

Stranger to differences: *by Haregwein Sileshi, Minneapolis MN Dec-2007.*

Hey, what can I say? I am one of those types of people who love their forefathers' traditions (shhhhh---some of them) and explore every opportunity to advance it in whatever direction I could use them to promote my nationality. Specifically, if someone is trying to undermine my tradition, I am all for tolerances alright, trust me. But my friends in America should know better to try and make a genuine effort to understand or know my traditions, as I do to know theirs. Or just leave it alone! Don't ask don't tell works for me! In my a little less than ten years of adapting, the same time introducing my tradition, both give and take kind of journey, in US, I have encountered so many funny, sad, a complete ignorance, naïveté's, pure innocence....the list keeps going, you got the idea, right? I hope you do. Otherwise as if it needs more complications you will make my job of describing these experiences more difficult.

Let us first talk about the bad once. Because those are the one who shapes us the most! Making us all strong and everything! Remember Darwin's the strong survive kind of theory? I completely disagree with him, but whenever makes sense to me, socially, I apply it. And unwittingly gave it a new name "**surviving traditionally.**" My first, noteworthy encounter was in NY, Long Island. I really don't remember the name of the place; it was a place of work. But let me tell you this; if you think I forgot because it has been a while, you are mistaken! I made every effort in my power to forget all about that desolated place. Cheer for me I am successful on that front. Forgetting everything about its' existence; except that I would like to share this little incident with you.

Mind you, it was my first job. Was hired, and went through all kinds of silly, redundant training procedures (it was just mail order filling job) all that crap, and despite arriving from Africa, I was quickly good at it. Unlike the person who trained me; my immediate supervisor wholeheartedly disagreed with this fact and was obviously not happy. Especially after she learned that, I am new to the country and with thick accent, as she calls it (she was on vacation when I started. She came after a few days). Her plan was simple and clear. Delight herself by finding errors and make me unhappy. What a terrible mistake, on her part?

She was one miserable woman who earned her income by snooping around, by spying on your shoulder, by playing hides and seeks. You think it is with someone? No. with her own shadow! The good old rumor book was opened and was recited to me. It was obvious that she master-mindfully(as if it needs one) splits her time between snooping and reporting every little detail on everyone on our floor. Simply she is the black shadow! She was fearless, shameless, and actually in a way proud, to put new employees like me in their place. She was hated by every soul on that place; I was encouraged to hate her too. A few of my friends warned me of her behavior, filled me with all kinds of facts and rumor checklists. Against my wait and see nature I quickly developed resentment of her personality. Not sure if I showed it though. Evidently she made all kinds of inspection, some, of course, overzealously to find mistakes so she can reprimand me. After all, didn't I just arrive from the jungle of Africa? What do I know? I said to myself. She is the predator, and I am the little helpless victim! Oh, my! Get over it! I am applying African's survival theory; you know the one in the jungle?

It was only probably less than six weeks (I forgot that too!) since I flew over the Statue of Liberty with her glorious slogan ringing in my ears, and landed at the vast and breathtaking JFK.

*"Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp besides the golden gate"*

Sure enough I spent one beautiful Saturday to make sure that these things are indeed written, and the Statue of Liberty was indeed a real thing! It was. It was my way of checking out America's too many greatness & civilizations claims. I was satisfied with my findings. The idea of a dress made out of Copper was fascinating. I could easily see the years mark on it, and well, for me it added more beauty, and certainly the design and the way she wore her dress was commendable and elegant. I touched it and I felt proud to be in America. I was

trilled by the sheer factor of finally, one historical word, which was real meaningful to so many people is rooted deeply to my unfortunate past, who made me flee my beloved motherland, and is encompassed into my future. Now, it belongs to me. "...yearning to breath free" I quickly rewritten the word in my head, for me, "yearning to find opportunity!" So I took the lady Liberty message from my heart, and right there I fell in love with her. To show my love I climbed those suffocated stairs all the way up to the top, against my hostess advice. Took as much pictures as I could, although most of them turned out to be real dark, and useless. What a bummer! Digital camera was unheard at that time.

Sorry, I got carried away. Anyways, my snoop supervisor gave me those dumbfounded, and fake, 32+ ear to ear smiles every minute of the day. After learning this fascinating style of hers I kept getting a knot in my stomach by looking at her, just once. Everything about her was screaming she was up to some odd balls with me. I didn't really care a bit. I was determined to pour the world of confidence towards succeeding on my assembly job and prevail yet again another Americans' slogan, "*Work hard and someday, you will live American Dream*" I am yet to find out what that dream is, but I am working on it. Hey, besides, who is thinking and wasting time on a crappy supervisor? While as I was thirsty, and hungry to see and hold, touch and smell the green thing for the first time in my life! Oh, boy. Have I not planned, budgeted, got all kinds of colorful saving plans and everything else in between in my feisty little head! Have I not, make a list of things that I will buy for myself? Have I not made a very long list of people that could use green dough here and there? Oh yes that is back home. Have I not planned to become the most giving and generous person of the year in my little circle? I was determined to ignore her.

