

Giorgis's Travels: The Incredible Adventures of a Young Eritrean

Written by Sirak Habtemichael



“I just took off, but I honestly didn’t know where I was going”, Giorgis, a man in his late sixties said narrowing his eyes remembering his long and adventurous journey as a young man. His full name is Gebregiorgis Mengistu and works as a watchman at the regional administration office in Medeferea located opposite to where he went for his elementary studies. The journey began back in 1954, when Giorgis was 17. They were the times when Eritrea was in a deep political turmoil with the enforcement of Federation and uprising of young Eritreans for an independent Eritrea. Giorgis was then a student with very humble background, which was a constant cause of restlessness. . This is a true story of a young Eritrean who took off from his home during his teenage times and wondered around the world in search of something he didn't really know and only to come back home old after around 50 years. The story was written by Abdulkader Ahmed and published in Haddas Ertra in 2005.



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Giorgis nodded his head and took a deep sigh recalling the very day he began the journey that lasted around 50 years. He groans when he recalls the reason behind his departure. Apart from the political tensions and disadvantaged lifestyle he was leading. "I was a sixth grade student at a small missionary school. We were ten students including one girl. That very day, we were learning about the New Testament from the Holy Bible. Our teacher was an old Swedish man who usually kept smacking us around. As a matter of fact, he destroyed my enthusiasm for education and I had to find a way from all the troubles in my life, which is when I decided that I would rather live a drifter searching for a better life."

One time after a class break, Giorgis was seated in the first row where the only girl in the class sat next to him. A couple of his friends from the class told him to write something naively stupid on the girl's desk and he agreed to do so for fun's sake. When the girl came to her seat a couple of minutes later, she noticed the writing which only said, 'I love you', but she didn't like it and was infuriated. She then went to tell Swedish teacher, who always looked for a reason to whack somebody. He found out it was Giorgis and didn't hesitate to punish him in front of the class and humiliate him.



"I couldn't sleep that night. I didn't want to go back to class the next morning and bear the shame. The feeling of embarrassment, together with the problems I was encountering in daily life made me think of taking off and never look back again. So at dawn the next morning I started my long journey, which bore me nothing except loneliness and regret".

The next morning, Giorgis wore his school uniform and carried his bible as if he was heading to school. His school was some five kilometers away from where he lived, so Giorgis had to walk at least 10 kilometers a day, which he thought would help him endure the distance of the journey awaiting him. "I didn't even have a penny to pay any transportation fare but I wanted to cross the border to Ethiopia that very day, to where, I didn't know. Wherever my feet led me and I would rest whenever I exhausted".

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Luckily, he traveled some of the way hitchhiking with some truck drivers and managed to reach somewhere around Kisd Ika, a village only few kilometers from the border with Ethiopia, before sunset. Giorgis's journey was going smooth, but there at Kisd Ika he encountered a handful of armed men and was shocked at what he was looking. "I was trembling, but I didn't want to show my fear. They asked me where I was going, and I said to the neighboring village. Again one of them asked if I saw any police on my way, I said 'No'. Incredibly, they told me to disappear from the area and let me go".

He crossed the Ethiopian border, but still he didn't want to rest. The sun was about to set, but Giorgis kept on marching. He passed through Rama, Daero Tekli, Adi Abun and finally called it a day when he reached Adwa, a town in the Tigray province. He was fortunate to find something to eat and a place to sleep in the town. Again the next morning, he set off once again towards the west, where he crossed a number of villages and wouldn't stop at nothing. Sometimes he would find a ride to help him some of the way and sometimes he does some labor work for a couple of days and earn some money for his food. Still he continued his journey towards Gonder and only rested during the night-time. But where was he heading? "I just started walking every time the sun rose and stopped whenever it sets. I really didn't have a clue where to end my journey and settle down".

Giorgis encountered a number of natural and social hurdles along his way, but he says he endured whatever happened because he was tough, "I am not a quitter", he would say. He kept on his journey and one day, "I went by a village called Emba Giorgis, a few kilometers from Gonder. The village is surrounded with mountains and the forest in the area is very dense. Upon my arrival at the village, heavy rain started to pour and I had to go to one of the many small stone houses in the village to find shelter. A woman invited me to get in and I entered with all my clothes wet. The moment I got into the house I froze with shock and started running back to the rain again. I looked at a huge fat man inside who was wearing no clothes at all. At that hour, at a village I have never been before and being a stranger; that would scare anybody and of course I preferred the rain." he laughed remembering that event.

Giorgis kept on walking to the next village and decided to rest there. He didn't want to settle in the province because he was scared of the people that wore no clothes, which apparently is their culture. That is why he wanted to go a little further until he reached Gonder, a relatively bigger town and more or less, modernized people. "I would rather stay here for a while", Giorgis said and decided to do so for a while. But his journey doesn't end there; he will travel more and explore more...

To be continued..