

## **“A Tale of Three Villages”: Tigray, Ethiopia**

February 2, 2005

Greetings all,

This will be my last report of our 6 week odyssey -- we'll be on the plane back to Melbourne in 36 hours.

Our main aim in visiting Ethiopia was to visit: (1) a village that has no well; (2) a village that has had a well for a short time; and (3) a village that has had a well for about ten years. The aim was to try to see first-hand the difference it makes when villagers have access to clean water.

I reported in the previous email on our visit to Jawe Village, which is located about two hours drive south of Addis Ababa. This email reports on our visits to three villages in the province of Tigray, to the north of Addis.

We first flew one hour from Addis to Lalibela, whose rock-hewn churches are surely among the wonders of the world -- Jan will report separately. Then, two days later, a 45 min flight to Axum, with more amazing history. Then we drove by 4WD on unpaved roads from Axum to Adigrat (which is very close to the disputed border between Ethiopia and Eritrea -- hot war may break out again any time), and next day from Adigrat via Adwa to Mekele. All these places are in the province of Tigray.

From the air, much of the Ethiopia that we saw looks desolate -- totally dry and brown. In fact, at times it looks like a moonscape, with massive jagged mountain ranges, chasms, plateaus, canyons. It looks from the air as though much of it would be uninhabitable -- and yet settlements can be seen dotted in the most unlikely places, as well as much evidence that fields have been ploughed, in hope of rain...

On the ground, the Tigray landscape through which we drove for the two days was indeed as dry and brown as it had looked from the air. At times, indeed many times, it looked positively biblical. Along all the roads, many adults and children were walking on foot for long distances, often carrying heavy loads on their backs. The animals to be seen along the roads included donkeys, mules, goats, sheep, cows, camels and oxen. The shepherds for these small flocks of animals were often small children.

[In one small rural museum, we saw a piece of pottery, more than a thousand years old, which showed two oxen yoked together ploughing. It could have been a depiction of today].

The land in the Tigray region is extremely stony, reminiscent of the land around Jerusalem in that regard. Thus, the typical rural houses in the Tigray region are made of stones piled on one another.

Plants in this landscape included cactus, sisal (which looks like cactus, and is used to make rope)... and Australian eucalyptus trees, which do well in the dry climate. The ones planted here are the tall thin variety, which grow fast, and whose trunks are useful in all types of construction activity.

Fields were being ploughed by bullock or by hand -- all in the hope that the rains will come. The rainy season is June-Sept. If the rains do not come then, the land stays brown, and there is famine. Rains have been inadequate with increasing frequency in recent times (global warming?) -- hence the Ethiopian famines of recent years. A man from USAID to whom Jan spoke on the plane said: "These days, in any given year, it's not a question of whether there will be famine in Ethiopia: rather, it's a question of which parts of Ethiopia will be in famine." *[In the National Museum in Addis on our last day, we saw a fascinating historical 'climate-chart' which showed that, thousands of years ago, much of Ethiopia was green and moist, with thousands of elephants roaming... a far cry from the way it looks today.]*

The absolute centrality of (the unpredictable) rain to life in Ethiopia makes it easy to understand why the Ethiopian people tend to be deeply religious, praying to God for rain

We were kindly hosted in Tigray by the "Relief Society of Tigray" (REST), the local NGO, which is the local partner organisation of Oxfam-CAA (Australia), and which has been doing superb work in Tigray for 25 years. (And of course, the entire Ethiopian trip was organised by Oxfam-CAA, to whom we are extremely grateful).

In addition to digging wells, REST also provides other water-conservation activities -- constructing dams, ponds, irrigation systems, developing natural springs etc. Where such water-related activities are undertaken, it is possible to get two crops a year, and economic life is much less precarious. Unfortunately, despite herculean efforts from REST, these two-crop areas are a tiny exception, rather than the rule.

### **1. The Village With No Well**

The first village that we visited by 4WD in Tigray, "Ra-ile" is one that has no access to clean water. To reach it, we drove 20 km on the main road from Adigrat, followed by about 30 mins off the main road over a fainter and fainter unsealed road/track, and at the end over no track at all, just rural

land.

The people had been expecting us some hours earlier, and many had left, so there were "only" about 100 people there. They gave us a warm welcome, including putting on a special dance. Among the dancers was a young man in army uniform with a rifle. At one point he fired a couple of shots into the air -- nearly scared the living daylights out of me. There was also singing and "ululating" in the traditional African fashion -- a high-pitched up-and-down sound made by the tongue (I presume) with the mouth hardly open at all.

Thanks to our REST escort, Mr Werede, who acted as translator into the local Tigray language, we were able to speak with the villagers. They said that it was a four hour round trip walk to get water, near the far-off mountains. This water is dirty, and carries diseases. This leads to health problems, especially for children, but also for adults and livestock. It was clear even to the untrained naked eye that many people looked less than healthy, especially the babies and small kids.

Some children start going to school, but they often soon drop out, either because they are needed to carry water, or because their mothers are carrying water and cannot support/supervise their going to school, which involves a long walk.

