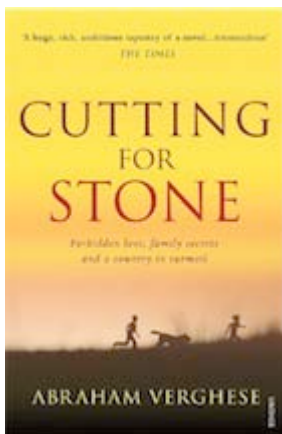


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Once upon a life: Abraham Verghese

He was a young medical student in Ethiopia when Haile Selassie was toppled, in a coup that plunged the country into two decades of bloodshed. Here, Abraham Verghese describes the lead-up to the day in 1973 when his world turned upside-down

Whenever I hear the phrase "geography is destiny" I think of my parents, George and Mariam, schoolteachers from India, arriving in the misty mountain empire of Ethiopia in 1951 within two weeks of each other and not knowing a soul. They were there because another traveller, Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia, happened to be on a state visit to India shortly after his country was freed from Mussolini's occupation. Haile Selassie, head of an ancient Christian nation surrounded on all sides by Muslim nations, knew of the legend of Saint Thomas's arrival in south India, on Kerala's shores (which took place 1,600 years before the Portuguese brought Catholicism to Goa). Saint Thomas made converts of the Brahmins he encountered. Their descendants, the Syrian Christians (so called because they owed their allegiance to the Church in Antioch) are the community to which my parents belong. The Emperor wanted to see those first churches, and his motorcade happened to drive through Kerala at the hour when the roads were thronged with legions of schoolkids in uniform.



It was that sight, so my parents say, that so impressed Haile Selassie that he hired all 400 of his first batch of teachers for the new schools he was building across the empire from this one state in India. To this day, almost every Ethiopian you meet abroad who is over 40 years of age will tell you that they had an Indian teacher in their school, someone with an Old Testament name such as Thomas, or Jacob, or Zachariah, or Verghese (the latter derived from Giorgis, or George). A change in their geography allowed Mariam Abraham and George Verghese to meet a few weeks after they arrived in Ethiopia and they eventually married. But it all began with what the emperor saw on a morning drive. The world turns on the smallest of things.

Unlike my parents, I was born and raised in Addis Ababa. I was accepted into the medical school at what was then called Haile Selassie the First University. Our professors were Ethiopians who had trained in Beirut and British physicians who served in Ethiopia courtesy of the British Council. It was a wonderful education and I considered myself very fortunate.

In 1973, which was my third year of medical school, an ITV documentary revealed to the world a massive famine devastating the Wollo region of Ethiopia. The world knew, but we in the capital city did not. When word finally filtered back, and later when we got to secretly see the documentary (now crudely doctored so that scenes of the lavish state dinners the emperor hosted were spliced in with scenes of the famine), it spelt the end for life as we knew it.

I'd grown up with Emperor Haile Selassie's face staring down at me from portraits in shops and houses: the famous hook nose over set and narrow lips, the regal brow and the penetrating gaze were burned into our subconscious. The Lion of Judah, the benevolent, dignified, firm, scheming monarch whose lineage could be traced back to the Queen of Sheba, seemed immortal. He had singlehandedly brought his country into the modern era. Just before the Second World War, in Haile Selassie's speech to the League of Nations protesting about Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia, he had warned the world about what was coming: if you let Italy do this, then you give Hitler permission to do the same. "God and history will remember your judgment." It made him the darling of the free world; he was *Time* magazine's Man of the Year in 1936. As a ruler he was a world apart from

the crude, buffoonish and cartoonish African leaders who later made headlines – the likes of Idi Amin, Mobutu or Gaddafi.

By 1973, at 81 years of age, Haile Selassie was slowing down. But he still micromanaged, insisted on approving all appointments and promotions, kept his ministers on edge, played them against each other. Perhaps this was why the famine blindsided him: no minister wished to admit the truth to him about crop failures and human suffering.

With that famine, Emperor Haile Selassie's aura vanished. On the radio he sounded weak and ineffectual, and on TV what had previously passed for stateliness now looked like senility. He shuffled the cabinet around but it didn't stop the students, teachers, labour unions and armed forces from agitating, demanding concessions. It was as if they were all waking from a long sleep. When the emperor raised military pay for junior officers, he only emboldened them. Soon a military "committee" called the Derg effectively ruled the country, having isolated the emperor in his palace. The Derg was about 120 men strong – hardly an efficient machine when it came to governing.

We went about our studies as best we could, but it was difficult not to be distracted by the "creeping coup".

Early one morning the Derg sent soldiers to the Jubilee Palace (a pukka copy of Buckingham Palace) and Haile Selassie was whisked away to jail in a Volkswagen Beetle. I pictured the emperor forced to climb into the back seat of a Beetle while in the palace garage sat his fleet of Rolls-Royce, Lincoln, Mercedes and Cadillac beauties, each custom-fitted for a diminutive monarch to sit high and to be seen.

So often during my childhood, and later, we'd see a police car come speeding down the road, waving traffic to one side. My father would pull the car over and we'd step out. First came the rumble of the escort motorcycles ridden by fearsome uniformed men wearing mirrored aviator sunglasses. Then, at last, pennant flying, the limousine de jour would slide into view, a vehicle so sensuous, so shiny and long that it seemed like a vision. Everyone bowed. Older pedestrians would actually kiss the ground. I bowed to the beauty of the car. I recall the time the emperor spotted my mother in her sari and brought his palms together in a Namaste, a gesture just for her. She still talks about that.

