

BEYOND THE COFFEE CEREMONY

Women's agency in western Tigray, northern Ethiopia

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If we do not see that all human agents stand in a position of appropriation in relation to the social world, which they constitute and reconstitute in their actions, we fail on an empirical level to grasp the nature of human empowerment. (Giddens 1991, 175)

The main focus of this essay is to discuss how gender identity instructs individual agency. I will define gendered practices which reinforce a normative gender identity among women in western Tigray, northern Ethiopia. However, even though the traditional sexual division of labour could be understood as defining the cultural limits for women's (and men's) agency, their life-stories show that compliance with social convention is far from absolute. Thus this essay will explore how women are able to negotiate spaces for agency beyond the norm within the confines of a sanctioned gender identity.

My curiosity about women's agency was initially aroused by the apparent fact that a significant number of Tigrayan women participated as fighters in the struggle against the military regime, *Derg* in Ethiopia (1975-1991)¹. Their participation was a pronounced break with traditional gender norms. Women had joined the liberation army in order to liberate the Tigrayan people, and equally important, due to the revolutionary promise of gender equality. Nevertheless, even though the Tigrayan revolution represented a possibility to escape traditional gender roles, the fighter women seemed to comply with cultural norms and under-communicate their participation as soon as they were demobilised. Women's participation had been a strong expression of agency *beyond* an ideal gender norm that in Tigray has emphasised female passivity and submissiveness. My question is; was women's agency quenched as a result of the re-establishment of the traditional sexual division of labour, which seemed to occur on the return to normality after the TPLF² based coalition EPRDF³ had overthrown the *Derg*? I will therefore explore whether the fighter women's retreat represents mere resignation in the face of traditionalism, or if there are other strategic considerations in play. To understand how fighter women as well as women in general chose to act in different circumstances across time I have based my discussion in their life-stories. In order to define women's strategies, I will begin by defining practices which reinforce normative gender identity for women in

the Tigrayan context; conducting the coffee ceremony and motherhood.

Gendered practices

The coffee ceremony serves as a symbol for the emphasis on sociability and hospitality in the highland Ethiopian cultural context, and offers a passage into their communion. The whole ceremony might last between one and one and a half hours. The floor should be decorated with fresh grass and incense burnt. Coffee beans are roasted on the coal stove. When cooled for a while the beans are crushed in a mortar to a fine powder. The coffee is boiled in a *jebena*, a special ceramic coffee pot, and three brews are made from the same portion of powdered beans. The coffee should be *hafiss*, bitter, and is served with a lot of sugar in small cups, *fenjal*. Making coffee might take place up to three times a day, again when a guest arrives, and consumes a lot of women's time. If you accept to participate you are expected to stay for the time it takes to complete the ceremony through the three brews that are called *awel*, *kalay* and *bereka*.

It is the woman who conducts the coffee ceremony. Men who know how to do it and take the chance of serving other people are questioned about their gender identity. "Are you a man or a woman?" Men are therefore reluctant to make coffee if women are present. Women would claim that the coffee was not good; implicitly claiming that, because of their sex, men are not able to conduct the ceremony properly. Conducting the coffee ceremony could thus be understood as a practice that reinforces a culturally sanctioned womanhood. When I ask Rahwa⁴ (18), a student who is one of just a few women who plough, a male activity, what she would say if her future husband conducted the coffee ceremony, she answers: "he cannot do it. Men cannot do it". Referring to the general attitude, she continues: "the women would say, '*bahltina*', it is our culture. The men have not learned to do it. 'How can you make coffee', they would tell him, '*kla!* move! I will do it myself' ". The same would happen if a man wants to make *injerra*, the pancake which is their staple food. "When I learned to plough", Rahwa says, "many of the men encouraged me, as did some of the women; but most likely the women would choose to insult me". Thus her

¹ Tigrayan women's participation in TPLF—Tigray People's Liberation Front—and the struggle against the military regime in Ethiopia coincides with their Eritrean sisters' fight for a liberated Eritrea (1961–1991). The armies of both TPLF and EPLF—Eritrean People's Liberation Front—comprised at some point of as much as 30% women (Hammond 1999, Young 1997, Hale 2001).

²Tigray People's Liberation Front.

³Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front

⁴Recorded interview, 9th October 2002. Her name is altered.

example implicates the importance for women to keep up the gender norm.