One woman talked about the fact that she has a sore lower back from carrying water. A number of people have had to emigrate from the village because of the water problem.

REST has helped the villagers with soil conservation activities and with bee keeping, and the villagers generously insisted on giving us a present of a large amount of their precious honey, honey that could be sold for money in town. But because of lack of funds, REST has not yet been able to provide a well to this village.

At the end of the visit, to try to even things up a bit, we asked if they had any questions about Australia.

"We eat and we drink water just once day. How many times a day do you eat and drink water in Australia?" asked one man. "And how much water do you drink each day?"

"See my shawl, I've had it for a month, and I haven't been able to wash it yet. How often do you wash your clothes in Australia?" asked one woman.

Both Jan and I found the visit to this village quite depressing. The land around the village looked particularly dry and unfertile. The people seemed

quite despairing about their lot, and their health looked not good. We wanted to be able to do something... And yet we were aware that there are thousands of villages like this all over Ethiopia (and all over the developing world). This just happens to be one where we had the privilege of being able to visit and talk with the people.

[Next day, we found out that this village is indeed high on the priority list once funds are available. REST provided more than 140 wells in Tigray villages last year].

## **2. The Village That Has a New Well**

We returned to the main road, drove another 10 km, and then turned off and travelled (as previously) for 40 mins on bumpy unmade roads/tracks/trails/fields... till we came to the village of "Guela Abenea". This very spread-out village has two hand-dug wells that were funded by the Morawetz Social Justice Fund (a sub-fund of the Melbourne Community Foundation) through Oxfam-CAA and REST. The wells were completed six months ago. The well at which we stopped is about 19 metres deep, and is operated, as usual, by an Indian-made hand-pump that was specially modified by Oxfam-CAA for Ethiopian conditions.

We were again running later than expected, so again "only" about 100 people were there to greet us. Again, a very warm greeting, with lots of ululating and rhythmical clapping. "What difference has the well made to your life?", we asked.

"The well is our health post," replied one man succinctly. And indeed, it is clear to the naked eye that the people here are healthier than at the village that has no well. Women and children do not have to walk so far to get water, the water that they get now is clean, and diarrhoea and other diseases carried by the polluted water are greatly improved. Some examples of such diseases include internal parasites, amoebas, skin diseases, eye diseases, giardia and the like. They showed us one of the places where they used to get water. The water was a dirty brown, very polluted.

One woman from this village who was interviewed for the REST follow-up report said: "One of the benefits of the well is fewer family quarrels and fights. When there was not enough water, and when we women were away from home for so many hours fetching water, there would be lots of family fights. These are less now. Also, we all participated in digging the well, and we all pay monthly contributions for hiring a person to guard the well and for maintenance, so we are part of it. The new well has made a huge difference in our life."

The villagers' questions about Australia included: "Is there a rich, a poor

and a middle group? How do people earn a living? Does everyone go to school? Can you tell us how improve our agriculture?" (A clear "No" from me to this last question!)

Overall, the meeting was a happy one, with lots of laughter. The insisted on feeding us with injera (Ethiopian pancakes), chicken, eggs and honey, and they, too, insisted we take some honey with us.

My feeling as we left was of joy, happy that they were happy. Once again, the cost of providing clean water to these 1,000 villagers was about \$10 per person.

### **3. The Village That Has Had a Well for 11 Years**

In the village that has had a well for 11 years, similar benefits were reported. One man said, graphically: "We don't like to remember it, but before we had the well, our children used to die."

Interestingly, however, this village was not obviously different from the one that got a well six months ago. It seems that once clean water has been attained, with all the benefits that it brings, a village needs some form of irrigation (which enables two crops to be grown each year) before it takes the next step, economically.

### **4. The Catch-22**

Once a village has clean water, health is improved. Once health is improved (and especially if food security is also improved), fewer children die, and life expectancy increases. As a consequence, population increases rapidly... which puts even more pressure on the land.

In this regard, Ethiopia (and perhaps other parts of Africa as well?) is about half a century behind much of Asia and Latin America. They faced this population explosion problem about 4 to 6 decades ago... but their family sizes have come down as women have become more educated and per capita incomes have risen. In Ethiopian villages, 8 and 10 children per family are still common... Economic development is a long slow process, taking generations, centuries...

In a land as inhospitable and with rains as unpredictable as Ethiopia, it is hard to see how things can be improved. But then, 50 years ago, it was hard to see how things could be improved in China and India, and they are now among the engines of world growth. So one can but hope...

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To finish on a lighter note: Ethiopia is almost the only country in Africa that managed to resist being colonised. The Italians tried to colonise

Ethiopia around 1896, but were beaten back in the mountains of Tigray. The Italians came again under Mussolini, but didn't last long. They have left their mark though. Even in the smallest of towns in the Ethiopian equivalent of the outback, the local restaurant will often have a fully functioning cappuccino machine, with "macchiato" being the drink of choice. And in the local Tigray language, the word for "goodbye" is "Ciao".

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That's all from me.  
I hope you have enjoyed our reports these last six weeks.  
Ciao for now.  
Lots of love,  
David