

# **\*\*THE GOLDEN TRADITION OF ABYSSINIAN HOSPITALITY**

From Ancient Generosity to Modern Betrayal\*\*

**\*\*** እታ ወርቃዊት ዛንታ ናይ ኦስፒታሊታ/ ጽብቡቕ አቅቀባብላ ናይ ሐበሻ  
ካብ እታ ጥንቲ ልግሲ ናብ ሞደርን ክድዓት/ጥልመት\*\*

## **Introduction መቐድም (ቀድደመ)**

Abyssinia—ancient Ethiopia and Eritrea—possesses one of the oldest and most refined traditions of hospitality in the world. Long before hotels, restaurants, or guesthouses existed, a traveler could walk from the Red Sea highlands to the Semien Mountains and sleep every night in the home of strangers, without paying a cent.

This was not charity. It was a deep ethical system rooted in Christianity, village culture, and a collective sense of responsibility. European travelers repeatedly observed and documented it. But in the modern era, this tradition has been exploited—by governments, by armies, and even by political elites who claimed to fight for the people.

This article explores the **rise of this tradition**, its **role in sustaining Abyssinia through centuries**, and its **distortion in the age of money, militarization, and political betrayal**.

## **I. The Golden Tradition: What European Travelers Saw**

**እታ ወርቃዊት ዛንታ\ትራዲዝዮን: እንታይ አልሎዎም ርኡይ እቶም  
አውሮፓውያን ቱሪስት**

### **James Bruce (1768–1773)**

James Bruce, the Scottish explorer who searched for the source of the Nile, wrote that Abyssinians treated him as a “*guest from God*” (ጋሻ ናይ እግዚ). He described arriving at remote villages where:

- doors opened without knocking
- strangers insisted he eat injera and drink coffee
- sleeping quarters were prepared with whatever the family had

Bruce repeatedly stressed that no traveler needed money. **Hospitality** was a social duty, not a service / እታ ሆስፒታሊታ/ ጽብቡቕ አቅቀባብላ ነበረት ማሕበራዊ ግብቡኣ, አይኮነን ሓደ አገልግሎት).

### **Henry Salt (1809–1811)**

The British envoy Henry Salt noted that villages competed to host foreigners. He recorded that even poor households (ስድራታት) shared their last bread, milk, or tella/ ዓለባ, ፈርጊ. Salt wrote that in Abyssinia, “*to turn away a stranger is a shame.*”

He also observed that this generosity/ ልግሲ extended to wars and famines—people shared what little they had even in hardship.

### **Mansfield Parkyns (1843–1846)**

Parkyns, one of the most detailed observers, lived among the people for nearly three years. He noted:

- villagers refusing payment from travelers
- homes functioning like informal community inns
- women preparing food for strangers without complaint

Parkyn admired that the rich and the poor followed the same moral code: “*A stranger is never without bread in Abyssinia.*”

### **Other travelers (D’Abbadie, Theodore Bent, Hotten)**

Many explorers, missionaries, and geographers repeated the same observation: Abyssinia functioned without hotels because **the home was the hotel** and **the family was the restaurant**.

## **II. A Living Example: Family Generosity in Modern Times**

Your memories reflect the ancient custom perfectly.

When your mother said:

**“Go to the house of ... and borrow a little coffee; we have a guest.”**

This represents an old social law:

- Food belonged to the community when a guest arrived.
- Neighbors supported each other to honor the guest properly.
- No guest ate alone; no host was embarrassed by lack of supplies.

This system created a moral economy based not on money but on **shared dignity**.

## **III. The Turning Point: Militarization and the Burden on Villages**

### **Example: Ethiopian Imperial and Derg Armies**

During the time of King Yohannes IV, Emperor Haile Selassie, and especially during the Derg (Mengistu), armies marched through villages with complete authority. They demanded:

- **injera for the soldiers**
- **milk**
- **coffee**
- **sheep or goats**
- **animal skins**

The villagers could not refuse. What was once voluntary hospitality became:

→ **forced hospitality**

→ **state appropriation of tradition**


The army ate for free; the villagers bore the cost.

## **IV. Eritrea’s Struggle for Independence: A Heavy Load on the People**

For 30 years, Eritrean villages carried the entire weight of the struggle:

- food
- clothing
- shelter
- labor
- intelligence
- protection

While the diaspora contributed money, it was the inland villagers—farmers, herders, mothers, young people—who fed and protected the fighters daily.

This traditional hospitality has been a lifesaver for many, including myself, but for others it has been far beyond what was more or less a honeymoon. The proof? Look at the photo of Isaias Afewerki and his small circle playing cards on YouTube under the title  ኢሰያስ ኣፎርቺ ናይዝጊ ክፍሉ ካይቕበር ንምንታይ ኻልኪሉ? In 1973, Isaias, despite denying it, has been criticized for eating canned fish while others starved. But his image in the photo suggests that, in addition

to the canned fish, he had a small secret shop where his servants, known as fighters, did his daily shopping.

