



Aethiopica 7 (2004)

International Journal of Ethiopian and
Eritrean Studies

RICHARD PANKHURST, Addis Ababa University

Article

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Aethiopica 7 (2004), 84–113

ISSN: 1430–1938

Published by

Universität Hamburg

Asien Afrika Institut, Abteilung Afrikanistik und Äthiopistik

Hiob Ludolf Zentrum für Äthiopistik

Ethiopia and the Great Transformation

RICHARD PANKHURST, Addis Ababa University

Karl Polanyi, in his seminal work *The Great Transformation* (1944), declared that, whereas “all types of society are limited by economic factors”, 19th century Western European capitalist civilization “alone was economic in a different and distinctive sense”. This was, he argued, because it “chose to base itself on a motive rarely acknowledged as valid in the history of human societies, and certainly never before raised to the level of a justification of action and behavior in everyday life, namely, gain. The self-regulating market system”, he concluded, “was uniquely derived from this principle”.¹

The above thesis, and Polanyi’s writings in general, have led to considerable debate, among economic historians and social anthropologists, as to how far non-Western, pre-Industrialised, societies were governed by “market principles”. This question has thus far not been considered in the Ethiopian historical context.

The object of the present article is to examine the economy and society of traditional, highland Ethiopia, i.e. the core of the medieval and post-medieval Christian State, and of its values, in the light of Polanyi’s thesis; to consider the validity of this hypothesis in the relation to traditional Ethiopia; and to ask how far the analysis under discussion provides a useful tool for Ethiopian historical study.

Land

Land, in traditional Ethiopia, so far from being regarded as an economic commodity, or factor of production, as predicated in modern Western economic analysis, was traditionally considered as entirely the property of the King. The earth was said to belong to the monarch in the same way as the heavens belonged to God.²

Land in traditional, medieval Ethiopia was in fact scarcely ever sold.³ This was true of the country’s three basic types of tenure: (1) *rest*, or inheritable land, held mainly by the peasantry, and passed down from father to son; (2) *gult*, or feudally-controlled land, the tax of which was ceded by the sovereign,

¹ K. POLANYI, *The Great Transformation* (New York 1944), p. 30.

² C. CONTI ROSSINI, *Principi di diritto consuetudini dell’Eritrea* (Roma 1916), pp. 11–12.

³ R. PANKHURST, *State and Land in Ethiopian History* (Addis Ababa 1966), pp. 29–31.

at his pleasure, to members of his family, the nobles, and/or ecclesiastical establishments; and (3) communally-owned land, held by local communities, and their descendants, virtually in perpetuity.⁴

The Middle Ages in Ethiopia was a period moreover during which the ruling monarchs, and their courts, travelled far and wide throughout the country, at the head of their soldiers, and established temporary military camps, which have aptly been termed “moving capitals”.⁵ This phenomenon militated against the growth of towns, and thereby retarded the emergence of urban-type land, a category of property more susceptible than rural land to influence by market forces.

The rise, in the early 17th century, of the great capital city of Gondär, which lay on major trade routes to the Red Sea port of Massawa and to the Sudan, and was the first major Ethiopian fixed capital for several centuries, was accompanied by a great expansion of commerce. The city, according to the late 18th century Scottish “explorer” James Bruce, had a population of no less than “ten thousand families”.⁶ They exercised a not insignificant commercial impact on the neighbouring countryside, which supplied the capital and its citizens with large quantities of grain, cattle, and other supplies.⁷

Such enhanced economic activity resulted, towards the middle of the 18th century, in numerous land sales in the city and its vicinity.⁸ The earliest of these purchases were made in gold, but later ones were in many cases effected in silver Maria Theresa thalers, or dollars, which gained increasing circulation in Ethiopia in the late 18th century.⁹

⁴ Mention may however be made of a hagiography of the 13th century Emperor Lalibala. Written over a millennium later (by which time values had quite possibly changed), it claims that the monarch bought the land required for his famous rock churches “with his own gold”. J. PERRUCHON, *Vie de Lalibala, roi d’Ethiopie* (Paris 1892), p. 123. The degree of credence to be paid to the text may be judged by the fact that it goes on to tell of Lalibala travelling to Heaven and back. Kings, as evident from their numerous land decrees, traditionally granted estates to their subjects, but did not purchase them. G.W.B. HUNTINGFORD, *The Land Charters of Northern Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa 1965), passim. See also A. CAQUOT, “Aperçu préliminaire sur le Mashafa Téfut de Geshen Amba”, *Annales d’Ethiopie* (1955), I, 107.

⁵ R. PANKHURST, “Ethiopian medieval and post-medieval capitals: Their development and principal features”, *Azania* (1979), XIV, 1–19.

⁶ J. BRUCE, *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile* (Edinburgh 1790), III, 380.

⁷ *IBID.*, III, 736, IV, 27.

⁸ D. CRUMMEY, *Land and Society in the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia from the Thirteenth to the Twentieth Century* (Urbana, Illinois 1999), p. 283.

⁹ R. PANKHURST, “The advent of the Maria Theresa dollar in Ethiopia, its effect on taxation and wealth accumulation, and other economic, political and cultural implications”, *Northeast African Studies* (1979–80) I, no. 3, pp. 1–7.

Emperor Iyasu I (1682–1706), perhaps responding to the expanding (but still localised and perhaps very limited) commercialisation of land, in the Gondär area, is reported to have undertaken measurement of estates in the city, as well as in the neighbouring province of Bègémder.¹⁰ A number of land sales were also recorded, by the early 19th century, in the commercially developed Aksum–Adwa area of the northern Tegray. The provincial ruler, Ras Wäldä Sellasé (died 1816), is reported to have purchased a piece of land, for the cathedral church at Aksum, for 200 Maria Theresa thalers. The daughter of Abustali, or Apostella, a prominent Greek goldsmith (who is alleged to have fathered one hundred children!), likewise bought a plot of land, apparently in Adwa, more modestly for eight pieces of cloth.¹¹

Land sales, throughout Ethiopian history, were, however, relatively rare, and in most of the countryside indeed virtually non-existent. The traditional inalienability of land was subsequently recognised by the modern Ethiopian scholar Mahtämä Sellasé. He states that land, in the eyes of his compatriots, was second in importance only to religion. The Ethiopian, he declares, “profoundly” loved the land which nourished him, and which would “receive his body on the day of his death”. To surrender this land, “willingly or by force”, was to “commit the greatest sin, the most vile crime”.¹² This statement echoes Polanyi’s memorable phrase that one “might as well imagine” a peasant “born without hands and feet as carrying on his life without land”.¹³

Land, in traditional Ethiopia, we may conclude, could thus in no way be regarded, in European market terms, as a commodity of production.

Agriculture

Agriculture, in the Ethiopian highlands, formed part of a subsistence, and in a sense feudal, economy, in which peasants produced primarily for their own consumption, and for the monarch, nobles and others to whom they paid dues in kind and/or labour service. Throughout most of the country there was virtually no market for farm produce, and therefore only extremely limited production for sale.

¹⁰ MAHTEME SELASSIE WOLDE MASKAL, “The Land System of Ethiopia”, *Ethiopia Observer* (1957), I, 284, 288.

¹¹ HUNTINGFORD, *Land Charters*, pp. 64–8, 79–80; N. PEARCE, *The Life and Adventures of Nathaniel Pearce* (London 1831), I, 163. See also J.T. BENT, *The Sacred City of the Ethiopians* (London 1896), p. 22.

¹² MAHTEME SELASSIE WOLDE MASKAL, “Portrait retrospective d’un gentilhomme éthiopien”, *Proceedings of the Third International Conference of Ethiopian Studies* (Addis Ababa 1970) III, 63.

¹³ POLANYI, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

Semi-commercialised agriculture, and the cultivation of grain for the market may, however, be discerned in the 18th and 19th centuries in two distinct areas: the Ḥamasén and Sārayé highlands near the Red Sea coast, which supplied international shipping and the ports of Arabia;¹⁴ and the area around Gondār, which, as we have seen, provided for the city's large population.¹⁵ Such commercialised areas were, however, exceptional, and agricultural sales in the country as a whole remained minimal.

There was, for this reason, generally little or no attempt at maximising agricultural production, as modern European market principles would require.

Opposition to product maximisation was on the contrary explicit in the traditional Ethiopian legal code, the *Fethä Nägäst*,¹⁶ or Law of the Kings. This text, which dated to the 13th century, sought to govern economic life in accordance with Biblical Writ, i.e. on moral or theological, rather than market principles. The code thus laid down, on the basis of the Book of Leviticus (19, 9–10), that:

“When you reap the corn of your land, you shall not be too attentive in doing so. Thou shall not gather what fell down; after having gathered thy grapes, thou shalt not turn back and gather the remaining, but shalt leave it to the poor and strangers”.¹⁷ Such disregard for product maximisation was apparently accepted without a murmur by 16th and 17th century European observers, such as the Portuguese traveller Francisco Alvares and the Jesuit missionary Manoel de Almeida. Writing prior to the rise of a market economy, their values, it may be assumed, were not so dissimilar from those of medieval Ethiopia.

