

Reflections on a Fulbright Fellowship in Ethiopia Spring 2009

This document is a summary of my experience as a Fulbright Senior Fellow in Ethiopia during the spring semester of 2009. It is intended to serve as a complementary document to the online version that I have submitted to CIES, and contains a longer narrative than the online format allows.

A. Background Perspective

Overall, I commend to anyone with an interest in an international exchange to consider the Fulbright program. For my wife, Danièle, this was a first-time living and volunteer working experience in Africa, while for me, it was a return to a country that I have come to know and appreciate over the years.

In my case, two events have shaped my recent Fulbright in Ethiopia. The first is that I was a Peace Corps volunteer secondary school history teacher who lived and taught in the village of Emdeber, a rural public secondary school in southwestern Shoa province, in the 1960s. At that time I learned the national language, Amharic, in terms of speaking, reading, and writing, in addition to a secondary language, Guraginya, which is the lingua franca of the community in which I lived (Emdeber).

The second event was my first Fulbright award, in 1984, as a senior lecturer at the University of Dakar, Senegal, in 1984, during which time I taught a graduate course in French on the economics of development at the Faculty of Law and Economics. From that experience and my previous experience in the Peace Corps in Ethiopia, I have pursued over the past forty years an academic career that has been very much shaped by an interest and experience in Africa. That experience includes work in Africa and beyond as a consultant to USAID, the World Bank, UNESCO, WHO, FAO, and the U.S. State Department on various subjects pertaining to economic policy issues, and it has encompassed travel on a professional and/or personal level to some 30 countries in Africa.

In addition, from my Fulbright award in 1984, I went on to create CERAF, the Center for Economic Research in Africa, at my home institution, Montclair State University, and which for many years served to host periodic annual policy conferences involving international institutions such as the IMF, the World Bank, USAID, the African Development Bank, and others, in addition to the publication of work by colleagues in the U.S., Africa, and Europe a series of some 75 research monographs over the years. All of the activities of CERAF have since been incorporated into a website that I have managed over the years, and which serves as a reference for some of the interests that I also have pursued. The URL of this site is:

<http://netdrive.montclair.edu/~lebelp/CERAF.html>

In terms of this document, I have decided to post some documents that I prepared during our spring 2009 Fulbright appointment. They are noted in this document and can be found at the following URL:

<http://netdrive.montclair.edu/~lebel/PLBEthiopiaFulbright2009.html>

B. A Fulbright Return to Ethiopia

B.1 Why Ethiopia?

Although I left Ethiopia in the fall of 1968, I managed to visit the country twice prior to the Fulbright Senior Fellowship in the spring of 2009. The first was in 1982, during which time I was serving as an Ampart (American Participant) guest lecturer for the US State Department in various countries in Africa. On the end of a January schedule, I arranged for a stop in Addis Ababa with the intention of meeting with old friends and making a visit to Emdeber, the village where I had once lived as a Peace Corps volunteer. At that time, Ethiopia was governed by the Marxist regime of Mengistu Hailemariam and had just recently undergone a terror purge of opponents during which time many prominent individuals were killed.

As Ethiopia was then undergoing a re-alignment with the then Soviet Union, Americans were officially suspect. However, I did make the stopover in Addis, met with friends and traveled to the village of Emdeber. As my Ethiopian driver friend said at the time, since there were curfew restrictions on travel to the interior, were we to be stopped by policy or army officers (which we were), I should say nothing in Amharic and the driver would announce my visit as a Russian advisor. He proceeded to do so, and virtually no requests for identification were made. We thus visited with my former landlady and landlord, and a few friends from the village prior to my departure for the U.S.

The second return trip was in 1990. This trip was based on a US AID consultancy I had undertaken on water conservation technologies in the Sudan. Prior to arriving in Khartoum, I was in touch with contacts at the US State Department that I had established as an Ampart speaker on economic issues. I asked if a speaking tour could be arranged in Addis Ababa, which they managed to do. The venue was a public lecture at the Central Planning Ministry, to be given to senior economists in Ethiopia. Some 100 senior economists and two Russian advisors attended the event. I spoke in English and Amharic, the latter to the astonishment of the Russian advisors.

