Chapter One: Out of Africa

Salopek encountered an oasis, oasis of electrons in the village of Dalifagi. It is an amazing picture of rows of cell phone charges hanging against the wall. They are dusty, in many different models and vibrantly blinking. The accompanying story is that in the middle of the pristine desert, someone started a business to recharge nomads' cell phones at the cost of a few cents. Even the nomads developed an addiction for their cell phones. Salopek said it very well that this village 'would never draw adventure tourists, much less inspire the verse of caravan poets, but it is the real story in sub-Saharan Africa.'

This is the kind of fascinating encounter I long for when on the road. Out of curiosity, I looked up telecom in Ethiopia. Like many others in the developing world, it leapfrogged into the wireless era. It is the second largest market in Africa, penetrating 65% of the country and accounting for more than 10% of the GDP. It is impressive. Humans like to talk, don't they? We may have forgotten what it was like just 20 years ago, this brings back the memory when making a phone call to someone is a show of care and love.

However, all these hours and calories burned by taping your ear to the phone only yield an underwhelming $36 billions revenue a year. It is the entire country we're talking about. Any sensible person will know that's a huge figure for this really poor country. Business in western nations follow very different senses though. If you're asked to guess how Ethiopia built the network relatively quickly, you probably will guess right. The answer is China. ZTE, Huawei, and Chinese Telecom Construction Corp built the modern network in Ethiopia under an agreement of $1.5 billion in 2006. $1.5 billion is not big enough to make Americans or Europeans go into the Sahara and do the hard work. My father was an engineer who built telecom networks. I went on some tours with him and I know how hard it is. Yet the Chinese did it in the beating heat of Sahara for a small sum of money. They did it for reasons other than making money. They probably aimed for bigger rewards in long term market dominance in the continent. This is just an investment for the gold mine. Ironically, the Ethopia government then contracted France Telecom to run the management from 2010 to 2013. It gave me the old colonization vibe somehow. The masters are sitting in the air conditioned offices giving orders. It didn't last long. The French were sent home and now it is run by their own people. As a matter of fact, Ethiopia was one of the only two countries that didn't get colonized by Europeans in the late 19th century. I couldn't find data on market shares of equipment and handsets though. Did the Chinese get what they wanted?

At the end of the story, a local nomad leader predicted 20 years from now (it was year 2013), which would be around 2033, life won't be camels and sheep any more. The debate goes on if that's for the better or worse, all depending on who you are, environmentalists or political left wing or globalization believer or hardcore capitialist or simply a curious tourist. But only elites are in these debates. Local people flock to the charging stations every chance they get.