

## REVIEW

# VISION

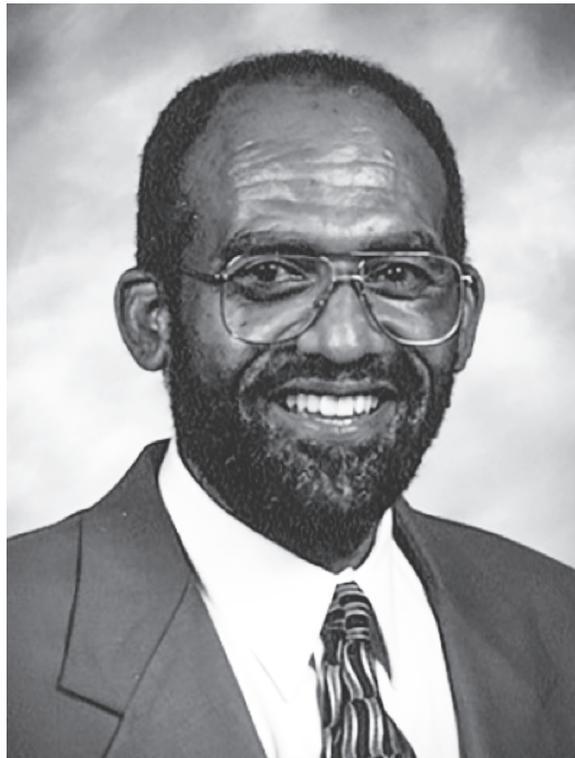
## *A Profile of Adugnaw Worku*

BY NANCY HOYT LECOURT

A slender man in his early seventies paces the stage in a long white shirt and fitted white trousers, the colors of the Ethiopian flag draped across his chest, a yellow band encircling his forehead. His glasses glint in the bright lights of Lakewood Stadium, in Atlanta, as he recites a poem in Amharic to an eager crowd of 30,000 on Ethiopia Day in June 2019.

The poet implores the youthful Ethiopian crowd to recognize the deadly consequences of ethnic animosities, warning that ethnic violence will destroy the delicate fabric of Ethiopian society, reminding them of the common values and aspirations that have kept them together for millennia.

His name is Adugnaw Worku, and he left Ethiopia in



1971 to continue his education in Australia and the United States. Because of his political activism—writing essays, speaking on the radio, sharing poems like this one that the Communist government found troublesome—he was in exile for twenty-nine years, unable to return to his village to visit family and friends for fear of being detained. Education has made him dangerous.

He has led a double life. He is also a mild-mannered Adventist librarian, retired after a long career, most of it as library director at Pacific Union College. His calm, reassuring manner and sense

of humor, with an Ethiopian proverb always at the ready, made him easy to work with, a respected colleague and friend. These two lives—activist poet, academic librarian—did not appear to overlap much. Most of his col-

leagues could not have imagined him on stage, passionately reciting political poems, fearing retribution from the Communist government of Ethiopia.

I first heard Adu tell his life story, or at least part of it, many years ago. But now, with the publication of his autobiography, *The Restless Shepherd*, I have learned many more details of his amazing life, like the kidnapping of his mother (by his father, in a bid to marry her—it worked) and his own near burial as a baby (he was rescued by his grandmother). And these aren't the really amazing parts.

He was born in 1945 in a tiny mud hut in a rural village most easily described by lack: no electricity, no plumbing, no medical care, no schools or shops, no transportation, no mail, only word of mouth communication between villages. The men worked the land, ploughing the fields with oxen. The women cooked over open fires in windowless huts, after grinding grain by hand for eight hours a day. It was the Iron Age, basically. The survival rate for infants was about 50%. For those who lived, there was one destiny: for a girl, an arranged marriage around age twelve (or younger); for a boy like Adugnaw, to become a shepherd at age seven and a farmer at age twelve.

End of story.

But then, when he was fifteen, everything changed—not in the twinkling of an eye, but in the putting out of one, his left, by the branch of a thorn bush while he was walking in the dark with friends. After a few weeks of terrible pain—remember, there is no health care—he starts to understand what his new future holds: he will be a one-eyed subsistence farmer, unable to earn a proper living, mocked behind his back, and called “You ugly, blind you!” to his face. He begins to settle into despair.

