

Kechene,
Addis Ababa,
Ethiopia.

RESEARCH BOOKLET

A COMPANION TO MENGESTE

2020

The aim of this booklet is to provide the reader of the graphic novel with a glimpse of the behind-the-scenes work. The hidden research on which the novel is based is revealed here as a series of commented images reporting the research methods and the analysis that constituted the final work.

The graphic novel tries to capture the ever-changing essence of Kechene, a district of Addis Ababa, through representations of everyday life in the *sefer*. We begin by stating that human life shapes its environment as much as it gets shaped back. Therefore, the main goal of this work is not only to represent architectural qualities and spatial relationship, but also to reveal the hidden narratives of ordinary stories. However, as we came to understand there is no such thing as an ordinary life, for even the most banal ones can become an incredible story.

By Antonio Paoletti, Casper Pasveer,
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Indeed, the story becomes more than an excuse to take us through the streets of Kechene being part of the architectural narratives of the sefer itself. Moreover, the novel is based on real stories and events that we recorded during several interviews with the residents. The narrative is structured in two handwritten letters, one from our protagonist to the government and the other from his wife to himself. As it is, the male protagonist of the story wrote to the Kebele administration to receive a house for his family during his military service. The letter from his wife narrates the transformations the sefer has gone through while he is stationed near Eritrea. In the final scene, the main character is depicted during our conversation with him and he tells us the last part of its story.

We believe that the story is both a unique account and a collective memory. Indeed, Addis Ababa is a city constituted by migrants that all lived through political instabilities. His life story depicts one that many Ethiopians have lived.

STRUCTURE



The novel begins with a letter addressed to the government that the protagonist, being illiterate, has to dictate to his comrade. In his letter, Mengeste tells his story and describes the situation of his family. He believed that his position as a soldier for the regime would have given him the right to receive a grant to build a house for his wife.

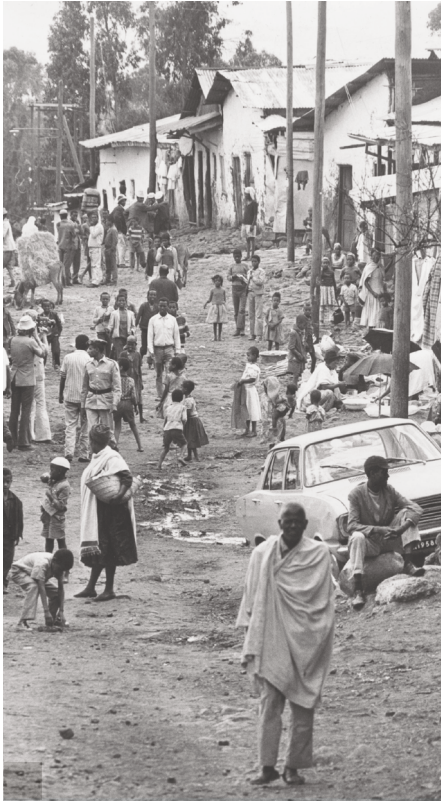
His story begins with his migration from a rural area to the capital city. After having traveled by foot and bus for over two days he reaches Addis Ababa. On his journey to Addis Ababa he brought with him, seeds to sell for a bus ticket, and a leather satchet used to contain Injera (sourdough pancake). We found his satchet still hanging in his home today 40 years later. During his journey to Addis Ababa he would pass the night on people's verandas. Finally, he catches the bus for the last part of his journey and finds himself arriving at his uncles house in Kechene during the sixties.

1. Lunchbox/leather satchet that was used to carry Injera during the travel to Addis Ababa.



2. A street in Addis Ababa during the 1970s. (The Guardian, 2017.)

3. Bus arriving in Addis Ababa during 1960s. (www.clbxg.com, n.a)



The following pages give a deeper understanding on various objects which we decided to include in the graphic novel.





Mengeste ended up marrying someone exactly from the sefer where he was living. We imagined this encountered to happen in the local church so as to capture the relevance of those places as encouraging social encounters. Indeed, when you find yourself walking through the bustling car-intensive roads of Kechene and entering the church-ground, it feels like an oasis in a chaotic city. The lack of public spaces and green areas makes the church-grounds something more than a sacred precinct and a space for worship. The greenery that embraces these spaces often attract locals to come and hang around, talk or recreate in other ways.