By the early 19th century, however, the situation in Western Europe had been transformed. The German scientist Eduard Rüppell, writing after the Commercial Revolution in Europe, thus castigated the farmer of pre-capitalist Ethiopia on the – to him shocking – ground that he did not “plough more land than is necessary for the needs of his family”. Rüppell, who failed to see such attitudes in Polanyian or historico-cultural terms, dismissed this restricted cultivation as evidence of the innate “laziness” of the Ethiopians.¹⁸

Agriculture in traditional Ethiopia, it may be concluded, was thus carried out with little consideration of the European-style market ethos.

¹⁴ T. LEFEBVRE, *Voyage en Abyssinie* (Paris 1845–8), II, Part II, 40.

¹⁵ BRUCE, op. cit., III, 191–2, 195, 253, 284, 335, 384, 736, IV, 27; E. COMBES and M. TAMISIER, *Voyage en Abyssinie* (Paris 1838), II, 22.

¹⁶ This work was translated from a 13th century Arabic text by Ibn Assal, an Egyptian Copt, who based it largely on the Old and New Testaments.

¹⁷ PAULOS TZADUA and P.L. STRAUSS, *The Fetha Nagast. The Law of Kings* (Addis Ababa 1968), p. 279.

¹⁸ E. RÜPPELL, *Reise in Abyssinien* (Frankfurt 1838–40), I, 367.

Church Holidays

Production – and trade – in old-time Ethiopia, so far from being based on market principles, was in many areas subordinated to the dictates of religion. This subordination was propounded in the *Fethä Nägäst* which forbade Christians from buying anything “on Sundays, on the Lord’s feasts and on the feasts of Our Lady Mary”.¹⁹

Work of any kind was likewise prohibited on Saints’ Days, which occupied a large portion of the year. The severity of such restrictions on production was noted in the 17th century by the Portuguese Jesuit, Manoel Barradas. He recalls that the Ethiopians, on church holidays, would not work in the fields, dig, or reap, or do “other things of this nature”. “To cut a sheaf of grass for a horse or mule who has nothing to eat”, he adds, “is considered a big sin and in no case will they do it”.²⁰

The custom of refraining from work on Saints’ Days was later more forcibly condemned by Western writers imbued with the Protestant work ethic. Nathaniel Pearce, an early 19th century British resident in Tegray, complained: “If it were not for so many holy days, it would be better for all workmen: a man dare not touch his crop of corn in the field [even] if he sees it going to be devoured by locusts! nor dare he offer to reap, sow or carry, on those days if the bad weather ever so much urges him to do it”.²¹

The subsequent British consul Walter Plowden, writing of Gojjam in the mid-19th century, likewise criticised what he considered the excessively long Ethiopian “week-end”, which embraced both Saturday and Sunday. “The Saturday”, he bemoaned, “is held of equal sanctity with the Sunday, so that water cannot be drawn, nor wood hewn, from Friday evening to Monday morning ... There are”, he added, “numberless saints’ days in the year, on which no work is done,” with the result that “the whole population” was forced “to be idle for a third of the year”.²² Work-free Saints’ days, at that time, were estimated by Ruppell at no less than 180 days per annum, or virtually half the year.²³

The prohibition on working on the Sabbath and Saints’ Days continued well into the 20th century, when it enjoyed strong support from the State. A

¹⁹ PAULOS TZADUA and STRAUSS, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

²⁰ E. FILLEUL, *Manoel Barradas, Tractatus Tres Historico-Geographici* (1634) (Wiesbaden 1996), p. 79.

²¹ N. PEARCE, “A Small but True Account of the Ways and Manners of the Abyssinians”, *Transactions of the Literary Society of Bombay* (1831), III, 31.

²² GREAT BRITAIN, HOUSE OF COMMONS, *Correspondence respecting Abyssinia 1846–1868* (London 1868), pp. 102, 106.

²³ RÜPPELL, *op. cit.*, I, 367.

proclamation issued in the city of Harär, in 1913, by Ras Täfäri Mäkonnen, the future Emperor Haylä Sellasé, recalled that work on Sundays was forbidden, and threatened that anyone breaking this ordinance would be deprived of his property.²⁴ Later, in 1930, a year of economic difficulty, he issued a further edict, which emphatically proclaimed:

“Before this there have been many proclamations about work being carried out on the Sabbath and other holy days which were established with excommunication. But now we realise that the wrath of God has not abated, due to your indulgence in working on holy days and especially on the Sabbath, despite proclamation and excommunication. Henceforward, observe the Sabbath and the other already specified holy days! Do not labour on these days! Any person found working on these days, forbidden both by proclamation and excommunication, shall be punished!”²⁵

Abstinence from work on the Sabbath and other religious holidays continued until the Italian Fascist occupation. In the early 1930s British consul Robert Cheesman reported that menfolk in Gojjam did “no ploughing or harvesting” on Sundays, and women, no grinding of corn. “Most people” also refrained from farm work on Saturdays.²⁶ The French ethnographer Marcel Griaule claimed, at about the same time, that there were some 220 church holidays a year. In one community he knew, during the 29 days around Easter-time between 9 March and 7 April, there had been no less than 21 work-free days. Peasants, he explained, were most scrupulous in their adherence to the prohibition on work, as it was widely believed that violation would result in terrible storms.²⁷

The deep-seated fear associated with work on the Sabbath was also buttressed by other popular beliefs. One held that the prohibition of such work had been broken in early 4th century during the time of Abba Säläma, or Frumentius, who had converted the country to Christianity. Tradition had it that God, angered by violation of the law, had unleashed a fierce leopard, which ravaged the people, until the beast was finally eliminated through Säläma’s intervention.²⁸

The frequency of Church festivals, and the powerful sanction against work thereon, represented yet another important area in which traditional Ethiopian society and its values differed from those of a modern European market economy.

²⁴ J.I. EADIE, *An Amharic Reader* (Cambridge 1924), p. 185.

²⁵ MÄHTÄMÄ SELLASÉ WÄLDÄ MÄSQÄL, *ZekräNägär* (Addis Ababa 1942 EC), p. 545.

²⁶ R.E. CHEESMAN, *Lake Tana & the Blue Nile* (London 1936), p. 54.

²⁷ M. GRIAULE, *Le travail en Abyssinie* (Paris 1931), pp. 7–9.

²⁸ R. SCHNEIDER, “es actes d’Abuna Salama”, *Annales d’Ethiopie* (1987), XIV, 164.

Surplus Production

In view of the absence of a significant market for agricultural goods, the existence of religious sanctions against product maximisation, and the ban on work on the Sabbath and Church holidays, the production of agricultural surplus in old-time Ethiopia was rare. If and when it occurred, it was perhaps due less to a desire to provide for the market than to insure against crop failure, or damage from hail or pests. In the early 16th century the Portuguese traveller Alvares, reporting on his travels to Manadeley, in southern Tegray, thus quoted the inhabitants as telling him that:

“in that year they had gathered so much corn of all kinds, that if it were not for the weevil, there would have been abundance for ten years. And because I was amazed they said to me: ‘Honoured guest, do not be amazed, because in the years that we harvest little we gather enough for three years’ plenty in the country; and if it were not for the multitude of locusts and the hail, which sometimes do great damage, we should not sow the half of what we sow, because the yield is incredibly great; so it is sowing wheat, or barley, lentils, pulse, or any other seed. And we sow so much with the hope that even if each of the said plagues should come, some would be spoiled, and some would remain, and if all is spoiled the year before has been so plentiful that there would be no scarcity”.²⁹

It was with a view to crop damage too that peasants’ land was often not held in any single area, but was scattered in different localities.

Livestock, in the absence of a sizable market, often reached entirely uneconomic numbers. The 17th century Jesuit missionary Jeronimo Lobo, claims that the country had an “almost unlimited” number of donkeys, horses and mules, and an “extremely large” quantity of oxen and cattle. Describing the latter animals as the country’s “principal form of wealth”, he reports that whenever someone became the owner of a thousand cows they held a great banquet and, collecting the milk, took a bath in it.³⁰ This “delightful custom”, as he called it, suggests that the cattle-owners were less interested in rearing livestock for sale than in owning a large number of animals as a status symbol.

Pasturage, like agriculture, was thus largely independent of market forces.

The area of old-time Gondär, however, once again represented an exception from the general pattern: Bruce, in the late 18th century, reported seeing a herd of no less than 800 cattle being taken to the city, not for their owners’ consumption – or prestige, but for sale.³¹

²⁹ C.F. BECKINGHAM and G.W.B. HUNTINGFORD, *The Prester John of the Indies* (Cambridge 1961), I, 189.

³⁰ D.M. LOCKHART, *The Itinerary of Jerónimo Lobo* (London 1984), p. 167.

³¹ BRUCE, *op. cit.*, IV, 27.

