



WILD COFFEE

Kaffa's coffee dream began with Kebede Geber's beans. Beans that have sent gourmets into raptures, given the locals a secure income and protected the forest. Then, one day, along came the richest investor in Ethiopia, wanting the coffee forest for himself. But the farmers refused to give it up.

by **Ines Possemeyer** (text) and **Johan Bävman** (photos)





YOU ARE LIKE my daughter now,” Kebede Gebere had said when, following Ethiopian custom, we touched our right shoulders together in farewell. He, the barefoot farmer who did not know his age. I, who had chronicled his life for a GEO film on the birthplace of coffee. In parting, Kebede had gifted me a small sack of sun-dried coffee beans. Neither of us could have imagined what a wondrous effect those beans would have.

That was 8 years ago and I have come back to visit Kebede.

At first sight, nothing seems to have changed: the loamy path up to the hut,

the trees in the jungle bedecked with ferns and lianas, the metre-high dry bushes in the undergrowth. Mossy whiskers hang from the branches glinting with small cherry-red berries—the wild Arabica coffee that has been picked by the farmers here for generations.

Domesticated descendants of these original plants have long since spread across the globe. But everywhere words like *kaffee*, *café*, *kawa* or coffee point to their origin in far-flung Kaffa, the highlands in southwestern Ethiopia that remained an independent kingdom until the end of the 19th century.

The rainforest that covered Kaffa then belonged to the sacred spirits. Today it

belongs to the state, is plundered by charcoal burners and loggers, and clear felled by farmers. All that is left is an area a little larger than London. Scientists are hastily attempting to locate the 5,000+ varieties of wild coffee and plant these in ‘living gene banks.’ For breeders, their value runs into billions. Yet, until recently, there was no market for wild coffee.

The GEO Rainforest Conservation society, active in the region since 2001, had the wild beans from Kebede’s sack tasted by experts. Their response was enthusiastic. The beans were mild, less acidic, had a banana aroma—they were simply unique. That marked the



Kebede's brother Alemayehu harvests wild coffee. The coffee has made the rainforest very valuable and so the farmers protect it.

The brothers have invested in a mill. The entire community brings their grain to them.

Alemayehu and his wife's six children will later go to a vocational school in the city.



beginning of one of the society's most important projects. The sale of wild coffee through its partner, Original Food, guaranteed a secure income for the farmers—and also provided them with an incentive to conserve the forest.

Kebede walks towards me dressed in hand-woven white cloth. Once again we press our right shoulders together in greeting. I hope he does not notice the tears in my eyes. His bare feet are as smooth as a child's. He seems frailer. He walks very little now, his heart is weak.

"I don't have enough strength to build a new house," he says apologetically as he leads me to his soot-blackened hut. Neighbours and relatives now pick the coffee in his patch of forest in return for which they keep a third of the harvest. But, as Kebede says, he still earns enough to educate his son to be a veterinary assistant, to pay for his daughter's school uniform and for his medicines. "Without the coffee," says Kebede, "I would not be alive."

In Kaffa, 7,000 wild coffee gatherers have come together to form local cooperatives and an apex Kaffa Forest Coffee Farmers' Cooperative Union, which monitors storage, quality and marketing to Europe. Today, Kebede receives 58 cents for 1kg of unhulled

coffee—15 times more than 8 years ago—along with a dividend. "It is like selling my coffee twice over," says Kebede. He has invested some money in a small grain mill that his brother Alemayehu runs.

Alemayehu starts up the motor; the women from the neighbourhood are already waiting. They now no longer need to carry their sacks of grain to the district headquarters Bonga, a 2-hour march away. Alemayehu also gathers cardamom, pepper and honey. He has put on weight and, like many of his neighbours, he has built a new house, a square construction made of mud, with windows and a corrugated tin roof. Signs of prosperity, just like the shoes that many of the men now own—carrying them in their hands, so as not to dirty them on the muddy path to town.

In Bonga, a coffee pot the size of a car adorns the roundabout. There is a new hotel called Coffee Land and the government is building a National Coffee Museum.

And the forest?

