Oral History Interview:
Taha Ahmed

Barédu: Okay. So, can you state your name for me? Your full name?

Taha: Taha Ahmed.

Barédu: And what is your year of birth?

Taha: I was born in September 15, 1955

B: Okay. And what is the city and country of your place of birth?

T: I was born in a place called Delete,\(^1\) which is just part of the capital city of Ethiopia-Addis Ababa. So we’re like- Delete is about 25 kilometers, I guess about 15 miles from Addis-

B: -Capitol City

T: Yes.

B: Okay. Capital City, Addis Ababa.

\(^1\) Delete is now a part of the capital city of Addis Ababa, instated in the 1990’s.

\(^2\) Both my father and I could not locate Furee or Chocha mountain on a geographical map of Ethiopia. This is the closest and most
T: Yes.

B: Okay, so um…before we get into anything, um, just uh…what year did you actually leave Ethiopia? Or roundabout year?

T: Well, when we crossed the border to Kenya, just south of the border, um, that was December 31, 1975.

B: -Wow. So New Year.

T: It was uh, eve of New Year, Yes.

B: 1975. And um…so, okay, the eve of the new year, got it. Okay. And how long have you lived in the United States [pause] from the time you entered up until today?

T: Uh, I’ve lived here now for 30 years.

B: Wow.

T: Yeah.

B: Okay. So just going back to Delete. Um, can you describe the physical environment of the city? Um, was it mostly grassland, was it a congested area?

T: Delete is an amazing place, and uh, it is surrounded by two really mountains. And we call them Furee, which is part of Delete, and then you have Chocha mountain,² which is part of Sebeta,³ and uh our own house just under one big- you know it’s not a big mountain, just a hill. But you could see all these mountains, and uh…you stand on this hill, you could see flat uh…farmlands. So, you just few miles away from the capital city, and you totally like in rural Ethiopia-

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² Both my father and I could not locate Furee or Chocha mountain on a geographical map of Ethiopia. This is the closest and most accurate spelling we could find of the mountains.
³ Sebeta is primarily made up of Oromo people, the tribe of my father and the second largest tribe in Ethiopia. This is were his oldest relatives live today.
B: -like, isolated almost-

T: -and quiet, there’s no electricity, and so on. So there are also Eucalyptus trees, uh, lot of cattles,\textsuperscript{4} and uh- I mean you know, people lived that traditional…you know, country life. And uh, everybody knew their neighbors, everybody knew each other, not only people knew each other, we even knew who’s donkey, who’s cattle, who’s cow-

B: -um hm

T: …you know? And…you could here this constant, uh, it’s not a noisy uh place, it’s a quiet place, so all you hear is animals you know, cows crying for their mom. Um, and especially like, wintertime, and you see the thunder rolling- that kind of noise. Or late at night you hear the hyenas cry. And so everybody’s like home by 6pm. All the cattles are you know, head counted, and everything, the gates closed-

B: -Mm

T: -quiet after that.

B: Mm.

T: And that is a mainly um, Muslim uh…uh religion-wise. The dominant religion is Islam-

B: -in Delete…

T: In Delete, yeah. So I grew up- I grew up in uh, Muslim family-

B: -ok.

\textsuperscript{4} Although the proper grammar is “cattle,” I left most of the transcription as close to accurate as possible to preserve the integrity of the interview. My father’s English is advanced and easy to understand, however the language in the transcription may not reflect this.
T: Yes.

B: And so the-the school you went to was a Muslim school as well?

T: Yes, my first school.

B: First school.

T: Yes. Yeah.

B: Okay, so how many siblings did you grow up with, and-and where were you in the queue, uh the birthing order?

Taha: (chuckles) I’m the last.

Barédu: Okay

Taha: Yeah. So I was the youngest. Uh…eight of us.

Barédu: Wow

Taha: In a perfect match, you know? Four, four girls four boys.

Barédu: Mm hm.

Taha: Yeah.

Barédu: Okay. And uh, what was life like, growing up with um…where you all very…er, close knit, or…?

Taha: Well. I was a special son. Being the youngest I think is the most beautiful thing because you always look after the older ones to take care of you.
Barédu: Mm.

Taha: And they feel like, sorry for you. Um...you are well protected. Umm...and so you really, you know, um...also unique in a sense that my mom- I never knew my real mom- she died at age two

Baredu: when you were two years-

T: From what they told me, yeah. So I really never knew my mom, so everybody was like, sorry for you, you know. Um...and so, everybody kiss you, “oh this is the boy, oh this is the boy who’s mom died when he was...you know?

