



March 20th, 2010

[Remembering Ato Ketema](#)

By Yilma Bekele

I am sure you are familiar with all the big numbers thrown around when it comes to the [number](#) of Ethiopians in the US. Hundreds here thousands there add up to make an impressive amount. My travels the last few years have taken me to different parts of the Country. To tell you the truth I was not ready for DC metro area. The sheer number of Abeshas in all walks of life begs the question 'who is left in [Ethiopia](#)?'

Why bother traveling to Addis when you can just drop by U Street. The smell of freshly brewed coffee with a whiff of caramelized onions and itan (አ ጣ ጎ) smoke was permeating the air. On U Street the mind plays tricks on you. One is virtually transported back to Ethiopia. A certain UN describable spirit takes over. It is Merkato tossed with Bole and a sprinkle of Piazza but cleaner. And a procession of never ending Ethiopians. This scenario is repeated in most metropolitan areas of the continent.

From [Toronto to Vancouver](#) BC, from New York to LA and from Seattle to Dallas there are Ethiopian enclaves mimicking life at home. Telegraph Avenue of Berkeley/Oakland is the same as Little Ethiopia in Los Angles. 12th. Street of Seattle resembles U Street of DC. It is all about Ethiopians working with Ethiopians making each other proud for being able to create such a vibrant [community](#) in exile. The Restaurant owner, the shop keeper, [the lawyer](#), taxi driver, [university](#) professor, house wife, Beauty saloon operator, contractor, [real estate agent](#) etc. etc. mingling to help their community thrive.

Damn, I said to myself 'there sure is plenty of us in exile.' All available evidence points to a resourceful people that have managed to adapt to a new and strange environment. We have also managed to make our new home resemble the one we left behind. We can make any mother proud. But, there is always a 'but' isn't there? That's life. It is a shock to find out the appearance is what we are into. Just like Hollywood creates illusion to simulate the imagined event we have created our own façade to hide our indifference. We wave the flag to show our love while we feed the monster that devours the flag.

Our behavior is very perplexing. It is very unreasonable. It is just not like us. When did we change? That is what brought the memory of Ato Ketema into my head. The

story of Ato Ketema was a 'teachable moment' in my life. It was a powerful lesson. It was an incident that was etched in my brain.

I was in my teens in a small town in southern Ethiopia. It was a time an organization called 'From Alem Gena to Wollamo road building project.' (ከ አ ለ ም ገ ፍ አ ስ ከ ወ ላ ሞ የ መ ን ገ ድ ሥ ሬ ድ ር ጅ ት) was founded. As the name implies the idea was to build a highway between the two cities. They were going to issue stocks to build the road and recover their investment by running a bus system on the new highway. Thus the directors of the organization travel to all the major towns and meet town elders to assess the situation. Based on income they will levy an amount the individual or his family is expected to invest in the project.

So one summer they showed up in our little town. They went about their business of asking merchants for investment. I remember my family being excited about the shares they acquired. There is always one nay sayer in any gathering. Ato Ketema was one. Ato Ketema is a well to do shop keeper with a thriving business. In fact his store was so big that it has two doors. I believe the investment asked of him was not much. It was definitely something he can afford. For some odd reason Ato Ketema refused to buy shares and help his people. His friends, family and neighbors were sent to appeal to him. He refused. What do you think they did? They decided to punish his anti social behavior by utilizing the power of boycott. A gathering was called and his refusal to give back to the community that sustains him was condemned. People were instructed not to enter his store, associate with him and not even invite him to weddings and funerals. He was made a pariahs by the town.

It was not long before Ato Ketema was reduced into a shadow of his former self. His store was empty and his friends were avoiding him like the plague. Within a matter of weeks Ato Ketema was walking down the street talking to himself and displaying strange behavior. Ato Ketema was finding out the cost of his one man stand against the many. Ato Ketema was forced to come in front of the elders accompanied by religious leaders and beg for forgiveness. He was made to pay a fine and the social curse was lifted. No matter, Ato ketema never recovered from the humiliation.

As a young person I was impressed by the powerful show of force by the community. The good of the many can not be overridden by the benefit to the individual. I saw the effect of social sanction to modify a persons anti social behavior.

Imagine my surprise later in life when I found out what the people of my town did was dupliated both by Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King. Our town used the weapon to change the behavior of an individual while our two teachers used it to challenge and change an unjust law.

In 1930 the British colonizers passed the Salt Tax. It made it illegal to collect salt from the coast, sell or produce salt. The British assumed monopoly on salt. Gandhi wrote to the viceroy and told him of his plan to march 248 miles to the coast in defiance. He said 'I regard this tax to be the most iniquitous of all from the poor man's standpoint. As the Independence movement is essentially for the poorest in the land, the beginning will be made with this evil.' The Mahatma gathered seventy-eight of his pupils and made the journey attracting many followers along the road. The salt march ushered in the struggle for independence that ultimately succeed and was able to create a stable democracy.

Martin Luther King led the boycott of Montgomery, Alabama bus system to oppose the city's policy of racial segregation on its transit system. The boycott caused financial hardship on the transit system. The refusal of Mrs. Rosa Parks to surrender her seat to a white person led the US Supreme Court to rule segregation of the bus system to be unconstitutional.

Gandhi challenged the British law. Gandhi showed the Indian people that an unjust law does not have to be obeyed. Disobedience comes with a price. Being shot at, thrown in jail or exiled is the price leaders pay. That is what is called the burden of leadership. Ask Gandhi, ask Mandela, ask MLK or ask Bertukan. They will tell you freedom by petition is not going to happen. Experience shows freedom is attained using a combination of bullets, boycotts, marches and international awareness. That is what is called the stick and the carrot approach.

Martin Luther King took the route of boycott as a weapon of preference to challenge the system. He was aware that the system will not tolerate killing. They can use water hose, tear gas, police dogs or police batons but not live bullets. He used that to the maximum.

In today's Ethiopia where the dictator has his own Agazi militia, Kilil dogs and the whole military under his command the picture is a little different. He shoots to kill. He has been killing the last seventeen years. Whether we like it or not a force will emerge that will successfully challenge the clueless regime. Where there is repression there is resistance. That is the law of nature.

On the other hand one can't just sit and wait for a redeemer. When it comes to our self-interest we seem to be action-oriented. We walk/fly over oceans and mountains to get away and start a new life. That is why we are here. Because we wanted to do better. To be free. To thrive. How come that is not translated into helping those that were left behind. 'Is it a case of I got my share the rest be damned?' (እኔ ከሞት ከሰርዶ አይብቀል እኮ የአሁን አስተሳሰብ ነው።) That is not going to work. That little voice inside of us can not be silenced.

We should do what we can to help. We should be very careful not to hurt. We should use everything in our power to uphold the sacredness of human life. We should work to shame those that abuse human beings and bring sadness and agony on their people. We are not against individuals. It is their lawless act we fight against. When we say no and deny them our support they will be forced to modify their destructive behavior. When we refrain from being part of their ponzi investment scheme, when we refuse to fly their private airlines, when we do not participate in their illegal land grabs they will be forced to listen to us. Money is their aphrodisiac. Without it they shrivel. My town people knew the power of not rewarding a destructive behavior. We should learn to use the power of "NO"!