Imprecise and Variable Measures of Volume

Traditional Ethiopian society, little motivated as we have seen by the market, employed a relatively unsophisticated system of measurements for farm produce. Grain and other crops were for the most part measured in baskets, sacks, or other containers. Use was made of a variety of units of capacity, i.e. volume, which, unlike those of a modern capitalist economy, were scarcely ever standardised.

Measurements varied considerably from one place or time to another. Variations tended moreover to conceal price changes. The French Duchesne-Fournet mission thus reported, early in the 20th century, that in times of scarcity, vendors, rather than increasing their prices, would reduce the size of their measures – a course of action which automatically minimised the apparent effects of market forces.³² An Italian observer of this time, Alfonso Tancredi, claims that persons selling agricultural produce might likewise on occasion over-fill their measures by up to a third.³³

Labour: Agricultural and Domestic

Labour, in traditional Ethiopia, so far from being a commodity of production, was mainly carried out by peasants and craftsmen, and their families, on an entirely household basis. The same was true of many priestly families. Monks and nuns likewise did most of their own work. Labour was therefore rarely ever remunerated, and wages, with exceptions, were scarcely known.

The peasants, who generally tilled their own land, as well as that of their social superiors, provided for virtually all their own consumption needs, and those of their families, as well as the requirements of the monarch, governor and/or local nobles. This latter was done through taxation provided either in kind, i.e. in farm produce, or in labour services, given on a *corvée* basis.

Handicraft workers on the other hand mainly exchanged their products for grain or such-like agricultural produce, and were thus marginally closer to the market than the peasants. Crafts-men and crafts-women for the most part did not, however, actually sell their wares on the market, but bartered them with the peasantry, or yielded them, without any payment, as taxes to the state and nobles.

³² J. DUCHESNE-FOURNET, *Mission en Ethiopie* (1901–1903) (Paris 1908–9), I, 255.

³³ A.M. TANCREDI, *Notizie e studi sulla Colonia Eritrea* (Rome 1913), p. 136.

Domestic Slavery

Such labour as was not carried out by members of the family was almost entirely the work of slaves. The institution of slavery had existed in Ethiopia since time immemorial, and was widespread throughout much of the country. Slavery was sanctioned, but also regulated, by the *Fethä Nägäst*. It declared that, though natural law recognised all men as free, the law of war and victory rendered the vanquished the slaves of the victors. This was justified on the basis of Mosaic law, which held that unbelievers, and their children, should be held as slaves. The book of Leviticus, 25, 44–6, thus declared: “Those whom you take from the people who dwell around you and the aliens who dwell among you, let them, men and women, be your slaves”. The offspring of such slaves “born in your land”, should, according to the code, likewise “be for you and your children after you, as an inheritance”.

Ethiopian slavery was essentially domestic. Slaves served in the houses of their masters or mistresses, and were not significantly engaged in agriculture or any other productive process. Regarded virtually as members of the family (albeit inferior ones), they received food and clothing, but no wages, either in kind or cash.

Though accepting, and indeed justifying, slavery, the code sought to bring it, like other aspects of economic life, under strict social control. Attempts were thus made to mitigate the worst abuses of the institution by specifying circumstances in which manumission should be effected.

Acquisition of Slaves

To consider the relationship between traditional Ethiopian slavery and the market it may be recalled that slaves were acquired in four main ways, namely by (1) inheritance; (2) capture in war; (3) raiding; and (4) purchase. Each of these means of acquisition had a different relationship to the market.

(1) Inheritance took place in two distinct ways: when children born to a slave became the property of their parent’s master; and when a master left his slaves as an inheritance to his heirs. In both cases the slaves were acquired at virtually no expense, and quite independently of market influence.

(2) The capture of slaves in warfare depended on the exigencies of the fighting. Captures were effected without any significant cost of production, and were scarcely influenced by slave prices. Such acquisitions therefore also had little or no relationship to the market.

(3) Slave raiding, largely carried out by armed intruders, many of them Arabs, resembled fighting in that it was an uncertain enterprise, effected at

only limited cost. It was, however, carried out for profit, and hence to some extent probably influenced by market prices.

(4) Slaves obtained by purchase were at first sight more oriented to the market, for slave prices were largely influenced by supply and demand. This was, however, by no means always the case, for many slaves had originally been captured in fighting or raiding, with the consequence that their supply was largely independent of demand.

Such varied means of acquisition suggest that slaves and their prices had little direct relationship to the market.

Control over the Slave Trade

The slave trade of traditional Ethiopia was subordinated to society through the *Fethä Nägäst* which forbade the sale of Christians to non-believers.³⁴ This prohibition apparently inspired Emperor Susneyos (1606–32) to forbid Christians from selling slaves of any faith.³⁵

This ban gained widespread acceptance. Early 19th century reports agree that Christians were prohibited from selling slaves, though they were allowed to purchase them. No such restriction, however, applied to Muslims, who in consequence virtually monopolised the slave trade. This was in any case largely based on the export of slaves to neighbouring Arab or other Muslim territories, which were more accessible to Muslim than to Christian merchants.³⁶

Slave sales took place at markets all over the Ethiopian region. Many slaves were taken by way of long-distance trade routes, and were sold, at a succession of intermediate markets, before reaching their final destination. The latter might be within the country, or abroad, for not a few slaves were exported, to Arabia, Sudan, Egypt, and to a lesser extent India.

Most slave sales, in the Middle ages, were carried out by barter, or in exchange for *amolé*, or bars of rock salt. Slaves, by the early 19th century, were, however, more usually sold for Maria Theresa dollars, which were imported in the course of trade, and were by then linking the country increasingly to the international market.³⁷ An apparently intuitive perception of this was expressed by a slave-girl on the trade route to Massawa. When shown a dollar, early in the 19th century, she is reputed to have exclaimed to the French Saint

³⁴ PAULOS TZADUA and STRAUSS, *op. cit.*, pp. 175–78.

³⁵ R. PANKHURST, *Economic History of Ethiopia 1800–1935* (Addis Ababa 1968), pp. 511–12.

³⁶ R. PANKHURST, *Introduction to the Economic History of Ethiopia* (London 1961), p. 378.

³⁷ *idem*, *Economic History*, p. 88.

Simonian missionaries Edmond Combes and Maurice Tamisier, “Is it this which serves to buy children and men?”³⁸

Wage Labour

Despite the prevalence of labour by members of the family, and domestic slavery, both of which were unpaid, there were also some – but not many – paid servants.³⁹

17th century Jesuit evidence indicates that such servants were far less numerous than slaves, and were remunerated almost entirely in kind. Emmanuel Barradas reports that servants were paid mainly in cloth.⁴⁰ A century or so later James Bruce stated that, in the city of Gondär – a place, as we have seen, of increasing commercialisation, a male servant would receive four silver “patacas”, i.e. thalers, a year, and two pieces of *enjära*, or bread per day. “If his master is good, he sometimes gives him a little flesh, lentils, or vetches. He is not obliged to clothe him, but he sometimes gives him a pair of trousers, which consist of about one-fourth of a yard of white cloth.” A maid-servant in the city was likewise “fed in the house”, and additionally received 15 bars of salt a year.⁴¹

Employment as a Status Symbol

The number of servants – or slaves – employed, like the number of cattle owned by a herdsman, often had no market rationale, for it depended almost entirely on custom – and on the owner’s social status. Nobles, for reasons of prestige, thus sought to maximise the number of their followers. The 19th century German Protestant missionary Henry Stern, who came from an of course very different social milieu, notes with some surprise that in the “homes of the great”, in Ethiopia, the number of “menials” was “literally legion”, while an ordinary “respectable merchant or royal officer” might employ as many as “twenty men and six or seven women”.⁴²

³⁸ COMBES and TAMISIER, *op. cit.*, IV, 192.

³⁹ This truth is implicitly admitted in Lalibala’s hagiography, mentioned above, which presents the alleged purchase of land by the monarch as an out of the ordinary occurrence, almost in fact as one of his many supposed miracles. PERRUCHON, *op. cit.*, pp. 122–23.

⁴⁰ FILLEUL, *op. cit.*, pp. 87–92.

⁴¹ BRUCE, *op. cit.*, 1813 edition, VII, 89. The above data comes from the Bruce’s notebook. In his published *Travels*, he makes no mention at all of cash, but states that a “common servant” received “coarse cotton cloth once a-year”. *op. cit.*, (1790), V, 77.

⁴² H.A. STERN, *Wanderings among the Falashas in Abyssinia* (London 1862), p. 319.