B:--yeah

T: And uh...that made me in a way sad, but also something that I could take advantage of [laughter]

B: [laughter]

T: Yes. That’s great, yeah.

B: So have any of your siblings moved outside of Ethiopia?

T: No, nobody. Many of them did not make more than 9th grade, and so on, so I was the only one who made it to 10th grade and- you know, and so on. And um [pause], so I’m the only one, yes.

B: So that’s interesting. So you’re the youngest.

T: Yes.

B: Uh, and you’re the only who-

T: Um hm, left-
B: -moved. Why do you think you…or…what do you think it is that made you feel like it was time to leave Ethiopia and not your...your siblings?

T: Well first of all, like I told you, I’m the youngest. The gap, for example uh the first four are my sisters.

B: Um hm.

T: I don’t remember even their weddings, so they’re really well-

B: -much older.

T: Much, much older. From what I know, that m-my dad himself was like around sixty when I was born. My mom had like thirteen, so eight of us are survived.

B: Wow.

T: But, I’ve never seen him- you know, so we always go- you know, I always said 8 siblings, that’s it. So you can imagine um…and so, w-what was the question…?

B: So the question was, eh, I was um, commenting on you-

T: -Why-why me…

B: -you being the one to leave and not your siblings.

T: -yes, yes. Uh, in fact I forgot you see. I’m an old man now myself [laughs] so forgive me. Um. Many of them were married, and so I was the only one now attending school. Times were very different, and um, at the time, when I was not even thinking, um…leave alone imagine living- you know, forever in some other country. Uh, the country was uh politically going through some crisis- social
crisis. There was famine, there was a general strike you know, workers revolting, demonstrations became the order of the day. And the former monarch that is the uh, Haile Selassie the Emperor, could not stop. And it got worse and worse, and there was a general strike, and uh...fuel crisis. Prices went up- through the rough. Uh...people could not afford and then there is this drought. And uh, it started with the University students, who even boycotted their breakfast and so on, and start feeding the home-you know, people who you know, traveled from the drought-stricken areas, cattles were dying, and uh...it became unstoppable- to the point there was just a power vacuum one could say. Eh, even the militaries betrayed, security people start betraying, and so they formed what they called- you know um [pause]...a cooperating commission uh that is uh people from the military- mainly the military from different divisions of the military, and they have this committee, and that committee became very powerful and they called it, “Derge,” uh...and start arresting former...uh you know uh, people in power. Ministers, government officials...in fact the Emperor himself was under house arrest. And um, soon after they consolidated power (the military) they declared that students over 10th grade had to go- uh and new ideology came into...you know, being, and uh socialism, you know, the-the revolution was all about socialism now because of the land reform and so on, and people demanded land reform. Uh...and so students were dispatched to rural Ethiopia to teach the role of socialism as well. And so, you know, if you didn’t do that, then you have no opportunities to go back to school, or you cannot have any governmental job whatsoever.

(11:58)

B: So you mentioned your...your older siblings were already married and out of school, so this wasn't-

T: -right, that did not apply to them.

B: So there was no real motivating factor for them to...

T: Well, you know, it is at this point I see no point, even though uh, many of us went to rural Ethiopia, but there were conflicts...to the point where you are personally now- you're gonna be prosecuted, number one, if you...you know, uh...if you do not, em...in cahoot with the government. Uh...and there was an underground party now coming up- which is a communist party. There are many, many, many, parties now, and there is the Eritreans fighting in the North, the Somali's...you know, invading the Ogaden region, a-and so on. And uh...the feudal-some of the feudal farmers also against the student campaign. Um...from many angles, it's just...a bad situation

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becoming worse.

B: Mm hm.
T: So, as a young person, you...are the target. You are either recruited into any one of these groups, including the government. You cannot simply stay neutral, and as a young person even though you sympathize with some of those who uh, call for Democracy, and so on- not necessarily socialism...but anyway, even the government was just maul down the people in the streets of Addis Ababa. And uh...that's how it affects you in a personal way. You're always afraid for your life.

B: So...this is about 1974...1973?

T: Yes, this was exactly 1974, was when officially the king was overthrown and the military mil- coup de- coup de tat, that same coup de tat became the government. But prior to that, still...uh...even though the emperor was not officially overthrown, but it was not a functioning government or anything he was under house arrest anyway. [inaudible] and it remains so until he died anyway. So now...that's what happened.

B: And how old were you at this time?