The lecture took place in the twilight of Mengistu Hailemariam's regime. My local counterparts seemed eager to re-establish ties with the U.S. In fact, at one point I was told that I was the highest ranking US official since Herman Cohen to visit the country some 7+ years before. I replied in saying that if I were the highest ranking official since the Cohen visit, Ethiopians had a lot of follow-up work to be done. After all, I was simply an academic economist conducting a public lecture, in this case, on US policy toward Africa in general, and on trade and agriculture in particular, and was not a full-time employee of the US State Department.

Following my lecture, I once again traveled to the village of Emdeber, met with my former landlady, as well as with friends from years gone by. On this trip, I was accompanied by a senior local official, who took me on a tour of the newly completed network of rural roads that were transforming Ethiopia's countryside by bringing hitherto isolated communities into more frequent commercial and cultural contact with major urban centers such as Addis Ababa. This network also presaged the expansion of public

education institutions, and a slowly expanding connection to the national electricity grid. It was evidence of economic development in a country that often shows up near the bottom in world rankings of per capita income and more often than not, on the front pages of any headline involving drought, famine, and starvation.

B.2 Logistical Considerations for the 2009 Fulbright visit

B.2.a Steps in the Approval Process

My application for a Fulbright grant to teach and conduct research in Ethiopia began with an online application in the summer of 2007. A US-based review issued a positive recommendation in early 2008, followed by a further Ethiopia-based approval in the spring of 2008. In late spring of 2008, I was notified that I was being placed on an alternate candidate list due to funding constraints and an expressed interest in a rotation of disciplines from year to year, an explanation of which is given below.

In my case, the official explanation for my being placed on the alternate list was that a Fulbright economist on loan from the IMF had taught at the University during the 2007-2008 academic year and there was some interest in having a rotation of disciplines. It was only during the summer of 2008 during a US-based orientation program when an accepted candidate dropped out that I was asked if I was still interested in going to Ethiopia during the 2008-2009 academic year. I accepted, but because of the late notification, I requested, and received, a deferral until January, to provide sufficient preparation time for the trip to Ethiopia.

Prior to my arrival I had prepared a portfolio of courses that I had taught or prepared in the U.S. for which I expected to be able to use my academic and professional website as a means of delivery. It turns out that none of my own qualifications, e.g. website, academic c.v., had been made available to the department chair prior to my arrival. In fact, the chair indicated that he had not been informed as to who I was until we met in person once there. Had a preparatory protocol been established in advance, this might have helped in the preparation of the course that I subsequently taught, in addition to establishing a stronger relationship with colleagues once there.

Two possible explanations for the above situation come to mind. One is that the current chair only took up his responsibilities a few months before my arrival. Another is the appointment of the above noted IMF economist in the previous year. To this day I still do not understand fully the consultative process involved in such decisions, except to note that US embassy staff administering the Fulbright program acknowledge that they seek to filter recommended candidates in terms of US and presumably, Ethiopian, academic priorities from one year to the next.

Some brief suggestions on the Fulbright approval and assignment procedures: 1. Undertake steps to consult with host institution immediate reporting representatives regarding the selection of qualified candidates that can strengthen departmental objectives as well as serve the interests of the US Embassy and candidate applicants; 2. Once a candidate has been approved, make sure that an up to date email set of addresses has been established well in advance between the host institution and the candidate; 3.

Undertake steps to notify, if not consult in advance, a host institution department chair that an individual has been approved to teach and/or conduct research in a department; 4. Upon advance notification and consultation with a host institution representative, make sure that a scholar's credentials have been forwarded to a department for purposes of establishing a program and schedule of activities by the visiting Fulbright grantee.