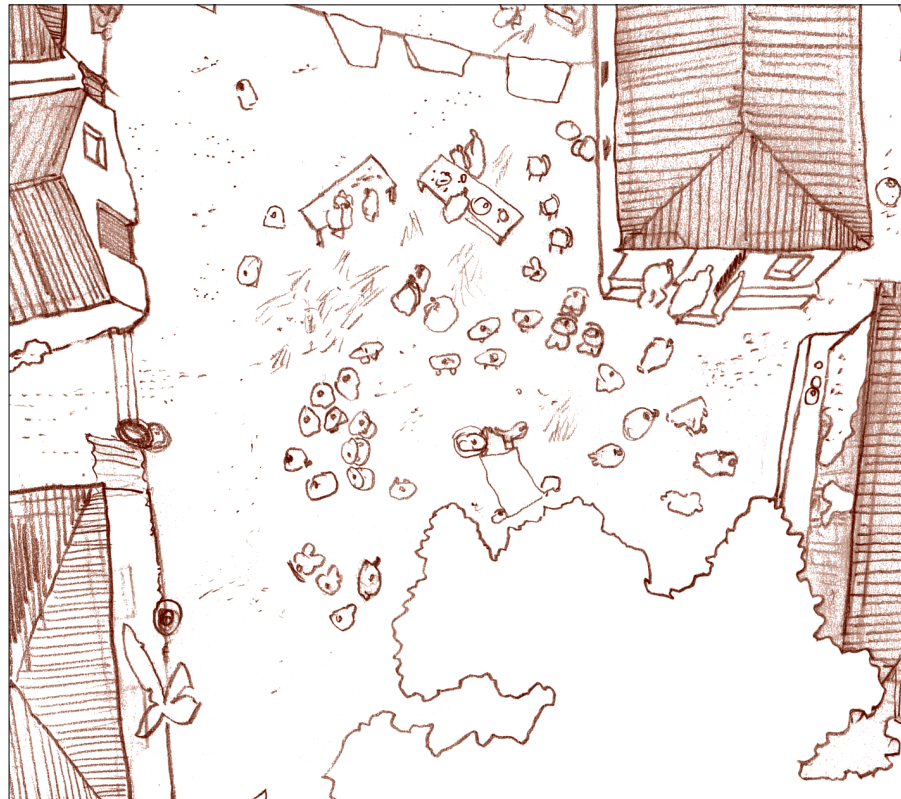
The courtyard is also used for social gatherings such as marriages and funerals. In this scene we highlighted the moment in which Mengeste married his wife. The courtyard perspective shows a gathering of families and friends. We were inspired to create this scene as it depicts a moment in which the courtyard is also open to family and friends from other *woredas* (districts). The elders are traditionally the individuals who decide when and where the ceremony should take place by brewing wine beer and cooking food (Solomon, K. 2003). The wedding ceremony starts with dance, music and the bride's parents give the groom a dowry, in most cases money and cattle. (Kebede, M. 2017)

top: A traditional Ethiopian wedding in Addis Ababa, 1936. (The Central Zionist Archives. N.A)

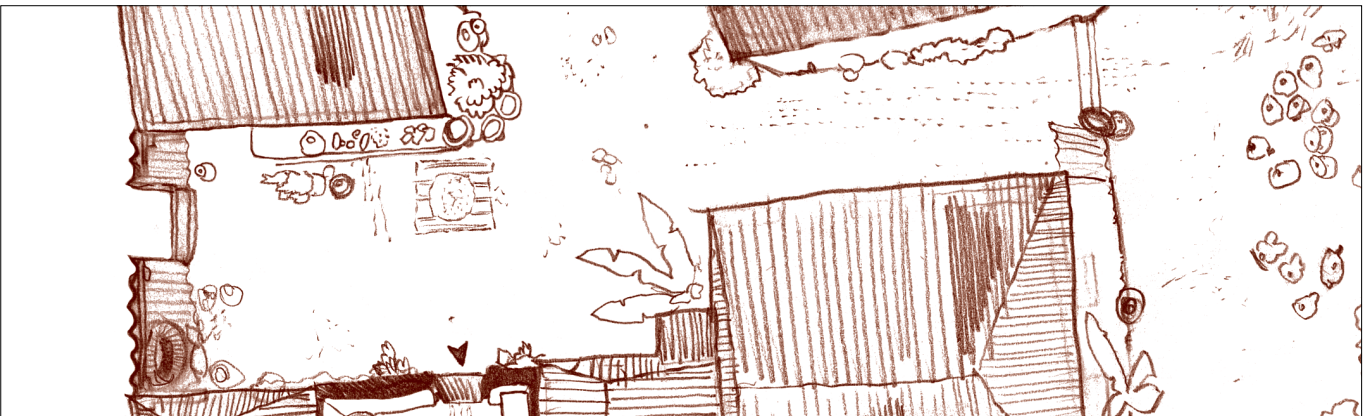
bottom: A traditional Ethiopian wedding near Addis Ababa, 1936 (The Central Zionist Archives. N.A)



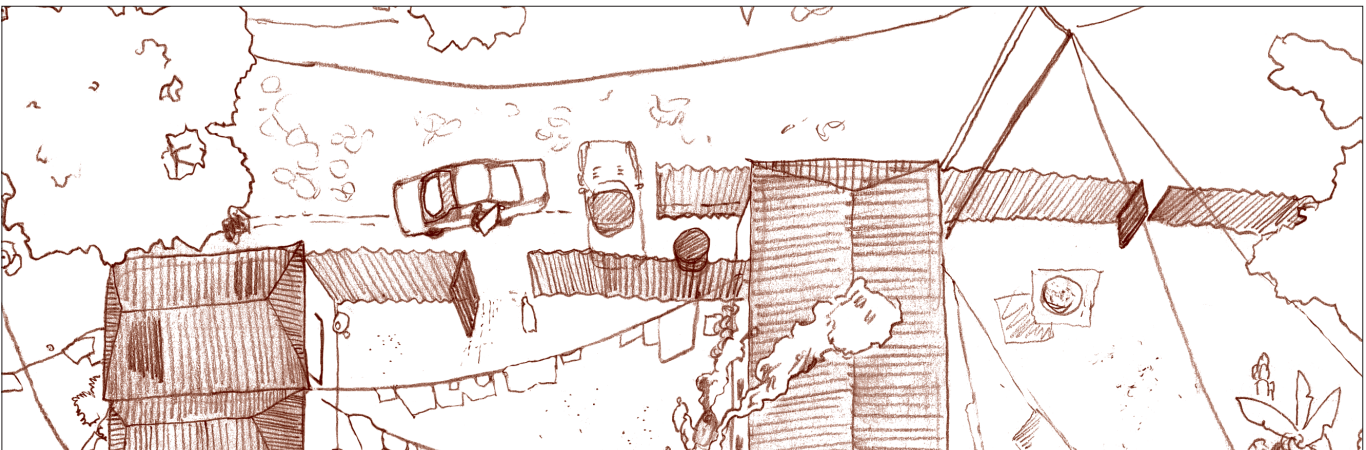
First courtyard scene, impression of the courtyard during a wedding ceremony