T: Well, I was around uh...I was going for eight- I am over eighteen at that time, going for nineteen. It was in 1975, shortly after I turned nineteen, and um...by then, there are small stations all over the city [inaudible] you know, uh every neighborhood has its own uh...uh...administrative uh, you know, to spy on people, to uh...carry out the government policies, making sure no enemies of the government live in that region, and so really even from- to go from one neighborhood to another neighborhood was becoming difficult in um in...the capital city, at this point. But anyway, you know, uh everybody’s suspicious of one another and you keep it to only the person that you trust the most. Other than that nobody really knew exactly, unless you belong to the party people and so on. Uh...political parties- that’s what I’m talking about. Anyway, uh, in the place uh...where I was dispatched for the campaign, uh we boycotted, even though we built the- I went to two places. I built uh...we built elementary school, and uh we almost finished completing- I mean, completed the uh, health center...also we tried to build...but uh...we really did about- three-fourths of the project was finished, but we uh...boycotted the campaign before the uh...completion.

6 [inaudible] insert replaces mumbling or incoherent words during moments my father is thinking out loud. You will find this throughout the interview.
B: You and the students-

T: in protest uh yes, my fellow campaigners [inaudible, both participants speaking at the same time]. And uh…and there were students campaigners that died, there were all kinds of conflicts, and so I can imagine there just like the country was becoming unbearable, so you kind of really live in a- in hiding in a way…uh when you return to the city…while voicing against the military regime. So I confided with one other friend of mine….uh…I mean, I told him my plans, and it’s not much time left. So we decided to leave. That was 1975. And uh, it took us about one week, so this was around December that…you know…not much of any thorough planning, but we just had to leave. And we left.  

B: Okay, so let’s back up a little bit.

T: Yeah.

B: So prior to the-the fuel shortage, and the-the oil…the oil crisis-

T: Yeah…

B: Did you ever envision yourself leaving Ethiopia?

T: No, no, no, no. I never even imagined. We wanted democracy, we wanted peace and prosperity for the country, uh…we were students, so we wanted to finish school, have a job, help ourselves, help our families, and so on. That’s the dream of any young person, you know…I think anywhere, not only Ethiopia. But, it is something beyond your control, when events happen. Yeah! The first thing is not anything about it, it’s about your safety and so on. You wanna run away, and you run, and it be temporary- yes. At that point when we decided, yes. That’s when you say, “Okay, what alternative, what is the best…,” you know. So for us, Kenya was really the choice, because it’s the easiest. And because transportation is easier, we spoke the language, most-for the most part, as an Oromo people. So…that-uh, you know…that probably helped us a lot…on the way to fleeing Ethiopia. Yeah…

Interviewee left Ethiopia with his first cousin, without any notice to their family members or friends. On the night before their departure, my father’s brother sensed their plans, and gave him a little money privately to help with their journey. This brother is now deceased.
B: Okay. Eh- now you mentioned something about the language. In…did you have, uh, knowledge of the language of uh, Kenya? Or the region you-

T: No, no, no. Then we…we talking about now crossing- it’s a long distance. You talking about some four hundred uh…no, it’s a [inaudible, calculating the distance under his breath] eight hundred, nine hundred kilometers…you talking about…six hundred, five hundred miles?

B: Okay.

T: Yeah.

B: And-and on that journey, the language came in handy for you? Speaking…

T: Well, we grew up spoken, eh you know, my native language is Oromifa,\(^8\)

B: Mm hm.

T: And for the most part, you know all the way from Addis\(^9\) as you go down south, that’s the language. I mean in between you have other ethnicities…yeah.

B: So that was an advantage for you.

T: That was a language advantage, because we knew that…eh…because the road blocks and everything, uh…checkpoints, you just cannot stay on the main road.

B: Mm hm.

T: Yes. And that is exactly why I said the language was helpful for-if you’re travelling by foot.\(^{10}\)

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\(^8\) Oromifa is the native language the Oromo tribe.

\(^9\) Capital City of Ethiopia.

\(^{10}\)
B: Okay.

T: Yeah, in between…

B: Okay. And-and um…before we get into, like uh… the U.S, the second half…um, did you speak…did you have any prior knowledge of uh any of the languages in Kenya?

T: No.

B: Coming in? Uh, okay.

T: We don’t know what language the local spoke but we know that Kenya was colonized by the British,\textsuperscript{11} so we knew that English is the official language, as well.

B: And you were, uh, speaking English at this time?

T: Ah, well we…not necessary speaking, but we could understand.