**Without this tradition of self-giving hospitality, the war for independence could not have lasted three decades.**

**But later came betrayal.**

The post-independence political class—especially those who portray themselves as EPLF war guardians—turned the people’s generosity into something they could exploit:

- demanding loyalty without providing services
- turning communal sacrifice into political capital
- replacing moral responsibilities with authoritarian expectations

The same tradition once used for survival was turned into an instrument of control.

## V. The Modern Crisis: “Money, Money World”

The old system cannot survive modern realities:

- urbanization
- migration
- harsh economic pressures
- political exploitation
- collapse of trust between people and state

Yet people still remember the beauty of the old tradition. What is needed is not to abandon it, but to **refine it for modern life**.

## VI. How the Tradition Can Survive Today

### 1. Transform it into community-based hospitality projects

Villages or diaspora groups can create:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• guest houses run by the community</li> <li>• rotating host systems</li> <li>• shared food banks</li> <li>• emergency accommodation programs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• አጋይሽ አባይቲ ብ እታ ኮምሙኒታ/ ዓድዲ</li> <li>• ቅጥዲ ናይ አቅቀባብላ ናብ እብረ/ተርታ/ ፍጅጅት</li> <li>• ምቕል ምባቢ ባንኪታት</li> <li>• ፕሮግራምዲ ናይ መሕደሪ ናይ አመርገዝ</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• pensioni gestite dalla comunità</li> <li>• sistemi di accoglienza a rotazione</li> <li>• banche alimentari condivise</li> <li>• programmi di alloggio di emergenza</li> </ul>
---	---	--

This keeps the spirit, while making it sustainable.

### 2. Teach the tradition in schools and cultural centers

Young people must learn that hospitality is not naïve generosity—it is a powerful cultural identity.

### 3. Protect it from political exploitation

People must distinguish:

- **true hospitality** (voluntary, mutual, dignified)
- **state coercion** (forced contribution, taking advantage of civilians)

### 4. Document personal stories

Your memories are precious. When placed next to Bruce, Salt, and Parkyns, they show a cultural continuity from the 1700s to today.

### 5. Strengthen diaspora–homeland relationships

The diaspora often contributes only money. A broader cultural commitment—knowledge, tradition, solidarity—can renew the moral economy.

## VII. Conclusion መደምደምታ

The tradition that allowed James Bruce to travel without money, that allowed your mother to borrow coffee for guests, and that sustained Eritrean fighters for 30 years, is one of the greatest treasures of Abyssinia.

But it has been abused—by kings, by soldiers, by modern rulers, by those who claim revolutionary identity.

For Abyssinia to heal, it must return to **the old hospitality—but with modern protections.**

This tradition can unite Ethiopians and Eritreans more deeply than politics or borders. It is not just cultural memory—it is a model for a humane future.

Eyob Ghebreziabhier

Mühlematt 6

6020 Emmenbrück

Sewwit.org

10.12.2025

#### Summary of the Golden Tradition of Abyssinian Hospitality (Eritrea + Ethiopia)

<p>1. Before hotels or restaurants existed, Abyssinia had a tradition so strong that no traveler needed money. A stranger could walk village to village and find food + a bed in every home. Hospitality was a moral duty, not a service.</p> <p>2. European travelers like James Bruce (1768) wrote that Abyssinians treated him as “a guest from God.” Doors opened without knocking. Families shared whatever they had—injera, milk, coffee—often their last portion.</p> <p>3. Henry Salt (1809) said villages competed to host a stranger. To refuse a guest was a shame. In hardship or famine, people still shared.</p> <p>4. Mansfield Parkyns (1840s) lived years among the people. He wrote: “A stranger is never without bread in Abyssinia.” Even poor families refused payment.</p> <p>5. This wasn’t tourism. It was a civilization built on dignity, respect, and sharing. The home itself was the hotel. The family was the restaurant.</p> <p>6. I grew up inside this tradition. When a guest arrived, my mother would say: “Go to the neighbors and borrow some coffee—we have a visitor.”</p>	<p>injera, milk, coffee, animals, skins... Hospitality became coercion, not generosity.</p> <p>8. During Eritrea’s 30-year struggle, villagers carried the entire weight: food, shelter, protection, clothes. The diaspora sent money, yes—but daily survival came from the villagers’ hospitality.</p> <p>9. And after independence? That same tradition was exploited by a new elite. The people who sacrificed everything were betrayed by leaders who used their generosity as political capital.</p> <p>10. Today’s “money money world” threatens the old values. But the tradition is not dead. It can be reborn—modern, protected, and sustainable.</p> <p>11. Community guesthouses. Cultural education. Diaspora-village partnerships. Documentation of memories. A clear line between true hospitality and political exploitation.</p> <p>12. The spirit that fed James Bruce in 1768, housed Parkyns in 1846, helped my mother welcome guests, and sustained Eritrea’s fighters— is the same spirit that can heal Abyssinia today.</p>
---	---

**The whole village shared the responsibility to honor a guest.**

**7. But this beautiful tradition was abused. Armies of Yohannes, Haile Selassie, the Derg, and today's Eritrean government forced villagers to give:**

**13. This is not nostalgia.**

**It is a blueprint for a humane future.**

**A future where Eritrea and Ethiopia honor the best of their shared civilization.**

**14. If we protect this tradition, we protect our identity.**

**If we lose it, we lose ourselves.**