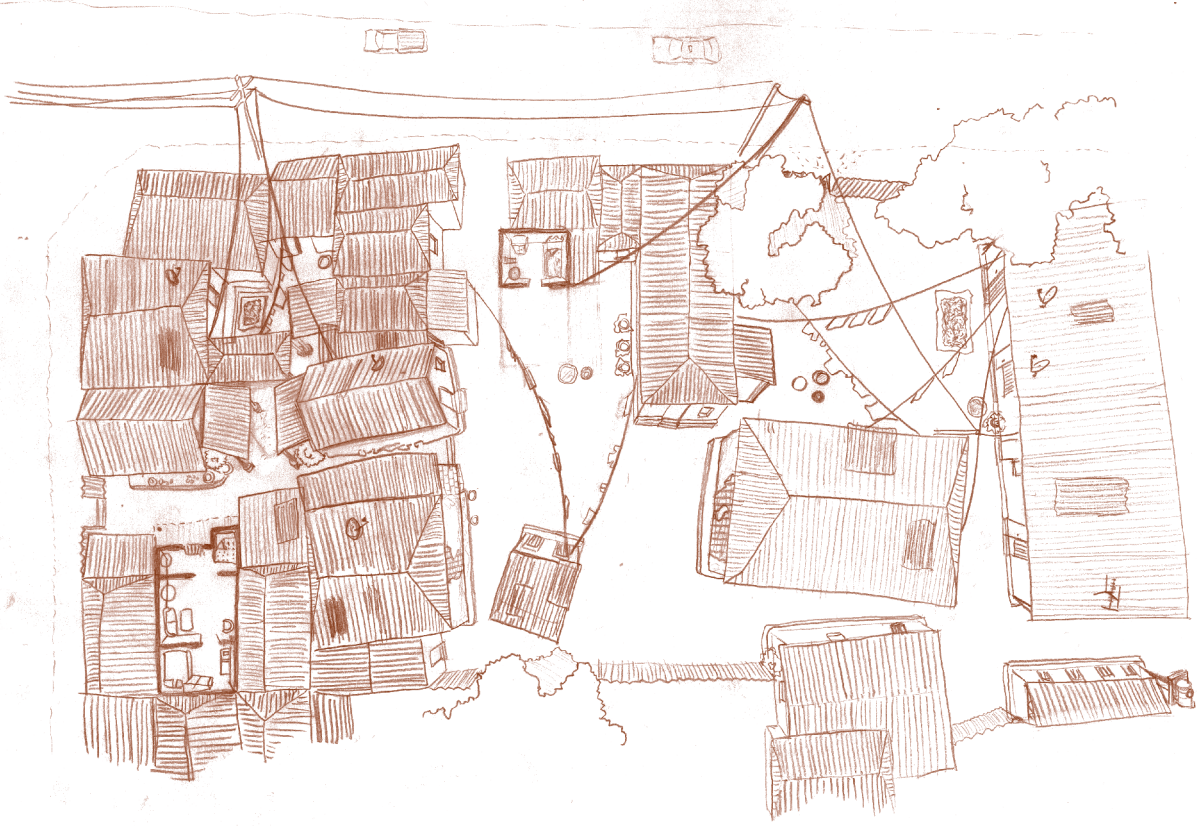








1. Most courtyards in Kechene have shared toilets and showering is usually done with buckets of water inside the homes.

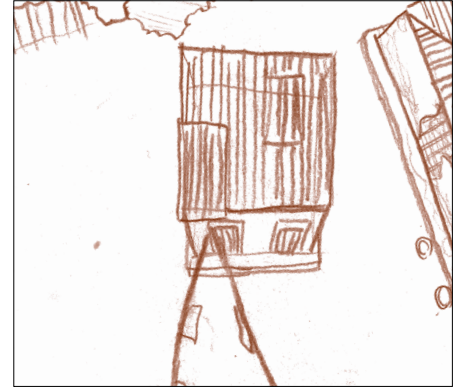
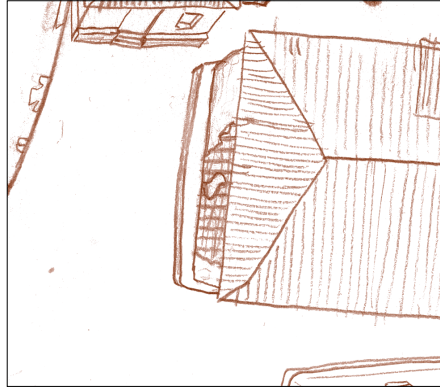


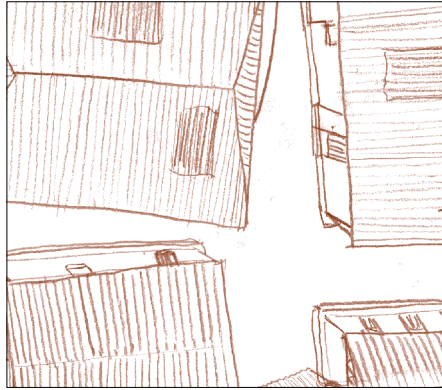
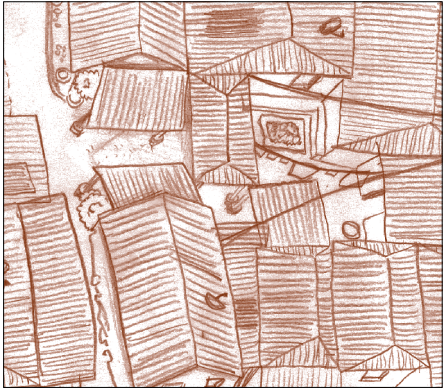
4. Bathrooms with antiseptic tanks, shared by 7 families. The antiseptic tanks get emptied every two weeks.