Ironically, it is at a time when the forest has become more valuable for many farmers and they are prepared to protect it that there is new competition in the form of Ethiopian agricultural investors. Their numbers have already

swelled to 100. They, too, usually cultivate coffee and spices. Investors have so far leased 27,000 hectares, but there appears to be little further benefit for the region: they do not pay local taxes, only one job per 20 hectares has been created, and in many places they work against the forest users.

THE JAIL is at the end of a washed-out track. My companion is afraid. He reverses quickly, as if backtracking from a wrong turn. Behind the high hedges, it is said, farmers are serving sentences for 'forest crimes.'

The first thing many investors do is to set up armed check posts. People wanting to cross the land with their cattle must pay. They can be fined if one of their cows strays into the forest or if they take a piece of wood to make a new plough or even lianas for strengthening their huts—things they have always done. The biggest coffee investor in



Traditional round huts are becoming rare. Houses with corrugated tin roofs are now much in demand.

The river crossing to Mankira, which, according to local belief, is the birthplace of coffee. An investor promised to build a bridge if he could have the forest, but the locals refused.

The main street in Bonga, centre of the Kaffa region. The city has grown by 50 per cent in just 8 years.

the region, Green Coffee, removed 3,000 beehives from a piece of land for which it did not yet possess a licence. The loss for the farmers amounted to 13,500 euros.

Then along came Mohammed Al-Amoudi, the most powerful entrepreneur in Ethiopia. He wanted the forest of Mankira. The district and regional

administration and two villages had already agreed.

If Kaffa is considered the home of coffee, its birthplace—according to local belief—is in Mankira, home to the bush from which all the coffee in the world is supposed to have originated. Earthen coffee mugs on the roofs of huts in Bonga, even the coffee pot at the traffic

roundabout, all reflect this.

We walk 3 hours to Mankira. After a night of rain, the steep path is slippery as soap, occasionally disappearing in slush. Then a river blocks the path. Even now, in the dry season, when the water is only knee-deep, the current tugs dangerously at our legs. Every year people and animals drown here, most recently a family of five, along with their horses. Al-Amoudi has promised to build a bridge in exchange for the forest.

“It sounded very tempting,” recalls Kifle Hailegeorgis, chairman of the local cooperative, “but just as fish cannot live out of water, we cannot live without the forest.” The village harvests 30 tonnes of wild coffee, its most important source of income.

Resistance against the investors is risky. In some places government officials ordered villagers not to share the draught oxen for the harvest with anyone criticising investors. Other opponents were sent to jail for ‘theft.’ The government has agricultural advisers working in every community, who control access to food aid, fertilisers, seeds and loans. There is tremendous

GEO'S COFFEE PROJECT

When coffee brings people economic benefits, they will protect the forest, even against speculators.



The **GEO Rainforest Conservation** has been actively involved in saving the coffee forests of southwest Ethiopia since 2001. The marketing of wild coffee, community forest management schemes and access to family planning are the pillars on which this effort is based. The project partners are the Farmers Union (forest management), DSW (family planning), Original Food (coffee marketing), NABU (biosphere reserve) and GIZ (malaria research).