With Haile Selassie jailed, rumours swirled and with each day the Derg issued new proclamations. The date I won't forget is 23 November 1973. That was when the Derg's nominal leader, General Aman Amdom, parted ways with the group. Amdom was charismatic, Sandhurst-trained, the hero of an earlier campaign to repel a Somali invasion. At a tumultuous Derg meeting, Amdom, who was Eritrean by birth, voiced the opinion that Ethiopia should allow Eritrea to secede rather than keep fighting a costly war against a formidable guerrilla force, a war that had gone on for over two decades. He also refused to sign the order to execute various ministers and members of the royal family who had been jailed — he thought it was a terrible idea, guaranteed to distance Ethiopia from the international community. He left the meeting and barricaded himself in his house, which happened to be visible from my hospital. The Derg sent troops to arrest him and a fierce battle ensued. It ended only when a tank fired a shell into the house, killing all within. We heard all the commotion, saw the smoke. Could things get any worse, I wondered?

They could. That evening – "Bloody Saturday" as it is now called – 59 distinguished Ethiopians, members of the old guard, were taken from prison, lined up and shot. They included former prime ministers, ambassadors, generals, educators and royalty – household names, people always in the news, people my parents had known personally. My parents had left the country a year earlier, seeing the writing on the wall. At the time I'd felt resentful of their abandoning the place, but on "Bloody Saturday" I was grateful they were not around to witness the end. The barbarians had clearly taken the reins. A man named Mengistu emerged as a leader of the Derg.

Ethiopians are generous people: hospitable, formal and polite to a fault. As a schoolboy I remember sensing that these attributes were balanced by an undercurrent of violence that could be striking when it was revealed; for all I knew, this was true of all countries. It had not been that many years since the *lebeshay* method of divining guilt in Ethiopia was outlawed: this practice consisted of drugging a little boy and taking him to the scene of the crime, and in his hallucinatory state he was asked to point out the guilty party. Who knows how many innocents

were killed by a child's pointing finger? A previous coup attempt during my childhood had led to the hangings of the mutineers – I can recall viewing the bodies swaying from a scaffold in the centre of town.

But to me our violent bent in Ethiopia was most evident in street fights. What was peculiar was the choice of weapons – I have yet to see it anywhere else. If the opponents found themselves 20 paces away they would scramble to fling stones; bystanders beware. At fisticuffs range, the goal changed to delivering a testa – a head butt. Testa – head, in Italian – was a weapon so unique to Ethiopia that there were some who claimed it to be an ancient Ethiopian martial art. If so there were no dojos, no sensei, and no black belts, just lots of busted orbits and fractured noses.

As medical students in the casualty ward, scalp wounds were the most common injury we would see. To have the head be both the weapon of choice and the target of choice doubled the chances of a scalp wound. The wardboys in the casualty office did the stitching. The doctor's job was to check the pupils, check the mentation and decide if further observation was needed. Bleeding from such wounds could be dramatic, startling to the novice. A professor taught us to not be so impressed with the bleeding: "Head injuries are only important because the head contains the brain," he said, which at the time seemed both funny and self-evident. But it was profound: scalp and skull injuries, no matter how bloody, only mattered because of the possibility of brain injury.

In the aftermath of Aman Amdom's murder and then of the Bloody Saturday massacre, it was bullet wounds one had to worry about. Since the revolution was led by junior officers, the lowliest enlisted man felt empowered. Bars were filled with military men in mufti, only their highly polished shoes giving them away. If a fight broke out, a gun or even a grenade could be pulled out.

All through this time I lived with three foreign students (from Cameroon, Kenya and Nigeria). We rented a small house on an unpaved street not far from the main road. The Derg had just closed the university for a year, and the plan was to send all students to the countryside to educate the masses. We thought it was just a ploy to get the intellectuals out of town. Expatriates like us had no choice but to leave the country. Time hung heavily on our hands as we tried to get the requisite papers. There was a curfew at eight in the evening and even in the daytime it wasn't always safe to go out. We often heard gunshots at night. This was the period when several of my Ethiopian classmates went underground to fight for the Eritrean secessionist guerrillas or other liberation groups.

One morning as I ventured out for some groceries, I encountered a sight that changed everything: a body left on the street near the main road, a dark stain of blood on the ground from a bullet wound to the head. This sort of thing had happened before, but that day it gave me pause. There was something so dislocating about seeing a corpse outside the hospital. No one was inclined to pick up the body and no one lingered. He appeared to have been executed. His face was familiar, not an acquaintance but perhaps someone living in the neighbourhood. Or perhaps the dead all look alike.

All day that image lingered with me – not so much his face but the memory of that big blood stain on the ground, like a pillow for his head. The words kept coming to me, "Head injuries are only important because the head contains the brain." This clearly was the important kind of head injury.

I saw much violence before that and after, but that sight, that blood stain felt like a personal message to me, an instruction that it was time to get out.

One day, at last, I had the requisite papers and permissions and I was aboard a plane bound for Rome. I wish I could say I shed tears as I sat looking out at the runway. No, I could not wait to leave. If "geography is destiny" I could not wait to change my geography.

As I looked out of the porthole, I had no way of knowing that in the ensuing years Mengistu would kill untold numbers of people in purges that made him worthy of Stalin, or that Ethiopia would adopt an Albanian-style communism, and become a vassal of the Soviet Union. I didn't know that Mengistu would rule for nearly two decades, and that it would not be until 1991 that a liberation army led by a medical student one year my junior, Meles Zenawi, would drive Mengistu into exile (and Meles would become prime minister of Ethiopia). I had no such foresight. All I kept seeing as the plane lumbered down the runway was a lifeless body, a deep square blood stain framing the head, and how I wanted to put as much distance as I could between me and that sight.