This picture was later corroborated by the early 20th century British traveller Herbert Vivian. Amazed by the extraordinary number of dependents in Ethiopian domestic service, which made no sense in Western market terms, he observed that “every one” had “as many retainers as possible, who live with him and eat with him as members of his family”.⁴³ “Every retainer”, he adds, “has his own duties, and will under no circumstances consent to do any others at all. In a big household one man looks after the tej [i.e. mead] and nothing else, another concerns himself only with the guns, another is merely treasurer, another has charge of certain animals. In fact there is an infinite division of labour. Even a small man never goes out of doors without four retainers to accompany him. One carries his gun, another his sword, another his purse, and the fourth, like the man in the *Chanson de Malbrook*, carries nothing at all ... Under no circumstances will they consent to carry parcels. If you take a man out with you, buy a small thing and hand it to him to carry, he calls a coolie at once. He will carry your gun and as many cartridges as is physically possible, but not a bottle or a roll of cloth. The rule is not to pay retainers, except when they travel”.⁴⁴

Corvée Labour

Palaces and churches, like peasant huts, in traditional Ethiopia, were generally built on an entirely non-monetary basis, quite independently of the market. Pearce, in the early 19th century, noted that “if a church is to be built, every Christian is ready to carry stones, clay &c., gratis”.⁴⁵ When the local ruler, Ras Wäldä Sellasé, determined to build a new church, he had his drum beaten in the Anṭalo market-place, and ordered every man, in the district of Endärta, to come with a rope and axe to fell trees. Everything was done, we are told, “without the smallest assistance from any mechanical device”⁴⁶ – and, we would add, without payment of any kind.

The building of the first modern roads, by Emperor Téwodros (1855–68) in the Mäqdäla area, was likewise carried out without monetary expenditure. The work was effected by the monarch and his followers, including a number of European craftsmen attached to his court. “From early dawn to late at night”, wrote one of the monarch’s European captives, Henry Blanc, “Theodore was himself at work; with his own hands he removed stones, leveled the ground, or helped to fill up small ravines. No one could leave so long as he

⁴³ H. VIVIAN, *Abyssinia. Through the Lion-Land To the Court of the Lion of Judah* (London 1901), p. 216.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 236–37.

⁴⁵ PEARCE, *Life and Adventures*, I, 243.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, I, 142–50.

was there himself; no one would think of eating, or of rest, while the Emperor showed the example and shared the hardships".⁴⁷

The involvement of the sovereign and his men in major building activities continued throughout the century. Emperor Menilek, according to his chronicle, actively participated in church-building at the then capital, Enṭoṭo, as well as in cutting timber at nearby Mount Mānāgaša.⁴⁸

The above account is confirmed by the early 20th century British traveller Henry Savage Landor. Coming from the culturally very different background of early 20th century market-oriented Britain he described the Ethiopian system as "quaint", and explained:

"If he [Menilek] wishes to put up another building, in the Palace for instance, or a church somewhere, he rides out upon his mule and picks up a stone or a piece of wood, which he carries back to the Palace, or to the spot where the erection is to be made. The thousands of soldiers who always follow him must imitate his example, so that by the evening plenty of building material is already at hand".⁴⁹

Labour in traditional Ethiopian society, it may be concluded, was primarily based on the work of peasants, handicraft workers, and slaves. The few servants who existed were remunerated almost entirely in kind. The number of dependents employed was, however, more often based on status than actual work requirements. Unpaid corvée labour was also widely employed, both in agriculture and building operations. From all this it followed that labour in Ethiopia, in its various manifestations, family, slave, and corvée, could scarcely be considered a market-oriented commodity of production.

Concepts of Time

Time, in traditional Ethiopia, as in most pre-market societies,⁵⁰ was largely measured, not by an abstract calendar, but by the seasons. These, in the Ethiopian highlands, consisted of a fairly continuous spell of warm dry weather, interrupted by two rainy seasons, one long and the other short. The year began with the end of the main rainy season.

The traditional Ethiopian conception of time was not based as in Europe, on a chronological progression of years, e.g. 1500, 1501, 1502, etc., but as part of a virtually interminable cycle named after the four Evangelists: Matthew,

⁴⁷ H. BLANC, *A Narrative of Captivity in Abyssinia* (London 1868), p. 342.

⁴⁸ GUÈBRÈ SELLASSIÉ, *Chronique du règne de Ménélik II, rois de rois d'Ethiopie* (Paris 1930-1), I, 170, 211-13.

⁴⁹ A.H. S. LANDOR, *Across Widest Africa* (London 1907), I, 137.

⁵⁰ R. PIRKER, "The Constitution of Work Time", KARL POLANYI, *Karl Polanyi in Vienna* (Montréal 1999) 224-26.

Mark, Luke and John, which recurred every four years.⁵¹ Days, likewise associated with the names of Saints which they celebrated, were also cyclical, for they were based on a rota repeated every month.⁵² Hours were conceived as running from dawn to dusk, and were sometimes measured by the length of shadows.⁵³ Such measurements had no market significance, for since labour was not considered as a commodity, it was not delineated – or remunerated – by the year, day, or hour.

Apart from cessation of work occasioned by Church festivals, there was virtually no conception, in Ethiopia, of leisure as opposed to “working” time. Except on religious holidays peasants laboured in the field whenever necessary, more or less from dawn to dusk. There was therefore no need for any time-keeping instrument as required in a market economy.

Thus was it that the accurate measurement of time began only with the advent, in the late 19th and early 20th century, of a more modern economic way of life. Significant of this development – and a major break with age-old tradition – was the installation by Emperor Menilek at his palace in Addis Ababa of a large one metre square clock. Introduced in an essentially conservative society⁵⁴ it is said, in the chronicle of his daughter Empress Zāwditu, to have “chimed like a bell (at each hour)” and was visible, and audible, “from afar”, as a result of which “everyone went to work on time”.⁵⁵

Trade, the “Just Price”, Usury, and Price-Regulation

Trade, in traditional Ethiopia, was largely subordinate to a subsistence economy,⁵⁶ which for centuries was little influenced by commercial activity. Trade was thus of only marginal significance, and, far from being independent, was “embedded”, as Polanyi would say, in society. Commerce was thus subject to considerable social control, as well as substantial taxation.

⁵¹ O. NEUGEBAUER, *Ethiopic Astronomy and Computus* (Vienna 1979), pp. 127–28, 209–15.

⁵² D.N. LEVINE, *Wax and Gold. Tradition and Innovation in Ethiopian Culture* (Chicago 1965), p. 73.

⁵³ NEUGEBAUER, *op. cit.*, pp. 209–15.

⁵⁴ On Ethiopian attitudes toward innovation see R. PANKHURST, “Misoneism and Innovation in Ethiopian History”, *Ethiopia Observer* (1963), VII, 287–320.

⁵⁵ GEBRE-IGZIABIHER ELYAS and R.K. MOLVAER, *Prowess, Piety and Politics. The Chronicle of Abeto Iyasu and Empress Zewditu of Ethiopia (1909–1930)* (Cologne 1994), p. 308.

⁵⁶ This would seem to concur with Polanyi’s argument that “markets are not institutions functioning within an economy, but without”. POLANYI, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

Buying and selling in medieval Ethiopia were in the first place prohibited by the *Fethä Nägäst*, as we have seen, on the Sabbeith as well as all Church festivals.⁵⁷

Prices were likewise supposedly governed, not by the haggling of the market, but by divine law. The *Fethä Nägäst*, based on the Bible, insisted that buying and selling should take place at a just or fair price, and that there should be no resort to either fraud or usury, which were both equally condemned.

The code's prohibition on competitive trading, bargaining and such-like market-oriented practices was expressed in a rambling passage, which declares:

"It is forbidden to say to someone who bought [from another] on condition of trial: 'Cancel the contract you have made [with A], and I will sell it to you at a cheaper price'; or '... at the same price he offered to you, and my goods are better than his'. It is also forbidden to say to a man who is going out to sell something he owns for profit: 'Do not sell it, for I will sell it little by little at a higher price' ..."

"If a buyer, finding a new roll of woolen cloth, is bargaining with the seller about its price, it is improper for him to bring another buyer who offers to buy it at a price lower than what is normally charged at the place of sale, or to buy it [at that price]. When the seller discovers this, he may disregard the offer he made [to the second buyer] and [cancel] the sale. If someone buys something for ten [dinars] and sells it to another through his partner, servant or friend for twenty [dinars] or less, the [second] buyer must be told of the addition in price; he may obtain back [the amount in excess of the seller's cost] or, [if he prefers], may buy back the goods at the price originally charged him. [In any event], the sellers must make known to him the price they fixed by fraud. Whatever involves fraud in sale is bad. And it is forbidden to estimate price unjustly, to forbid what is permitted, or to obstruct the purchase of basic necessities like food, drink, clothing, or shelter so as to greatly increase their price".⁵⁸

The *Fethä Nägäst* outlawed usury of any kind. The granting of a loan was comparable, the code declared, to the giving of alms as commanded by the Gospels,⁵⁹ but usury, by contrast, was forbidden by "Divine Law".⁶⁰

The attempt by the code to control market forces went, however, even further, for it banned – and fulminated against – any attempt at over-charging,

⁵⁷ PAULOS TZADUA and STRAUSS, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, p. 190.

⁵⁹ Luke, 6, 35: "Lend and do not frustrate the hope of anybody".

