

TAMARACK  
STUDIO & GALLERY

March, 2014

# ROOTS Ethiopia: A Story of Hope



Photography by Lauren Werner

*“The camera, like a mirror, is a tool of observation. We can judge what we see, or see it for what it really is – a reflection of ourselves. My journeys in photography are moving meditations.*

*I venture to capture the moment when a person looks inward.*

*As a young student of photography, I felt something exquisite and unique that I could not name. It would be years before I realized that it is simply the joy in rendering life being lived.*

*I just needed to slow down and start looking, with my eyes, and with my heart.”*

LW



ROOTS  
ETHIOPIA

## ROOTS Ethiopia: A Story of Hope

Hope is manifested in two ways: construction of the new and repair of the broken. In the southern region of Ethiopia, there is no shortage of hope. Daily life follows a generations-old rhythm woven of ingenuity and determination, faith and optimism, resilience and fortitude.

My work in Ethiopia was two-fold: to photograph hope as reflected in the daily lives of its people, and to journey with an open heart into the birth culture of my youngest son. He joined my family in 2007 at the age of five months. I am his mother and the keeper of his story.

While in the country for eight days as the team photographer for Roots Ethiopia, my focus was to observe the ways people live, learn, work, and relate to one another. This body of images reflects the places and people whose paths I joined for a few days in December of 2013. They are the builders of hope, the repairers of what breaks, the essence of what compels us all to create a better future.

*Laurin*



Image: Roots 1

Title: **Sacrifice**

Location: Kembata Tembaro Zone, Ethiopia

A cluster of buildings with blue painted windows houses a high school in the town of Amacho Wato. One of the first students I encountered was, to my surprise, a 50 year-old man. Patience and persistence have allowed him to pursue his high school education. He attends school with his son. They are in the tenth grade.

Image: Roots 2

Title: **The Doorpost**

Location: Hadiya Zone, Ethiopia

Where are the words that mean everything to you? Are they in a book, or a journal? Are the phrases poetry, or prose? If you could post a phrase on the side of your house, what would it say? Would it be written in a straight line? What kind of strength would it take to stand in front of those words, a testament to everything you say and do? I wonder....



Image: Roots 3

Title: **Sacred Space**

Location: Wolaita Zone, Ethiopia

A few weeks earlier, he was known as the boy whose leg was bleeding. After surgery and care at a high quality hospital far from home, he was beyond suffering and onto healing. His father was his rock, leaving the rest of their big family behind to tend to his son. The easy smiles echo the relief of having averted death. Father and son have endured.



Image: Roots 4

Title: **Eight Frames**

Location: Shankoles Mountain, Hadiya Zone, Ethiopia

At one point on the trip I began to laugh to myself that photographing landscapes in Hadiya was about the first eight frames. After identifying a location for an image, I had exactly eight frames of shooting until someone appeared in front of my lens. Oftentimes I took a person-free picture, only to discover on review later that evening that I was, in fact, not the only one in the scene.



Image: Roots 5

Title: **Pathways**

Location: Hadiya Zone, Ethiopia

A child is a treasure, an incarnation of hope. As adults we contemplate the dual meaning of children: who we once were, and at the same time, where we are headed as a community. For older children in Ethiopia, being in school has a cost: one less person working. At harvest time especially, a child in school symbolizes the greatest investment a family can make. This choice is made over and over, even for the same child, as he grows, and his immediate value is weighed against the future worth of his education.

Image: Roots 6

Title: **Angecha Church**

Location: Hadiya Zone, Ethiopia

Meeting with an Ethiopian church leader feels like three conversations at once. The translator adds a voice, as well as another perspective, to the work we were doing. I often found myself marveling at this priceless intermediary, who tirelessly facilitated communication with a tilted baseball cap and a sense of humor that seemed to transcend language. Our conversations about the needs of students and adults in the community filled the room with noise. And yet, this quiet corner spoke for itself without saying a word. Churches are like that in Ethiopia.



Image: Roots 7

Title: **Dedicated Harvest**

Location: Near Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Living in a largely agricultural state, I often contemplate the contrast in farming practices between nearly automated farming in Wisconsin and the purely manual methods of rural Ethiopia. What appears to be a quiet field is a puzzle piece landscape dense with quiet and intense activity. This is where riding in a car has its disadvantages. Surely we made our way quickly, but in turn failed to see the threads of the fabric some days. I wonder in my daily American life, how much of it is drive-by living, and yearn for more of the present moment that forms the texture of my experience as a human being.

Image: Roots 8

Title: **Lessons**

Location: Kembata Tembaro Zone, Ethiopia

Part of the joy of photography is sharing the images with the people who were gracious enough to stand before my lens. The high school students were especially interested in seeing their images. Responses when regarding their own photos went something like, I look beautiful, and I look nice. It was like a fresh breath of air to hear young women react positively to their own visage. The sickness of female self-loathing has not permeated this sliver of the globe, and this gives me great hope.