B2.b Housing, Travel, Communications, and Shopping Considerations

The Fulbright program provides adequate funding for travel and allowances for baggage and other considerations to a host country. The usual procedure is for a grantee to arrive in Addis, stay in a locally recommended hotel and then visit prospective housing sites with a member of the US embassy Fulbright staff in making a decision. In our case, because I had lived previously in Ethiopia, we had an idea of what we would be interested in prior to our arrival, and through a personal contact, we were able to rent in advance an apartment in Addis. Thus, on the day of our arrival, we left the airport and proceeded directly to our furnished apartment, which turns out to have worked quite well for our needs.

Fulbright grantees often rent villas rather than apartments. To do so usually involves hiring a cook, a maid, a guard, among other personnel. At one level this appears to support the local economy. On the other hand, for shorter-term grantees, an apartment might serve one's needs better, which is what we thought reasonable. The apartment we rented prior to coming to Addis is a new two-bedroom, two-bathroom unit on the fourth floor of a building in the old airport section of town. It is just across from the Addis Home Depot store, and located between the Bistrate Gabriel church and the Dagem Millennium Hotel. The neighborhood is an up and coming one with an increasing number of embassies located in the area. The drawback for me at least is that it required taking a taxi to campus, which often took 40-45 minutes. However, our choice was made in part in consideration of my wife Danièle, who liked being near Ethiopian contacts whom she knew, in addition to being a short walk to the International Community School, where she wound up doing volunteer teaching.

Two additional advantages of our apartment are first, it has an automatic generator backup system, and secondly, a satellite television unit. For those not used to traveling to a place like Ethiopia, power load shedding is a common experience, particularly during the spring months when Ethiopia's hydropower units begin to run short of water in the reservoirs that sustain them. While we came prepared with flashlights and all sorts of electrical backup conveniences, in the end we were hardly interrupted by power outages. The message here is look for living quarters with an automatic backup system.

The satellite television unit provided both news and entertainment. We enjoyed the opportunity to follow news broadcasts from around the world, including the BBC, CNN, France 24, Deutsche Welle, and several other sources. While one does not travel to a place like Ethiopia to spend your time watching television, for news access, it is a major source of information since English-language print media are not that up to date or readily available.

Our travel decisions in Ethiopia were driven by the constancy of high accident rates, including a near-fatal one we encountered during our stay, and which is found in the Return to Ethiopia series of documents posted on my website. We decided beforehand not to even try to purchase a used vehicle, especially since we planned to be there for only the five month grant period. Instead, we traveled with a combination of local taxis and local minivans.

A local one-way taxi ride from our apartment to the university cost Eth 70 birr, or around \$U.S. 6-6.50 at current rates of exchange. I chose to pay a contract taxi driver this amount for the dependability he provided. At other times, Danièle and I would take local minivans. They are typically the Hiace brand that carry 12-15 passengers. They cost a fraction of what you would pay for a regular taxi, are overcrowded, and generally make stops to help keep the van as full as possible. Yet they were highly reliable means of getting around town, and after we learned a few routes, we note that fares are largely regulated by a transport office in Addis.

In terms of communications, we were fortunate in having our Ethiopian landowner help us to get a sim card to operate the Nokia pay-as-you-go cellphone that we brought to town. It is advisable to bring such a unit to Ethiopia and then have someone install an Ethiopian Telecom sim card. I used the unit primarily for transportation connections rather than as a regular means of communication, in part because we were fortunate in having a regular, and working, landline in the apartment. We also had the advantage of an Ethiopian telecom office not far down the road where we could pay our monthly bill. The only issue here is that if you have a landline, chances are that you do not have a regular postal address or post box that can be operable within your stay, and you have to find out when your bill is due or your service can be cut. This happened only once to us.

Apart from required health procedures, the Fulbright program recommends bringing along some linens for use in Ethiopia. This turns out to be good advice in that local sheets and towels are either quite expensive, unavailable, or of such rough quality as to lower one's level of comfort. One item we did choose to bring that I do not recall as having been on our list was a mosquito net, which we had installed in our bedroom. Addis is sufficiently above the malaria line that for now, it is not at risk. But mosquitoes are readily found in Addis at night and we simply slept better with our net than without.