Then his father's older brother suggests that he go to the Adventist hospital in the highlands, where the White mission doctors can cure anything. It is two days' walk and he has no shoes. But it is his only salvation. He imagines getting his sight back, his eye healed. His mother gives him a bag of “travelling food” (a roasted mixture of garbanzos and barley), and he finds a group of merchants

who are going his way, so that he can travel safely and not get lost.

He arrives at the mission compound just before sundown and sees electricity for the first time. He is full of questions about the roaring generator and sparkling lights, but the people just tease him for being a country boy. He sleeps fitfully that night; then dawns the day when his life trajectory will take a turn, though not the one he expects:

I woke up early on Monday morning hopeful and nervous. This was the day! This was the moment! . . . I was looking forward to a magical moment of healing and restoration. . . . When I reached the hospital, a gentleman ushered me in and directed me to wait until called. I had never seen a place like this before. (93)

Finally, he was ushered into an examination room, where he saw a White man for the first time: Dr. Christian Hogganvik of Norway, assisted by Mr. Dessie Gudaye, his associate and translator. “Dr. Hogganvik's skin color and his language fascinated me. I had a sense that I could see right through his pink ears.” Dr. Hogganvik asked him many questions and examined his eye. “The moment of truth had arrived. I was a nervous wreck.”

“Finally they turned to me and dropped a bombshell. ‘Young man, I am so sorry to tell you that I cannot help you. Your eye problem is beyond my expertise. I am not an eye specialist. If you can, go to either Asmara or Addis Ababa.’” Adu was stunned. Couldn't the missionary doctors heal every illness? Asmara and Addis Ababa were both a month of walking away—impossible. He left the hospital in tears.

And then, not in the examination room but on the grounds of the mission compound a few minutes later, *then*, came the turning point of his life. He noticed a noisy group of young students playing volleyball or chasing each other; others were quietly reading or writing. He was mesmerized. “I couldn't take my eye off them. They

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were a smartly dressed and healthy-looking bunch. What a marked difference between them and myself.” (94) The spark that would light the fire of his life’s passion was ignited in that moment: “Lucky them! I thought. I was so jealous. I longed to be one of them. While still sitting there, a forbidden thought crossed my mind. . . . I was possessed by a mysterious and powerful emotion that I could not ignore.” He would defy his father, his poverty, and his destiny, and go to school. He prayed, “Dear God, please help me! I need a miracle now. Please help me, dear God!” I prayed that prayer over and over and over. In essence, I was asking God to make the impossible possible.” (95)

With the drive and persistence that he has shown throughout his life, Adu simply pushed ahead with his dream. “At fifteen and a half years old I became a proud first grader.” Most of the rest of this fascinating book tells of the many seemingly insurmountable obstacles on his way to an education, the hunger and hard work, the ingenuity and social skills he deployed to get through elementary school as a penniless student at Adventist mission schools in Ethiopia, and then continue his education at an Ethiopian Adventist boarding academy and then abroad.

Along the way, the power of Christian education became so clear both to Adu and to his family that eventually his two brothers and one sister were able to get an education as well. When his parents paid a surprise visit to him during his eighth-grade year, they realized what education could do:

*For the first time in their lives my parents took a hot bath in a modern bathtub. Also for the first time, they slept in a clean, comfortable bed. We laundered their clothes. . . . They could not believe that life could be so clean, so comfortable, so convenient, and so magical. (140)*

*Using forks and spoons instead of their fingers was also a first for my parents. My father loved sweets, and he ate his dessert with relish. Seeing electric lights for the first time was the ultimate wonder for them. My father’s observation captured what they were experienc-*

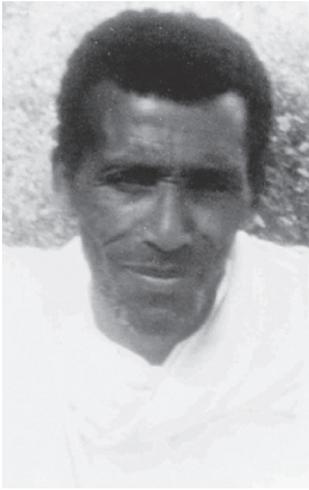
*ing when he said, “These people don’t need to go to paradise; they are already in it. They live fully, but we merely exist.” (141)*