Image: Roots 9

Title: **Amacho Wato Flour Mill**

Location: Kembata-Tembaro Zone, Ethiopia

Low-slung roadside buildings sit humbly, side by side. There are a few people standing alongside the structures, gazing into the midday sun. From my point of view, this is a quiet town, even at noon. However, I had experienced this phenomenon before, being the intruder. Things are often not how they seem. Behind any given door is daily life happening. Men brewing tea, students reading books, people grinding wheat into a soft, white flour. Overwhelmed by the visual stimulation, the world around me becomes silent, a mere whisper, as time marches by in blocks of texture and light.

Image: Roots 10

Title: **The Ask**

Location: Kembata Tembaro Zone, Ethiopia

A portrait is a moment. Then the moment dissolves. I place a high value on getting permission to make a person's image. Without that affirmation, I am truly taking the picture. Across the languages, asking is easy. Making meaningful images at this rural clinic was another matter entirely, because this man needs an incubator for his clinic, and the clinic is busy, and the office has some nice bookshelves, and would we like to see them? Sometimes the moment happens. Sometimes there are more important things to do.



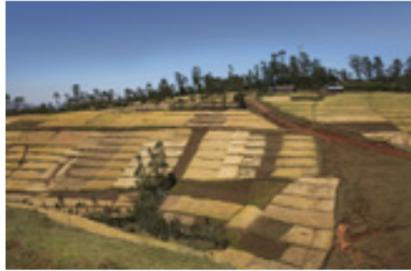


Image: Roots 11

Title: **Seasons Seen and Not Seen**

Location: Southern Region, Ethiopia

In December, Ethiopian harvest season is in full swing, as shown by blue skies, squares of crops on terraced hillsides, and busy families. The crop known as teff forms the mainstay of the Ethiopian diet. From my Ethiopian companions, we learned how to tell the graceful, sleepy, fine-stemmed teff from the more structured, bold straw of wheat, both shown here. Every glorious harvest is preceded by a rainy season, as evidenced by deep troughs that cross the hillsides and spontaneous ruts that populate the town roads like an invasive species. The crops appear stolid alongside the haphazard erosion as a testament to the resilience of the people who make their lives in this place.

Image: Roots 12

Title: **Soul Gazing**

Location: Hadiya Zone, Ethiopia

We had just left a visit with the Ethiopian team in the town of Gimbichu. Roots Ethiopia's partnership with community leaders deeply informs how donations are put to the best use. We learned a lot at the meeting, and left feeling that there were many needs that could be met through support from Roots Ethiopia. As we walked back to the car, I passed a baby petting a goat, three young boys threshing wheat, and an adolescent girl who, for no reason other than sharing a time and place, looked through my lens and right into my soul. Just as boldly, I looked right back. And then the car started and slowly we drove on.



Image: Roots 13

Title: **In Transition**

Location: Kembata Tembaro Zone, Ethiopia

There is a certain potential energy in adolescence that is captivating. This combination of strength and vulnerability is so intense for a few brief years. It is an inside-out, bones-to-skin experience, as a famous teacher of mine once said. Housing under construction is much like an adolescent, sturdy yet unfinished, inside and out.



Image: Roots 14

Title: **Sarbet**

Location: Hadiya Zone, Ethiopia

A traditional home in Ethiopia is a round structure, called a sarbet. Often made of mud and straw, the structures are easy to maintain, and can shelter a family and its animals. The outside can be simple, or decorated, as seen here. The house forms the backdrop for the two young men who allowed me to visit their farm and ask questions. I envy the body language of this culture, outward signs of affection are abundant and free. The closeness we all crave as humans thrives here.



Image: Roots 15

Title: **I am Smiling**

Location: Kembata Tembaro Zone, Ethiopia

When I was a child, my grandmother would say, "Thank God you have your health!" Two decades would pass before I myself would come close to death and personally understand the meaning of that exclamation. In rural Ethiopia, poor nutrition, infectious disease, and injuries are daily risks to life. Limited access to medical care means sick people do not get the help they need. As we passed through his neighborhood, a young boy, who was once sick and is now better, deliberately sought out Meghan, founder of Roots Ethiopia, which sponsors his schooling. I heard the echoes of my grandmother, as he repeated her sentiment in a child's language as if to say: *Look at me, thank God for my health!* What he actually said was much more tangible: "I am smiling!"



Image: Roots 17

Title: **Everything Renewed**

Location: Kembata Tembaro Zone, Ethiopia

Eucalyptus groves have a certain rhythm to them, tall trees in a disorganized clump like a group of strangers waiting for someone they all know. There is a certain sturdiness to the rectangular house, with its sharp roof and efficient angles. And yet there is the loss of the style that has defined rural housing for centuries. Their existence side-by-side is the foundation of hope and strength that build both tradition and modernity.