B: Enough to communicate

T: [inaudible] Yes. Just enough to get by, because in most high schools- from the middle school up you really learn English, but we just don’t speak English so…uh….verbal English is difficult for us. Yeah.

B: Okay. An-and what were your…your dreams or your plans for your future during this time? Did you uh have a career path in mind?

\textsuperscript{10} Their main mode of transportation was hitch hiking, catching the bus, and walking.

\textsuperscript{11} Kenyan achieved independence from Britain in 1963. However, the legacy of Britain was strong, and much of their language, culture, and education system remains closely linked to Britain.
T: No, I always wanted to go to University and study metallurgy and so on…that was the dream. I also- I was in technical school, and I mentioned to you like uh…the campaign. The campaign had two parts, one is by infrastructure and others are just uh…literacy campaign. Since we were from technical school, we were charged with building…you know..uh schools and health centers. Uh…we have one carpenter and two uh…university students from engineering, architecture, and so on. And so there are site-keepers and so on. We’re like fourteen or fifteen…not a big number. 12

B: Mm hm.

T: But big enough to build something. Yeah! We carved stones, uh..you know [pausing] cut trees. You know, we did the basic construction! Yeah. Mixing cements. Uh yeah.

B: Hm. This was…this in Kenya? Or in Ethiopia during the…the campaign?

(both interviewer and interviewee speaking at the same time for the next two lines)

T: No, no, no, we were in Ethiopia during the campaign.

B: Okay.

T: So, that’s different. So that’s my career. The only thing I was thinking of that time was that was the case. Yeah.

B: Okay. Um, so uh…just going back to um, one last question about uh, the political regime and the changes in Ethiopia. Um…when you heard news about uh…Haile or the Emperor, Haile Selassie’s um…death, how did that make you feel?

T: Well, Haile Selassie did not die when we were in Kenya or when we were…you know…during the revolution. Like I said he was under house arrest and… I think his…I don’t know what year [clears throat], it was long after I…uh…migrated to the United States. Then we heard the king died. And uh…it’s not much of any ceremony to bury him or anything. But, um…I was not, you know- my generation revolted against the king. We did not want the king and so we really didn’t care. The king and his henchman, you know.

Taha eventually changed his major to mathematics in the United States.
B: Okay. Um, so you mentioned your first country of residence was Kenya.

T: Kenya, yes.

B: Um, so at that point you were…you had a refugee status.

T: Yes, so we crossed the border December 31, 1975 and so they interviewed us, and uh gave us a holding place, and they accepted us and took us to uh, Marsabit, where we stayed for fifteen days…uh and then, they took us- you know- that’s where they had the full immigration, you know, services. And then they took us to Nairobi, we went to the United Nations high commission for an interview with with the Kenya…you know. It was approved and uh so…at that time they didn’t have any uh camps or anything, just…welcome to Nairobi! That was it! And that’s when we realized that there was uh…Kiswahili language…was, you know, another official language, in addition to English. Yes. So, it was easy because you know remember I grew up in a Muslim family, and so we knew how to write and read Arabic, so we certainly heard some words and Kiswahili actually, the “k” denotes the language, and Swahili is the people. And Swahili people generally these uh…I think descendants of Arab migrants a long long time ago around the coastal areas, and mainly like Mombasa, Malindu Zanzibar all the way to Tanzania, you know? Um…so that was the language adopted, so the whole Eastern you know…uh…Kiswahili became very very a popular language in East Africa, and that was the language and uh so, certainly we…we felt comfortable that…you know…that we would…learn in a short time.

B: Okay.

T: So I did speak a little speak a little bit of Kiswahili anyway. Just conversational.

B: Mm Hm.

T: Um…that was Kenya in 1976, so…exciting, very different.

B: Did you experience, um, culture shock when you came?

T: Well Kenya was a bit ahead of Ethiopia in terms of economic development and so on, and certainly I…that’s where I saw so many white people that I never seen before in my life, and I thought like really this is…I thought I was in Europe, compared to Addis. Yeah…a lot of tourists, Europeans as…you know, tourists. And uh…not so much of a shock. You know I was a young person, there’s
nothing…nothing shocks you. If anything excites you, because young people…you know, accept changes. We knew that was not our country, we expected some of it to be different, and so we have to adjust. Eh, the only problem is just a financial means, you know. That was our main problem. You know, we had our freedom- they gave us the freedom to stay and live and be comfortable and so on. So not uh…you know, I really liked the country. The people are very nice, very tolerant immigrants and uh…we really liked Kenya, you know. It’s just…uh…we didn’t have a job or anything.

