

# Electronic Oasis

Sept. 12, 2014, 6:33 a.m.

by Paul Salopek, Dalifagi village, Ethiopia, 10°37'34.8" N, 40°18'43.9" E

Water is gold in the Afar Triangle of Ethiopia. No surprise. It's in one of the hottest deserts in the world. Walking for three days recently near the western scarp of the Rift Valley, guide Ahmed Alema Hessian and I found one smear of muddy rainwater to ease our camels' thirst. But we stumbled across a new type of waterhole a day later—a coveted oasis of electrons, the village of Dalifagi.

The immense saltscapes that straddle the borders of Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Eritrea weren't even mapped until the 1920s. For centuries, the martial Afar pastoralists who ruled the area resisted all incursions by the outside world. Today, though, they embrace the information revolution with a vengeance. "It has given them power," says Mulukan Ayalu, 23, an Ethiopian government technician who maintains the tiny power plant at Dalifagi. "They can call different goat traders. They can choose their selling prices."

The diesel generators of Dalifagi don't throw much shade. And they offer meager habitat for weaverbirds or gazelles. But the Chinese pistons chug out a 220-volt current for six hours a day. In the process, they've transformed an end-of-the-road outpost that was pristine desert just 20 years ago into the latest hub of the information revolution—a magnet for Afar pastoralists who walk from miles around, desperate to slake their cell phone addiction with a battery charge.

As well master of the electronic oasis, Ayalu recharges nomad cell phones for a few cents. On Mondays—market day—trail-worn Afar pastoralists line up at his office door with the folds of their sarong-like shirts laden with dead cell phones of faraway neighbors. Customers who drop off their phones for recharging are given a handmade token. The numbers now rise into the hundreds. Some purveyors of scarce electrons on Africa's information frontier get even more creative. In the nearby Afar town of Asaita, one local entrepreneur has jigsawed together a Frankensteinish apparatus that quick-charges clients' phones in minutes.

At night, when the power is on, the residents of Dalifagi engage in a new cultural practice that didn't diffuse from Manhattan—the power dinner, with cell phones clamped to ears. When two Afars meet in the desert, they often conduct a dagu, a formal exchange of news with a lengthy call-and-response greeting. "Now we dagu, dagu, dagu all the time on the phone," Ahmed Alema Hessian says.

As oases go, the electronic waterhole at Dalifagi would never draw adventure tourists, much less inspire the verse of caravan poets, but it is the real story in sub-Saharan Africa. Nine hundred million people. A headlong sprint into the digital age that leaps over a century of analog technology. Exploding aspirations. Consequences unknown.

In Ethiopia, the government is aggressively expanding its state-run mobile network. Last year, cell use ballooned by an astonishing 30 percent, to more than 17 million subscribers. In isolated Dalfagi, even the frontier rusticity of the communal wall plugs will fade. Next year, fixed power lines arrive. "Twenty years from now? There will be a different Afar people," said Haji Boddaya Qibad, a local political leader of the nomads. "Life won't be camels and sheep anymore."

In what way is water gold?

What is this "new type of waterhole" that the writer found?

What point is the writer trying to make as he points out that the saltscapes weren't mapped until the 1920s?

Explain what the writer is saying about the manner in which the Afar pastoralists welcome the information revolution with the phrase, "with a vengeance"?

What is the information revolution? How has the information revolution changed the way goat traders do business?

Where do they get their electricity? (How does Singapore get its electricity? How do other countries get their electricity?)

What must the Afar people do to get their cell phones charged?

What does the description "Frankensteinish" suggest about the charging station in Asaita and the local entrepreneur?

Why does the writer mention Manhattan?

What is the plural form for 'oasis'?

What is another phrase for 'information revolution'?

What do you think Paul Salopek feels about the change he is seeing in Dalfagi? Explain with evidence from the text.

## What is a metaphor? What is metaphoric language?

Examine these examples, then write a working definition for metaphor in the shaded area below.

*Sally is such a pig!*

*I'm drowning in debt.*

*Life is a roller coaster.*

*He is a walking dictionary.*

*You light up my life.*

## What then is an extended metaphor?

<http://literarydevices.net/extended-metaphor/>

What is an oasis?

Wikipedia says... "In geography, an oasis (plural: oases) or cienega (Southwestern United States) is an isolated area of vegetation in a desert, typically surrounding a spring or similar water source. Oases also provide habitat for animals and even humans if the area is big enough. The location of oases has been of critical importance for trade and transportation routes in desert areas; caravans must travel via oases so that supplies of water and food can be replenished. Thus, political or military control of an oasis has in many cases meant control of trade on a particular route."

Paul Salopek titled this dispatch "Electronic Oasis". *How does he sustain the metaphor of an oasis throughout his article?*

Geographical oasis	Electronic Oasis: Look for references in the dispatch that extends on the oasis metaphor (add to the suggested answers below)
isolated area	faraway neighbours
vegetation: e.g. palm trees	the <u>diesel generators...don't throw much shade</u>
desert	
spring/water source	
habitat for animals and humans	
trade and transportation routes / caravans	
supplies of water and food can be replenished	
political or military control	well master