INTERIOR ANALYSIS

Chika construction (mud straw composition held together with light wood eucalyptus construction)



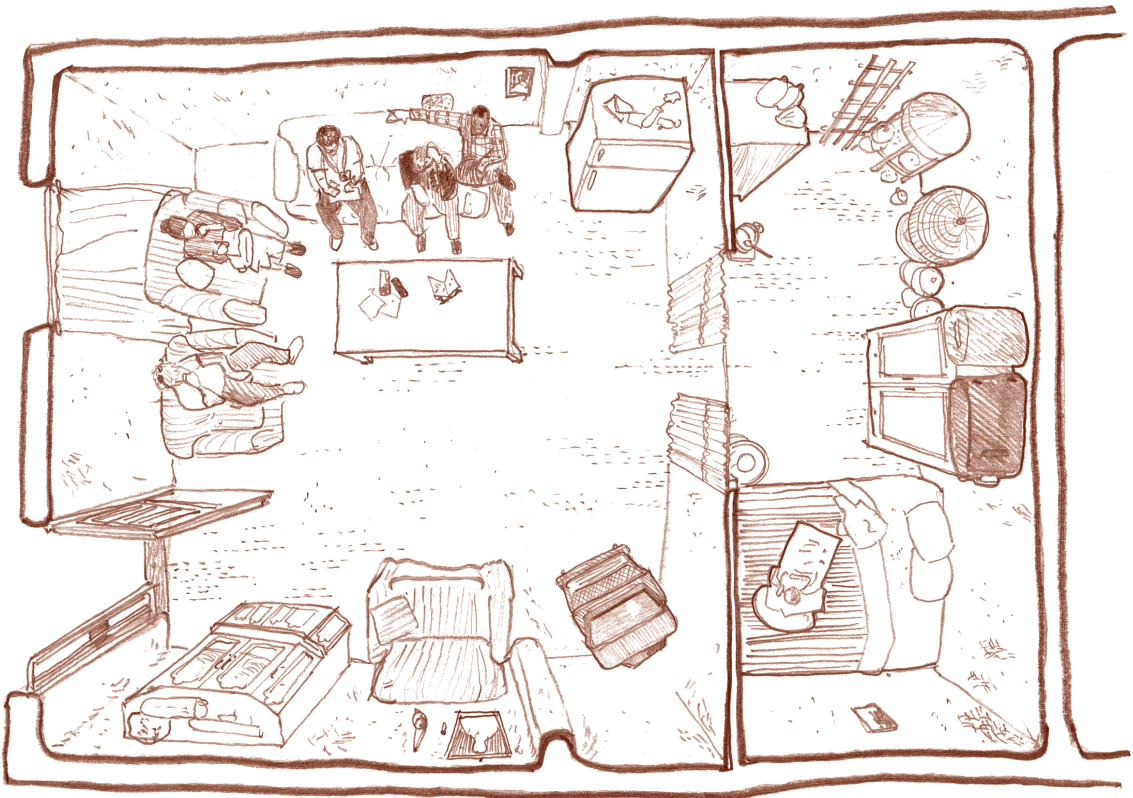


Construction elements mainly consist of *chika* (mud and straw) using light wood structure and corrugated steel panels. Often bedded on a concrete/aggregate foundation.

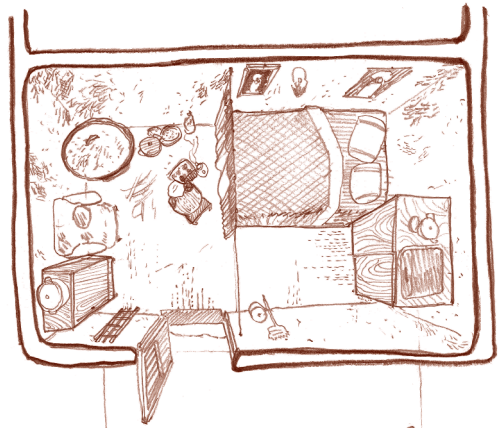


A typical dwelling which the novel portrayed as the initial home that was built for the protagonist wife. It consisted of a sleeping area and cooking area. A space devoted to cooking showing the Injera stove, a gas cooker, pots, pans and plastic containers.





Impression of the house that Mengete got constructed during his service as a soldier. It comprises of a bedroom and kitchen divided by a curtain. The figure examines some typical objects which were found in these homes.



The Ladder to get to the attic. The attic has a height of around 70cm. Besides being a storage space, it can have mattresses for people to sleep on.