B: So while you were there, uh…did you feel like that was going to be home for you until you could return to Ethiopia, or did you have plans to move elsewhere?

T: Temporarily, we never thought the military regime in Ethiopia would eh…you know. We thought it was gonna to be overthrown quickly. So that we all gonna be coming home triumphant. You know? A new government, a democratic government, a peaceful government, and the country will develop quickly just like in Kenya and so on. That was the thing. I never imagined I would leave Kenya…I was…you know, despite all the problems. Also one of the things that Ethiopians are very organized people, wherever they went, students are very very strong, especially in my generation. In fact, we have Ethiopian students union in East Africa. We have similar organizations in America, in Europe, and everywhere. And there were all, you know, communications between the students, you know, movements. I mean this…these movements, student movements, go back a long long time. At one time, I mean during Haile Selassie regime. At one time, in fact, it was very bloody. You know…uh…a lot of university students died. And uh…I really-you know, since that time, uh, some students in exile, students eh…you know, formed an organization…you know, to voice their opposition to the government.

B: So, um-

T: -so we did not uh…you know, I mean you could also get news from Ethiopia since this is just a country close to Ethiopia. You could hear the news in Amharic, you could hear…uh…you could, you know, learn so much through the organizations. You know, different channels, different [inaudible] I mean obviously. So…in fact, in Kenya, now imagine, you have Somali-Kenyans, and then you have Borana-Kenyans, and Borana-Ethiopians. So the Borana’s, despite this artificial border…you know, demarcation, really the people are the same. You know…and the language- you could speak Oromifa to the Borana people. And-the uh-and so you know, it’s a very unique you know…Kenya is very unique. But the whole Africa is like that.

B: Mm.
T: You know, because of the colonial past. And these borders are like that [inaudible]. So we did not really feel like…we knew that we’re far away from home, but safe. At least we’re not afraid of the government, or arrest, or persecution. At the same time, uh…close enough, with the culture and everything.

B: So, how did the opportunity to come to the United States happen, or when did that decision…?

T: Well, I was a homeless, in Kenya. You know, temporarily. I was…um…a good salesman at one time, which gives me an opportunity to visit, and know Kenya better than I knew Ethiopia. Now remember, I lived there for eight years. I was a student, I had all kind of things going in…at one time I was very hopeful and so on. But anyway, it was only the final years that I went to…you know, I got some scholarship through the United Nations high commission for refugees. And uh…I was really pressed. Uh…the scholarship money ran out…it’s not a traditional school. This is like, uh pause]…there are several private colleges that prepare you for external exams. You know, I was stu- now no longer metallurgy or anything. Um…completely switched to business you know, concentration accounting. So, we taking some…I did pass the Kenya Accountants and Secretaries National examination board, and then I wanted to get my CPA, which I did part 1. But then again, you know life became very difficult. I didn’t have any money at that time. And uh…now like, uh…to make matters worse, I felt also incensed in a way. Kenya underwent through a lot of changes, uh there was a coup-de-tat at one time against the regime of Moi, and also, uh…what was the um…the plight of Ugandan refugees, it was very unfortunate when Idi Amin was overthrown, the Kenya government took all these refugees, did not give them enough time even to withdraw their little money from the bank or any of their belongings. They just simply rounded them up and took to the border area. “Now the regime is changed, you people are safe to go back,” and I didn’t want that to happen to us, without…you know, our consent and uh…you know. Um…so, I-I felt very incensed, in addition to all of this [inaudible] like is just…the, you know the rule of law is very subjective there. So I said, “why not even apply?” And I did fill, you know, applications for many other refugees, and so this time I filled out paper for myself and I took it to the American Embassy in Nairobi, and uh…they called me for an interview. And uh, the funny thing is, I tell you a story. The counselor of the U.S Embassy, after he was done with me interview, and he said uh…he cannot make any decisions about my case. That he’s gonna forward to the uh immigration officer who used to go around uh Djibouti, Sudan, Kenya, and interview people every year and so on. And he will hold the case without any decision. I kind of felt very bad for myself. It was not-certainly was not encouraging. So…you know I…I went back home, I start thinking about it, you know…and uh…I think it was just about a week later, or a month later, I was walking. Uh…I was also fortunate enough with the uh…one British lady, while hitchhiking gave me a ride, and she also gave me uh…a guest quarter to live in. And so it was an affluent neighborhood so…uh…there was this little white boy about eleven or twelve years old. He was a good uh…companion. And we used to walk or jog around like 5 o’clock, just around the sunset in Africa, its beautiful time. Lush green area. And so one day we were just walking together and when we saw a bunch of kids playing soccer, and uh this ball just bounced on the main road and uh there was this little
boy running after the ball. Didn’t care- I think he was about four years old. And there comes this car, speeding, and- and I saw what was about to happen was just terrible, so I ran like crazy and grabbed this little boy. And uh the car also stopped, all dust around us and uh, tires smoking and you know. And then we had that eye contact. Guess what? That was the counselor who interviewed me.

