

**WOMEN, THE PEASANTRY
AND THE STATE IN ETHIOPIA**

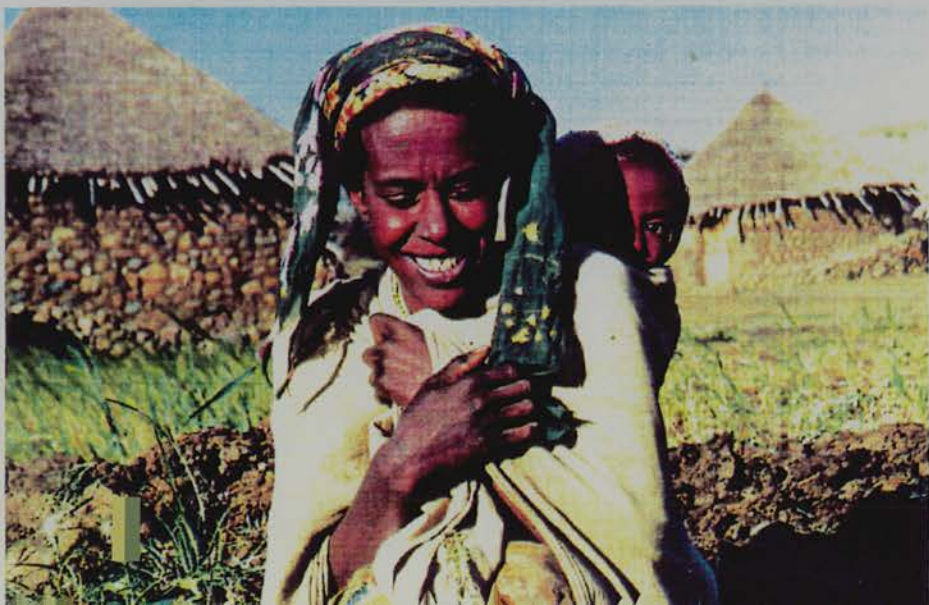
A STUDY FROM MENZ

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is based on fieldwork carried out in 1988-89 in a rural community within Menz, a highland Amhara society of Northern Shewa, Ethiopia. It considers two sets of interactions operative in a Peasants' Association. These are, firstly, the relationship between the State and the peasantry and, secondly, relations between men and women. In both cases the focus of analysis is on understanding and explaining the position and the channels of actions of the subordinate group - the peasantry and women.

In the first of the empirical chapters, the effects of the State and the community's attitudes to it are considered in the context of the activities of various associations, cooperatives, campaigns and ministries through which the State administers the population. The following chapter focuses on one particular policy, the Villagization campaign. The complexity of its overall effects on a heterogeneous population are illustrated. Consideration is given to areas of mismatch between Government theory and practice, between what the State conceives and what the peasantry understand to be happening, between the impact of the State on men and on women. Having explored the significant areas of the society in which there is State involvement, the thesis is increasingly devoted to the areas of people's lives which the State has not penetrated.

Some activities are more visible than others, both to the State and within society. In Menz, ploughing is a male domain which cannot exist without crop processing, a female domain. Livestock husbandry, and other activities such as spinning and fuel production show the ways in which women are marginalized, while accounting for their vital role in the economy.

The phenomenon of marital instability and the relationship between spouses points to the hardship and dissatisfaction in unions. It also demonstrates women's ability to play an active role in decisions that affect their position. Neither State nor Church have had much success in regulating the forms of contracts and numbers of marriages an individual goes through. Government policies have been directed at the household as a single unit, oblivious of the frequency of divorce, the demographic cycle of the household and the stratifications within it.

The identity and valuation of women is established, at least in part, by their reproductive abilities; and life giving events are firmly within their domain. Yet women's experiences, such as menstruation and pregnancy, are camouflaged; their blood has to be purified through holy water and the mediation of a priest. The burdens of biology and the social constructions of womanhood are not considered by the State. Similarly, death is a crucial occasion in which the State plays no part. Despite its attempts at radical transformation, the State has made little attempt to affect lifecycle events, its priorities being established elsewhere.

The dominant Orthodox Christian religion is one which gives power to men, however, women find support, particularly in the figure of Mary and, in addition, they prevail in an alternative, socially marginalized and eclectic spirit-belief system. The various forms of religion, in particular the spirit-belief system, exist despite the conflicting ideologies of a State imbued with Socialist modernizing values. The State ideology has had little impact on rural beliefs and its local legitimacy rests, in part, on a manipulation of Christianity.

The empirical data presented in the body of the thesis is brought together in the final chapter. The interrelationships emerge between different spheres of State intervention, between the household economy, religion, marital relations and lifecycle events. All these considerations combine to show how women are oppressed, but also how women take control; to show how peasants are constrained and influenced by the State, but also how peasants' lives remain directed by themselves and the battle against limited resources.

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To David.

No portion of the work referred to in this thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification in this, or any other institute of learning.