How you choose to shop in Addis depends mostly on your needs. Most neighborhoods, including our own, have small neighborhood shops that often go by the name of "supermarket". Most fail the test of a U.S.-style supermarket, but for local groceries, i.e., vegetables, milk, and fruit, they are just fine. You may have a problem if you want a number of canned goods, or something imported like French butter or wine, and for which you will have to go to a larger supermarket. Still, we generally found that by a bit of looking around, we could find most of the consumable food items we needed.

Laundry considerations for us were relatively minor. Living in the apartment, we did not hire a cook or a maid, individuals who might otherwise serve your clothes washing needs. In our case, we had a new clothes washing machine that, after a few adjustments, seemed

to work well most of the time. We also had in our neighborhood a dry cleaning store (actually there were two of them), and prices were comparable to what they are in the U.S. In short, we had no laundry issues to keep us at bay.

In terms of other kinds of shopping, e.g., household items and gift items, we generally scouted about town and bought at local stores. The Home Depot across the street had a reasonable stock of household wares, few of which we needed, but some of which we did purchase. As to gift items, we began to acquire an inventory once we had acclimated ourselves to prices. In many stores, you have to negotiate for gift items, which can be a pleasure if you are used to this, and perhaps not if you are not. In our case, we already were adjusted to this and found bargaining a treat, in part because so many of the merchants along such places as Churchill Road and Nigeria Street were operated by the Gurage, people in whose region I had lived and thus could bargain in the local language.

C. Research and Teaching

C.1 Research

Over the years I already had established a career built primarily on academic teaching and research, notably in the field of energy, natural resources, risk choices, and institutional governance, with some consulting work along the way. My expectation regarding teaching was that I would be able to draw on a course that I had already taught, which did not turn out to be the case, as the explanation below may help to clarify.

While I had done most of my work on and or in Africa, I also had expanded my focus more recently to cover East Asian countries, East Europe, and to a lesser extent, Central and Latin America, and the Middle East, with conference presentations and consulting in some 21 countries. It was during the course of various conference presentations that expanded my original research interests to the field of institutional risk management, a topic that I planned to pursue during my stay in Ethiopia in 2009.

In recent years, much of my research interest has focused on the economics of institutions, notably, how institutions respond to the presence of various forms of risk. With this in mind, I looked to a return to Ethiopia to examine how institutional change under various political regimes has affected perceptions and attitudes toward risk. Toward this end, I planned to focus on financial institutions, in addition to how climate change affects decisions in key sectors such as agriculture. During my stay in Ethiopia I did manage to gather some preliminary data that I plan to expand and incorporate into a paper I expect to write now that I have returned to the U.S.

What might have helped in the research would have been an initial introduction to various faculty and a discussion of their research interests. As already noted, this did not happen and it affected the range and scope of contacts I was able to establish for purposes of gathering data. One thing that did help me was access to the Ethiopian Economic Association's datadisk, which I acquired before I left, and which is a useful source for some of what I am collecting. In addition, by coincidence, the current head of the Ethiopian Statistical Agency is someone whom I had met some 20 years ago when she

was a graduate student in the U.S. I managed to share a series of data files with her that she said she would have someone complete and send to me as soon as they are available.

In conjunction with all of these activities, I also gave a talk to the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, which is housed at the Sidist Kilo site of Addis Ababa University. I had established a personal relationship with Dr. Richard Pankhurst, founder of the Institute back in the days when I was a Peace Corps volunteer teacher. It was through a renewal of this contact that I gave a talk on the village community where I had lived, and out of which I may write another paper. Years ago I had already had published two articles on the local population, one on Gurage Architecture in 1969, and the other in 1974 on Oral Traditions and Chronicles on Gurage Immigration, in the *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*. The talk I gave to the Institute this June is available in pdf format at the URL site noted above.

C.2 Teaching

Addis Ababa University does not regularly produce printed materials in the form of catalogs of courses, faculty qualifications, and related information that could guide a visiting professor in making research and teaching decisions. Although Addis Ababa University maintains a website that does contain information on programs and has an online application window, there is no up to date schedule of courses and related information that I found helpful in consideration of a course-specific teaching proposal in advance.