B: Wow.

T: And he recognized me. And said, you…you know, asked me whether I lived in that area. “Yeah,” I said, “I’m not too far, we just jog all the time here.” Well he said that I did a good job and uh…I kind of felt good, but there was also this feeling that he might change. You know?

B: Mm hm.

T: As a human being, you know? Anyway, three months later I was called for an interview and uh, everything went okay. And that was the-you know the whole process took about one year. And uh…[inaudible]…uh…the…it went. So I was very happy, excited, uh…now…in a way sorry also. I really liked Kenya and the people. But anyway, but I had to leave and then came- arrived here in 1984, thirty years ago.

B: And you came to what city first?

T: Well we land at JFK and um…I had my cousin here whom I have known also in Nairobi. He was also uh…catholic charities associated uh…catholic charities and uh…my cousin were the two sponsors. And um…

B: By JFK do you mean New York City?

T: JFK in New York City.

B: Okay.

T: Just uh for a couple of hours waiting for uh smaller plane to bring us to uh National Airport, which is now Regan National Airport. So and then I came here I mean I’ve…I saw for my first time, it was January 13, and uh…it was…it did snow, snow stopped. Little
flurries but otherwise sunny. Um…that was the greatest shock of all- is the chill and the snow. This white powder like, cotton like stuff we never seen before. Yeah.

B: What were your…your…apart from the snow, um…what were your feelings at this time? Were you excited, or hopeful…?

T: Yes, excited but also afraid. Everything overwhelmed me uh just sitting at the airport and watching people. Looked very fast paced. The buildings look big. Cars look bigger, much bigger. Um…the people looked bigger. Everything was like…I thought I was wearing, you know, a magnifying glass or something.

B: [laughter]

T: Yeah…Uh…it’s just beyond my imagination. I never imagined that even though we familiar with…you know we used to go to the um…US culture center in Nairobi and watch ABC news and so on. And uh…even then uh we thought it was just like movies, but in reality its just about the same- very close. Uh…and so its surprise but I was also like, you know, people did not stare at each other…I quickly noticed that. We were the ones who were staring.

B: Mm hm.

T: Yeah…and uh…so we came here uh and uh met with my friend and cousin. And uh where I stayed momentarily for few…few months and became roommate together after awhile.

B: In Washington, DC?

T: In-in Washington, DC. But we did live in Washington, DC, yes. And then I think after uh six, seven months we moved to Silver Spring, MD.

B: Okay.

T: Yeah.
B: So while you were... you were living in uh... you know, when you first came and you were getting acclimated, did you have a plan for what you were going to do, did you find work or did you go to school?

T: Uh, you know. It’s not like we planned things. We don’t plan things. If anything, our... our surroundings, our environments really... our big thing is just to adapt to a new situation. We don’t have resources to plan for anything. The first thing of course is gain this interview and come here... and that was really nice, and then now get some orientation, definitely. And now, its to f-next step... step is just to find a job, and then be able to go to school or you know, where you left and continue. And at least, you know- we knew one thing that people did believe in the law and everything and order, and so we know that we are in a stronger country. And uh... they mean what they say. And uh... that made us really... of all the things made me at ease. So... except for the climate. The weather situation really. Um... by living in Kenya I’m already exposed to a different culture than of Ethiopia. And as young person you quickly accept. That was not a problem. And uh... also much of through you know, the ’70’s, American pop culture is also everywhere, and um... America dominated in that respect. And uh, we all wanted to be like Americans, as young people. You know? And so... I was like... dream come true also sometimes coming here. And uh... okay, so we have all the opportunities. Uh... found a job. Two jobs.

B: What kind of work?

T: My first job was really as a busboy in Bethesda. A place called, “Beach Toms Inn.” Oh what a busy place, and uh... simply the chinaware was really really heavy, and we had to just bus the table and making sure that the waiter has her table cleaned. And things put away and continue, and lay the table. I with all, you know, the utensils...

B: Mm hm.