As a result of this visit, Adu’s father decided that his other children should attend school as well. This would be completely unheard of in the village, a radical break with tradition, but both his parents were independent thinkers, and in the end, with the support of a missionary teacher and her family, this new dream came true. “I, for one, was keenly aware that a profound family history was in the making. No one in our village, or the surrounding villages, had sent any of their children to school, much less all their children.” (142)

It would mean a lonely life for his parents, in a culture where family is so important. “They would have no help at home or on the farm, and no one would sympathize with them. In fact, they would be ridiculed for their countercultural decision. . . . Rumors soon circulated that my parents had actually sold their children to foreigners.” But they believed it was their responsibility to give their children the best life they could.

When Adu completed high school in 1970 (at age 25), he decided to continue to attend Adventist schools and was able to fly to Avondale for college. “Explaining my impending departure to Australia was mission impossible. They didn’t even know a country called Australia existed.” (160) There at Avondale, he was introduced to the gospel by Desmond Ford. After graduating, his dream of going to America was finally fulfilled. He enrolled at Andrews University for two master’s degrees and completed his education at age 39 with a third master’s degree in library science from the University of Southern California—even winning USC’s Outstanding Achievement Award for two years running. A long, successful career on the beautiful Napa Valley campus of Pacific Union College, with an educated Ethiopian wife, Zewuditu (whose own story makes a compelling separate chapter), and two intelligent, healthy (and charming) sons was eventually the reward for his hard work.

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Adugnaw Worku's father and mother (in America, right), some of the photos included in his book.



With his education complete in 1984, Adu had longed to return to his village, as promised. But it was not to be. The 1974 coup that overthrew Haile Selassie had resulted in a takeover by a Marxist-Leninist military junta, followed by years of economic instability, famine, and civil war. Adu considers himself a member of a “lost generation in search of itself,” exiles who are “emotionally Ethiopian and intellectually Western, committed to liberal democracy” (206). He became part of the growing Ethiopian diaspora. “In hindsight, returning to Ethiopia would have been an unmitigated disaster. . . . When I read that the communist government in Ethiopia was charging parents for the bullets it used to kill their children . . . I grasped the gravity of the situation as never before” (207). He applied for political asylum, got a work permit, and settled down rather reluctantly.