Signed

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TRANSLITERATION

To minimize on diacritical marks when transliterating from Amharic, the following rules have been adopted:

1. The seven vowel orders are represented as: e, u, i, a, é, i, o.
2. Glottalized explosives are indicated by an apostrophe after the letter, t', k', ch', etc.
3. Letters are doubled where the syllable is stressed.
4. Where a different but more common transliteration exists, in particular in the case of the names of people and places, the more common spelling has been adopted.

DATING

In most cases, the Ethiopian calendar is translated directly into the Gregorian one. However, where a date is given in a direct quote, the Gregorian figure is provided in brackets.

GLOSSARY

A translation is generally used together with all Amharic words. The glossary lists the terms used repeatedly and in more than one chapter

<i>Arek'i</i>	Liquor, made out of barley in Menz
<i>Awraja</i>	Second tier administrative region
<i>Bana</i>	Locally made woollen blanket
<i>Belg</i>	Short rains, term used for rain and crop
<i>Berberé</i>	Ethiopian spice, based on red chillies
<i>Birr</i>	Ethiopian dollar, almost equal to half an American dollar
<i>Dabbo</i>	Bread, usually made from wheat
<i>Dega</i>	Highlands
<i>Fird shengo</i>	Local law courts
<i>Gwassa</i>	Communal pasture land
<i>Iddir</i>	Burial Association
<i>Injera</i>	Staple pancake bread made from barley in Menz, eaten with <i>shiro</i>
<i>K'olla</i>	Lowlands
<i>Mehaber</i>	Religious Social gathering, usually held monthly
<i>Meher</i>	Long rains, term used for rain and crop
<i>Ribbi</i>	System of renting out livestock
<i>Shiro</i>	Ground pulse-based stew, staple food with <i>injera</i>
<i>Sira zemecha</i>	State organized communal labour, (<i>corvée</i> labour)
<i>T'ella</i>	Locally brewed beer, made from barley in Menz
<i>T'ibbek'a gwad</i>	Local police
<i>Wereda</i>	Third tier administrative region, now being abandoned

EQUIVALENTS

1 quintal	=	100 kilograms
1 <i>silicha</i>	=	approximately 1/2 quintal
1 hectare	=	10,000 square metres
1 <i>t'ind</i>	=	approximately 1/4 hectare

1 INTRODUCTION

- | |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">I. The questionsII. Evolution of researchIII. Criticism of thesis formatIV. Outline |
|--|

I. The questions

Two sets of issues are addressed in this thesis, which are highlighted by the following questions:

- The first concerns the peasant-State relationship:
In what areas has the State attempted to effect transformations? What are the attitudes towards, and the effects of, State policies on the peasantry? Where the State has had little impact, what non- Governmental structures and services are operative?
- The second concerns the lives of women:
What is the position of rural women in Menz? What do they do? How does what they do reflect how they see themselves and how they are perceived by men?
What are their sources of oppression or subordination and their sources of power and self-expression?

II. Evolution of research

The questions above summarize the focus of the final product, rather than the enquiries which I set out with. During the course of the research presented in this thesis, various

alterations were made to the initial research proposal, both as a response to changing opportunities and to my own understanding of the situation. The initial project was to study the effects of Villagization, a nationwide campaign introduced by the Ethiopian Government in 1985. However when my fieldwork began (May 1988), much of Menz, the area of my research, remained un-Villagized. Moreover, even where some communities had been partly regrouped, I found that on a day to day level other factors impinged more forcefully on people's lives. It was these which respondents were more interested in talking about. Furthermore, there was little variation in what people said about Villagization, and though I could have set about measuring changes in resource use, I found it more meaningful to talk to people about the issues that they were discussing with each other or which were a regular feature of their lives. Thus the method adopted, participant-observation, combined with the population's preferences, and my own,¹ jointly resulted in the decision to let the subject matter evolve into a more general study of Government structures and women's lives.

Another change emerged as a result of the gradual realization that I had the choice between labelling my work as: research on women, or a study of gender relations, or leaving the women/gender issue implicit, and presenting the thesis in terms of an analysis of the State-peasantry relationship. The last of these options was attractive because it seemed important not to box in, and hence segregate, the thesis as one dealing with what are considered by many as sideline issues, with '...women and that kind of thing...'² I felt, for example, that simply having the word women in the title of the work would reduce interest in the thesis, assuming innocently that the work would be read. The second option was sounder than the first in that it acknowledged that one could not look at women in isolation; that it was the relationship between men and women which was at issue. However, the fact remained that women were the key component of my fieldwork. They were the ones with whom I spent the most time, and it was observations on their lives that I recorded in greatest depth. In the end, I decided to opt for an overt focus on women in the belief that honesty to my data was preferable, and in the perhaps *naïve* hope that the more numerous male-centred accounts of fieldwork would also state their explicit androcentric angle.³

¹ There was also the problem of depressing both informants and myself by an exclusive focus on a policy that the population as a whole disliked. It was rewarding to be able to talk about a range of issues which resulted in a more positive and lively debate.