During the revolution, TPLF had encouraged women to plough. Saba⁵ (45), a cadre specialising on women's issues, told me about one occasion in a rural village when the TPLF wanted to prove for the people that women could also plough. To conduct the test the farmers gave a woman the most difficult oxen. "She ploughed, they saw it themselves, oh revolution!" Saba says with a laugh. The TPLF later withdrew their stand on this potent symbolical gender-issue; the reason given was that it would only add to women's already heavy workload (Hammond 1999). However, this official reasoning has been questioned. Instead it has been suggested that the TPLF feared it would cause offence and challenged core religious and social beliefs about women in rural Tigrayan society (Young 1997). Even though women have been secured equal rights in the Ethiopian Constitution of 1994⁶, the revolution nevertheless failed to challenge core structures in the relationship between men and women. Still, as a woman, you are not supposed to do men's work, or vice versa. In such cases people would question your gender identity. "Maybe if the woman is ill the man is allowed to make coffee, if there are no other women present", Rahwa says and continues: "if my [future] husband made me coffee and people got to know about it, it would generate a lot of insult; that I dislike. However, if nobody got to know about it I would like it a lot. We could be equal", she says. However the TPLF was not consistent with its claim for equality between men and women if it meant challenging the peasants' support of the revolution itself; hence the traditional sexual division of labour prevails.

Motherhood and strategic positioning

Although I did consume an infinite amount of coffee during my fieldwork, I never learnt to conduct the coffee ceremony myself since my Tigrayan husband does it without objections. I know it was discussed in the local community that I wore trousers most of the time resembling a *tegalalit*, a fighter woman. And likewise, I did not spend my expected wealth to buy expensive dresses and gold, which, more than agency would signify a Tigrayan woman's successfulness. Both this and the fact that I have not given birth, and am reluctant to do so, made people question my gender by directly asking me: "Are you a man or a woman?" One woman put her hand under my shirt to establish if I had breasts and thus a female body. Likewise, an old traditional healer always asked me if it was true that I had not given birth. I would confirm this. Then she would tell me repeatedly, "please, just one child".

Tigrayan women are achieving social worth from being mothers.⁷ Motherhood, in the region I studied, could be understood as a requirement to becoming a 'real' woman. An educated woman with her own earnings might decide to have fewer children, but my impression is that she would never consider *not* having children. The exception is if a woman decides to become an Orthodox nun, and hence has to suppress her femaleness to advance spiritually (Wright 2001). In Europe however, and according to the heritage of Simone de Beauvoir's ([1949] 1988) thinking on western feminism, the tendency has been to see children as an obstacle to women's freedom, or at least a question: 'what do we do about being mothers?'

When a friend came to visit me from Norway she was immediately asked by the women if she had children. When they found out she had, one woman told me: "she is clever, you are foolish". My voiced reluctance towards becoming a mother turned out to be a major concern for both men and women who tried their best to make me change my mind. This choice of positioning, not always complying with culturally sanctioned gender norms, exploited the fact that I was never able to acquire 'Sameness' anyway, due to the 'Otherness' inherent in my skin colour. Thus, by actually crossing the gender-line, I was explicitly told where the boundary is situated.

Conducting the coffee ceremony is imperatively a women's domain of sexed practice, engendering gender, and few men dare challenge this delineation because of the questioning and insulting it generates about their own gender. Following Bourdieu (1977) the 'sexual division of labour' as well as 'division of sexual labour' must be understood to embody normative practices for both men and women. By consorting to sanctioned practices, a normative gender identity is produced and reproduced, and hence deviant practices must be understood to threaten this identity. However, to be able to move beyond the structural coercion implicit in Bourdieu's theory of practice, Moore (1988) suggests that precisely subjective strategies are involved in the reproduction of these norms:

gender[ed] relations receive symbolic emphasis because they are the social arena in which individuals are enabled to make political claims and initiate personal strategies. It is through the competing claims that women and men make on one another, in the context of particular sets of social and economic relations, that the cultural conceptions of gender are constructed. (Moore 1988, 37)

These gendered positions can be interpreted as an 'investment', Moore (1994) further states with a reference to Wendy Holliday, and directed at "the very real,

⁵Recorded interview, 15th October 2002. Her name is altered.

⁶ See Fasil Nahum (1997)

⁷ According to the 1994 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia the fertility rate in Tigray is 6.95 against an average of 6.74 for Ethiopia in general.

material social and economic benefits which are the reward” (Moore 1994, 65). This explains why keeping up certain gendered practices are important for both men and women, and that these gendered expert positions are used to negotiate personal interests. Complying with the gender norm, as the fighter women in my example below do, might be a way of actually securing a possibility for negotiations and hence access to scarce resources. The fact that women seem to be the fiercest defenders of the gender norm, as Rahwa above experienced, likewise suggests that for women, alternative options for negotiations might be extremely limited or even absent.