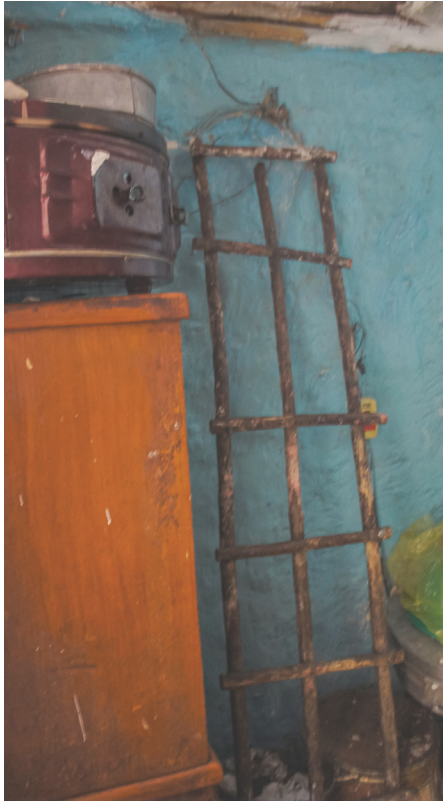


The traditional **jebena**. The jebena is usually made of clay and is used to brew coffee.



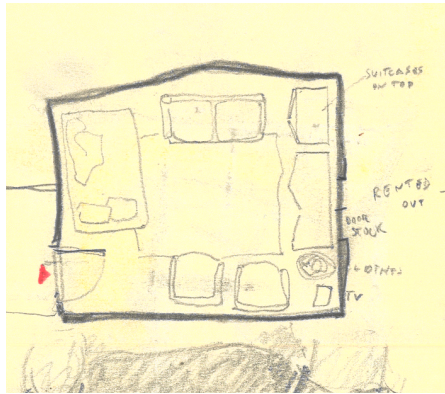
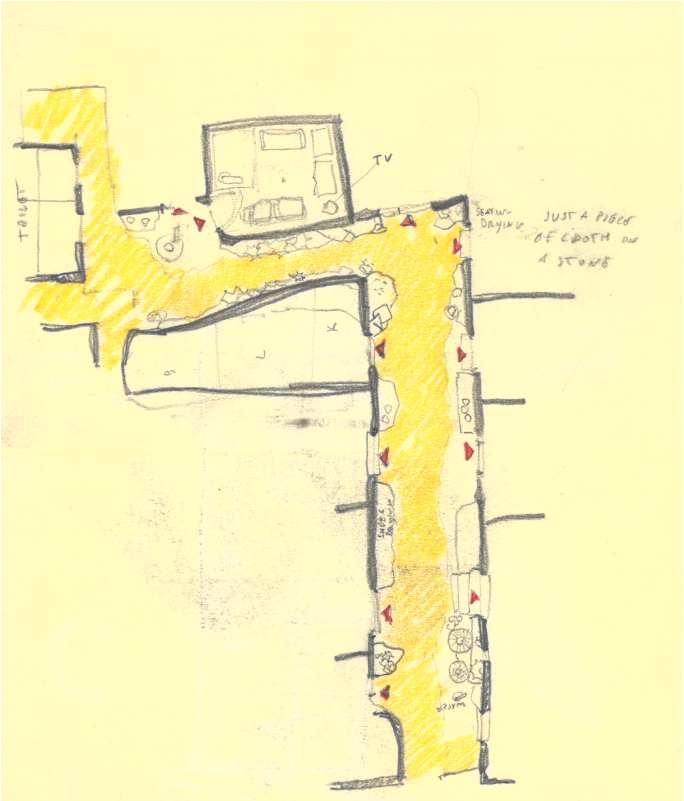
The **mesob**. Used for storing or serving injera.

The **prayer stick**. Most commonly used by elderly priests, monks, nuns and churchgoers, but also used during chanting and other worship events.





This lady has lived in Kechene most of her life. She lost her husband due to the civil war. She now lives by herself and works multiple jobs. She used to cook food for organizations such as EiABC. She now earns an income by washing clothes, while also renting out an extension to her home. The extension has its own entrance and the transition between the rooms is partitioned by a closet.



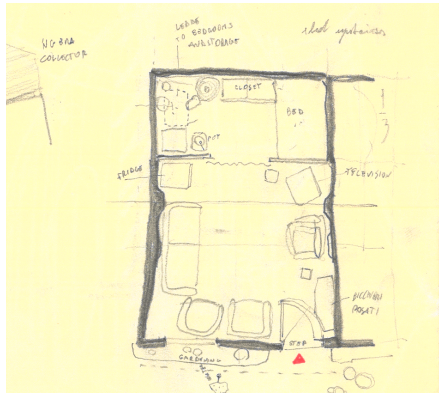


We named this man “Mengeste”, the inspiration for our protagonist, standing in the doorway of the house he got built during his service near Eritrea. He recalls moving to Addis Ababa after leaving his parent’s teff farm at age 18. He is now the neighborhood elder, and provides shelter to friends and relatives which made the same decision that he made when he was a boy. His life stories inspired many parts of the graphic novel. The experiences conveyed feelings which many Ethiopians have been through, especially for those migrating to Addis Ababa.

Framed picture of younger *Mengeste* found hanging in the living room.



Our impression of Mengeste and a plan impression of his current home.







How did you use to communicate with your wife while you were a soldier?