Forgive me, but I really don't remember if it was the first or second week at my job. It doesn't really matter. But it was ye-Sene Tsome, and I had to bring lunch with me. It was Enjera. I said my prayer and was on my first trip to my mouth. Just about then my supervisor came to eat lunch with her superior, who was suckling and looked pre-occupied with whatever this supervisor of mine was saying; rest assured it must have been new or re-fabricated gossip. But suddenly my supervisor gasped for air making a weird noise, her mouth dropped, her eyes popped out, her two hands spread in both direction like some sort of large bird, uncertain if he could fly. I am being very kind here, okay. Because, I assure you there is no bird that looks very silly the way she did with her plastic bagged Celery and Carrot lunch hanging from each side. The sudden abrupt action forced the other women to follow the direction where the eye popping is caused. Quickly she appeared to be amazed by what she saw. Sure enough she made a face too. I can't possibly describe it now, because I forgot. All I remember was she put her gigantic hands over her mouth, and kept rubbing it. It is my recollection, and my only conclusion I could reach, it was from nervousness. I didn't hear but, thinking back, she probably whispered, "Poor thing!"

A few dreading minutes passed. Hell not for me, for them two. Then she slowly collects herself and started walking towards me, the other lady was following right behind, hovering like a badly hurt Eagle. By the time she reached my table her hands from the sudden sprang to the two opposite directions came to their habitual place. Collecting them was quite a task, I guess, because when she reached my table her hands were so deep in her armpits. Thinking that is something she will eat any minute I was disgusted by it. After learning why she was disgusted by me, I said there was a perfect balance. It only makes sense. They were appalled by my savage-ic culture of eating by hand; I was erupting inside me with some sort of unsettling feeling, by not so hygienic lunch that she was planning to consume. I forced myself to put this thought a side and I said smiling genuinely, and invitingly "*Hi. I am eating lunch, would you like to join me?*" Why I invited her? Because it is my tradition to share what you eat. I told I am all about respecting my tradition even if it is a strange thing to do in US soil. Do you think I will have enough of that look? And oh boy, would I ever forget it? Now looking back, she was basically telling me, "*Are you serious? Get a grip of yourself? Do you know what you are saying?*" and I kept nodding and pointing to the chairs, and kept repeating there was enough food for all of us. How naïve and backward was I? Inviting these two well groomed and civilized people into my own little 18<sup>th</sup> or may be 15<sup>th</sup> century lifestyle? Desplicable!

Without taking my eyes off of them, and appearing completely innocent I wiped my fingers on the napkin. The napkin quickly crumbled to a sorry looking shape and turned into all sorts of colors from the Alecha and Berber wot that I was eating. She rolled her eyes (at that time, I didn't really know what rolling eyes means), slammed her Carrot and Celery on the table, as if hitting me with the stick, just like what we did in Africa. I later learned that she was a vegetarian, but I suspect she was saving money, and of course, that too is my African style of evaluating the situation. She pushed her long hair back and brought it forward with the same push and pull whirl, and grinned at me. And there and then I learned something isn't right. I kept thinking; what have I done to anger her like this? Have I punched out lunch in the wrong time of the day? Have I forgotten to punch out all together? I kept raking my brain for answers. She squinted her eyes, I guess to show how disgusted she was, and said "*Harri (they call me Harri, or Harriet), what are you eating? And why in the world are you eating by hand?*" By now, I know she was trying very hard to stay calm and friendly. "Oh, that" I said to myself. I was assessing her, as if to prolong the agony she has to go through before hearing my reply. I said to myself, "relax". I took my time had another perfect bite, properly chewed, swallowed and I said, sheeplessly, "*Enjera!*" ignoring the later question, as if I didn't hear her. She backed, stood straight and glared at me. Since my invitation wasn't received very well, my Ethiopian pride started to kick in, slowly, but coming.

I very well went ahead with my lunch, took my time to roll my Enjera, and put a reasonable amount in my mouth and started munching away. Part of it was I didn't want to say anything. Part of it was my way of telling her, I get it, that you are disgusted, and I don't know why, and I really don't give a damn! I am at my lunch eating my exotic food, in this democratic country, and now, she can get lost with her pain seeking, miserable self. I guess she absorbed her pride or may be the thought of me suing the company, naming her as a plaintiff, crossed her mind, for "*discrimination of National origin*" or any other name that the American legal system afforded me. Whatever the reason she decided it was time to change gear. Grease it a little bit with what she is known better, but for approval purposes or may be for moral support, or for both, she looked at her superior and winked "*It smells good! What is it?*"

Damn that culture of ours. It is hard to break free easily isn't it? Here all over again, repeating myself, pointing very gently to the empty chairs in front of me, and inviting them to take a chance of trying something new. What I didn't stop was eating! I was munching away happily, but with a proper Ethiopian table manner.