Space for agency; Rahwa’s choice

That agency beyond normative gender practices challenges culturally sanctioned gender identity is a point also forwarded by Bilen Gisaw:

[f]orthrightness in women is viewed as unfeminine. The idea of women’s submissiveness is so embedded in the [Ethiopian] society that energy and creativity have become synonymous with masculinity, all in spite of the great contributions made by women (Bilen 2002:36).

Likewise, although male discourse on female sexuality in Tigray is concerned with women’s appetite for sex, women’s passivity and submissiveness seem to be the cultural norm. By not complying with normative gender practices, women would risk either their gender identity, by being classified as men, *or* being stigmatised as *shermut’a*, prostitutes. There seem to be no alternative categories available than those questioning her gender or her morals, to classify women’s agency beyond the sanctioned gender norm. Below Rahwa expresses her frustration about the limitations implicit in these categorisations.

Rahwa’s⁸ voice is intense, but low; hardly audible on the tape. She comes from a rural village in the lowlands. This is her second year as a student in the market town. She has just started eight-grade. Rahwa lives with a friend, a girl from her village in a small rented house. “The very fact that we go to school in the market town is for many synonymous with being *shermut’a*, a prostitute. If the girl starts to put on weight, people will talk about her and say, ‘how many men has she slept with?’ If I’m seen in the streets talking to a boy, ‘oh, that’s her boy-friend’, people would say. When I put on weight and my breasts got bigger, people said, ‘she is not a virgin, she has slept with a man’. But people do not know!” Rahwa says agitated.

It is believed that when a girl starts to be sexually active her body will become more womanlike; that she will put on weight because sex is thought to be good for her. Thus sexual practice transforms her from a girl

to a woman. There are no institutionalised rites dealing with the transition from childhood to adulthood other than marriage. Traditionally the girl will enter this union as a virgin; her husband acting as the catalyst for her womanhood. According to Kidane⁹ (20), a male high-school student, a woman risks being stigmatised as *shermut’a* by the mere fact that she has been operating outside the control of her family. As well as attempting to obstruct promiscuous sexual behaviour, the category is thus used to prevent as well as belittle women’s agency.

Rahwa says, when it comes to boys, “*ane suqh’ ile*, I keep quiet”, in this case understood as refraining from having sex. If her family knew about such a relation, they would start an insulting campaign and threaten to exclude her. If she cares about her reputation, she has to stay away from male acquaintances until she marries. However, to be educated is her choice. Rahwa’s parents wanted her to marry. She wanted to go to school. When the first offer of marriage came, at the age of eleven, she returned the *maeteb*, the silver cross and ring that in the rural villages are given to the woman at the *h’ets’e*, engagement. The *maeteb* is to be worn on her lower chest in a black band around her neck to show she has given her promise to a man. Neither did she accept the new dress brought as an engagement gift. “I threw it all. I said I did not want it”, Rahwa says. Her parents were angry: “why, why? What are you doing now that you have studied?” If they had forced her to marry she assures me she would have run away; disappeared.

Rahwa’s resistance however, must be seen against her knowledge of the challenges subsistence peasants face in the rural villages in Tigray; with increased pressure on land, escalating soil erosion and recurring droughts, and thus the lack of possibilities to stay on. Her parents had been among the new settlers that inhabited the lowlands in north-western Tigray in 1959. They build their houses and ploughed new land. Her family was well off then. Her older sister describes their future prospects, coming from a family with fourteen children, as “*h’emaq’ eddel*, bad fate”. Their mother and father had shared the land between them when they divorced; it will not be enough to live off if it is divided again. Rahwa thinks her chance is through education, but is afraid of failing.

Social sanctions and cultural coercion are implicit in the negative categorisation of women when they are perceived as transgressing the gender norm. However, it is important to see compliance not only as resignation, but to understand cultural norms’ interrelatedness with access to resources (Bourdieu 1977). Rahwa represents a new generation of young women who actively influence the course of their own lives by insisting on education, and thus a wider range of knowledge than previous generations, mainly to escape poverty. Their strategies might be seen as less political than those of

⁸ Recorded interview 9th October 2002.

⁹ Recorded interview 23rd September 2002. His name is altered.

their mothers and older sisters, who joined the liberation front as fighters to liberate the Tigrayan people in general, and women in particular. This new generation of women nevertheless challenge the cultural category ‘woman’, as did the fighter women during the liberation struggle.

