

The lecture on Thursday was attended by some 50 individuals, perhaps because there was not a lot of publicity in advance. However, the audience was quite engaged in the conversation that followed, and the discussion was quite interesting. I may yet post a version of the PowerPoint presentation I prepared for the talk, no doubt after I give a similar invited lecture at Unity University in Addis later next week.

Once we finished our official visit at Haramaya, Abdulmalik and several faculty arranged for us to take a tour of Harar. Unlike Dire Dawa, Harar is a quite old and walled city, whose 72 successive emirs ruled from 969 to 1886. The walls of the city evoke a place that often stood in opposition to the outside world even as its trade became its lifeline.



Harar City Wall, ca. 1500's, 2009



Harar City Gate, ca. 1600-1800, 2009

Harar is a largely Moslem community. Its commercial base flourished under several successive waves of trading routes that ranged over spices, ivory, the slave trade, and more recently, the export of tchat, a local stimulant grown in increasing quantities in Ethiopia and marketed through a nearby town just outside of Harar. My own recollection of tchat was that it was chewed by my former students in Emdebir during our Peace Corps days, no doubt as the local equivalent of Benzedrine. However, one can become addicted to tchat, and the rate of addiction in places such as Yemen, and Saudi Arabia, is notable.

Harar belongs to a more tolerant brand of Islam than found among the Wahabi of Saudi Arabia. Although women dress modestly, they have a more important role and independence than among the stricter teachings of the Wahabi. As a result, there is an even larger tolerance toward others, regardless of their religious beliefs. What made all of this somewhat precarious was the military conflict and defeat of the last emir of Harar by Ras Makonnen, an Ethiopian governor who also was the father of the future Haile Selassie, in 1886.



Harar Cultural Center Salon, ca. 1700's, 2009

We were shown the site of what was once a mosque in Harar, but which now is the site of an Ethiopian orthodox church, no doubt as an emblem of the conquest of Harar by Ethiopian forces, and event which few Harari do not recall when asked.

Harar today has several sites of interest to visitors. One of them is the Harar Cultural center. It houses a collection of household objects and rooms decorated in traditional style. They include traditional baskets from the region for which the Harari weavers are well known.

Another site in Harar is the Rimbaud center. The poet Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891), who gave up writing poetry by his early 20s, took up a career as a merchant trader and lived in Harar from around 1880 until just prior to his death in 1891. There is no clear evidence as to where he actually lived, but the Rimbaud center houses a collection of household objects from the period, including photographs taken by Rimbaud himself during his stay.



Rimbaud Center, Harar, 2009

What we know from Rimbaud's correspondence is that he had extensive dealings with Emperor Menelik, and which some think were instrumental in providing Menelik with enough weapons to deliver a resounding defeat to Italian forces in the Battle of Adwa, in northern Ethiopia, in 1896. At any rate, visitors to the center can examine the many photographs from the period, along with excerpts from Rimbaud's poetry and correspondence. The photo below is a self-portrait photo taken by Rimbaud during his stay in Harar.



Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891), Self-Portrait, Harar, ca. 1885

Lastly, no visit to Harar is complete without taking stock of its "hyena men". These are local inhabitants who, for a fee, will demonstrate feeding to wild hyenas that come to the city gates at night. National Geographic magazine did a story on the hyena men years ago that sparked a level of tourist interest. That particular individual was eventually eaten by a pack of hyenas, just as a reminder that this is no ordinary zoo operation. We took photos and some video of the spectacle that reminded me not just of the hyenas I heard and saw during my stay in Emdebir during my Peace Corps days but the fact that they live in various communities throughout Ethiopia today. Locals claim that by feeding the hyenas they develop a bond of mutual respect that translates in part in the hyenas not attacking the cattle, camels, and goats that traffic in and out of Harar, but also the local population. We bought a DVD documentary on the hyenas of Harar that documents much of the local folklore and practices.



Harar Hyena Man in a Nightly Feeding, 2009

And so we close our tour of the region with scenes from the local streets of Harar. It is a reminder of the role of commerce to cities everywhere and of the history on which they have been built.



Harar City Street Scene, 2009



Harar City Path, 2009