

The Code and The Cloth

by Mintesinot Dache

My grandmother's hands were a map of a life lived in thread. I would watch them, mesmerized, as they guided the shuttle back and forth on the old loom, their movements a quiet, confident dance. Clack-clack. The warp and weft of red, yellow, and black wool slowly grew into a Dinguza, the traditional wear of my Wolaita people. Each pull of the thread was a word; each finished pattern, a story. Her hands were dark with sun and age, the nails short and practical. They knew the weight of the wool, the tension needed, the exact point where a new color must be introduced to continue the ancient narrative woven into our fabric. This was my first language: the language of the cloth. A language of patience, of community, of patterns passed down through generations. It was a language that said, You belong to something. You are part of a whole.

My own hands now know a different weight. They rest on the cool, smooth surface of a keyboard, lit by the blue glow of a monitor at the Ethiopia Artificial Intelligence Institute. Instead of wool, I weave with code. Instead of a shuttle, my tool is a cursor, stitching together lines of Python and C++ into a different kind of fabric—a neural network. My project, a ChatGPT clone and an Amharic voice-to-text tool, is a tapestry of a different sort. It has its own patterns, its own logic, its own silent clack-clack of the keyboard that builds something meant to connect, to communicate, to clothe thoughts in language.

For a long time, I saw these two parts of myself as enemies living in the same skin. To embrace the code, I felt I was betraying the cloth. The world of algorithms and machine learning felt sterile and lonely compared to the vibrant, communal act of weaving. How could a line of code ever carry the warmth of a hand-woven Dinguza? How could a chatbot understand the soul of a story told by my grandmother? I was stretching, a thread pulled taut between two worlds, afraid I would snap.

The turning point came not in a grand moment, but in the quiet struggle of debugging my voice-to-text model. It kept failing to recognize the subtle inflections of the Wolaita accent in Amharic. I was frustrated, staring at a screen full of errors, feeling the distance between my modern tool and the ancient, oral language it was meant to serve. In that moment of failure, I heard my grandmother's voice. Not literally, but the memory of her teaching me. "You don't force the

thread, Mintesinot. You guide it. You listen to what it wants to do.”

I was trying to force the code. I was treating the language as data, not as a living, breathing thing with a soul and a history. So, I stopped. I went back to the beginning. I spent hours not just inputting data, but listening—really listening—to recordings of elders speaking. I learned to recognize the rhythm, the music, the pauses that were not silence but meaning. I was, in essence, learning the pattern of the speech, just as my grandmother had learned the pattern of the Dinguza.

And then I saw it. The profound, stunning connection I had been blind to.

The loom and the computer are the same. Both are frameworks. The Dinguza pattern, passed down through generations, is an algorithm—a set of instructions to create beauty and function. My code is a digital loom. The patience required to sit for hours, untangling a single syntactic error, is the same patience required to undo a mistaken knot in the wool. The act of creation, whether with thread or with code, is an act of faith and discipline.

I am not a programmer who happens to be Wolaita. I am a weaver. My grandmother used a wooden loom and colored thread to create a Dinguza, a garment that protects the body and proclaims an identity. I use a silicon processor and code to create a tool that I hope will protect a language and empower a community. The Amharic voice-to-text tool is my Dinguza. It is woven not to clothe the body, but to clothe the voice—to preserve it, to amplify it, to ensure that the stories and wisdom of my people are not lost in the noise of a homogenizing world.

My name is Mintesinot. “What is he not capable of?” My grandmother’s loom and my code are the answer. They are not two separate answers, but one single, woven truth. I am the loom. My life is the frame where the past and the future are stretched tight as the warp. With every line of code I write, with every tradition I honor, I am the shuttle, passing the weft of my story back and forth, weaving a new fabric for a new generation. A fabric where the deep, resonant colors of our heritage are not faded, but are the very foundation upon which we build our future.