Privatised experience; Saba’s story

The participation of women adds legitimacy and symbolic power to war efforts, but while equality between men and women is favoured during the war, civilian society encourages gender difference (Barth 2002). According to John Young: “[o]vercoming the age-old fetters on the role of women was a major concern of the TPLF from its earliest days. . . , in part because attacking female oppression was consistent with its liberation philosophy” (Young 1997, 178)¹⁰. He emphasises that women’s participation must be understood against the actual need TPLF had for all human resources in the struggle against the *Derg*.¹¹ In peacetime however, fighter-women’s contribution to the struggle seems to be under-communicated, not least by themselves. This silencing implicitly disqualifies their experience and knowledge gained as fighters *and* women, on return to civilian life. However, women’s life-stories show that their agency challenged normative gender practices also prior to the Tigrayan revolution.

I had known Saba for many years, but it never occurred to me she had been with the Tigrayan fighters during the revolution. She never told me she was, and I never considered asking her. As a head of the household she was always busy with her daily work, going to the mill, making *injerra* or brewing *sewa*, the local millet beer; never sitting down during the whole coffee ceremony, but filling the time between the three obligatory brews with work. There are no obvious signs of Saba’s time in the field, as a propagator for the revolution specialising on women’s issues. She plaits her hair the way most women do, tight and released at the neck in a bushy fan, wears the same kind of customary dress with tight bodices and full skirts, and she would always take her *nets’ela*, the traditional white shawl when running outside.

Saba¹² starts her story by telling how, as a thirteen year old, she had run away from the marriage her parents had arranged. Running away, as Rahwa claimed

she would if her parents had insisted on her marriage, has been and continues to be a potential strategy for girls and young women in Tigray to escape the norms of their gender. However, Saba soon after married another man. But when her children were still young, she decided to join the fighters. She came back from the field to her house every night to sleep there, keeping up her role as mother and wife; hiding her equipment as she entered the town. When her youngest son was weaned, she left the children at home with her mother, and went to stay permanently in the field. Saba continued to work for the Women’s Association of Tigray (WAT)¹³ after the struggle until she was told, “you do not have education”, and had to quit. She suddenly found herself disqualified after so many years of dedication. Her lack of modern education made it impossible for Saba to compete with both ex-fighter women and men when civil positions were distributed among comrades after the revolution. Thus, neither the women themselves nor society at large seem to have been able to fully exploit the qualifications of the fighter women in peacetime.

However, Saba talks proudly of the Tigrayan fighters’ uniform attire and hairstyle that made it difficult to distinguish between men and women during the struggle; even though it made people question their gender: “are they girls or boys?” When I ask her why she quit wearing the trousers and conformed to the traditional women’s style for hair and dress after the struggle, she answers with a question: “what about it? . . . The war was over!” I ask her whether people would have insulted her if she had continued the *tegedalti*¹⁴ style; afro-hair and trousers. She says, “*ewe!* yes! They would ask, ‘does she sit when peeing?’”; implicitly questioning her sex. Saba has not forgotten how to handle a *kalashen* though. I watch her while she confidently detaches the bullet magazine, and puts away the semi-automatic weapon belonging to one of the guests in her *sewabét*, beer-house. She notices that I watch her, and smiles. Likewise, when I confront the ex-combat fighter Luula¹⁵ with my observation that female ex-fighters do not emphasise their past role in the struggle, contrary to men, who still might carry their *kalashen* around, she says, “it is good. . . Coming back from the struggle, women left the war behind. . . We [the fighter-women] are marked by the war inside our bodies; other signs serve no purpose”. She had shown me photographs from the field, of herself in uniform with male fighter compatriots, but Luula stresses: “we are not different

¹⁰ In the mid-1980s TPLF decided to restrict the number of women being recruited, in spite of resentment from the women themselves. Young (1997) suggests this decision was a response to unease in the rural villages about women recruitment. TPLF was dependent on a massive support from the peasants in its revolutionary project. The peasant values subsequently placed limits on, and gave shape to, the course of TPLF’s military campaign as well as its program to transform agrarian society.

¹¹ Young’s point is supported by the fact that with the TPLF-based coalition EPRDF in power, Ethiopian women were not enrolled for combat in the Eritrean-Ethiopian war (1998–2000), as were Eritrean women. The latter made up between 15 and 20% (Hale 2001) of their country’s national forces during the two-year war. On the Ethiopian side, literally speaking, there was no lack of *manpower* this time.