² See Robertson, 1987: 97; Moore, 1988:1-11; Papanek, 1984.

³ A less ambitious and realistic hope might be that, to those who read it, the data presented here would show how much male researchers and policy makers are missing if they focus only on men.

The focus on 'women's issues' is a starting point of gender analysis and a study of the discrimination against women on the basis of sex. My aim is to show on the one hand the cultural/social, political and economic elaborations of sexual distinctions which subordinate women and, on the other hand, those forces that seem to work towards gender equality. There is the inevitable problem of the antithetical tie of criticism with the object of criticism, i.e., instead of working towards the abolition of the distinction, such approaches tend to return to a sexually based dichotomy between men and women,¹ thus subordinating the divisions within each gender and the unions across gender. Ironically, in attempting to argue that the biological difference between men and women is used to perpetuate a certain type of hierarchy, there is the danger of sex and the biological distinction being reinstated as the dominant, or even the only issue. Nevertheless, this study will focus on women as a distinct category, stressing the inherent contradictions in their position. The heterogeneity of women's experiences and its context in terms of the position and work of men will, however, be constantly reaffirmed.²

Furthermore, although the subject matter is women, the way this study presents their position is by making an analogy between their relationship with men and that between the peasantry and the State by looking at the issue of subordination. In the chapters on State policies, the approach will be to examine the situation as it occurs on the ground, rather than as it is planned and publicized by the Government. The interest is also in what the State does *not* do, as well as in what it attempts to achieve. The chapters are thus also concerned with a study of less 'obvious' parts of the culture and economy. Not surprisingly, given that women are marginalized in most societies, the study of the less visible and often less valued is located primarily in women's spheres of the private and public world.

Associated with this is another difference between the study as first conceived and the final product, namely the incorporation of structures which existed prior to the Ethiopian Revolution of 1974.³ Initially, I was more interested in change, and in the impact of Socialist transformation, but due to the very lack of such a transformation, I found myself focusing more and more on people's own efforts, 'traditional' systems and means of livelihood. The shift was also apparently justified by criticism that the

¹ Eichler, 1980.

² 'Explaining matters by sex may be both the most useful and the most dangerous manner of explanation imaginable...The problem with most of the work in these areas is precisely that it over-extends the explanatory capacity of the variable sex.' Eichler, 1980: 122.

³ The research therefore became a study of continuity and change, themes that seem to appear and reappear in the literature on Ethiopia: Molvaer, 1980; Clapham, 1988.

Government was unaware of the constraints and potentials within existing structures. It seemed to be working indiscriminately against some traditions, such as when it decided to introduce a new policy, yet at the same time, there seemed to be areas in which the State put little emphasis on transformation, and thus where traditional systems remained unchallenged. A study of State involvement was meaningless without a study of what was already in place, and how the two related to each other. The study thus became not just one of State and peasant actions and reactions, but also in what spheres action was taken and in what spheres it was not, and an analysis of the repercussions of 'non-action' became a central concern.

III. Criticism of thesis format

A single written text is a highly unsatisfactory and artificial reduction of dynamic processes and complex relationships, in this case between men and women, people and the State. The thesis format, with the progression of chapters each of which is divided into headings and subheadings, and which follows some linear, unidirectional account, with the odd themes woven in for variation, belies the chaos and intangibility of reality. The sense of frustration generated in the writing-up stage can best be illustrated with the questions I kept asking myself: How can I conceive of the individual lifecycle without bringing in, at the same time, issues of household structures, and vice versa? How can I evaluate State policies in isolation from the individual and household chapters, and how do I incorporate comparisons with 'traditional' structures? How satisfactory is the term 'traditional' when it is the present manifestation of past structures that are being observed, when the present tends to be discussed in terms of the past and thus the clear distinction between 'modern' and 'traditional' begins to blur?¹ In short, how can I mention one issue in isolation without mentioning its impact on a series of other factors? More fundamentally, what issues should I highlight, which explanations do I espouse?

To give an example of the dilemmas, here is an extract from my diary written in Menz, which comes at the end of a description of a christening:

¹ The concept of tradition looks deceptively simple. However, any structure that is described as traditional is constantly evolving, rather than a reified or fossilized phenomenon transmitted unchanged through the ages. There is also the distinction between an idealized event and the actual one, between a laid-on performance, and a routine, accidental embodiment. Where the term tradition is used here, it is as a contrast with structures and events that have their origin in post-Revolutionary Ethiopia.

The christening of Almaz's child [the first I had been to since I arrived], was unimpressive. This is not because Almaz's father is poor; (he is comparatively rich). I do not know whether the cause was the illegitimacy of the child, or perhaps the fact that the christening was organized by the father of the young mother, or because the infant is a girl. Maybe it was on the small scale because that is the way things are now (poverty, drought, ...) or because that's the way things have always been in the area. Perhaps foreigners, travellers, all outsiders, tend to build up a more colourful event than is actually warranted. Also, they are most likely to see the grandest celebrations since they have more access to the households of lords than to those of the peasantry.

