



## Sidamo Cups of Plenty

In the highest reaches of southern Ethiopia's Sidamo region, coffee grew wild until the reign of Emperor Menelik II, at the end of the nineteenth century. Today, Sidamo's gentle hills overlay each other with alternating hues of green, and the growing season lasts all year. Well-worn dirt paths follow and intersect rivers and streams. Kelly-green *kulkual* cacti along the trails reach up to ten meters in height. And every grass-thatched home is abutted by the ever-forking branches of the coffee trees, with their burgundy cherries.

During Menelik II's time, locals picked coffee by cutting down an entire coffee tree, carrying it to their home, and waiting for the tree to dry and the cherries to simply fall off. They'd then discard the rest of the tree, and use and sell the coffee.

Ato Sha'le Bokal tells us this story. He's the elder in this community of several hundred, the man to whom others come when a dispute needs settling. Born in 1925, he tells me that they now leave the trees in place when they harvest the coffee.

His grandparents told him the story of the trees, as well as other tales. "In those days," he says, "even still when I was a boy, we did not have any cups."

He pauses, as if to confirm that I'm still listening. I nod.

"Do you want to know how they drank the coffee?" he asks.

After I nod again, he says, "They drank it with their hands."

The gathered crowd smiles even before the translator finishes relaying Ato Sha'le's words to me. When Ato Sha'le joins in, his smile erases the eighty-four years on his face.

"No," Ato Sha'le says. "That is not true. Wait, and I will show you the truth."

We're clustered atop evenly grazed grass in the shade of a Dagucho tree. Ato Sha'le asks one of his seventeen children to fetch leaves from a false banana tree—a Woficho. His son returns clutching in one hand a dried leaf and in the other a fresh leaf, and Ato Sha'le selects the dried one first. Ato Sha'le quickly bends and buckles the leaf parchment, stringing a small twig through either end to maintain a bevel deep enough to hold a liquid. Next, he picks up the fresh leaf and through a series of folds reduces the meter-square foliage into a ladle.

*Opposite:* Ato Sha'le.

"A hundred years ago," he says, "this is how we drank coffee." He shows me how they would pass the leaf and share this collective cup.

The dry-leaf vessel easily holds ten times as much coffee as today's omnipresent six-ounce ceramic cups, the kind found in all Ethiopian homes, both urban and rural. I want to ask if coffee seemed more abundant back then—not only on the land, but in the giant cup. Instead, I look around. Coffee trees fill almost the entire backdrop to the horizon, some forty kilometers away. As Ato Sha'le earlier told me, for decades here in Sidamo they'd never done anything with the meaty, red husk of the coffee bean. Other tribes roast the husk and drink the brew. When I asked about this, Ato Sha'le said simply, "It is a sign of plenty when you can throw something away."

We bid goodbye to Ato Sha'le, and then walk an hour back to the road alongside the long afternoon shadows of the coffee trees, deep in the land of plenty that is Sidamo.



## Ato Sha'le's Machete

When I meet Ato Sha'le, it is his machete I notice first. The ornate, silver-wrapped handle is meticulously patterned. After we talk for a few hours, I ask to see it. I hold the machete carefully. "This silver is beautiful," I say.

"That?" he asks. "That is from a battery cover."

I look closer. I can see a faint stamping of familiar letters, though I cannot make out a word.

"Remember," Ato Sha'le says, "we lost everything once, twice, many times. I will show you more." He leaves and comes back dressed in a velour cape with short cotton pants. "This should have been my father's costume," he says. "But the Italians took it all, so I have made it up."

He turns to show me the back of his cape, where a lion decal is glued onto the velour. "This is my costume now," he says.



## Sidamo Prominence

Sidama people currently make up more than 3.5 percent of the Ethiopian population—a testament to the province's mammoth size prior to being officially divided into the Southern People's Region and Oromia during the 1995 re-partitioning of Ethiopia. Sidamo's highland position, consistent rainfall, and proximity to the major thoroughfares for centuries maintained its role as an integral contributor to Ethiopia's revenue. Today, the multiple ethnicities in Sidamo intermarry, intercommunicate—with at times as many as eight languages in as many kilometers—and cross-trade, thus layering the difference into a collective whole.

But in the heart of the high country, Sidamo is simply Sidamo. Here, enclosed by dense woods full of hyenas, Columbus monkeys, mangos, guava, and coffee, the Sidama people subscribe to their own traditions. Sidama celebrate their own New Year (Fiche Chembelala) and write in a Latin script. The New Year is a source of pride; the language is a sore spot.

According to legend, a cow ate the old Sidama letters to protect them during times of strife in southern Ethiopia. When the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) took over the government after the Derg, in the 1990s, they slaughtered cattle to feed their troops. The cow that held the letters fell to the knives, and as it was cut apart the letters that tumbled from its belly were all in Latin script. The TPLF forced the Sidama to use these letters, and thus Latin letters are pronounced as if they were Amharic. The Sidama say they have never been able to get their letters back, now that the cow is gone.