¹² Recorded interview 15th October, 2002.

¹³ WAT was established as a committee during the struggle within TPLF, but has since 1996 been an independent NGO. It organises approximately 400 000 women in Tigray.

¹⁴ Fighter: *tegedalti* (plural), *tegedalay* (male, singular), *tegedalit* (female, singular).

¹⁵ Recorded interview 16th October, 2002. Her name is altered.

from the other women; we look the same, wear the same kind of dress and plait our hair”.

Saba agrees that she exposes no signs of her past history with the fighters of the Tigrayan revolution. “In this place though, people know. Others do not know. There are no signs”, she says. The tattoos marking her throat with horizontal lines and ending in a big elaborate cross on her chest, are visible traditional signs imprinted in her body enhancing female beauty, as well as her identity as an Orthodox Christian. The traditional *nets’ela* she is wearing is a gift from a beloved sister. She wears it because she really likes to use it, she assures me, thus implicitly emphasising that she perceives complying with this convention not as coercion, but as a subjective choice. She puts her *nets’ela* in a demonstrative heap around her head as she runs off to the mill.

Saba’s story is also about struggling to make ends meet for herself and her family. It is a story of washing gold in the rivers in *berekha*, the ‘wilderness’, to pay for one year’s back-lag on the house-rent; of walking on foot with twelve donkeys to May Tsebri, two days walk away, buying cereals to sell in the town. However, she decided not to follow the others to Sudan during the big famine (1984-85). “The TPLF said we should all go to Sudan, but we said we would stay here. We told them if we go there, we will end up as prostitutes to make a living”.

However, according to her daily life she might be seen as someone who is back where she started. In spite of her efforts during the struggle to improve the lives of women, she still has to struggle to secure only a minimum living for herself and her family. With no education, she is stuck with traditional women’s works; selling *injerra* and *sewa*.

Saba had worked for a revolution that emphasised education also for women. She happened to be disqualified by the very fact that she lacked it. Her experience and knowledge from the field did not qualify her to continue working for the women’s organisation which had originated in *berekha* during the revolution. Nevertheless, the subduing of her fighter-identity must be seen against her life-story as a whole showing her ability to act. “I will continue to try”, Saba assures me.

New knowledge; old symbols

The history of Tigray region, comprising of wars, recurring famines and poverty, has made resilience a relevant cultural strategy. I think this point is important to understand how women, like Saba and Luula, were able to join the fighters in the first place, and thus avoid interpreting their agency as a matter of modernity.¹⁶

Nevertheless, modernity is often understood to challenge traditional gender roles. Modern education represents one such challenge to female gender norms not only because of access to a particular knowledge, but due to its influence on timing as well as spatial circumstances in women’s lives. That schooling for their daughters represents a challenge is obvious in one peasant’s remark, talking about the fact that they have to send the girls to the nearest town after fourth grade. “If she goes to school in the market town on Monday she will be sleeping with a man on Tuesday”, he said pointing to the general fear that daughters would lose their virginity before they are married, and hence their value as an economic-relational asset for their families. His statement also bears connotations of a wild female sexuality that has to be controlled, mainly by others. Thus, marriage at an early age¹⁷ is of utmost importance for parents, realising they would not be able to control their daughters’ sexuality forever. Access to education however, tends to postpone marriage for girls and implicitly childbirth, and opens up for changes in gendered practices, and consequently gender identity. Rahwa does perceive education as a possible way forward, as was the revolution for women like Saba and Luula, who joined the armed struggle.

When I ask the ex-fighter Luula¹⁸ what the revolution gave her, she emphasises the knowledge she gained through expanding her activities in space and time. Women participating in the struggle on equal terms with men escaped the cultural legacy of women’s passivity and submissiveness, at least in the field. Luula says: “if I had not been a *tegalalit*, I wouldn’t have learned anything. I would have continued to be subordinate men. Now I know the *h’eggi* [Ethiopian law]. Now I am experienced”. “My age mates from the village”, Luula continues, “we were married at the same time; they have given birth. To me they seem more like my mother. How many children do they have, seven or eight? They only know about giving birth, they do not know how to manage their upbringing. If I had stayed in the village I would have borne seven or eight children by now. The government has not treated us differently, but we [the fighters] have gained my knowledge. . . . I went to fight, I thought I might die, but I did not. I fought day and night, day and night, we stayed in different places, through all this I gained knowledge. With this experience my father could never have made me marry someone I didn’t know, I wouldn’t have gone there. Now, if I want a man I will choose myself!” However, that the fighter-women tend to subdue their self-presentation, including their knowledge from the field, prevents the community as a whole, and other women in particular, to gain knowledge from their experience.