The extract above points to a number of different leads. The key words could be: christening, illegitimacy, social stratification, traditions and observation - which one should be developed, which one abandoned? How do I interpret and order casual happenings?¹

To lessen the constriction on the data, theory and practice would have to be presented in a variety of parallel accounts; stories creating a plethora of images and ideas some of which are quickly or gradually rejected, others adding up to a clear picture, remaining unexplained, or proving to be inconclusive. Ethnographic work, in particular, seems ill-suited to the loaf presentation in which even the size of the result is more or less prescribed by the size of the tin - the three hundred or so pages of the thesis. It would be easier to mould the data into a number of different rolls, numerous stories that do not necessarily fit neatly together. The thesis *genre* parallels the construction of a detective or mystery novel rather than that of short stories which do not require as much of an overarching plot.

The need to tell one story involves an ironing out and tidying up process which is particularly unsatisfactory to the researcher, since it is the very variations and complexities, the intricacies of the particular case and the subtlety of patterns - almost the perversity of reality - which is so exciting. To mention one last problem, the theoretical grounding and empirical knowledge of even the most conscientious researcher is patchy. One page of the final draft might represent the findings from more than one hundred observed events, or, at the other extreme, from the views incidentally expressed to the researcher by one respondent. Different kinds and quality of data are merged together because of the need to present one complete picture.

¹ I do not come back to this case in the thesis though the theme of impoverishment is a constant refrain throughout the work and illegitimacy is referred to in Chapter Seven on marital careers. In addition, my attempt has been to present events as observed over the period, and not to magnify and 'brush up' events, if anything, focusing on the un-glorified.

Yet, to be constructive about the whole enterprise, its value lies in the unravelling of the respondents' world through the 'lens' of the researcher with the hope that, by the end, a view of their world will have been created, and a few of their problems elucidated and brought into a wider context. The rationale for the conventional approach lies in the value and necessity of simplifications, interpretations and generalizations.

IV. Outline

This thesis is broadly divided into three sections. The first provides the setting and background to the study. The second gives the empirical data and follows up specific issues of analysis, and the third ties the analysis together with overviews and conclusions.

This first chapter in Part One is an introduction to the thesis. The second chapter discusses the theory and methodology relevant to the work. Chapter Three completes the setting, first by providing background information on Ethiopia, then by focusing on Menz as a whole, and finally by concentrating on the specific area of study, here given the pseudonym of Gera Peasants' Association.¹

Part Two, Chapters Four to Nine, contain the empirical data. Chapter Four leads the way with a discussion of the different forms of State presence at the local level, and the population's perception thereof. Chapter Five focuses on one Government policy, Villagization. The analysis then moves from issues in which the State has been involved, to those in which its presence is increasingly marginal, despite the centrality of these issues to the population. Thus Chapter Six considers the household economy, Chapter Seven marital relations, Chapter Eight the lifecycle, and Chapter Nine the influence of religion and language. The chapter on religion shows the spheres in which the society's pre-Revolutionary ideas and modes of operation continue, the State having an impact in altering a few conditions rather than in establishing a radical alternative.

The State's blindness to women, described in early empirical chapters, contrasts with the emergence of women, in the subsequent chapters, as significant actors in Society. Thus, understanding how women are marginalized and yet important contributors to

¹ In keeping with local practice, the term Peasants' Association will be used in this thesis both as an administrative unit and a geographical location.

household and community draws us away from the State to the household, marital relations, the individual lifecycle and religion.

Chapter Ten, in Part Three, goes beyond specific issues and the empirical data to bring together the main themes of the thesis - gender and State-peasant relations. The Epilogue considers some of the changes since the fieldwork and possible future developments.

Given that the thesis was data - rather than hypothesis - led, a literature review will not be presented separately at the beginning of the work, as is usually the case. Instead, the relevant literature will be referred to in the appropriate chapters, compared with the empirical data of the thesis, and integrated into the arguments as they develop. The reason for this treatment is a belief that the relationship between the literature and the data is that which is of interest. Segregation of the two seemed counter-productive. The literature consulted falls under a number of categories including: women's studies, Socialist Third World and the peasantry, Ethiopia, and general anthropological, sociological and political works.

It is perhaps in the nature of such work that one starts by bemoaning the paucity of relevant studies, and ends up groaning under their abundance. In terms of the specific literature on women in Ethiopia, however, the complaints about lack of data remain applicable. There is no single book devoted to the position of women in the country as a whole, let alone in the Menz area itself, and most of the general works on the country are written by men without much time for gender issues. The paucity of information on women also exists at the level of articles and unpublished material.¹

¹ See: Cassiers, 1974; Tsehai Berhane Selassie, 1984; Hirut Terefe & Lakew Woldetekle, 1986; Poluha, 1987; Fellows 1987; Fetenu Bekele, 1989; H. Pankhurst, 1989 (c); the papers presented for the Seminar on Gender Issues in Ethiopia, Addis Ababa University, Institute of Ethiopian Studies, 1989, e.g., Dessalegn Rahmato, 1989; R. Pankhurst, 1990.