T: Yeah, everything. Orderly bring water, and so on. So I learned that, and uh... it was just simply very far. I had to take three buses, uh... after fifteen days I actually went to the managers office and was standing there. And the guy said, “what do you need, boy?” I say, “I’m about to resign.” [laughter]

B: [laughter]

T: This man, he laughed. The manager laughed, he never heard a busboy resigning his position. He has... he... do I know why? I’m like okay, I gotta go back to school. So I-I guess in a way, I just wanted to get rid of that job. I didn’t like it that much. It’s too far, the money was $3.35, and all the money the waiters gave us became part of the $3.35, instead of an addition, really.
B: Mm.

T: And that was really terrible. I resented that. So anyway, I resigned [laughter]. I quit, that’s what it meant. And found a similar position in Roslyn, and quickly promoted to a room service. So in a way like, busboy slash room service slash waiter. I made more money then. I also found a job in a parking lot. I got my driver license, and that was good. And then I quit that one too, and stay in the parking lot job, and also found a job at World Bank as a security guard. So quite an improvement. By now I was all- started going to school, and learning the culture, and…you know the- the language…you know, and uh…slowly, um…I began to embrace my second adopted country, and uh…I love it. Yeah.

B: So while you were um, uh…working and-and going to school…

T: Yeah.

B: Um, now you mentioned in Kenya you felt like it was a temporary holding place, because you were hopeful, you know, that…that the instability in Ethiopia would you know…

T: Uh uh.

B: …sort of stabilize and you can come home. While you were in the US at this time, you know uh getting acclimated, did you feel like this was also temporary? And you would be returning home?

T: [sighs]. Well, the situation in Ethiopia, unlike what we really thought would be fast changing, um…at least the government would be toppled quickly…be…you know, it became difficult. It became a far away dream since the Russians came. The government became stronger militarily, and um…and I just…the country became more and more polarized with ethnic uh…ideologies, um…different parties, and lots of conflicts. It didn’t seem to be like a problem to go away very fast. In fact. in the ‘80’s, also came the second round of famine, and it just like heartbreaking. So our dreams at this point, w-you know, we’re no longer that young either,

13 During the era of “Reganomics, the Regan administration in the United States were widely criticized for their lack of aid to Ethiopia during the second hunger strike as a result of their communist ties to Russia.

you know but I- although relatively you know, still pretty young at age twenty-nine, thirty…you know. You still a young person, but uh…as far as dying for the revolution…it just dies away. Slowly. And uh…and you’re own dire situation just to stand on your feet, to be- you know for one thing now here, you become much more liberated in a sense that you stand on your feet. You know longer depend on a hand out from the United Nations or anywhere. So you work, you earn your living, and uh your reward is how hard you work. And of course it really pays off. Hard work also pays off. And uh…you know, uh…roof over your head, you know food, clothing, and what else you need. And then you can think now for others. Uh…yes, that’s true. Um…so going back to Ethiopia…um….there was not er- you know, good enough reason for me to go back to Ethiopia, really. There’s no incentive. I don’t have any particular skill and nothing to offer. Even for those…I mean more educated people are fleeing the country. I mean there is a brain drain on the country. So going back is just becoming uh…a burden. To myself, to my family, to my country. So, I’ve also ask myself…the uh principles- it’s a question of principles. Eh b- you know, that helped me even embrace the United States of America. I’ve lived in democracy. The things that we fought for, law and order, peace…you know? Personal freedom, and so on. And economic freedom too! I mean what freedom without jobs? I mean you can only live so long without it, you know? So anyway, I asked myself again and again, and uh…I didn’t wanna to cry. And cry- become a cry boy…eh…boy all the time. Because I cried when crossed the border. We thought about our country. We thought we betrayed our country. And so…no we did not betray. We just wanted to save our lives. So here we are, in the United States of America, and it’s…I felt…I felt at home, honestly. I saw a lot of Ethiopians, a lot of people from the whole world here. And uh…I said, you know? Uh…It’s no longer just black and white. It is a country with different beliefs, different religion, different everything, but believe still in American dream and everything. And here we still chasing the dream in some ways, but at least all things are relative, and it’s much more achievable here than I think from my past experience in other countries. Including Ethiopia. So, if anything now I don’t blame any…anybody, it’s just my decisions. Decisions…decisions. Good decisions, and you stay on it. You…you achieve something. So…there was no cultural shock or anything for me really. There are things that uh…seem to be extreme sometimes, but that is true in every culture, to me. And they are rare. But we’re talking about here the main in a general sense. So…it’s not shocking to me, really.

B: And, you’re a U.S citizen today?