¹⁶ Modernity is often ideologically understood in an evolutionary sense where “modernity remains the terminus towards which non-Western peoples constantly edge” (Comaroff & Comaroff 1993, xii). But as Henrietta Moore and Todd Sanders state: “Modernity comes with no single built-in telos, no single rationalizing *raison d’être*: modernity, if it ever was a single entity, has gone in innumerable and often unanticipated directions” (Moore & Sanders 2001, 12).

¹⁷ Girls in the rural areas are commonly married off between thirteen to fifteen years of age even though the legal age is eighteen.

¹⁸ Recorded interview 7th November, 2002.

To explain this set-back, Kjetil Tronvoll (1998) notes in his study from Mai Weini, a village in highland Eritrea, the need to maintain cultural institutions of integration “to withstand the pressures and changes brought upon the village by external factors related to war, drought, and hunger” (Tronvoll 1998, 260). However, as these factors are themselves the very cause of change, it is important to understand this ‘cultural stand-still’, according to Tronvoll, from the positioning of the ‘cultural brokers’ who *left*, not only to escape Ethiopian state terror, but also “based on grievance related to gender and generational/structural inequities determined by traditional cultural institutions in the village[s]” (Tronvoll 1998, 262). In Tigray, as in Eritrea, these young entrepreneurs escaped to Europe or joined the fighters in TPLF or EPLF. Even though the struggle indeed depended on interaction and cooperation with rural populations, the liberation fronts, (and I would like to emphasise this point), were based in *berekha*, the arid, basically unpopulated areas of Tigray and Eritrea, and as such,

did not have any significant, direct impact on social transformation within the village[s]. Instead of working from within the system and to create social change, . . . [the villages were left] under the continuous domain of the older generations. Thus the ‘establishment’ in the villages were never really confronted by a new generation of aspiring young villagers (Tronvoll 1998, 262–3);

men *and* women. The female fighters’ contribution during the revolution could be interpreted as an innovative leap, as acquiring new knowledge as women exceeding the limits of the traditional gender role. Thus widening the scope for women’s agency and suggesting new premises for being a woman. But by doing so, the fighter women challenged the culturally sanctioned category ‘woman’ as mother and submissive wife. However, venturing into the Tigrayan ‘wilderness’ to fight for a revolution, Saba and Luula (and other fighter-women with them), have not managed to render the value of their experience understandable through the female categories culturally available, and thus their experiences are excluded from sanctioned womanhood. This incorporation into a pre-existing cultural symbol-system is what Obeyesekere (1981) sees as a necessary step in order to move an individual experience from the private sphere to acceptance in the wider community. This would be hard-earned in the Tigrayan context, where deviance from normative gender practices makes women either ‘men’ or ‘prostitutes’.

Thus women’s agency in Tigray is not merely a matter of modernity versus traditionalism, but concerns the ability individual actors always have, at least to a certain extent to influence their situation (Giddens 1991). It is a fact that girls and young women have been opposing cultural constraints by running away both before and after the revolution. But while they traditionally have run away to become nuns, or risked prostitution

in the towns, the revolution gave them an alternative site to run to.

Conclusion

My argument in this essay is that women’s (and men’s) agency must be understood as bounded by normative gendered practices reinforcing sanctioned gender identity. The fact that the Tigrayan fighter-women (and women in general) tend to under-communicate their ability for agency and implicitly over-communicate their compliance with the cultural norm in social interaction, does not mean however that they refrain from actions challenging the sanctioned gender norm. Their compliance must be understood precisely as a strategy that seeks to avert confrontations and social sanctions, and thus secures a minimum of space for agency by the mere ‘invisibility’ their compliance creates.

Women’s strategies must likewise be understood as different choices in different situations across time. And, women are not necessarily risking everything at the same time. Rahwa has gone against her parents in choosing an education, but she is not at the same time risking her parents’ exclusion by dating boys at school. Saba left for the field to fight for the revolution; coming back she complies with a traditional lifestyle. The gain from continuing to play out her fighter identity is calculated to gain little in comparison with the stigma it creates. Thus, to be able to see the empowerment implicit in Rahwa and Saba’s strategies, I think it is important to consider both complying with and resisting traditional gender norms as implicating agency.

Listening to women’s life-stories made me aware of the fact that Tigrayan women’s agency reaches beyond the coffee ceremony.

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