Listed below are some of the links that were updated during the course of my stay in the spring of 2009:

1. Faculty of Business and Economics Teaching Staff:
<http://www.aau.edu.et/index.php/economics/staffs>
2. Faculty of Business and Economics Course Listing:
<http://www.aau.edu.et/index.php/economics/courses>
3. Faculty of Business and Economics Objectives:
<http://www.aau.edu.et/index.php/economics/objectives>

To determine the selection of a teaching program, I had to rely on either email (which failed in the end prior to my arrival) or an in-person conversation once in Ethiopia with my counterpart department chair (which I did). Moreover, while I was introduced to the chair by the US embassy staff coordinator upon my arrival, I did not subsequently have the opportunity to be formally introduced to the faculty in the department, and established contacts only on an informal basis. At the time of my visit, there was no program of invited presentations by visiting faculty, although mention of this possibility was made at the end to both me and to a visiting instructor from the University Paris, neither of which took place.

What I did not anticipate was the slowness of Ethiopia's internet service, and which led me to abandon my original web-based approach to using both cd's containing course materials for student use, in addition to PowerPoint presentations that I wound up

preparing once in Ethiopia. My own approach to teaching is not to rely on PowerPoint lectures, but since many Ethiopian students have neither the means nor inclination to purchase texts, I wound up devoting a considerable amount of time in preparing some 300+ slides for the graduate course that I eventually wound up teaching.

In determining what I would teach, I had been given the email address of the chair of the Department of Economics, in the Faculty of Business and Economics of Addis Ababa University some time prior to my arrival. However, from a lack of responses to my queries I was then notified of a new head of the department, to whom I also sent queries regarding a course I had been interested in teaching. We never managed to communicate our understanding as to course offerings prior to my arrival, with the result that once there, I wound up negotiating a course, in this case a graduate course in natural resource economics, ECON 674, that I had not taught before, even though I had published in this field. As a result, while I had a preliminary syllabus for such a course back in the U.S., I wound up spending a considerable amount of time re-orienting what I would teach to students used to having PowerPoint notes, or their equivalent, once I began teaching. Links for this course are found on my Fulbright website listed at the beginning of this report.

Although I wound up preparing extensive PowerPoint materials for students, one experience I had may be worth noting, namely, getting a computer projector through Ethiopian airport customs. When my wife and I arrived, we each had laptop computers, along with peripheral equipment (a portable printer, portable scanner, computer projector, iPods, backup hard drives), officials flagged the computer projector. All went through customs without a blink with the exception of the computer projector.

Airport customs officials declared that in order to bring the projector into the country I would have to pay in advance \$US 700, a tariff that was well in excess of what I paid for the projector, new that it was, when I purchased it in New York prior to departing for Ethiopia. I decided to leave the projector in the airport customs office and then present a request to the US embassy to see if I could get a release based on my visiting lecturer status.

After some effort and time that eventually involved the US embassy General Services Office, I was able to retrieve the projector from airport customs. However, the release was based on the promise that I would take it with me when I left. I confess I was perplexed a bit by this stipulation as I had originally intended to donate the projector to the University. I had even gone so far as to get a letter indicating my intention by the new chair of the Department of Economics. However, none of this produced a clear resolution in advance. Irony of ironies, when I left the country with the projector and all of the rest of the equipment we had brought, not once did any of the security scanning produce a request to prove that I was in possession of the projector, something that to this day I am not sure indicates whether the customs officials had bothered to follow through on or not, but which in any case struck me as a missed opportunity to have made a constructive equipment donation to the University. Let me note that in all of this, the efforts by US embassy staff were first rate and much appreciated, as I used the projector

not just in my classroom teaching, but also in various public lectures that I delivered to various constituencies in Ethiopia during our stay.