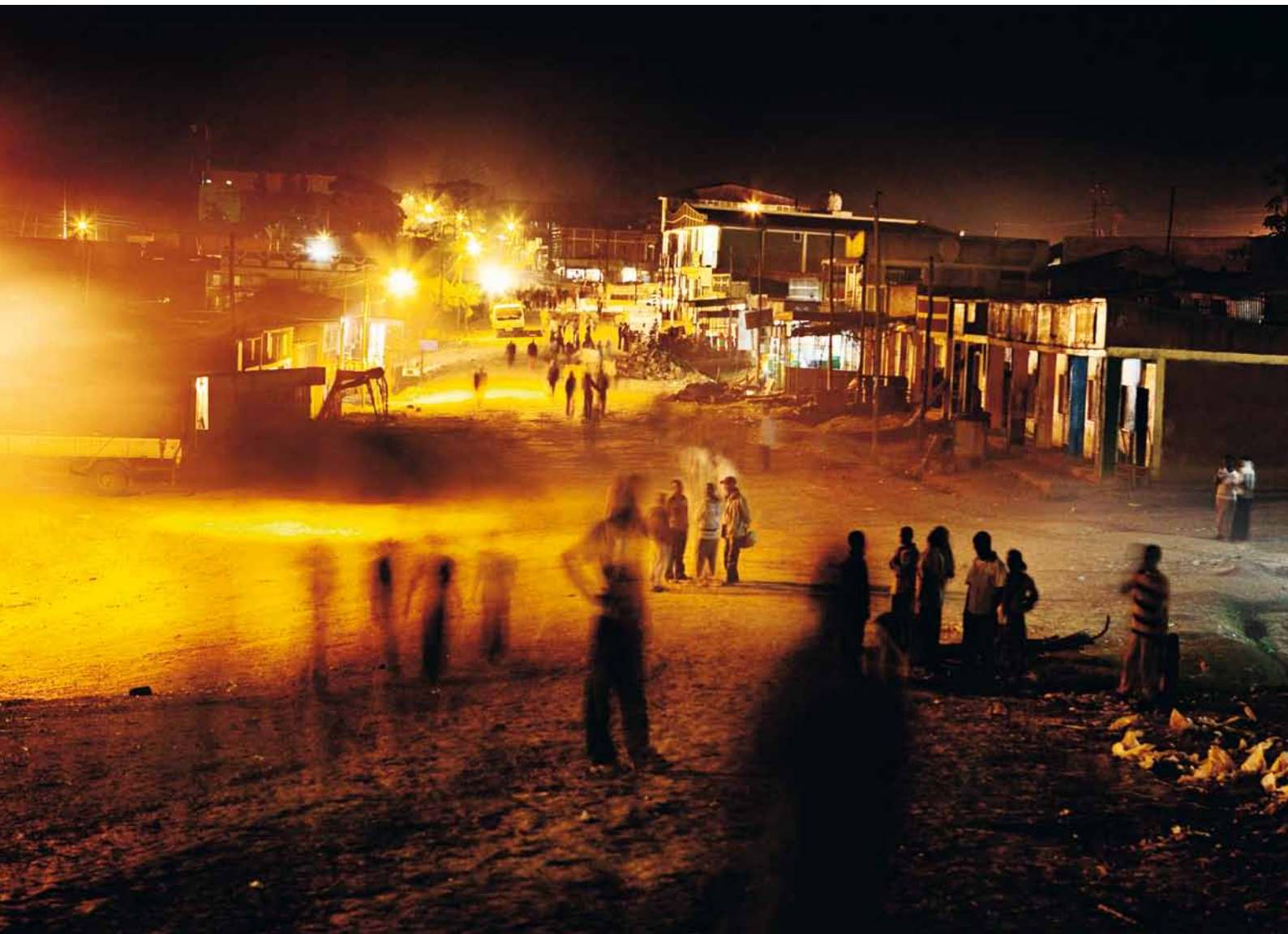
For further **information**, visit

www.geo.de/rainforest. The **coffee** can be bought directly at www.originalfood.de.

Donations to GEO Rainforest Conservation go entirely towards local conservation and development projects:

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Membership forms are also available.



pressure to conform.

The people in Mankira, however, approached the Farmers' Union for help and demanded an agreement with the district government. The official term is participatory forest management (PFM). This, for the first time, grants the forest communities vested rights in using the forest and, at the same time, commits them to preserving it.

The government finally acceded to the agreement.

GEO Rainforest Conservation has been funding PFM measures in Kaffa since 2001. After investors began thronging to the region, the demand

for PFM agreements has risen sharply. 36,000 hectares are now protected by small farmers—effectively, as a satellite-based study showed. While forest cover has receded in almost all other places, the PFM areas have remained intact and even expanded marginally.

GEO Rainforest Conservation was able to take an even bigger step towards linking up conservation and utilisation with the help of the Nature and Biodiversity Conservation Union in Germany (NABU). In summer 2010, UNESCO recognised Kaffa as one of the two first biosphere reserves in Ethiopia. Forest management will now

be extended to 150,000 hectares. Some areas will be partially reforested and new sources of income will be created, for instance through ecotourism.

And it all began with Kebede Gebere's beans. I visit him once again before my departure. "As soon as I am feeling better, I will start harvesting my coffee myself again," he says, as if he were encouraging me. He walks with me down the path for about 100m, then he stops, exhausted.

Will we ever meet again? Who knows? But at least now I'll be able to find out how Kebede is doing. His brother Alemayehu recently acquired a mobile phone. ■