

MIETRO

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PETULA DVORAK

For adoptive families, a slice of Ethiopia in Va.

At a rustic summer camp in Virginia's Shenandoah Mountains, wedged between a monster water park and a Golden Corral restaurant, a raucous, Ethiopian feast unspooled and 9-year-old Mati found her groove at last.

There was a pony, an African marketplace and piles of injera bread. There was a drumbeat that grew faster, twangs from a stringed instrument called a krar and an impossibly fast esketa — an Ethiopian dance that had Mati and her friends shrugging

their shoulders at warp speed. Whoa. This wasn't baseball. Or Wii bowling. Or skateboarding. This was what kids do in Ethiopia, the country Mati had tried to forget ever since her adoption at age 5.

Ethiopia was the place where she'd lost her parents and been separated from her brother. It was the place where ear infections went untreated and caused pain, said Mati's mother, Elizabeth Glynn.

So why in the world, when her eager, American adoptive-

parents came to her with Ethiopian music and phrases and pictures, would she want anything to do with that place?

"I didn't really want to talk about it," Mati explained. "And everyone kept asking me questions."

But there she was Saturday at the Ethiopian Heritage and Culture Camp in Massanetta Springs, near Harrisonburg, her American clothes shed in favor of a traditional, gauzy white

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Mitikey Steinberg enjoys a brownie and a cuddle with her mom, Lynn Steinberg of Chapel Hill, N.C., at the Ethiopian Heritage and Culture Camp near Harrisonburg, Va. The camp helps children adopted from Ethiopia and their families experience African traditions together.

PETULA DVORAK

Far from Ethiopia, heritage camp in Va. feels like home

DVORAK FROM B1

habesha libs, dancing to the krar. She was surrounded by kids as big-eyed and coffee brown as she, watched over by parents as white and doting as her own.

Suri Phillips, 9, who left Ethiopia for Annapolis three years ago, was thrilled by the camp. "I don't see brown people very often where I live. And now, I see all these other kids and families that look like mine," Suri said. "I know I'm not alone. It's not just me."

Suri met dozens of other kids and learned to shoulder-dance at the culture camp, where about 60 other families took classes in Amharic and Ethiopian etiquette, music and cooking. It's the third year they've done this, and the camp has grown bigger each time, as adoptions from Ethiopia have soared.

Last year, more than 2,500 children were adopted from the impoverished African nation, which has an estimated 5 million orphans. The adoption figure seems certain to fall in the wake of new restrictions imposed by the Ethiopian government, prompted by revelations of corruption in the adoption process.

But with thousands of Ethiopian children now in America, demand for information about Ethiopia has surged among adoptive parents.

"We thought it was important for us to learn about our daughter's culture and help her maintain that identity," said Mark Boucher, who came to the camp from Albany, N.Y., with his family of four, including Lidia, the 7-year-old girl they adopted three years ago.

The Bouchers and parents from Rhode Island, Arizona and even Belgium were visibly jealous when I told them that I bought injera at my gas station on U Street this week. The



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Gezachew T. Mariam of Washington plays a masinko, an Ethiopian instrument, at the camp as part of a demonstration of Ethiopian music. One parent described the camp as a "magical place."

"I just didn't want to leave. I didn't want to break the spell of what a wonderful place this is for us."

Sara Mac, a Tucson parent who attended the Ethiopian heritage camp with her 7-year-old daughter, Fiqir, after finding it in a Google search

Washington area has the largest Ethiopian community outside of Ethiopia.

"Lucky!" they each said. "I have to have mine shipped and then I freeze it," one mom told me.

The heritage camp is the brainchild of Mekdes Bekele, a native of Ethiopia who was struggling to raise a bicultural child in the land of the Big Mac and Nintendo and discovered that white adoptive families were having an even tougher time.

The Babers of Charlottesville were in from the beginning. They have two biological children, plus the 4-year-old they adopted from Ethiopia.

"We're not just bringing a child into the family," said David Baber, 32. "We changed the culture of our family."

Most of the parents at the camp were eager to embrace Ethiopian culture, dressing in the traditional tunics of white cotton and learning the coffee ceremony and the right way to bow and shake hands. They took classes in how to care for their African child's hair and skin.

For their children, it was a revelation, too.

Beyond hearing the sound of Amharic and smelling a good doro-wat (chicken stew), Mati and the other kids at the camp found the thing that is uniquely their own: families that look like their own, American and Ethiopian, white and brown, piano and krar, sliced whole wheat and injera, all under the same roof.

"It's this magical place," said Sara Mac, who flew in from Tucson with her 7-year-old daughter, Fiqir, after finding the camp on a Google search. "The other day, I had to go find an ATM and I just didn't want to leave. I didn't want to break the spell of what a wonderful place this is for us."

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