⁶⁰ PAULOS TZADUA and STRAUSS, *op. cit.*, pp. 159–60.

or in effect the maximization of profits. This practice was thus likened to usury in a passage which declared:

“If you have crops or gold, and do not want to take usury from this, but sell at a high price, you shall be despised before God; instead of taking usury, you have taken three or four times more than usury. There are many who hasten to take a great part; they have forgotten the saintly word which says: ‘He has not lent his gold with usury’.⁶¹ To those who take usury, the great Council has said that if anyone takes usury, or uses it in any manner to derive a shameful profit, such a person, if found, shall be deposed [if he is from among the clergy], and shall be segregated [if he is a layman]”.⁶²

Increased commercial activity in and around the city of Gondär, after its establishment as a capital in the early 17th century, may, however, well have led to embryonic usury. This apparently resulted in the need for renewed opposition to the strongly reviled practice. The latter was discussed at a Church Council held in the city in 1678, when a decree was issued, by Emperor Yohannes I, reiterating that “whoever lends silver or grain must not receive interest”.⁶³

The prohibition apparently later fell into abeyance. This is evident from the fact that Nägadräs Kidanä Maryam, reportedly the richest merchant of Gondär, charged a high rate of interest in the 1830s. The Frenchmen Combes and Tamisier and the Swiss Protestant missionary Samuel Gobat agree that this amounted to 10 % per month, i.e. no less than 120 % per year.⁶⁴

Barter, and “Primitive Money”

In view of the subsistence character of the traditional Ethiopian economy, the absence of money, and the prohibitions on “unjust” commercial practices, trade tended to be of marginal, or secondary importance. Commerce was moreover largely based on barter or “primitive money”, and a market economy was virtually non-existent.

Commercial activity in early 16th century Ethiopia was described by Alvares, who, writing about contemporary markets, or fairs, observes:

“The fairs consist of bartering one thing for another, as for instance, an ass for a cow, and that which is of least value gives to the other two or three measures of bread or salt. They exchange goats for bread. With the bread they buy cloth, and with cloth they buy mules and cows, and whatever they want,

⁶¹ Psalms, 14, 5.

⁶² PAULOS TZADUA and STRAUSS, *op. cit.*, p. 305.

⁶³ I. GUIDI, *Annales Iohannis, ‘Iyāsu I, et Bakāffā* (Louvain 1903), p. 37.

⁶⁴ COMBES and TAMISIER, *op. cit.*, III, 347; S. GOBAT, *Journal of a Three Years’ Residence in Abyssinia* (London, 1834), 242.

for salt, incense, pepper, myrrh, camphor, and other small articles which are all things highly considered and valued and they reckon them like gold, and they circulate in all the kingdoms of the Prester [i.e. the Christian kingdom of Prester John] and the pagans ...”⁶⁵

Barter, according to a subsequent Portuguese observer, Miguel de Castanhoso, likewise played a major role in the country’s export-import trade. People from the gold-producing region of Dāmōt in the interior, he reports, thus came with bags of gold, which they exchanged for “inferior and coarse Indian cloth and [imported] red, blue and green beads”.⁶⁶

The absence of any form of monetary economy was likewise emphasised in the 17th century by Barradas. He observed that in Tegray pieces of cloth were used “as coin to buy or trade things ... because, as there is no money, everything is paid, bought and sold by bartering some things for others, such as cloth, food, oxen, mules, horses, and the rest”.⁶⁷

The vagaries of barter and “primitive money”, most notably of the *amolé*, or bar of rock-salt, introduced an element of imprecision into the traditional Ethiopian price structure. The value of the *amolé* for example varied immensely. Costing little near the salt plains, where it was mined, it grew increasingly expensive the further it was taken into the interior. *Amolé* prices also fluctuated considerably with the weather, and the condition of the roads, being much cheaper in the dry season and more expensive during the rains.⁶⁸

Such imprecision is relevant to the Polanyi thesis, in that it reflected and contributed to the prevalent Ethiopian weakness of market forces.

Trade: Social Control and Taxation

Such trade as took place in the traditional Ethiopian economy was far from independent, for it was largely “embedded” in the society, as Polanyi would argue. Long- and short-distance trade were both fairly rigidly controlled – and taxed.

Long-distance trade, in medieval times, was closely watched by the country’s rulers. Merchants involved in the export-import trade were mainly Arabs, or other Muslims, many of whom, according to the modern Ethiopian historian Tadesse Tamrat, served as “agents of the Christian kings”, and

⁶⁵ BECKINGHAM and HUNTINGFORD, *Prester John*, I, 125–26.

⁶⁶ R.S. WHITEWAY, *The Portuguese Expedition to Abyssinia in 1541–1543* (London 1902), p. 101.

⁶⁷ FILLEUL, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

⁶⁸ On the inconveniences of the *amolé* and primitive money in general see R. PANKHURST, “‘Primitive money’ in Ethiopia”, *Journal de la Société des Africanistes* (1965), XXX, 213–47.

enjoyed “official protection”. Muslim merchants had “considerable influence at the king’s court”, but were under no small measure of supervision.⁶⁹

Ethiopian trade, in the late 17th century, was still largely in the hands of Muslim merchants, known as Ġäbärti.⁷⁰ Acting as commercial agents for both the Emperor and the Christian nobility, they were described by the French physician Charles Poncet, in 1699, as “a Mahomitan people”, who “depend upon the Emperor of Aethiopia, who treats them as slaves”.⁷¹ The significance of these traders, their control of foreign commerce, and their almost total subordination to the monarchy and aristocracy, was later recognised, in the 18th century, by James Bruce. He observed: “Every great man in Abyssinia has one of these Gibbertis for his factor. The king has many, who are commonly the shrewdest and most intelligent of their profession”.⁷²

Control over long-distance trade was also exercised by the country’s local rulers through a series of internal customs posts at which the merchants paid considerable taxes. These places, which were found along the main trade routes, constituted a major burden on the commercial community. Taxes, according to the 17th-century Spanish Jesuit Pero Pais, might amount at each post to ten per cent of the value of the merchandise, while disputes between merchants and toll officers resulted, Jesuit Almeida states, in innumerable delays.⁷³

Such taxes, which the early 19th century French travellers, Pierre Ferret and Joseph Galinier, referred to as “legalised plunder”,⁷⁴ continued up to the Fascist invasion.⁷⁵

Strict governmental control was also exercised over local trade. This operated, in the early 19th century, at all the principal towns, and was effected through an official known as a *nägad-ras*, literally “head [or chief] of the traders”. This functionary held the office, Pearce notes, of tax collector “under the

⁶⁹ TADDESSE TAMRAT, *Church and State in Ethiopia* (Oxford 1972), pp. 46, 132, 149. One of these Muslim merchants, Te’eyentay, acquired some prominence when he was captured by the ruler of the neighbouring sultanate of Adal. G.W.B. HUNTINGFORD, *The Glorious Victories of Amda Seyon King of Ethiopia* (Oxford 1965), p. 56.

⁷⁰ J.S. TRIMINGHAM, *Islam in Ethiopia* (London 1952), pp. 150–53.

⁷¹ W. FOSTER, *The Red Sea and Adjacent Countries at the Close of the Seventeenth Century* (London 1949), p. 110.

⁷² BRUCE, *op. cit.*, II, 9.

⁷³ C. BECCARI, *Rerum Aethiopicarum Scriptores Occidentales* (Rome 1903–17), II, 285–6; C.F. BECKINGHAM and G.W.B. HUNTINGFORD, *Some Records of Ethiopia 1593–1646* (London 1954), p. 41.

⁷⁴ P.V. FERRET and J. G. GALINIER, *Voyage en Abyssinie* (Paris 1847–48), II, 412.

⁷⁵ R. PANKHURST, *Economic History*, p. 524. For a list of the *kellas*, or internal customs posts, and the officials in charge of them, in 1935, see A. ZERVOS, *L’Empire d’Ethiopie* (Alexandria 1936), pp. 152–53.

government”, and paid “a certain sum yearly for it, whether trade be slack or brisk”.⁷⁶

A glimpse into this State regulation – and taxation – is provided by the early 19th century British ship’s surgeon Charles Johnston. He reports:

“everything that is exposed for sale in the market pays a kind of duty. This is generally either in kind, or an equivalent in salt pieces ... Grain is examined by the governor, to whom it is brought, who determines the amount to be taken as toll, and which is regulated according to some customary laws. Such toll is measured by single handful ... Butter is submitted to a similar process, the officer appointed scooping out of the gourd-shell in which it is generally bought, a quantity with his fingers, which is then placed into a recipient jar that stands by his side. The salt merchants, cattle sellers, and, in fact, all dealers, pay for the convenience of bartering their goods, and during the day large heaps of ahmulahs [i.e. *amolés*, or salt bars], and of market produce, accumulate around the feet of the Governor, whose perquisites of office they appear to be”.⁷⁷

Markets in some religious centres, such as the Zégé peninsula beside Lake tana, were on the other hand controlled by the Church. A priest, according to the early 20th century British traveller Arthur Hayes, thus stood in the market, supervised the proceedings, and took a tithe “upon the spot” whenever anyone completed a purchase or sale.⁷⁸

Governmental control over market trading, continued into the early 20th century. Addis Ababa’s open market, then the largest in Ethiopia, was dominated, as the British big game-hunter Percy Powell-Cotton recalls, by “two little thatched sentry-boxes perched on poles where the Negadi Ras ... and his assistants, sit on market-days”.⁷⁹ Describing the sale of livestock, and the control over prices, he recalls:

“The Abyssinians have an excellent rule, that, before a bargain is complete, the vendor and the purchaser must together lead their beast before an official, who registers their names, witnesses the paying over of the money, and exacts a fee from both parties to the contract. No horse may be sold for more than fifty dollars, but a mule may go up to three hundred”.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ PEARCE, *Life and Adventures*, II, 11.

