

A Friendship from Time Gone By

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From 1965 to 1968 I served as a secondary school teacher in Emdeber, Shoa. I served as a Peace Corps volunteer between 1965 and 1967 and spent the following year as a contract teacher for the Ethiopian Ministry of Education teaching at the same school. Given the time I spent there, I was able to make many friends and learn much about Gurage and Ethiopian history and culture.

While living there I was able to document many aspects of rural life among the Gurage, whose economic livelihood depended much on a remittance economy sustained by seasonal workers earning income in larger communities such as Addis Ababa. In Emdeber, the remittance economy provided one source of income while local trading provided another.

Many in the local community lived on a mix of subsistence agriculture and partial participation in the trading economy. My landlord, Ato Berta, and his wife Atsede, rented the sauer-bét grass thatched roof round home to me and I came to know them fairly well. After I left in 1968 to attend graduate school, I did not know that I would be able to see them again but as luck would have it, I was able to make return visits - in 1982, 1990, 2009, and 2017. Ato Berta passed away sometime in the 1980's while Atsede continued to stay in the same home where I had known them. While the house I rented had been demolished by the time of my visit in 2009, memories of times gone by were still visit, and refreshed, each time.

While Ato Berta and his wife Atsede grew and consumed ensete, the false-banana plant so common in the region, and grew their own coffee, they still needed to acquire other household food items. Although my rental income was one source for them to do so, I learned that Atsede used to make pottery to sell on market days and then use the proceeds to purchase other household items.

I found her pottery to be quite exceptional. Though low-temperature fired, she managed quite fine clay-fired bowls using a simple stick, water, and low-temperature finishing right amidst the ensete field near their house. Below is a sequence of her pottery-making, along with one of the last photos I had taken during my visit in 2009.

I learned that Atsede passed away in the spring of 2023, after a long and fruitful life. These photos remind me of the energy she displayed in pottery and the enthusiasm behind it all.

What follows is a documented set of images among which Woyzero Atsede demonstrated here pottery making skills. She continued to live in the same sauer hét (thatch roofed circular house) long after her husband, Ato Berta, had passed. Members of her family took care of her in her later years.

Whether enjoying a coffee ceremony, or catching up on news of the neighborhood. she was an exemplar of the community. Neighbors remember her taking her fired pottery bowls to the open market, and with the proceeds from sales, buying necessities and other amenities

for the home. I was always struck by her unwavering hospitality during my several visits to Emdeber, in 1981, 1982, 1990, and 2009. She passed away peacefully in 2023 but lives on in my memory as if it were yesterday on my first visit to Emdeber.



Woyzero Atsede with husband Ato Berta, Emdeber, 1967



Hand shaping of a clay pot amidst the neighborhood ensete field.



The shaping process begins



A bowl shape begins to emerge



Squeezing the moisture out of the clay



The bowl base takes form



Scooping out the bowl



Creating a rim to the bowl



Etching the outer rim loops for stringing the bowl



The bowl is almost finished and ready for firing



Final touches in shaping the bowl



Creating a base for the bowl



Attending to detail of the bowl



A second bowl is under way



And finally, a third bowl has been shaped



Three finished bowls await firing



Once fired, the bowls acquire a satin black finish



PLB with Woyzero Atsede in Emdeber, 2009