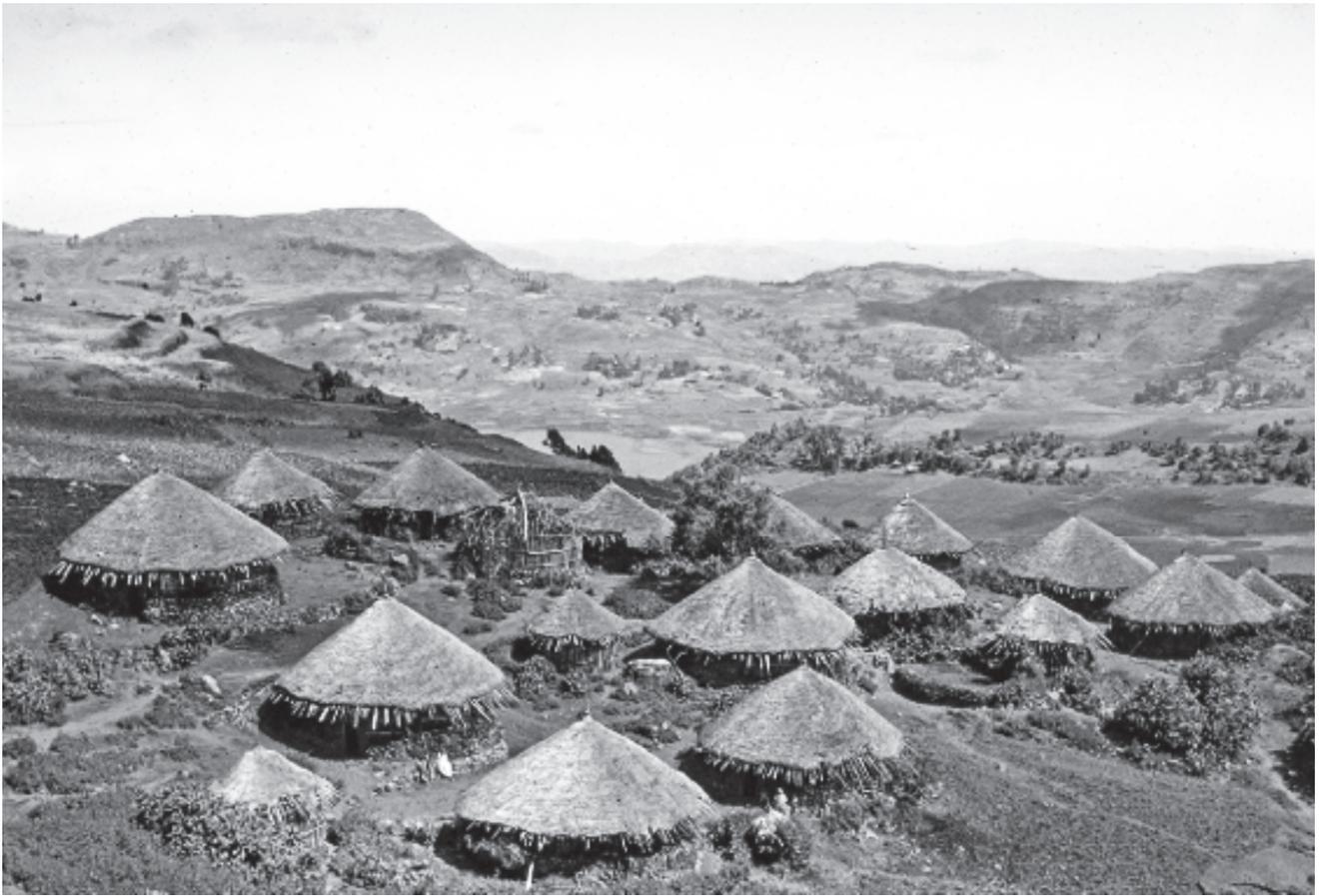
In 1996, Adu renounced his Ethiopian citizenship and became a United States citizen. “I was pleased and proud to be an American citizen, but renouncing my Ethiopian citizenship felt like a stab in the stomach. I felt like a traitor.” (217).

Finally, in 2000, Adu became convinced that the political situation had calmed enough that he could return home for a visit. The presence of so many people who looked and spoke like himself, the sound of doves cooing and Orthodox priests chanting, the smell of his mother’s cooking—everything told him that he was home. He saw the house that he and his family had purchased for his parents, and visited the villages, fields, and hills of his childhood. It was wonderful.

But it was also disturbing. He saw a barren, deforested landscape, empty villages, women still grinding grain

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Worku includes many photos in his book from his childhood (Photos courtesy of Adugnaw Worku).

with stone grinders, cooking on open fires, fetching water from unclean rivers, and travelling farther and farther to find firewood.

Everything was exactly the same as I remembered it decades before. In fact, some things had gotten worse—far worse. . . . The rapid population increase and land nationalization under the communist government [resulted in] family farms . . . reduced to small plots. . . . The level of poverty I saw was much more acute than before (263).

He was also shocked by the continued practice of female genital mutilation, early marriages, and pervasive superstitions. He

had a lengthy argument trying to convince some of the villagers that there was no such thing as the Evil Eye, but they just laughed. “I was convinced more than ever that only education would change hearts and minds and liberate people from baseless, superstitious beliefs. . . . Thank

God for education and its transformative power.” (263)

And thus began his third life, as a philanthropist. Upon his return home to California, he began planning how he could make lasting improvements to the lives of his people in “the old country.” After five years of careful, prayerful planning he found caring people with the financial resources to help fund his dreams. He created a team on the ground to design the projects, get cost estimates, and implement construction, with “accountability,

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sustainability, and transparency” as the guiding principles. High expectations and regular inspections, honesty and integrity—these were the methods. The team also cultivated local ownership and responsibility. “Once projects were complete we would hand them over to the community and walk away.”

He began with water. In 2005–06 he and the team were able to dig three community water wells, and a fourth for the elementary school. “For the first time ever, the villagers had access to clean water close to home.” Next came tuition, room, board, and supplies for twenty-three outstanding students. Then in 2007, one of his agents on the ground asked him to consider building a high school in the village.