*"It is called Enjera, my traditional food, if you would like to test,"*

I posed purposefully for dramatic effect and reached deep into the Enjera, digging and shuffling, rolling all the same time. My fingers were furious working their way! I guess I felt a little intruded by their sudden appearance and scrutinizing and analyzing my food, how dare she? But I managed to say holding the Enjera right next to my mouth,

*"There is still plenty!"* with encouraging voice, I added, "*Go ahead, wash your hand and let us eat!*"

The Enjera was deep in my mouth. Now, just chewing as a proper lady, and looked at them as if I am waiting for their response. She said no thanks, very quickly with barely audible voice. She turned around guiding her friend as if she is a hostess in a crowded restaurant to a near by table. Right before grabbing a chair she turned around as if to say, my business with you isn't finished yet!

*"I have to watch my weight, you know, and I am a vegetarian."*

I said, "*Oh, Good for you! I consider myself lucky, because this is a very tasty vegetarian dish, you could have tested it. This is a fasting season for me. I don't eat lots of things, but I don't have to eat Carrot and Celery!*"

I chuckled all the way making the statement, and I was not shy about my accent. I wasn't sure if I was trying to be sarcastic or what, but I said it. The beauty of it was there wasn't a damn thing either she or her supervisor could do. She intently listened to my little lecture, and her face turned red slowly, instantly her grin faded away, and she throws herself and sank on the empty chair.

The next day, she came to my morning 10 minutes break giggling and her face, plastered with one gigantic fake smile all over and loud enough for everyone to hear, she said,

*"Harry, here I brought you some forks, spoons, and knives so you could use them for your lunch!"* I barley looked up from my book; I was reading the biography of Nelson Mandela; Long Walk to Freedom. I said, *"That is mighty kind of you! Thank you, but I have Enjera for lunch not pasta."* She was stunned by my indifference and was staring at me. I intentionally ignored that and continued reading, my fingers were busy making some paper shuffling, aimlessly, of course,

*"Even if I need one of those things...."* I pointed at them. Wasn't she full of quick wits? She said still with a smile, *"Plastic utensils"*, she meant to improvised my poorly versed English. I was unmoved by her effort to put me down, so I continued nodding,

*"Evane showed me where to get those things from the lunch room, so don't worry about it."*

She looked wounded and defeated, with determined look though she came forward and said,

*"Well, it is better than eating by hand, if you know what I mean!"* I knew right there and then, her intention was to embarrass me and my tradition. I closed the book down without even bothering to mark where I was and said,

*"Thanks, but we don't use forks and spoons when we eat Enjera. It is unholy"*

I don't know where the idea of "holiness" came from. Even though I was unprepared and impulsive, I intended to defeat her. I didn't really think the consequence of every word that came out of my mouth, defending my National, oh, no, no, my Continental pride. I said it and I was proud of myself.

This created, body shuffling and murmur in the room. One of my co-workers Fred said,

*"What do you mean by unholy?"*

Oh, I said changing my tone of voice dramatically, for a friend? Anything!

*"We use our God given hand to eat our food, "Enjera" that is all. We wash our hands before and after"*

I added, *"Fred, it taste better that way, and besides why waste those things if you really don't have to?"*

Fred was listening, and he was agreeing with me, so was the others. Most were happy that this little snoop rat is being bashed by a newcomer from Africa, such as, me. Fred excitingly pulled his chair towards my table and winked, I know what this means no more reading, but at that moment I cared less. I was in the land of victory. I am sure my beloved Mandela can wait another half day, until I get to it. His smirk on his face was encouraging for whatever punch I had in mind, so I added,

*"You know Fred, how else was I supposed to eat my lunch? With my foot?"*

The little lunch room erupted with laughter. Fred and I always had a lot to debate, both inland and across Atlantic. I winked back at him, invitingly and we did high-five! He was jerking all over the place with his loud and roaring laughter. My supervisor was stunned and embarrassed by the fact that her subordinates are ganging up against her! And once again, she can't help it but to drop her mouth, pop out her eyes, and this time for a change, she immediately put her two hands right under those big holes, her arm pits! I said ewwwwww...

After laughing for a good minute Fred said, *"From now on, can I eat with you? I mean by hand?"* I nodded and laughed. I have said too much for the day and decided to leave it at that.....but I told you I love my tradition, and defended it rightly!