⁷⁷ C. JOHNSTON, *Travels in Southern Abyssinia* (London 1844), I, 230.

⁷⁸ A.J. HAYES, *The Source of the Blue Nile* (London 1905), p. 168.

⁷⁹ P.H.G. POWELL-COTTON, *A Sporting Trip through Abyssinia* (London 1902), p. 108.

⁸⁰ *ibid.*, 115–16.

Compulsory Hospitality, and State Banquets

Another long-established traditional Ethiopian practice which ran counter to the Western market ethos was the custom whereby travellers, private individuals and officers of state, were freely catered for by an institutionalised system of enforced hospitality. This arrangement, which bore heavily on the peasantry, assured travellers food and lodging, at no expense, virtually everywhere they went.

One of those who discussed this tradition in the early 17th century was the Jesuit Almeida. He recalls that “the inhabitants of any place” were “compelled to shelter and give food for one night to all travellers arriving there in the evening. The custom”, he continues, “originates in the admirable rule of holy charity which teaches and commands that strangers should be sheltered, and at the same time in the difficulty of transporting provisions in this country, and in the lack of order and government, which means that inns cannot be established”.⁸¹

Compulsory hospitality was strictly enforced. Barradas reports that, if a travelling official was not given his due, the local governor would “slap on a large fine” on those responsible; and that, if an ordinary traveller was provided with too little, he was entitled, next morning, to demand that “the land pay him double what he should have received”.⁸²

Such hospitality was so deeply ingrained that Ethiopians travelling abroad are said to have expected to encounter it also in other lands. The late 17th century German scholar Hiob Ludolf thus told of “a pleasant little accident in Rome, where the simple Habessines newly arrived out of the East, being walking in the Suburbs, were invited by a Cook into his Shop. They believing all Invitations to be made gratis, at first admired the Hospitality of the Man, but then considering that it might be done out of Curiosity to see and discourse with strangers, went into the Shop, and very cheerfully accepted of what was set before them; but at length, when they were going away, they consulted together for Phrase and Language to return their thanks to so kind an Host for his liberal Entertainment, which one among the rest, who best understood the Language was to deliver to the Cook in the behalf of his Companions. The Cook having listen’d a while to their Learned Speech, and not hearing a word of any Money, without any respect to the smoothness of their Language, *Gentlemen*, said he, *who pays?* The Habessines like men Astonished made answer, *That they came into his Shop not of their own accord, but by his Invitation, without any mention made of Expectation of Payment; and that he, when he set his Wine and his Meat before them, never bargained*

⁸¹ BECKINGHAM and HUNTINGFORD, *Some Records*, p. 80.

⁸² FILLEUL, *op. cit.*, pp. 91–92.

for any Money, for that was the very thing they wanted. But all this would not satisfie the Cook, who forc'd them to leave their Cloaks in Pawn, which were afterwards redeem'd at the Pope's Charity, which made the Courtiers not a little Merry".⁸³

Obligatory hospitality in Ethiopia continued up to relatively modern times. The early 19th century British traveller Mansfield Parkyns recalls that while journeying in Tegray he arrived in the late afternoon at a village, where the inhabitants were all at work in the fields. Seeing that at the principal house there was no one to receive him, he recalls that he sat down and waited:

"... till a very respectable but warm-looking gentleman, followed by three or four youngsters or dependents passed me as they went into the house, with their agricultural instruments, &c. on their shoulders. On passing, the senior of the party made a low bow and wished me good evening. I thought their going straight in and saying nothing, rather impolite; but still this was excusable, as no doubt they were much fatigued, and must have their supper before they could attend to us. However, I was not left long in suspense. Immediately on their entry there was a great bustle and moving of skins and other articles of furniture. Meanwhile one of the boys who had gone in with the others came out again, bringing me a large bowl of new milk to drink; and before I had well begun my second turn, after each of my servants had his, the respectable looking man made his appearance, still more respectable than before, but not so warm-looking, for he had taken off his dirty breeches and sheepskin in which he had been working ... He politely ushered me into his house. The bustle we had heard had been occasioned by their placing skins, a couch, &c., in the best hut, and removing some corn-jars and other utensils which had formerly occupied it. Having himself arranged the couch for me, he seated me on it, and then going out brought us a good supply of provisions, serving me with his own hands, and putting into my mouth the very supper which no doubt was intended for himself; nor could I even induce him to sit down with me, although he must have been very hungry".⁸⁴

The overriding importance of hospitality in Ethiopian culture was later formulated by Emperor Téwodros II (1855–1868). When his British friend, Consul Walter Plowden, following Foreign Office protocol, refused to accept gifts, Téwodros replied, 'Our country requires us to be hospitable ... I do not give you pay or railment – I only give you bread and water. You must receive them'.⁸⁵

⁸³ J. LUDOLPHUS, *A New History of Ethiopia* (London 1684), pp. 393–94.

⁸⁴ M. PARKYNS, *Life in Abyssinia* (London 1853), I, 218–19.

⁸⁵ W.C. PLOWDEN, *Travels in Abyssinia* (London 1868), p. 460.

The principle of hospitality, without any payment in return, was further institutionalised during the reign of Emperor Menilek when recipients were given papers certifying their entitlement to *dergo* as such hospitality was called. This system was taken for granted by most Ethiopians, but was condemned by some (though not all) European observers. The critics, who were accustomed in other countries to paying for what they required while travelling, saw the *dergo* tradition as bearing unjustly on the populace. The British traveller Augustus B. Wylde thus observed, in the 1880s, that no one could “accuse the Abyssinians of lack of hospitality”, but that for a peasant to live on a major highway would be “ruin in a very short time”. Captain Montagu Wellby, a subsequent English eye-witness, went further, declaring that the “hungry-looking” peasants who brought his *dergo* seemed “more in need” of it than its recipients.⁸⁶

The tradition of State hospitality also found expression in the holding of great royal banquets, a form of redistribution of wealth long practiced by Ethiopian monarchs. Those fed included not only courtiers, but also innumerable soldiers, whose loyalty to the monarch was thus obtained or confirmed.⁸⁷ Some of the largest such banquets were given by Emperor Menilek in his Addis Ababa palace at the turn of the last century, when he provided meals, more or less weekly, to as many as 20,000 guests.⁸⁸

The idea of free hospitality encountered its first challenge in Addis Ababa early in the 20th century, a time of increasing modernisation, when a number of Ethiopian and foreign hotels, restaurants and drinking houses were established. These places were innovative in that they were based on payment, and hence on market principles. The tradition of unremunerated hospitality was, however, so generally accepted that when the Emperor’s consort Queen Taytu, founded the city’s first major hotel in 1907, the royal chronicler Gäbrä Sellasé, felt it necessary to explain, as something unusual, that at this establishment it was necessary “to pay for what one ate”.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ A.B. WYLDE, ‘83 to ‘78 in the Soudan (London, 1888), I, 236; M.S. WELLBY, ‘*Twixt Sirdar and Menelik* (London 1901), pp. 53–54. For an opposing view see COUNT GLEICHEN, *With the Mission to Menelik 1897* (London 1898), p. 74.

⁸⁷ V. NESSASSIAN and R. PANKHURST, “The visit to Ethiopia of Yohannes T’ovmacean”, *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* (1982), XV, 86–7; FOSTER, *op. cit.*, pp. 119–20; BRUCE, *Travels*, III, 304. See also M. KROPP, “The ser’ata gebr: a mirror view of daily life at the Ethiopian royal court in the Middle Ages”, *Northeast African Studies* (1988), X, nos. 2–3, 51–87; GOBAT, *op. cit.*, p. 474.

⁸⁸ P. MÉRAB, *Impressions d’Ethiopie. L’Abyssinie sous Ménélik II* (Paris 1921–29), II, 134, 159–60; R. PANKHURST, *History of Ethiopian Towns from the Mid-Nineteenth Century to 1935* (Stuttgart, 1985), p. 209.

⁸⁹ GUÈBRÈ SELASSIÉ, *op. cit.*, II, 530.

Resistance to New Imports

Traditional Ethiopian resistance to the Western market is graphically apparent in 19th and 20th century opposition to cheaper, and apparently superior, manufactured articles imported from abroad.