2 THEORY AND METHOD

I. Theory

1. Women and Socialism
2. Women and Development
3. The State

II. Method

1. Cross-disciplinary approach
2. Period of study
3. Mini diaries, medium-sized questionnaires and maxi life-histories

I. THEORY

1. Women and Socialism

When socialism was declared as the guiding principle of Ethiopia, a green light emerged for the equality and freedom of women¹

In much of the literature on women and development, a ubiquitous 'traditional' patriarchy,² the capitalist system in general³ and colonialism in particular have been the villains blamed for women's subordination. By contrast, Socialism has often been seen as the emancipating herald. On what rationale does this high expectation rest?

¹ Ethiopia, Revolutionary Ethiopia Women's Association, 1982:14.

² There is considerable controversy, into which I do not wish to enter, about what patriarchy means, where it originated, its historical progression, how it is perpetuated, etc. Analysts like McDonough & Harrison, 1978, have attempted to define it in terms of Marxian and psychoanalytic considerations; Beechey, 1979, likewise suggests that there is a value in the integration of the two theories though she argues that the duality leads to confusion and that a materialist analysis is more useful, whilst Eisenstein, 1979, has suggested that patriarchy is rooted in biology and women's role in reproduction, rather than in economic or historical factors.

³ Engels, (1884), 1972, for example, located the beginnings of female subordination in the introduction of private property relations and sexual divisions of labour that kept women in a static domestic environment whilst men's productivity in the wider economy increased. The implication is that the end of private property would end women's oppression.

Socialism has been conceived, theorized and practised as a stage of political evolution. In Marxist theory, political economy is reduced to the social relations of production and the interaction between social relations and means of production. The issue as expounded by Marx and his followers is about class, defined narrowly in terms of a relationship to production. Yet all societies and economies have been, and still remain, divided across lines such as gender, race, ethnicity, age and religion.¹ It cannot be assumed *a priori* that Socialist countries or countries with 'Socialist tendencies' are any more sensitive to different oppressions than those specifically defined as class and production based.

In terms of religious oppression, the Socialist State response is clear: it banishes all religions in one derisive sweep, proclaiming an egalitarian atheism and explaining the emergence and function of religion in class terms - as an ideology used by the powerful to justify their dominance and subjection of the masses. When it comes to hierarchies based on age, ethnicity or colour, early Marxist tracts had little to say. Later writings have at least introduced the colour and ethnicity issues into their analysis in, for example, the articulation of modes of production debate, which analyses syncretic relations between capitalism and pre-Capitalist social formations in the periphery.²

However, what concerns us here is the reaction in Socialist theory and practice to the gender divide. Socialist States have often equated their Revolution against previous *régimes* with a transformation in which all oppressed people are liberated, and the category of women emerges as one of the beneficiaries. Similarly, liberation movements have been in the vanguard of groups that campaign for improving the position of women.

In general the Socialist State concern tends to be at a rhetorical level only. The literature on the USSR, China and Tanzania for example³ suggests that the commitment of Socialism to gender equality is secondary to the commitment to 'male' Socialism, and is conditional on not interfering with the dominant issue. In reality

¹ For a criticism of the theories which promote production and demotes other cleavages see Parkin, 1979.

² Even in the articulation of modes of production debate, however, ethnicity or colour divisions are not perceived as central to the analysis. Rather, the assumption is that social divisions within the pre-Capitalist social formation are used to the advantage of the imperialist capitalist system. Wolpe, 1980; Seddon, 1978.

³ Molyneux 1981, 1985; Croll 1981, 1983, 1985; Buckley, 1981; Bengelsdorf, 1985; Alpern-Engel, 1987; Pelzer-White, 1987. There are, however, differences between the experiences of women in different 'Socialist' countries, as there are in 'Capitalist' countries, Bystydrienski, 1989.

there is no reorganization of the sexual division of labour as there is of the class division of labour.¹ Studies of the Socialist liberation movements suggest that their schemes for women are a result of their requirement of labour in the struggle and the need for maximum labour participation in the social, political and military rather than personal and private realms. The literature thus suggests that Socialist Governments' commitment to women is limited by an unwillingness to consider the position of women, let alone to devote political force, time and money towards a consideration of the complex and interrelated factors at work.² Finally, the autocratic, militaristic nature of the *régimes* leaves little room for abolishing male domination.