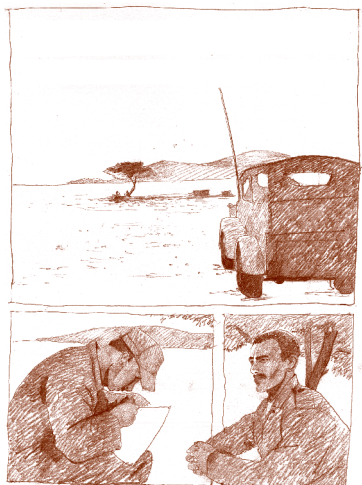
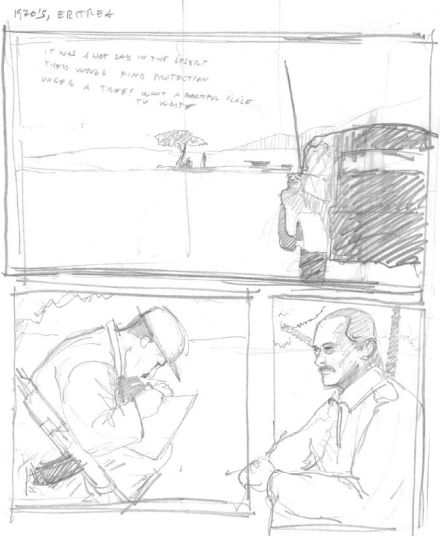
By letters.

Would you write those?

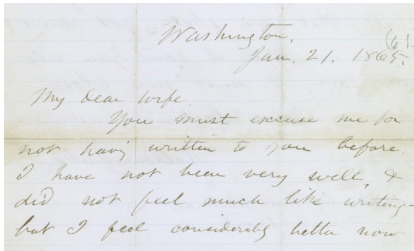
I cannot write nor read myself and neither my wife could. A friend would help me. Different neighbors were helping her.

In which situation were you writing more often? Were you in your room or in a camp? Was it mostly during night-time or day-time?

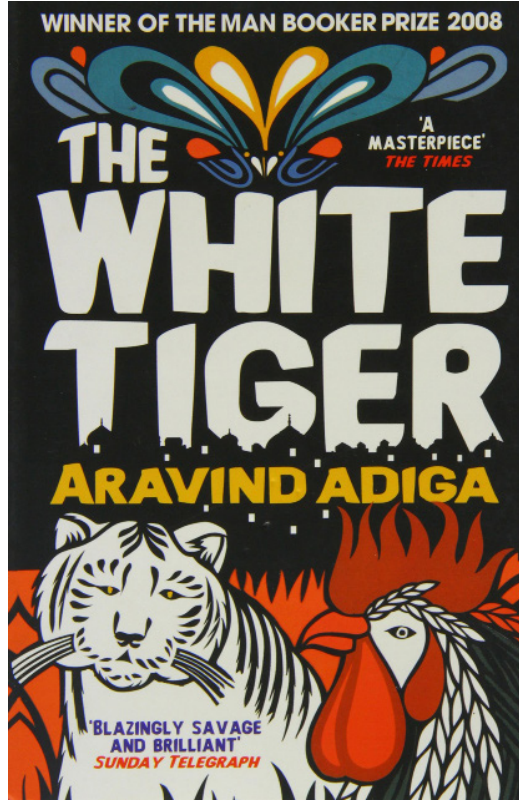
It was so hot in that desert... but there was a tree under which we would meet. I use to tell to this comrade what I wanted to tell her. He would write.

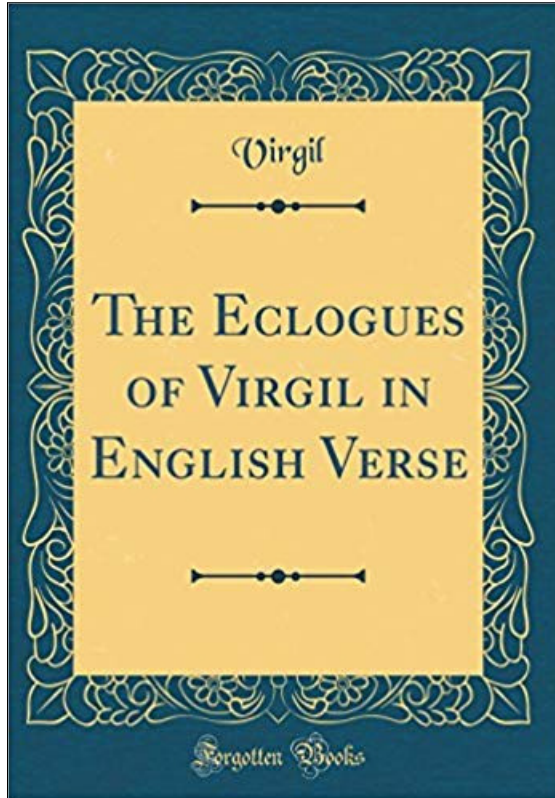


His description of those situations conveyed such a beautiful image that we could really see it. Those letters naturally became the main element for the narrative structure of the story. The first letter to the administration gave us the possibility to tell his story in a way that he would never write to his wife. The use of this narrative technique was also inspired by the famous book “The White Tiger” by Aravind Adiga, in which the protagonist writes the story of his life in a letter addressed to the Chinese Premier. Furthermore, we based our letters on real hand-written communications of illiterate soldiers during war periods.