Ethiopian handicrafts were mainly produced by specialised workers, among them blacksmiths, weavers and potters, whose products, as we have seen, were traditionally bartered for agricultural produce, sold for *amolés*, or bars of salt, or paid to the rulers of the country as a kind of non-monetary tax.⁹⁰ Such handicrafts, after the Industrial Revolution in Europe, were subjected to ever increasing competition from foreign factory production. This competition was, however, limited by the slow emergence of a market economy in Ethiopia. This was due in part to difficulties of transport, in part to the prevalence of a subsistence economy, and in part to vigorous popular resistance to foreign, mainly European, political penetration.

The continued production of local handicrafts also owed much to their perceived superiority over factory products. This was recognised in a British Diplomatic and Consular Report for 1905–06, which bluntly stated that “native *shammas*”, i.e. traditional Ethiopian-type togas, were “of a finer quality and more lasting than the imported”.⁹¹

Competition by foreign textiles, from America and Japan, as well as from Europe, was, however, so strong. Dr. Mérab, a Georgian pharmacist resident in Addis Ababa, wrote in 1929 that a piece of cloth which took an Ethiopian weaver a month to weave, could not hold its own against factory-made material which arrived from Manchester in bales of 100 to 200 kilos.⁹²

Despite this prediction, local *šamma* continued to be produced in large quantities. The British businessman Charles F. Rey noted that though imported cloth was much cheaper than the local, it did “not get far afield from the main centres”.⁹³ His compatriot Rosita Forbes, visiting Ankobär, the old capital only 150 kilometres from Addis Ababa, likewise reported seeing handlooms at work in front of almost every hut.⁹⁴

⁹⁰ GEBRE-WOLD INGIDA-WORK, “Ethiopia’s Traditional System of Land Tenure and Taxation”, *Ethiopia Observer* (1962), V, 309–10.

⁹¹ GREAT BRITAIN, FOREIGN OFFICE, *Diplomatic and Consular Report for 1905–6 on the Trade of Abyssinia*, p. 5.

⁹² MÉRAB, *op. cit.*, II, 407.

⁹³ C.F. REY, *In the Country of the Blue Nile* (London 1925), p. 119.

⁹⁴ R. FORBES, *From Red Sea to Blue Nile* (London, 1925), p. 118.

Many traditional Ethiopian handicrafts are indeed still produced to this day – though their future may now be uncertain.⁹⁵

Alms-Giving

Traditional Ethiopian society's insensibility to the European market ethos also found expression in the immense importance attached to alms-giving. The overwhelming spiritual value of charity was already propounded in the 15th century by Emperor Zär'ä Ya'qob (1508–40). He declared that every Christian giving alms in the name of the Virgin Mary, "whether much or little, be it only a cup of cold water", would be rewarded, both in Heaven and on earth. He accordingly urged his subjects to place their alms on "the ladder" of Mary's intercession, so that She would take them to her Son, who sat "on the highest Heaven clothed with her flesh".⁹⁶

The value of alms-giving was likewise emphasised in the *Fethä Nägäst*. Citing many Biblical passages, it declared that "all people, rich and poor, must give what they can afford". Charity should "be given to the one in difficulty, to supply him with what he needs". Turning to specific categories of the needy, the code urged the faithful to "stretch out your hand[s]" to the "poor widow ... if she is poor through sickness or too poor to bring up her children, or poor because of physical sickness". Alms should be "given to all the needy, be they Christians or infidels, good or bad", for it was necessary to "give to the needy even if they do not belong to Christ".⁹⁷

Such teaching had a significant impact on traditional Ethiopian thinking and behaviour. Alvares, in the early 16th century, reported seeing "more than 3,000 cripples, blind men and lepers" at the sacred city of Aksum, who had gone there in quest of charity.⁹⁸

The early 20th century British traveller Savage Landor, though alien to Ethiopian custom, conceded that the Abyssinians were "decidedly charitable".⁹⁹ This view was shared by British consul Craven Walker, who, shortly prior to the Italian Fascist invasion, noted the prevalence of alms-giving, to

⁹⁵ For a contemporary discussion on the future of Ethiopian handicrafts today see A. PANKHURST, "Decline, Survival and Development of Crafts; Comparison of Tanning, Ironwork, Pottery, Woodwork and Weaving with Particular Reference to Southwestern Ethiopia", *Ethiopian Journal of Development Research* (2000), XXII, no. 2, 1–64.

⁹⁶ GETACHEW HAILE, *The Mariology of Emperor Zär'a Ya'eqob of Ethiopia* (Rome 1992), p. 121.

⁹⁷ PAULOS TZADUA and STRAUSS, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

⁹⁸ BECKINGHAM and HUNTINGFORD, *Prester John*, I, 166. For other accounts see also R. PANKHURST, "The history of leprosy in Ethiopia to 1935", *Medical History* (1984) XXVIII, 67.

⁹⁹ LANDOR, *op. cit.*, I, 107–08.

both the poor and the clergy. It was then, as in Alvares's day – and indeed much later, a common sight to see beggars clustering around churches, praying for charity in the name of the Holy Virgin or other Saint.¹⁰⁰

Asceticism – Prayer, the Intercession of Saints, Amulets, Pilgrimages, Holy Water, Vows, Spirit-Possession, and Miracles

Traditional Ethiopian society, being deeply influenced by both the Judaic Old Testament and the Christian New Testament, as well as by traditional lore, had a strong belief in the Supernatural, and displayed many so-called “unworldly” attitudes. These ran directly counter to market values, and tended significantly to circumscribe them.

Ethiopian Christians traditionally believed almost universally in the efficacy of prayer, and in the intercession of the Virgin Mary and the Saints, as well as value of amulets, pilgrimages (to Jerusalem and local sites), holy water, vows, spirit-possession, and miracles. Such Supernatural forces, were almost certainly far more meaningful to the general public than market forces.

Many Ethiopians likewise attached considerable merit to asceticism and humility, as well as to the mortification of the flesh¹⁰¹ – a concept diametrically opposite to the hedonistic philosophy implicit for example in the pro-market writings of Jeremy Bentham. Ethiopian Christians for a large part of the year practiced the strictest abstinence, which involved refraining from consuming all animal products – meat, milk, butter, and eggs. This took place during Lent, which lasted for no less than 56 days, and several shorter periods of abstinence, as well as twice a week, on Wednesdays and Fridays. Certain monks, during Lent, also submerged themselves all day in cold water up to their necks, or mortified themselves by wearing iron girdles, with points facing inwards, cruelly lacerating their bodies.¹⁰²

The Ethiopian respect for humility found characteristic expression in the deeply ingrained belief that it was the “pride”, and arrogance, of Emperor Lebnä Dengel (1508–40), that had been responsible for the invasion of Imam Ahmäd ibn Ibrahim, popularly known as Grañ, or the Left-handed, as a Divine punishment.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰C.H. WALKER, *The Abyssinian at Home* (London 1933), pp. 39, 100. See also LEFEBVRE, *op. cit.*, II, 274.

¹⁰¹G.W.B. HUNTINGFORD, “The Saints of Medieval Ethiopia”, *Abba Salama* (1979), X, 273, 275–76.

¹⁰²BECKINGHAM and HUNTINGFORD, *Prester John*, II, 391–92.

¹⁰³A. CAQUOT, “L’homélie en l’honneur de l’archange Raguel (Dersana Ragu’él)”, *Annales d’Ethiopie* (1957), II, 110. See also J. MERCIER, *ASRES le magicien éthiopien. Souvenirs 1895–1985* (Paris 1979), p. 458.

Faithful Ethiopians devoted much attention to prayer, and many would every morning utter the words of Psalm LXII, “My soul waiteth upon God”, and, in the evening, those of Psalm CXL, “Deliver me, O Lord, from the evil man”. Many believers also recited other extracts from the Old Testament, as well as prayers from the Song of Mary and the Song of the Three Children.¹⁰⁴

The overwhelming importance attached to the Supernatural had its epitome in the story of the Cannibal of Qemer. It was told in one of the most popular Ethiopian religious texts, the *Miracles of the Virgin Mary*, depicted in church paintings all over the country. The story tells of a cannibal who killed and ate 78 people, including his wife and two children. He was later approached by a thirsty leper, who twice asked him in vain for water, but finally gave it when begged in the name of the Holy Virgin. The cannibal poured out a handful of water, but, changing his mind, seized the leper by the throat, and prevented him from assuaging his thirst. Shortly afterwards the cannibal died, whereupon Mary appealed to her beloved Son for compassion. Christ called for the Divine Scales, and the drop of water given in Mary’s name, though it had never entered the pauper’s throat, reportedly weighed more heavily than the crime in eating the 78 people, including wife and children.¹⁰⁵

Such beliefs, which subordinated the present world to that of the hereafter, applied likewise in the specifically economic sphere. Another well-known miracle tells of a rich farmer who had acquired his wealth by robbing his neighbours of their land and crops. Though he had “lived on the fruits of oppression”, he was a devotee of the Virgin Mary, and received Salvation, because She appealed to her Son, saying, “Let go this man, for he used to serve me in this world so that I might help him in the world which is to come”.¹⁰⁶

Resignation to the Will of God

Ethiopians imbued with such spiritual beliefs and ideas tended to be resigned to the Will of God, and to accept natural or man-made calamities in an unworldly manner, without attempting to resist them. Alvares, travelling in Angot in the north of the country in the 1520s, recalls passing for five whole days through areas virtually entirely devastated by locusts, and reports:

“I saw men, women and children, seated horror-struck among these locusts. I asked them: ‘Why do you stay there dying, why do you not kill these animals and revenge yourselves for the damage which their parents did to

¹⁰⁴H.M. HYATT, *The Church of Abyssinia* (London 1928), p. 211.