Image: Roots 19

Title: **The Tailor**

Location: Kembata Tembaro, Ethiopia

Market days are busy during harvest time. Rows of people selling spices, oil, sugar cane, flour. Mending what is broken is as much a part of daily market life as buying and selling. The tailor makes his repairs just peripheral to the main activities of the marketplace. Clothes are faithfully rehabilitated and repurposed. With the use of a time-tested, foot-operated sewing machine, the tailor reminds me of the patience and ingenuity required to keep things in working order, in contrast to the western culture of single-use apparel and disposable appliances.



Image: Roots 20

Title: **The Best Beans Go**

Location: Kembata Tembaro Zone, Ethiopia

Coffee drinking is part of everyday life and celebration in Ethiopia. It has been grown there for over 700 years. Ethiopia's young people work at the local drying plants, sorting out the best beans, ironically, for export. Atop a layer of burlap, men and women sift through the firm, raw beans. Laughter erupts every so often along the long narrow table, as teenagers share jokes, along with shy smiles and coy glares. Sorting coffee beans pays about 15 Ethiopian birr (about \$0.80) per day.

Image: Roots 21

Title: **Who is the Future?**

Location: Kembata Tembaro Zone, Ethiopia

As essential as education is to the strength of communities in Ethiopia, it is not compulsory. There is a wide array of possible paths for a young adult, especially for women. School is just one option, along with work and family responsibilities. Classrooms can be crowded places, especially in public schools. One girl's distraction was all I needed to understand the tenacity that attending school requires of Ethiopia's youth.

Image: Roots 16

Title: **Half Empty, Half Full**

Location: Kembata Tembaro Zone, Ethiopia

Classrooms are often the simplest of places. The head of the school opens a wooden door. Quiet and nearly empty, there is no evidence of learning inside. And then a flow of children move past me, giggling and eager to warm this space that is frozen without them. A profound lack of resources cannot throttle the energy of a throng of children into a classroom. Imagine what could happen if they had books there...





Image: Roots 22

Title: **Children on a Bench**

Location: Kembata Tembaro Zone, Ethiopia

Quiet and curious, three children kept close to our group as we visited a neighborhood where Roots Ethiopia has been providing support for some time. One girl wore a blue scarf, delightful to any onlooker, but in reality, a necessary garment. Dealing with dust is a constant challenge. It accumulates in hair, clothes, on skin and in eyes, noses and mouths. As we bounced by crowds in our car, we left a plume of dust thick enough to obscure the view for those we passed for at least a minute. The next group, as soon as they saw our vehicle, hastily raised scarves and other coverings to protect their faces, before we even got close.

Image: Roots 23

Title: **During School**

Location: Kembata Tembaro Zone, Ethiopia

A room full of children wanted to practice their English. We asked, What do you do after school? The answer was, in retrospect, quite sensible, and was repeated by child after child with a melodic lilt, like a mantra. I help my parents. I help my parents. I help my parents. I wanted to laugh, and to cry. I had a lot to learn. So I listened more. What is it like to be a child in rural Ethiopia? When does childhood end? Children under the age of 15 make up nearly half of the total population in Ethiopia.



Image: Roots 24

Title: **The Tide**

Location: Kembata Tembaro Zone, Ethiopia

Wheat threshing involves two elements of nature: wind, and gravity. Tossing the wheat in the sky, with a bit of wind, allows the grain to separate from the straw and fall to the ground, where it is collected and stored until it is milled into flour. This majestic activity is composed of graceful, slow, and purposeful movements, with a rustling sound like waves of water as the tide rolls in.



Image: Roots 25

Title: **Market Day**

Location: Kembata-Tembaro Zone, Ethiopia

It was a warm market day in Gimbichu town, and we were in search of Berhane, selling her two kinds of flour. The criss-cross of wood sticks frames the market stalls, stretched roofs made of colored tarp. Some stalls were empty, just the wood pieces sticking high in the air looking jealous and vacant. And then we found her with her bag of flour, her children, and her basket. Her idea, her plan, her work. A Roots Ethiopia startup grant was all that she needed. On her own, she supports five children. And so it goes...



Image: Roots 26

Title: **The Potter at Home**

Location: Kembata Tembaro Zone, Ethiopia

Pottery makers occupy the lowest class status. As I learned, poor families eat the weakest cow, potters eat the cow that got sick and died. Days framed by hard work making pitchers and pots, the young and old work tirelessly at their craft. Less than five percent of Ethiopia's population is over age 65. Meeting an elderly potter woman is an honor beyond words. Blinded, likely by an infection, she sits quietly in the shade and listens as workers build her house nearby.