Walt Whitman's Letter For A Dying Soldier To His Wife Discovered



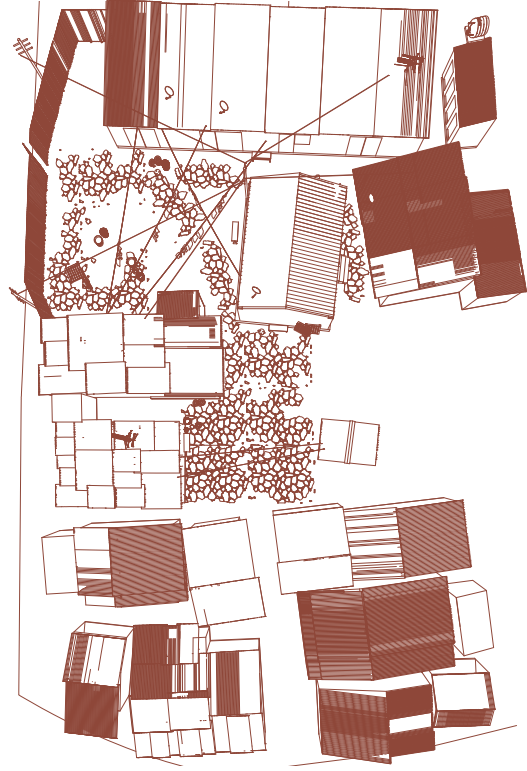


Envisioning Mengeste's arrival in Addis Ababa was a challenging task for us. For we had to picture and understand someone coming from rural Ethiopia and arriving in an urban environment which he had only heard stories about. He could have expected a large town from what they told him. But what did that really entail? an extra butcher? more tailors? two churches instead of one?

Mengeste's arrival was inspired by Virgil's Eclogues. A scene where rural inhabitants Meliboeus and Tityrus converse about Tityrus's first impression of reaching a city called Rome.

Tityrus:

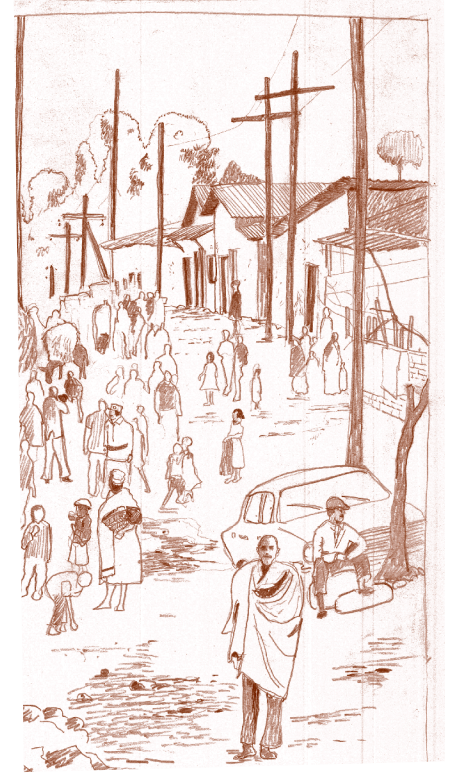
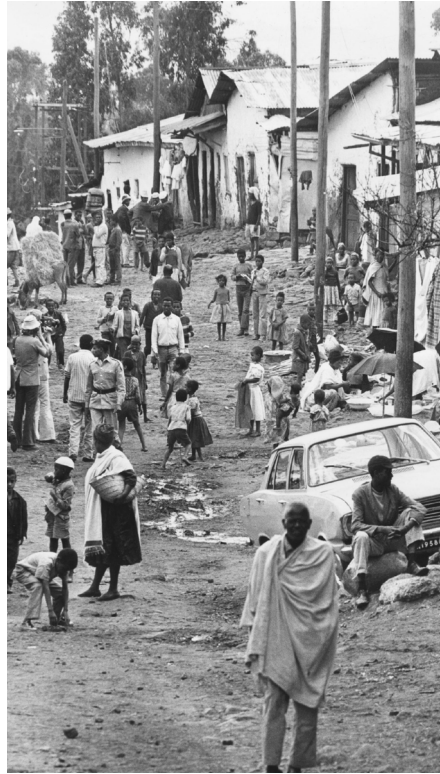
*"The city, Meliboeus, they call Rome,
I, simpleton, deemed like this town of ours,
whereto we shepherds oft are wont to drive,
The younglings of the flock: so too I knew
Whelps to resemble dogs, and kids their dams,
Comparing small with great; but this as far
Above all other cities rears her head
As cypress above pliant osier towers."*





Tracing historical images might represent a practice that produces a particular kind of knowledge. Indeed, by copying those pictures portraying old realities one has to linger on each and every detail. In general, what you can see with a pencil might be much more than what your eyes can make you see.

Copying is an age-old method for understanding a drawing and one that -in this age of mechanical or digital reproduction (with a nod to the famous Walter Benjamin essay) is often overlooked but retracing a well-known drawing is an excellent way to interrogate it, approaching drawing on its own terms and examining qualities of composition, proportion, line quality and shade.¹