2. Women and Development

There is a growing body of literature on women and development which points to the dangers of assuming that economic growth benefits men and women equally. It is now common knowledge that development can be detrimental to women since it can result in greater economic oppression and political powerlessness.³ Given the absence of significant economic development in Ethiopia, and in particular since there is no cash crop production, much of this literature on the integration into the market economy and expansion of cash production is out of place, at least in the part of the country considered in this thesis. In terms of the political position of women, however, the comparative literature seems relevant. Regardless of the polity, and Ethiopia is no exception, the same picture continually emerges - one of women's comparatively lower status.

The influential theory developed by Boserup in *Woman's Role in Economic Development*,⁴ suggests that the world can be divided into an Asian, male, plough-based agricultural system and an African, female, hoe-based agricultural system. In the Asian system, women play a relatively minor role in agricultural cultivation, and it is here that veiling and gender segregation and greater restrictions on the mobility

¹ Hartmann, 1979, and Eisenstein, 1979. For a study of the changing attitude of the Soviet State to women's emancipation see Juncar, 1978.

² Of all the countries, Cuba seems to have put the most political will behind women. Attempts were made to include women in production, to socialize the domestic chores and to make men as involved in the domestic sphere as women. However, considerable structural obstacles have not been removed, Nazzari, 1983.

³ For example, Rosaldo and Lamphere, 1974.

⁴ According to Benería and Sen, 1981:279, probably the most quoted book on women in development.

and actions of women seems to occur. On the other hand, in the African system women predominate in the agricultural production system and have a relatively powerful, though still subordinate, position in the household.

Connected with this theory is that developed by Goody.¹ In *Production and Reproduction: A Comparative Study of the Domestic Domain*, he argued that in parts of the world where the plough is used, agricultural surplus can be produced. This surplus leads towards a more stratified society, one in which inheritance becomes a key to ensuring social order. The seclusion of women, arranged marriages, and inheritance rules ensure that reproduction can be controlled and does not provide a threat to the burgeoning class structure. In this scenario, women become marginalized. By contrast, he suggests, areas of hoe agriculture are likely to be more egalitarian both in terms of class and gender.

Focusing on Africa, a third theory can be brought into the discussion, namely that coming out of West Africa, through the work of Guyer and Henn.² This theory suggests that development and increased involvement in the market economy has affected the female hoe economy in a way which is detrimental to women in particular. The benefits to be obtained from cash-crop production have attracted men into agriculture, leaving women to continue with subsistence domestic production on increasingly marginalized lands.

Despite Menz being located in Africa, plough agriculture is practised there, as in many parts of the rest of Ethiopia, and women are not the 'dominant' force in crop cultivation.

Contrary to common African usage, the Ethiopian male works in the fields, leaving the women to prepare meals, crush the grains which the men have threshed, carry water and collect wood.³

Though situated in Africa, much of Ethiopia, including Menz, thus seems to accord with the Asian rather than the African pattern. This view is supported by the fact that the society was until recently a 'feudal'/tributary one, i.e., a highly stratified society. This fits Goody's scheme for Asian systems. The problem is that the basis for stratification in Goody's schema is located in crop production, i.e., an agricultural

¹ Goody, 1976.

² Guyer, 1980 (a), (b); Henn, 1933, 1984.

³ May and McLellan, 1970: 487.

surplus producing the foundation for stratification. The literature on Ethiopia, however, clearly points to a hierarchy which was not solely or even primarily based on agricultural production. The nobility was a military one; control over long-distance trade being an important source of wealth. The sustainability of any one area both in terms of fuel and agricultural production was so low that capital cities always shifted. The machineries of the State, kings and emperors with *entourage* and armies, were obliged to be continuously on the move because of the incapacity of the land to produce constant and sufficient surpluses.

If, despite this, we accept the assumption that Northern and Central Ethiopia is an exception and that it conforms with the Asian rather than the African model, then the fact that women are not the main cultivators fits, and the Ethiopian case can be used to prove the dangers of a simplistic geographical determinism. However, in gender terms, Ethiopia does not sit happily in the Asian category. The sexual division of labour is not as rigorously upheld as the Asian model would suggest. There is little of the segregation and veiling of the Asian kind, and, as we shall see later, women have the ability to act independently in a way which would not be predicted by the theory.

Wherever the position of Amhara women is documented in the literature, the impressions are ambiguous. For example, Messing wrote:

Cultural participation of the female is so restricted during her life cycle, that many emotional outlets are denied her. Monotonous daily routine of manual labour, two years of breastfeeding after every birth; denial of active participation in the church; derogatory views of female intelligence on the part of the males...¹

However, Reminick is less convinced:

In learning of the prevailing cultural norms and patterns of authority, one's impression of the superior dominant male appears strong. However, when one examines the rights and duties inherent in the marriage alliance and divorce procedures, the picture becomes more one of equality where the real factors of authority and domination consist in relative wealth, influence and outside support regardless of the sex of the spouse.²

The cultural definition of inequality between the sexes allows for a greater behavioural, acted out equality.³

¹ Messing, 1957: 707.

² Reminick, 1973: 57.

³ Reminick, 1973, 362.