It seemed impossible at first, but in 2009 a donor caught the vision and the project began. In five months, Adu’s team built an administration building, offices for faculty and staff, and a large classroom building. Local government provided teachers, administrators, furniture, and supplies. “This was team work at its best. . . . When school opened in mid-September, 233 ninth graders, of whom girls outnumbered boys by 33, showed up.”



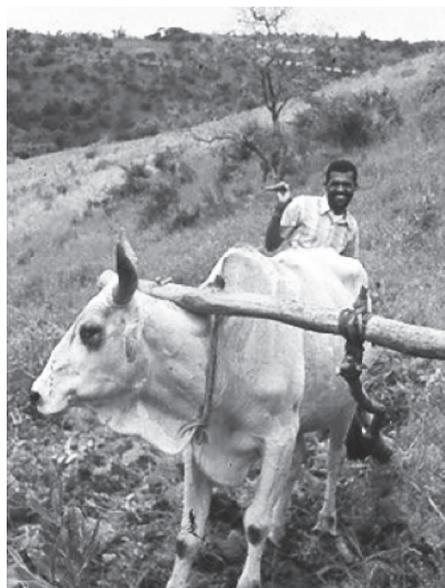
Worku’s grandmother Enkua-Honech and Worku’s parents in front of his grandmother’s hut where he was born.

when the high school was completed, Adu and Zewuditu, along with some donors, returned to visit the school. Adu received a hero’s welcome.

The ceremonies and speechifying, the feasting and dancing, were overwhelming, but the most intense moment came when Adu asked for his relatives and childhood friends to gather with him in the center of the field. “I had not seen many of them for more than four decades.” Many he did not recognize. “Some . . . had poor eyesight. Others had gone blind altogether.” Yet they had travelled miles to be there that day. They reminisced about shepherding, remembered playing games together, and recalled those who were no longer among the living.

Adu couldn’t help comparing his own comfortable and fulfilling life to theirs. “Education in my case, and a lack thereof in theirs, had made all the difference. We were all keenly aware that the school we had built would make a huge difference for their grandchildren and for generations to come.” (276)

And so, at last, Adu’s story comes full circle and his theme resonates into the future: the power of education to change lives. With his parents’ deaths he feels keenly his responsibility to assume their mantle of responsibility to help his people. “Going forward, my primary mission is to help as many rural Ethiopians as I possibly can, especially women and girls, so that they can achieve literacy, independence, and freedom from harmful practices. Education is key.” (280) (For more details, visit the



Worku’s sister Wudie (far left) and his family’s farm (right).



Worku with Demamu, his first grade teacher (left) and Worku with his wife and sons (right).



Zoz Amba Foundation website at <http://zozamba.org>.) Through a variety of community partnerships, he and Zewuditu are committed to the eradication of female genital mutilation and early marriage.

We will also endeavor to provide women and girls with access to clean water, modern flour mills, feminine pads, and ongoing training in basic health, hygiene, and nutrition. Above all, we will try to make sure that girls stay in school and graduate. Only then will they be able to make sustainable change in their lives and in community attitudes. (280–81)

Yet amidst all the positive changes for his own life, his family's, and now that of his village, there is also the ambiguity of loss. While Adu's life struggle, in some respects, was to escape the confines of traditional culture, he is also well aware of its strengths:

Freely expressing affection without sexual connotation, respecting our elders, looking after our neighbors, taking care of strangers, sharing

what we have with others, visiting the sick, attending funerals, socializing with everyone, and raising children together are some of our traditional core values. (192)

In the end, Adu remains “a peasant” (224). “For reasons I can't fully explain, I am neither comfortable with nor do I fully appreciate urban culture.” While he appreciates the easy convenience of modern life, and values education above all, he still prefers the simple things of rural life, and sees the limitations of the fast-paced, materialistic lifestyle in the Global North. “I remain Ethiopian to my core,” he says—and by the end of *The Restless Shepherd*, we understand why.



NANCY HOYT LECOURT, PhD, is a professor of English, academic dean, and vice president emerita at Pacific Union College, where she served for forty years. She has recently retired to her garden in Angwin, California.