



Africa

US-Based Non-Profit Group Reunites Ethiopian Families Separated by Adoption

By Habtamu Seyoum
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Amarech Kebede Richmond, at rear center, reconnected with her biological mother Abaynesh and brothers several years ago through Beteseb Felega-Ethiopian Adoption Connection. (Courtesy of Andrea Kelley)

The letter delivered to Måns Clausen brought startling news. It advised the Swedish actor that his biological mother in Ethiopia, long presumed dead, was alive and searching for him.

After a few months of correspondence and phone calls with newfound relatives, the actor flew from Stockholm to Addis Ababa to see his birth mother for the first time since his adoption as a baby by a Swedish couple.

"That was a surrealistic experience! It was wonderful, of course," Clausen said of their reunion three years ago, starting at the airport in Addis Ababa. Now 46, he recalled his mother "was a stranger to me. But for her, I was, of course, her child. She had been looking for me for years."



That revelatory letter to Clausen came from [Beteseb Felega-Ethiopian Adoption Connection](#) (BF-EAC). The nonprofit organization operates a program, including a website, that reunites Ethiopian-born adoptees with their biological relatives. Clausen's younger half-brother saw its online search database and contacted the organization on his mother's behalf; he

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Måns Clausen, a Swedish actor, reconnected with his Ethiopian birth mother and brother via the search program Beteseb Felega. (Photo by Mikael Melanson)

also was at the airport when they reunited.

BF-EAC is the idea by Andrea Kelley, an American. She and her husband, who live just outside Kansas City, Missouri, adopted their two children from Ethiopia, bringing home a son in 2000 and a daughter in 2002.

Over time, Kelley became aware that many birth families “were searching for their children, but there was no way for us both to meet,” she said in a phone interview. She and her husband were able to find their daughter’s biological family in 2004 and have visited several times. They have not had success with their son’s, whose “mother could have been searching for him and I would have no way of knowing it,” Kelley said.

Accustomed to adoption search databases in the United States, “I just decided to make one for Ethiopia,” she said.

Helped by an adoptive mom with strong tech skills, Kelley invested countless hours and \$3,000 to launch BF-EAC in 2014. Since then, the organization – registered with the Ethiopian government as a nonprofit – has reconnected more than 200 adoptees with their Ethiopian relatives. More than 1,000 other cases remain active in the registry, with adoptees or their birth relatives seeking connections.

The database posts information – such as birth dates, names of the children or relatives, photos – provided by Ethiopian birth families, adoptive parents or adoptees themselves. Once a likely identification is made, Beteseb Felega contacts the subject of the search – as it did with adoptee Clausen. If that person confirms a match, he or she can provide a letter and photos for Beteseb Felega to deliver. The organization will interview the Ethiopian family, providing a detailed report to the adoptee and providing follow-up as needed.

Access to the online database is free. Sometimes, an adoptee or adoptive family will want an on-the-ground search in Ethiopia, for which Beteseb Felega charges the adoptive side. There is no cost to Ethiopian families, Kelley stressed.

“Most of the people that did give up their kids were the poorest,” she said. Many were told, by adoption agencies and intermediaries, that their children were being sent abroad to get an education and other opportunities and would return as adults.

Foreign adoptions banned

[Ethiopia banned adoptions by foreigners](#) in early 2018, citing concerns about mistreatment of children abroad – including the 2011 death of an Ethiopian child at the hands of her adoptive U.S. mother. In recent decades, the Horn of

Africa nation has become [one of the biggest source countries for international adoption](#) – including to the United States. Many children have also found homes in western European countries and Canada.

With the ban, “the issues of Ethiopian children adopted abroad were sidelined and no one was concerned about sustainable communication and the connection between birth families and adoptees,” said Wubshet, one of Beteseb Felega’s three social workers in the Horn of Africa country. He asked that his full name not to publicly disclosed, so that he could speak more freely and avoid extra pressure on searches. Wubshet said federal and local governments, along with police, decline requests for most files.



Andrea Kelley (C) founded Beteseb Felega-Ethiopian Adoption Connection after struggling to find her son’s biological family. He group reconnected Swedish actor Mans Clausen, not shown, with his Ethiopian birth family. (Courtesy of Andrea Kelley)

“The bureaucracy is tough,” added Habtamu, another social worker.

“Some institutions did not want to collaborate with us” in providing documents vital to a search, even when the social workers provided letters of legal authorization from adoptive parents or adoptees. But, he added, “I also need to acknowledge those who helped us” in the government and adoption agencies.

An official with Ethiopia’s Ministry of Women, Children and Youth Affairs told VOA that the ministry and other governmental organizations are doing the best they can to help with reconnections.

“When people from foreign countries ask us for help, we usually look into our record vault and provide them with the needed information,” said Belete Dagne, director of child protection. “When Ethiopian families request us about adoptees, we also try to help them by collaborating with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ethiopian embassies based in foreign countries.”

He estimated that some 70,000 Ethiopian children had been adopted by foreigners since the 1960s, many in the 1990s after HIV-AIDS ravaged the country and left many without parents. Dagne said up to 2,000 children are adopted each year by Ethiopian families.

Dagne also said his office has received requests about adopting children orphaned in conflicts in Tigray and other parts of Ethiopia. “It is our responsibility to protect the safety of these children,” he said. “We are discussing how to support the children with regional governments.”

Some resistance

Challenges with reconnection go beyond governmental institutions and

missing documentation. Sometimes, adoptive parents or adoption agencies don't want to help, Kelley said. "They do not support the child's right to know his/her history and the Ethiopian family's right to know that their child is alive."

Amarech Kebede Richmond hopes to change that thinking. She was adopted in 2010, along with a younger biological sister, by a family in the U.S. mid-Atlantic state of North Carolina. With her parents' support, she was reconnected to her birth family through Beteseb Felega and visited them in Ethiopia in 2016. Now she serves on the organization's adoptee advisory board.

"I encourage adoptees to look for their families," said Richmond, a 22-year-old student at the University of North Carolina's Greensboro campus. She acknowledged risks of frustration and disappointment, but added, "It's a process that's worth it" in terms of identity.

Clausen, in Sweden, said he keeps in touch with his biological family through periodic phone calls.

Reconnecting families can be life-changing, Habtamu said.

He spoke of Ethiopian women who, after giving up their children, were "living in shame." Reunification made them feel "like they are new moms. Some of them even told us that they feel like they are revived from the dead."

Beteseb Felega plans to expand its services. Those include introducing a DNA database to speed identification so other adoptees can experience the "surrealistic" feeling of a reunion.

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