The references to the position of women in Ethiopia are puzzling, and the attempt to fit Ethiopia into the general theory proves problematic; either there is some validity in these theories and Ethiopia is an exception, fitting neither the Asian nor the African category, or there is something missing or wrong in the theories themselves.

3. The State

A theory of how State policies relate to society is a major component of this work. The focus here is not on the internal logic of the State itself,¹ nor on the events that take place at a national scale. These issues are dealt with only briefly in Chapter Three. Rather, the aim is to look at how people perceive the State, what services and infrastructures, and ideologies come their way, and how people react to them. As Azarya points out, this is not solely a methodological point. Until recently,

Scholarly interest still focused on the state itself; it tried to explain what went wrong with the state and the reasons for its weakness. When the society was brought into the analysis, it was usually in order to explain why the state did not function properly. The focus has thus remained state centric...relatively little attention has been paid to how societies cope with the state, rather than how the state acts upon the society... / State-society relations in contemporary Africa can be studied with greater emphasis on societal responses. This is not a methodological point, nor is it simply a plea for a new research agenda. It raises some substantive questions about the relevance of the state to African social life, which make it imperative to know how the society behaves irrespective of or despite certain state actions.²

In this thesis, the term State will not be distinguished from that of Government, nor is the concept of the State clearly disaggregated in any way. The justification for this approach rests on the fact that the focus of this work is on how the State is perceived by the population, and not how the different organs interact, or how analysts interpret the history behind particular State actions. There remains the need for studies which will lead to a more precise understanding of the constantly negotiated power structures within and between the different State apparatuses.

Coming more specifically to the area covered by this thesis, it is easy to be appalled by the social, economic and political record of this particular Ethiopian *régime*, both in

¹ Evans, *et al.*, eds. 1985. In Ethiopia, see Pausewang, 1987.

² Azarya, 1988: 5/18.

terms of its relationship with the peasantry and in terms of the position of women. However, the context is one of 'failure' in much of the developing world and in Africa in particular.¹ Furthermore, the settings of war and famine are ones which have a long history in the country, and are unlikely to disappear irrespective of the particular form of Government in power.

II. METHOD

1. Approach

The history of how I became involved in this research, and how Gera Peasants' Association was chosen, is presented in Appendix A. My position as a woman in many ways determined the kind of information I was privy to during the fieldwork period. Also important was the fact that I felt, and was seen to be, involved in the society. In many ways what I saw was not particularly alien to me, since I was brought up in Ethiopia. This situation is unlike the stereotype of traditional ethnography.² In this case, I could back up my political and social commentary of Ethiopia by a sense of belonging, and a knowledge that I was freer to express my views than many Ethiopians.

In terms of presenting myself to the Peasants' Association, however, my approach was to try not to fit too comfortably into any mould and in this way to encourage an ambivalent attitude towards me; an attitude which allowed me to talk to different groups of people without sliding into too much of a chameleon act.³ I was seen as neither a proper foreigner nor a proper Ethiopian (I was white but claimed I was born in the country, and I spoke Amharic); I was not an outsider nor an insider (I resided in the area, but was new to it, temporary, and mobile within it), not young nor old (people found it difficult to estimate my age and many of the things I did which might have given them an indication conflicted with each other). I was not important, yet I had status amongst the population, the leadership and outsiders. I was not poor, yet not rich (I did not have the traditional forms of wealth and had explained that I was only

¹ '... not one African country has succeeded in transforming its economy into a self-sustaining and viable system. Since the later 1970s the overall economic performance on the continent has been, on the average, dismal.' Kinsin, 1988: 267.

² For example, Lévi-Strauss, 1955, on the sense of alienation from the observed society and rejection of one's 'own' society. However, there are disadvantages to being at least a part-insider. For example, events, and attitudes might be taken for granted and therefore not considered for analysis.

³ See Agar, 1980: 88 for the different roles adopted by researchers.

a student). I was not part of the Government yet I communicated extensively with Government agents. Finally, I was not a normal woman, because of the clothes I wore and the things I was doing, and it was never clear to my respondents if I was married or not since I encouraged conversations about sexual issues yet claimed to be 'still a girl', essentially for reasons of personal security.

2. Cross-disciplinary approach

In the past, most work in rural Ethiopia has been carried out by anthropologists and a few historians and sociologists relying on participant-observation as their main methodology. In Northern Ethiopia, these include Levine, 'the Hobens', Messing, Weissleder, 'the Reminicks' and McCann. In contrast, the current work being done by Ethiopian researchers at the Addis Ababa University¹ is increasingly conscious of the dangers of a narrow discipline-based analysis. Although the value of ethnography is recognized, little ethnographic work is carried out because of funding problems and commitments to teaching. Thus, rapid rural appraisals - the consultancy approach - characterizes much of the work. Since this thesis is based on ethnographic methods, it might seem to be an anthropological account. However, the interests that lie behind the study seem more in the sociological, political and economic domain. In fact, the study takes the view that these divisions contribute to simplistic accounts.

