

Chapter One: Out of Africa

Salopek was getting closer and closer to the border with Djibouti, which means he was closer to the Red Sea. He told a story about irregular migration from Ethiopia to Saudi Arabia, or Europe, crossing the Red Sea through Yemen. Noticeably, he never used the word “illegal”, which says a lot about his position on this issue. I had recently read the book ‘American Dirt’, from which I learned about border crossing between Mexico and the U.S. without a visa. It is putatively fiction but the treacherous journey is hardly someone’s imagination. At least the author claimed credits for completing diligent research. In Salopek’s dispatch, real people played out the scenes in the book, deadly heat from the sun and equally deadly coldness in the desert without the sun, hunkering down in any tiny bit of shades you can find during the day, and endless walking in the dark. Thirst, hunger, tiredness, despair and glimpse of hope are common characteristics across storylines.

We have seen this many times-- similar human experiences played out by people who have absolutely no contact with each other in every corner of the world. It even fuels the theory that aliens were here to spread the knowledge among us. A simpler answer may just be that our brains have similar constructs and we come up with similar ideas for the same problems. So Mexican coyotes and Ethiopian smugglers figured out the same techniques to lead the pack across the desert at night.

Human Rights Watch published a long article back in 2019 about the abuses endured by Ethiopian migrants. It was horrific. The exploitation, torture, abuses from fellow country men who assisted scammers, militants groups, and even government agencies foreign and internal are insufferably harsh and heartless. Many lives were lost. Those who survived the ordeal only got deported back to Ethiopia after wasting their own and most of their family’s lifetime savings. Even though you didn’t lose your life, your livelihood perished. Yet, studies showed that 80% of them say they would make that trip again. How bad must it be to drive people to make such decisions? It is beyond my ability to reason.

Anecdotally, most human migration is driven by economic perspective. If there was time and resources, I would gather more data to confirm it. What I know is that what we hear from superficial reports from mainstream media is not telling the entire story. It cannot be. Ethiopia is the second fastest growing economy in Africa. For sure, its baseline is at the bottom compared to most of the world. Nevertheless, it is an economic boom by academic standards. Yet, there is something missing about what this means to the average people. People are risking lives to get out. And more importantly, going back thousands and thousands years, why did they leave Africa on this exact same route?