¹⁰⁵E.A. WALLIS BUDGE, *One Hundred and Ten Miracles of Our Lady Mary* (London 1933), pp. 94–6.

¹⁰⁶*ibid.*, p. 346.

you, and at least the dead ones would do you no further harm?'. They answered that they did not have the heart to resist the plague which God gave them for their sins".¹⁰⁷

Efforts to overcome natural disasters, as suggested in classical Ge'ez texts, seem generally to have been confined to appeals to the Supernatural. Not untypical was the story in the Acts of Abba Afsé of Yéha, one of the 6th century Nine Saints. Faced with a major drought and famine, he prayed to God, whereupon the Almighty responded by making *manna* fall from Heaven, and water flow from a rock.¹⁰⁸

Subsequently, in the 12th century, there is report of an outbreak of drought and famine, attributed to the wickedness of the then Ethiopian king. He is said in the *Synaxarium*, to have "turned to God and repented", whereupon the Almighty "removed His anger" after which rain fell upon the country, and the famine and pestilence passed away.¹⁰⁹

No less miraculous is the legend of Saint Täklä Haymanot, the most important holy man of 12th or 13th century Šäwa. When famine struck, he was still only a child, but had merely to touch an empty basket for it to fill with grain, thereby enabling his family to hold a great banquet in honour of Saint Michael.¹¹⁰

People brought up with such beliefs, when faced with natural calamities, turned easily to purely Supernatural solutions, which ran entirely contrary to the much more materialistic thinking of the West. One of those said to have done so was Emperor Zär'ä Ya'qob. Confronted at his capital at Däbrä Berhan by a serious epidemic, which killed so many people that it was impossible to bury the dead, he ordered the construction of a church. This he did, his chronicle explains, in the belief that "plague will not come to a place where a temple is built."¹¹¹

More practical, and less unworldly, solutions were, however, subsequently also reported. Emperor Iyasu I, at Gondär, is said in his chronicle to have held large stocks of emergency grain, which enabled him, during a famine in 1701–02, to provide assistance to all in need.¹¹²

¹⁰⁷BECKINGHAM and HUNTINGFORD, *Prester John*, I, 136.

¹⁰⁸R. SCHNEIDER, "Les Actes d'Abba Afsé de Yéha", *Annales d'Ethiopie* (1985), XIII, 113.

¹⁰⁹E.A. WALLIS BUDGE, *The Book of the Saints of the Ethiopian Church* (Cambridge, 1928), III, 800–01.

¹¹⁰*idem*, *The Life of Takla Haymanot in the Version of Dabra Libanos* (London 1906), pp. 44–46.

¹¹¹J. PERRUCHON, *Les chroniques de Zar'a Yâ'eqob et de Ba'eda Mâryâm* (Paris 1893), pp. 73–74.

¹¹²GUIDI, *op. cit.*, p. 232.

During the much later Great Famine of 1888–92, Emperor Menilek apparently blended the more modern, secular approach with the more traditional and religious by urging his subjects to pray, but also to take constructive material action. He issued a proclamation, according to his chronicler, saying:

“Men of Šäwa, gather yourselves together, all of you in your churches, and utter to God the cry of *Egzi'o* [a prayer addressed to the Almighty], because you know full well that if the oxen disappear there will be no more grain, and, if there is no grain, there will be no more men”.¹¹³

Menilek was, however, not content only with prayer. “He formed a big camp”, Wellby reports, and, “setting the example to his people with his own hand, and assisted by his soldiers, tilled the soil, and in due time handed over to the sufferers the fruits of their labours, an example that encouraged others to do likewise”.¹¹⁴

The traditional Ethiopian approach to calamity, also displayed in recent famines, was however, one of to modern Western eyes almost unimaginable resignation. This, like the other features here discussed, represented an entirely alien to the values of Western-style market mechanism.

Conclusions

The above review of Ethiopian medieval and post-medieval life shows the interest, in the Ethiopian context, of Karl Polanyi's thesis: that traditional non-Western societies differed significantly from those of 19th and 20th century Western capitalism in that they were not primarily motivated by market considerations.

Land, though subject to various types of tenure, was regarded as the property of the monarch, and was traditionally seldom sold. It was emphatically not considered a factor of production. Farming and other work was suspended on the Sabbath and innumerable Saints' days and Church holidays, with the result that production was deliberately minimised rather than maximised. Agricultural surpluses were rarely produced, except perhaps as an insurance against crop failure, or damage from pests, while considerations of status might result in the retention of economically excessive numbers of cattle. Crop measures based on units of varying capacity, militated against accurate measurement of production.

Labour was likewise little related to the market. Peasant families worked largely for themselves rather than for sale. They worked on their own land, without employing outside assistance. They also provided crops or *corvée* services by way of taxation, to the monarch and/or the nobility and clergy, on

¹¹³ GUÈBRÈ SELASSIÉ, *op. cit.*, I, 258.

¹¹⁴ WELLBY, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

the basis of a feudal system of land tenure, which did not involve any form of monetary payment. Slaves served in many households, but received nothing save their food, and minimal clothing. Wage-earning servants were relatively few, and their numbers had little relationship to the market, for persons of status sought to maximise the number of their followers solely for reasons of ostentation. Labour, like land, was therefore not regarded as a factor of production, and there was no idea of measuring it by the week, day, or hour.

Trade was traditionally in large measure subordinated to ethical considerations. The legal code forbade usury, and attempted to prevent the making of excessive profits, by insisting that sales be carried out at a “just”, rather than a market price. Trade, both long and short distance, played an only secondary role in an essentially subsistence economy. Merchants were closely controlled – and heavily taxed – at customs posts scattered all over the country, as well as within the markets themselves.

Rejection of market considerations was implicit in the tradition whereby officials and other travellers received free hospitality, the provision of which was a compulsory obligation on the peasantry. No less significant was the custom whereby monarchs entertained lavishly at great state banquets, which were likewise provided entirely gratis.

Market requirements were furthermore generally subordinated to traditional religious values, including asceticism, humility, and the mortification of the flesh. Much attention was devoted to prayer, the making of vows, and pilgrimage, as well as to miracles, spirit possession, amulets, and holy water, rather than to questions of price and productivity. One of the results of this was that people, in times of drought and famine, often displayed, to Western eyes remarkable resignation, and accepted such calamities as the Will of God.

Polanyi’s analysis would thus seem useful in focusing on, and contextualising, numerous areas of Ethiopian life which were independent of the market mechanism.

It must, on the other hand, be recognised that economic conditions in Ethiopian history were far from static, and on the contrary changed greatly over the centuries. The emergence of the populous capital city of Gondär, in the early 17th century, and the advent in the following century of the Maria Theresa dollar, led to a limited degree of commercialisation. This found expression in not a few land sales, and some land measurement, in and around the city, as well as the growth of a significant market for both grain and cattle. There was likewise a probable increase in the number of paid servants, and perhaps a more rationalistic approach to famine. An increase in trading activity seems at the same time to have led to some exaction of interest, to which State and Church responded by reasserting their traditional opposition to usury.

Such commercialisation was, however, limited, and scarcely affected the essentially subsistence character of the traditional Ethiopian economy, which did not begin to respond significantly to market forces until the inauguration of Menilek's modernising initiatives of the early 20th century. These were symbolised by the establishment of the capital city of Addis Ababa, and the introduction of a railway linking it with the port of Jibuti, as well as by such innovations as the *ṭaytu* hotel, where people paid for what they consumed, and the palace clock, which told people when to go to and stop work.

Most features of the pre-market economy, however, continued to be operative until well after World War II, and some have remained to this day. It is symptomatic that land in Ethiopia today is considered as state property,¹¹⁵ and not subject to market forces; and that many traditional handicrafts have been slow to succumb to factory production. The situation is, however, now rapidly changing, and the country is thus today facing a great transformation of its own.

Summary

The article considers Karl Polanyi's thesis that 19th century Western capitalism was unique in basing itself on the principle of gain, as expressed by the self-regulating market system. Polanyi's argument is examined in the light of Ethiopian historical experience, with special reference to land and labour (including slavery), agricultural production, control over trade and prices, and traditional institutions which curtail or serve as an alternative to market factors. These include church holidays, compulsory hospitality, state banquets, alms giving, and, more generally, asceticism and resignation to the Will of God.

¹¹⁵Article 40 (3) of the Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia states: "Land is a common property of the Nations, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia and shall not be subject to sale or any other means of exchange".