T: Yes. Like I said, because of the principles…the democratic principles and…it became easier after five years or so, you know, living here and learning the culture. And I said like, “wow.” It truly is the country with the hero, the free, and the brave. I said, “my God.” You learn and see these things only the more you examine the history, examine what this country stands for, and then you really begin to admire and like it even more. So…you know at first, there are people who resent because they come here…maybe they’re older. They had some skill, they had positions in their country. Now they’re disappointed because they have to start all over. Uh maybe they’re cashiers in some cases. You know like uh, “you know I used to be a prince, I used to be a king in my country,” you know?
[laughs] and uh…it is funny. I no longer look at it that way. In fact, you’re being judged by what you really just accomplish. Not from the family you come from, or ethnicity you come from, or race or anything. You judged by on your own, individually. And how hard you work, and get there. I am very proud of the people like for example when like when Bob Dole talks about like how he used to live in a basement-apartment and pay his way through college, and become a lawyer, a congressman, man who accomplished so much, man who served in second World War, man who…you know, sacrificed so much for his country, and at the same time became very wealthy man. And uh…I mean…these are real stories. So…that’s why I say like, you know, you don’t have to look so far. And…these days, you can just fly home, Ethiopia, you’re birth place. You never forget something sentimental, but…you know, such is life anyway.

B: When you, uh…when you applied to become a citizen, and-and uh, went through the process I guess of uh-

T: -yeah.

B: …being inducted as a US citizen, did you feel um…uh…well, what were your feelings at the time? Did you feel a loss of identity in a way to Ethiopia?

T: No. No I was already American before they Americanized me [laughs]. In a sense. I mean it is just an official ceremony. Deep in my heart I believed in these ideals. And uh…so, when I applied and uh…you know, approved and uh went for the uh…[inaudible] the ceremony, in uh…Maryland…uh…Baltimore. Well, the uniqueness of the situation was I was lucky. Eh there were daughters of American revolution there, and uh…they gave us little booklets and uh…they sang. You know? Uh…the songs of the national anthem and everything. The ceremony was- even though it was very small, but we had all the great people out there to congratulate us, to welcome us. In fact, the uniqueness of the country is how welcoming the people are. How encouraging the people are. You know? When they see you are doing the right thing. So it is just amazing. They are kind generous people, and welcoming. Really welcoming, and so, esp especially this area, Washington metropolitan area, you know. It’s about 30 mil- miles radius. You got the highest concentration of educated people. And also the exposure to immigrants and people from all over, so you really feel at home. This is the…Washington, DC is the seat of many embassies, offices…uh travelling is easy. Um…um…it-it’s just so convenient and just so beautiful, and you just don’t feel that you are so far away from anywhere.

B: And…and how do you feel, or how are you connected to your family in Ethiopia? In what ways do you stay...?
T: Ever since I landed here, I think….yeah uh, three times I went back home. First visit was ’96, second was 2002, and last one was 2008. But that way of communicating with the family members is a very very…costly proposition, uh…uh…experience. I mean, you visit, it costs you arms and legs. Because your purpose of going there is really, mainly visiting your relatives. Your siblings, and so on-surviving relatives, you know. I lost my dad, my sister, my brother, since I left. It’s just immediate family. And my mom also. Now, coming here…thanks to technology these days, by the way, it’s easier now, it’s a lot cheaper. Before it used to be mainly writing letters. In a way I miss it. Uh…but now, calling cards, and uh…just modern communications, yeah. This is how you get in touch with uh…people back home. Uh…

B: Do you miss home?

T: uh…I miss…no matter what, you know, you always miss the place that you grew up. The people, the friends that you, you know, play together whether its merry-go-round or stuff, or similar situations…you know? Uh…you miss all the stories that you did, the mountains, the rivers, uh…the playing field, you know, where you used to run. We used to ride a donkey, all of that. I mean, it would be a lie is somebody says that he doesn’t think about those things at all. But what do you mean you miss them? If I were in Ethiopia, would I do those things now? No? Would I be living in Delete? Probably not. Well, its…now things have changed in Delete’s becoming uh just like Addis Ababa. I always said Delete is Addis Ababa. Now it has become part of it. Uh…and uh…so yeah. But, you are older. You don’t live as a child anymore. So…you miss it if you didn’t do it. If you didn’t enjoy your youth, yes. But for me, no regrets. So I don’t really miss it as such. You know. I’ve done it. I’ve lived it. Yeah.

B: Well, thank you.

T: [laughs].
ADDITIONAL RESOURCES


