

# COFFEE RITUAL AND THE POLITICS OF OPEN DEFECATION IN ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA

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On my first morning in Addis Ababa, my advisor, Dr. Marit Ostebo, and I walked the streets of the city in search of a cup of coffee. To the right of the sidewalk behind brick planters, a young woman in a blue smock sat on a plastic stool before a short table with rows small handleless cups. The jebena [Ethiopian coffee pot] rested at an angle atop a charcoal stove awaiting the next order. We stepped into the small courtyard and sat at a cluster of three colorful plastic stools, joining groups of men sharing copies of the newspaper and thumbing manila folders. Eventually a man adopted the final stool. His curiosity as to why two foreign women were sitting amongst Ethiopian men on the street sipping coffee begged an introduction. He explained that this space was a recently constructed public park—a government attempt to green and clean the city. “Yes, they serve coffee,” he said, “but they even have toilets.”

Recently, international aid organizations have given ‘open defecation’ policies and projects primacy in an effort to improve sanitation and increase access to clean water throughout Africa and Asia. Ethiopia considers reducing open defecation by improving access to basic sanitation one of the most difficult Millennium Development Goals (MDG) to achieve. Since January 2016, Addis Ababa Water and Sewerage Agency has constructed over 100 mobile public toilets (MPT) within the city municipality that also feature a compulsory Ethiopian coffee ceremony—a ritual that holds clear sacred undertones and is traditionally performed in the domestic sphere to strengthen women’s solidarity and social belonging.

MPT are constructed based on the assumption that they can improve marginal populations’ well-being and marginalized spaces by changing individual’s sanitation habits. Framed as a participatory development project and promoted as urban “green” recreational areas, MPT present a point of

entry to probe the function and implications of neoliberal empowerment claims and behavioral economics that underpin the MDG. During ten weeks of ethnographic research conducted in summer of 2016, I investigated what role coffee plays in Ethiopia’s public health policy framework to combat open defecation and how this ‘model of’ and ‘model for’ development elicits (un)intended consequences by pushing women and the coffee ritual into



the public spheres of waste work. MPT reconfigures the responsibility and reward of waste work by instrumentalizing women as key transformative figures in governance agendas for economic growth, poverty reduction and public health mobilization. They are expected to educate the public on proper sanitation and hygiene practices, generate income by commodifying the “traditional” coffee ritual, and extend their social reproductive duties into the neighborhood space. Because the implementation of MPT is underpinned by a discourse of women’s empowerment and entrepreneurial citizenship, the coffee ritual acts as a “technology of governance” that reorders social space and ritual. Drawing upon preliminary ethnographic data, I

suggest that this process of commodifying the sacred and mobilizing women’s (traditionally) domestic coffee ritual produce new and reify existing gender inequalities. My summer research culminated in a master’s thesis and two presentations—at the center’s Social Change and Development in Africa Working Group and the annual African Studies Association conference in Washington, DC. Because these findings and analyses are preliminary, I intend to further interrogate how the “traditional” coffee ritual transforms in the movement from the domestic to the public and, more broadly, how this speaks to processes of remapping the public and private in African cities. Upon my return to Addis Ababa this summer, I will continue to explore how women renegotiate and define their economic standings within structural constraints that often compound their marginalization.

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