Image: Roots 27

Title: **Making Circles**

Location: Kembata Tembaro Zone, Ethiopia

The shaping of pottery by women bent in half like bobby pins is phenomenal to watch. As if in defiance, the pots themselves remain still as the potter rotates around the pot, molding the clay as she moves. The traditional lower jaw tattoos are barely visible on her face with each rotation. These markings are becoming more rare as younger women opt out of the custom. Intensely curious, I made pictures until she told me, with her eyes, to go. As always, I complied.



Image: Roots 28

Title: **Stories**

Location: Kembata Tembaro Zone, Ethiopia

Stories form the backbone of our heritage. Listening and retelling are invaluable skills that inform our understanding of who we are. As I sat listening to a woman telling her story, and the soft voice of the translator, I became keenly aware of the other people in the room, children and adults, listening. She spoke of relatives who had moved away, and the struggles and blessings of her life.

Image: Roots 29

Title: **The Man and the Machine**

Location: Kembata Tembaro Zone, Ethiopia

Coffee starts as a berry with the bean inside. The flesh of the berry is removed by this red machine, and then the beans are washed and dried before they are sorted. This was the first piece of engine-powered machinery I had seen the entire journey, besides our car. The sense of pride and ownership was palpable.



Image: Roots 30

Title: **Dried Coffee Beans**

Location: Kembata Tembaro Zone, Ethiopia

Like a pile of sand, the coffee beans sit in the storehouse. The harsh light outside gives way to this tranquil space of mild edges and soft curves. I gasped as a man reached in and grabbed a handful of beans, as if he were destroying a beautiful beach sand castle. But some beans higher up on the pile flowed down into the hole and everything was smooth again. The coffee knows exactly what to do.

Image: Roots 31

Title: **Classroom Before Singing**

Location: Kindergarten, Hadiya Zone, Ethiopia

First, I thought nobody was in the room. The door was closed and we stood outside. I assumed we were being shown an empty classroom. Imagine my surprise when the principal opened the door and behind it sat fifty kindergarteners and their teacher. Elated, they danced and sang for us for many minutes. But right before that, it was calm. For a second.



Image: Roots 32

Title: **Walls**

Location: Kembata Tembaro Zone, Ethiopia

Mud, fermented with straw, is applied to a wall and smoothed with a simple piece of wood. Buildings are like living things, breathing in and out through small perforations. The warm mud forms a skin, applied gently. The thick walls keep the heat out or in, depending on the season. Small window holes let in just enough light, but keep out the rains.

Image: Roots 33

Title: **The Goat**

Location: Kembata Tembaro Zone, Ethiopia

It was there. In the window. It made us laugh. Goats have a great sense of humor.



Image: Roots 34

Title: **Girls in School**

Location: Kembata Tembaro Zone, Ethiopia

Full of curiosity five girls sat and let me know whose classroom I was visiting. The skills acquired in school will serve these girls well, to manage money, to communicate, and to think critically. I see my daughters, your daughters, in these faces. Which one is you?



## About the Photographer

Lauren Werner grew up in a community just outside New York City. She studied history at Yale University and medicine at Wake Forest University. While raising her five young children, she teaches yoga and studies photography. In the fall of 2014 she will graduate with a Masters in Public Health with a focus on health literacy from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

She lives in Middleton, Wisconsin with her family. This is her first show. [www.laurenwernerphotography.com](http://www.laurenwernerphotography.com)



## About the Founder

Meghan Walsh is an anthropologist, an unstoppable social connector and a mother to five children, including two young boys from Ethiopia. She enjoys helping compassionate people transform their concerns about social issues into action.

Meghan's passion is supporting communities in achieving their own solutions for the issues they face. The success of Roots Ethiopia is firmly based on this principle of community-led initiative. The projects that Roots Ethiopia supports are developed and implemented by the southern Ethiopian communities they serve.

Meghan loves her work and her family, and considers it a huge privilege to have both her personal and professional life to come together in the purposeful work of Roots Ethiopia.



Roots Ethiopia helps families in Ethiopia's southern region – the Kembata Tembaro, Hadiya and Silte zones. Roots Ethiopia gives form to connecting with communities in Ethiopia in culturally-appropriate, forward-thinking ways. We hold a long term vision that is on proactive, sustainable projects that are based in local wisdom and experience.

Working in collaboration with our Ethiopian partner, and guided by local community experts and elders, we support community identified solutions for job creation and education. Community aligned work with vulnerable families is having a profound impact on Roots Ethiopia program recipients.

We are a 501(c)3 organization and operate as an independent non-profit organization. We monitor our programs to ensure we are achieving our goals and look forward to new opportunities to expand the scope and impact of our programs focused on education and work.

For more information please visit [www.rootsethiopia.org](http://www.rootsethiopia.org)

“When spider webs unite,  
they can tie up a lion.”

– Ethiopian proverb

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