¹Ray Lucas. (2016). p.183

Working process

Development of scenes





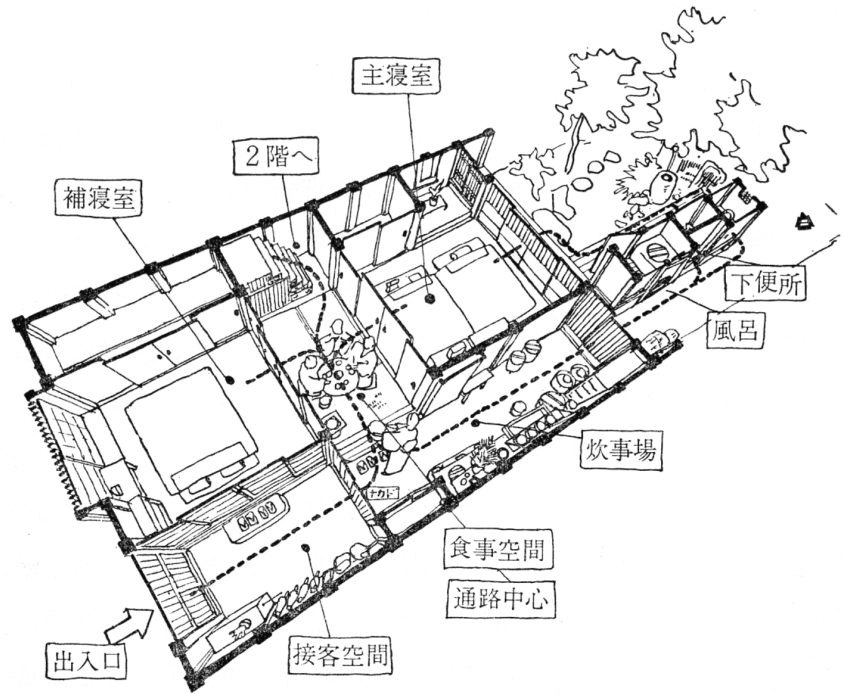
As it often happens in historical moments characterized by rapid change when even the present seems to be vanishing, it appeared urgent to record every detail of the urban life and Wajiro sketched it, “from the signs drawn on pieces of scrap wood to the kinds of clothes worn by people passing through the town, he made sketches of whatever he saw.”

We cannot find the field of academic subjects such as “life” or “lifestyle” among the existing specialized departments. However, there is a researcher who continues to do one unique activity. Right now it is said that Kon Wajiro’s “science of lifestyle” is an academic discipline to take up such a problem.²

² Uzo, Nishiyama. (1971).

Uzo Nishiyama, a generation younger than Wajiro, “is a descendant of these figures in that he recorded human life in detail”³. However, while Wajiro’s narrative follows the movements of a methodical figure that investigates the space step by step, Nishiyama’s drawings are characterized by synthetic perspectives planes cutting through a construction in which every detail is registered from a distant view.

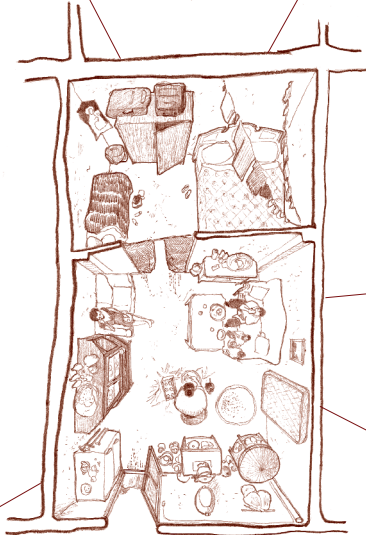
In Nishiyama’s detached perspectives the opportunity to introduce moments of pause and transform his scientific notations into a collection of memories and anecdotes revealing details of life.



³Hiroshi Nakabayashi. (2018). p.2

LIKE MANY OTHERS IN KECHENE, ON THE TOP OF THE CLOSETS, WE USED TO HAVE SEVERAL SUITCASES. SOMETIMES A RELATIVE WORKING SOMEWHERE ELSE WAS VISITING US; SOMETIMES WE WERE VISITING THEM. WE ARE ALWAYS ON THE MOVE!

SMALL PIECES OF WHITE CLOTHES WERE OFTEN HANGING ABOVE THE BED OF MY AUNT AND UNCLE.



THAT CENTRAL SPACE IS ALWAYS THE MOST IMPORTANT ONE IN THE HOUSE. EVEN IN THE COURTYSIDE WHERE I COME FROM, YOU CAN FIND SIMILAR ARRANGEMENTS OF THE FURNITURE TO SIT ALL TOGETHER.

MY PLACE TO SLEEP IN MY UNCLE'S HOUSE WAS A MATTRES LEANING AGAINST THE WALL BY DAY...

IN THE LEFT CORNER, THE BRIDE... WAIT, THAT'S NOT POSSIBLE! IF MEMORY SERVES, IN THAT CORNER THERE WAS NOTHING. MAYBE TODAY MY COUSIN HAS ONE THERE...

IN A CORNER OF THE HOUSE MY AUNT USED TO HAVE THE KITCHEN EQUIPMENT.

HANGING ON THE WALL THERE WAS A BASIN THAT SHE USED TO CLEAN THE KITCHENWARE.

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Table of images

A street in Addis Ababa during the 1970s [Photograph]

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Bus arriving in Addis Ababa during 1960s [Photograph]

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A traditional Ethiopian wedding in Addis Ababa, 1936 [Photograph]

The Central Zionist Archives. (N.A). *The Viterbo Collection*. Retrieved from: [http://www.zionistarchives.org.il/en/Pages/witerbu.aspx#!prettyPhoto\[horizontal\]/11/](http://www.zionistarchives.org.il/en/Pages/witerbu.aspx#!prettyPhoto[horizontal]/11/)

A traditional Ethiopian wedding near Addis Ababa, 1936 [Photograph]

The Central Zionist Archives. (N.A). *The Viterbo Collection*. Retrieved from: [http://www.zionistarchives.org.il/en/Pages/witerbu.aspx#!prettyPhoto\[horizontal\]/12/](http://www.zionistarchives.org.il/en/Pages/witerbu.aspx#!prettyPhoto[horizontal]/12/)

Aerial of Kechene showing the urban fabric of the sefer. [Photograph]

Brook Teklehaimanot. (2019). *Aerial of Kechene showing the urban fabric of the sefer*. Retrieved January 18, 2020.

Walt Whitman’s Letter For A Dying Soldier To His Wife Discovered. [Photograph]

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