



## IN SEARCH OF THE RAINS ASFAWOSSEN ASRAT KASSAYE

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The first time I heard about the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin (Wiko) was in 2015 when a very esteemed colleague of mine who himself was a former Fellow of Wiko mentioned

it over coffee and matter-of-factly asked me whether I would be interested to apply for the Fellowship. Nearly three years later, on September 15, 2017, I started my Wiko year.

I had grand ambitions for my stay at Wiko: reconstructing a quantitative rainfall index and drought recurrence in the period 1750–1950 in the Ethiopian highlands using documentary archives (historical archives, treatises, chronicles, church records, municipality archives, tax records, travel reports, military operation reports, missionary correspondences, letters, gazettes, weather diaries, scientific mission reports, flood level gauges, etc.). Though rainfall is very crucial for subsistence in Ethiopia, as the country's agrarian economy is entirely dependent on the distribution and amount of rainfall, the country's rain cycle is very erratic in its spatial and temporal distribution, leading to frequent moisture stress and drought. Reasonably forecasting the rainfall pattern has been a major challenge owing to the lack or scarcity of long instrumental records. On the other hand, reconstructing the rainfall regime to the highest possible temporal and spatial resolution is imperative, because even a slight variability in rainfall amount and distribution leads to a major shift in the hydrologic system and the vegetation regime in various localities. Reconstructing the rainfall index of a long-term series from any available historical records in Ethiopia is therefore of great practical importance, as a long record of rainfall will help to better understand the rainfall regime in the country and possibly to predict drought cycles, which in turn will help to prepare for immediate impacts and eventually to plan long-term adaptation and mitigation strategies.

As part of my bigger research program on paleo-climate reconstruction, I have been thinking of doing this particular research for a long time and had in fact been collecting available archival sources whenever I had the chance to do so. However, this kind of research requires reading hundreds of books and archival sources and extracting data in a systematic manner. The Wiko was an ideal setting for this purpose: the fantastic library system along with the very savvy and helpful library personnel; the ideal working environment where I was given all the space, time, and resources for my research with no administrative and teaching duties; the company of Fellows, which encouraged intellectual pursuits; the environmentally friendly physical setting of the Wiko; and above all the excellent service provided by the warm, friendly, and efficient Wiko staff.

It was impossible not to be productive in such a setting. In addition to publishing several articles, which I had been postponing in the previous years for lack of enough time to write them up, my Wiko year was a time when I rediscovered my strong appetite for reading. I was able to read several hundred travel diaries, treatises, chronicles, church

records, travel reports, military operation reports, missionary correspondences, weather diaries, and scientific mission reports on the highlands of Ethiopia covering the last 250 years. I was able to largely reconstruct the rainfall index and the drought recurrence history of the Ethiopian highlands of the last 250 years. Though my dream of fulfilling an easy and healthy routine of “8 hours work: 8 hours relaxation: 8 hours sleep” was shattered starting the first week, owing to the very interesting stories I could not stop reading through the night, the whole exercise was rewarding.

But Wiko was not only about work: it was also about the numerous informal discussions on all subjects imaginable during lunch and dinner; the fascinating introductions of Fellows before their respective Tuesday colloquia (which on several occasions were better organized and more informative than the presentations themselves); the diverse subjects treated and various ways of presentation during the colloquia; the brilliant and sometimes curious questions and interventions following presentations; the delicious food at the restaurant and the inevitable but agreeable queue at the espresso machine; the late night, lighthearted “discussions” after the Thursday dinners; the weekly *Deutschkurs*; the often-times inconsequential “gossip” in the name of “critical evaluation”; the developing and evolving group dynamics among the Fellows; the experiments at social activities including the memorable “ethnic restaurant” outings in Berlin; the long, cold, and dark winter days (which for some reason seemed to be even longer and darker in Berlin than elsewhere); the transition of winter to long, warm, bright summer days, skipping the spring season altogether; the ecstasies and disappointments over the success and failure of the countries competing in the “FIFA World Cup 2018” (not to mention the failure of the German team to make it beyond the Group phase); the forging of lasting friendship with like-minded Fellows; the agony of saying goodbye to such a wonderful environment and easy life; and the longing to be back at the more demanding, more challenging, more messy but more familiar routine at home.

I have the feeling that the wonderful experience at Wiko will be matched only by another Wiko year, if that were an option!