If there are lessons to be learned from the teaching experience I would note the following: 1. Make sure that you establish email communication with your counterpart(s) well prior to your arrival if possible, to clarify what you will teach; 2. Anticipate a slow internet service and develop compensatory alternatives such as using a laptop, computer projector (along with a portable printer and portable scanner should you be in need of printing or scanning documents); 3. Be prepared to utilize PowerPoint, or equivalent, classroom materials that can be made available (through a departmental duplication service, for example) to students; 4. Weigh your chances carefully as to whether to bring along a recent computer projector – my own advice is that I probably could not have taught anywhere near the quantity and quality of material I covered without such a projector.

Beyond the graduate course in Natural Resource Economics, I also taught a graduate course in political economy to students in a Ph.D. program in law that was delivered at the Akaki graduate school campus of the university. This was a two-week intensive course that I had agreed to teach in advance through contact with an American colleague whom I have known for many years and who had undertaken the initiative to start the program. As this course had some students with legal practices as individual attorneys or in the courts, they were much more at ease with the kind of seminar style I had hoped to deliver in the graduate program in economics at the Sidist Kilo campus. Links for this course also are found on my Fulbright webpage noted in this report.

It was through the Akaki program and through attendance at a Martin Luther King, Jr. African-American heritage day celebration that I also came into contacts that led to two other public lectures beyond the one I gave at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies. The topic for each was the economic factors in the current recession and policy implications and alternatives for developing economies such as Ethiopia. One lecture was given to the public at Haramaya University, near Harar, Ethiopia, and the other was given at Unity University, at the edge of Addis Ababa. Documents used for these lectures are also found on my Fulbright website.

D. Related Professional Activities

Beyond teaching, research, and public lectures, I also undertook three additional activities while in Ethiopia. One was to join a Middle States Commission on Higher Education visiting team at the American University of Beirut. I have been a regular participant in Middle States visiting teams, based in part on my previous administrative experience as department chair and as dean of our School of Business. For this evaluation, I was given documents in advance of our departure from the U.S. and a pre-arranged ticket was available at Addis Ababa International airport, which then took me to Cairo and then to Beirut to participate in the accreditation visit. All of this took place over a five-day period well prior to the beginning of my classes at Addis Ababa University, and for which I received a commendation by the President of American University of Beirut, as well as by the MSCHE team leader.

Finally, during my stay in Ethiopia, the chair of the Department of Economics asked me to undertake a review of a Ph.D. in Economics proposal that was about to be submitted to the Addis Ababa University graduate council. I did so and the chair indicated his considerable satisfaction with the report, mentioning that he already was undertaking some revisions in light of the comments I had made in my report.

For professional reasons I have chosen not to disclose the contents of either my Middle States Commission on Higher education accreditation team visit, nor of the review of the AAU Ph.D. in Economics proposal. Anyone interested in details of either may contact me individually or either of the institutions cited above.

One third activity in which I was engaged was a follow-up to a project to expand information technology to rural areas in Ethiopia. Working with two former students from Ethiopia now living in the U.S. and a former Peace Corps volunteer teacher who worked in Emdeber at the time I was there, we have a working project to gather donated computers and disseminate them in rural schools. While I was there I was able to clarify some of the issues surrounding the shipment of some 45 computers and related equipment, but unfortunately they had not arrived by the time we left in mid-June. I have learned that they have since arrived in Addis Ababa and I am hoping that our partnership with a local NGO will help expedite the delivery of these items and pave the way for future donations.

E. Conclusion

Overall, I found my Fulbright experience in Ethiopia most satisfying, as did my wife Danièle. That we were able to do so in good health and spirits is testimony to the preparations we undertook prior to our departure. The contacts we either renewed or established are ones we hope to pursue in the future. In my own case, I may be invited to offer short-term courses at any of the three universities with whom I had established contacts, in addition to possible future participation in the Ph.D. program in law at the Akaki campus. We both look forward to future contacts with our counterparts and very much appreciate the widespread hospitality we received by Ethiopians at almost every turn.

Phillip LeBel, Ph.D.
Professor of Economics
School of Business
Montclair State University
Montclair, New Jersey 07043