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## VICS: Come for Coffee

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# Come for Coffee

*Extract from a letter from Willa Suintjens,  
VICS Volunteer in Ethiopia*

On Sunday, Dejere invited Cliff and me to a coffee ceremony in their house — part of their tradition. On our arrival an armful of freshly cut grass was scattered on the packed earth floor by one of the younger boys in the family.

Meanwhile the older brother chatted with us, eager to practice his English. He stood up to pour our cokes explaining that in his culture it is very impolite to pour a drink for a guest while sitting. He told us that there were nine children in the family, the oldest twenty-eight years old and the youngest eight months old.

Their father is seventy-four but has a much younger wife now. We were invited to meet his father who, it turned out, was sitting on a bed behind the dividing curtain in the same room. This distinguished-looking man looked very stately with a white muslin shawl wrapped over his shoulder. We presented him with a bag of fruit and candy that we had brought. When his wife came in, we gave her a bouquet of rather gaudy purple artificial flowers that we were told are appreciated as gifts.

## The coffee ceremony

We returned to our places of honor on the floor-mat to witness the coffee ceremony. Dejere's young sister glided in silently carrying a charcoal brazier, which she placed on the floor in the room. Then she brought a set of miniature coffee cups, a clay coffee pot, a flat metal pan, a metal stir stick that looked like a teensy garden rake, and a container of green coffee beans. Sitting on a low stool in front of the brazier, she set the flat pan on the top and spread the coffee beans on it. It wasn't long until the air was filled with the marvelous aroma of roasting coffee.

When the beans had turned a rich brown, the young girl brought the pan over to us so we could fan the smoke towards us and inhale the wonderful fragrance, expressing our appreciation as we did so. This done, she retired to her stool where she used a small wooden mortar and pestle to grind the roasted beans. She spooned the freshly ground coffee into the narrow spout of the pottery coffee pot, added water and set it on the heat to boil.

As the coffee brewed, an older sister served us the two "meats of Easter" — mutton and chicken in a special sauce. These meats are particularly special because for fifty-five days prior to Easter the Orthodox Christians follow a strict vegetarian fast. Another traditional dish appeared before us. It was made with whole boiled eggs that had been simmered with Ethiopian spices turning them an unappetizing yellowish-brown. Of course, along with this, we had the essential injera and wat.



"...the air was filled with the marvelous aroma of roasting coffee."

## The injera pancake

Injera is the national staple and is eaten at least once a day. It is most commonly made from tef, although the Gurage people in this area like to use flour made from false banana and in some areas they use sorghum. Injera is a most interesting food item. It's like a giant, spongy grey pancake at least 18 inches in diameter and made from slightly fermented batter. This batter is poured onto a large flat piece of metal or directly on top of a cast iron stove. Then it is covered with a cone-shaped lid made from basket materials impregnated with mud (otherwise the wicker could catch on fire). The steam created allows the top of the pancake to cook so it does not have to be flipped.

Ethiopians use these huge, soft pancakes as platters for their communal meals. Heaps of wat (spicy meat sauce) and sometimes little piles of local curd cheese are set on the injera. You rip off a piece of injera and use it as a scoop to take some of the wat.

Our friend Dejere brought a pitcher of water and a basin so we could wash our hands before we dug in. I consciously tucked my left hand behind me so I wouldn't be tempted to use it for eating — an absolute breach of etiquette. By now I counted at least twenty adults and children lined up against the opposite wall watching us. Only Dejere's brother ate with us.

By the time we had finished our meal, the coffee was ready. Our little hostess poured it for us, adding three heaping teaspoons of sugar to each of the tiny cups. It was strong and black, smelled wonderful, and tasted even better, sweetness aside. Fortunately we weren't offered the traditional three cups or I would have been awake for the rest of the week. As we sipped this delicious brew, Dejere tossed incense on the burner so that the room was soon filled with cloying smoke. ■