Having accepted the challenge of a cross-disciplinary approach, I must add that there are limits to what a single study can undertake, and to what angles the researcher can usefully explore. In particular, there will not be any attempt to consider the role of psychoanalysis, to look at the subconscious. The omission needs comment because the two researchers² who have concentrated on Menz rely heavily on psychological explanations, and because part of the literature on gender veers in this direction. My omission of the psychological is the result of a number of interrelated factors. Firstly, psychoanalysis has largely been conceived of and theorized by men in the West, using concepts and examples which are androcentric and Euro-centric to the extreme. It is the use of psychology which, in the view of Ethiopian readers amongst others, mars the accounts of the two researchers mentioned earlier.³ Secondly, attempts to formulate analyses with more understanding of women seem biased in reverse, replacing the

¹ For example, Alemayehu Lirensso, Alula Abate, Dessalegn Rahmato, Eshetu Chole, Mesfin Wolde Mariam, Tegegne Teka, Yeraswork Admassie .

² Levine, 1963, 1965 and Reminick, 1973.

³ See the review of Levine's *Wax and Gold* by Gedamu Abraha, 1967.

Freudian mother-son centrality with a mother-daughter one.¹ Finally, socio-economic and political considerations seem far more immediate and relevant than the universalistic and fatalistic psychoanalytic approach.²

3. Period of study

The research started in October 1987, with nine months of courses, preparatory work and reading. Fourteen months were then spent in Ethiopia, most of the time in the chosen Peasants' Association, collecting data, with each stay lasting up to three months. The rest of the time was spent on inputting data on a computer, reading, and some visits to other areas of the country to obtain a comparative perspective.³

4. Mini diaries, medium-sized questionnaires, and maxi life-histories

In addition to the perusal of archival and printed material, my own data was collected in three different forms. This was an attempt at triangulation to widen the type of information received, the respondents questioned and the framework within which the information was passed on.⁴ Contextual information was also gathered from visits to a number of different villages and towns in Menz.

• Diaries

I always walked about with a small note-book and would scribble in it addictively. Respondents and subject matter would be considered before I decided whether to make visible and constant my addiction, to wait for pauses in the conversation or for the

¹ For example, Eichenbaum and Orbach, 1982.

² For a critique of the psychoanalytic contribution to understanding women's oppression, see Brenner and Ramas, 1984. For recent work see Henley, 1985. For an attempt to integrate a psychoanalytic analysis with a materialist anthropological approach see Rubin, 1975. In the Ethiopian case, both Levine 1965, 1974, and Reminick, 1973, attempts, are in my view rather unsuccessful.

³ H. Pankhurst, 1989 (a).

⁴ See Denzin, 1978, Chapter Eleven for an account of the benefits of triangulation, using different methods to reduce the inherent limitations of the whole. Denzin, quotes a study by Davis, 1964, 'Great Books and Small Groups: An informal history of a Natural Survey', in P. Hammond (ed.) *Sociologists at work*, New York: Basic Books: 212-234: 'By and large, the fashionable people in sociology are 'action painters' who dribble their thoughts on the canvas of the journals, unrestrained by systematic evidence, while at the opposite pole there are hordes of 'engineers' who grind out academic development housing according to mechanical formulas of elementary texts. It is not easy to steer between these courses... but my opinion is that the fun lies in trying to do so.'

respondent to become occupied, or whether it was best to hold back until I was in my hut before writing up. In general, I quickly established my note-pads as necessary accoutrements. Many of the quotations in this thesis were written down in these diaries. I would often translate then and there, with the exception of the odd significant Amharic expression or sentence which I noted in the original.

My visits to Addis Ababa after bouts of fieldwork were particularly useful not only to consult the literature, but also for keying in data from these diaries onto a computer. Inputting fourteen diaries at the end of the fieldwork would have been very frustrating since it is so time-consuming and tedious. This form of data, most of which was accessible before I left Ethiopia, is the most interesting, and qualitatively the richest. The subjects, often jotted down in the diary one sentence after another, ranged from adultery to *zemecha*, i.e., labour campaigns. I keyed in the information by subject matter onto the computer, and by the end I had more than three hundred files on different issues. In this way I sorted data as I went along and had opportunities to return to the Peasants' Association with new questions or requests for clarification.

• Questionnaires

Most of my time was spent in the Villagized part of Gera and adjacent communities, with only the odd conversation and excursion to other parts of the Peasants' Association. Eight months into fieldwork, it seemed important to talk to a wider set of people in the Peasants' Association, and work on an overview of their lives. Perhaps more importantly, it was difficult to ask for quantitative and economic data once I started living in and hence became part of the community. Questionnaires seemed to provide a way out - a way of collecting a relatively large sample of necessary statistics.¹

I administered these myself, ninety seven of them, mainly to men, usually sitting with my respondents slightly apart from people working on communal labour tasks, busy building huts and installing water pumps. The interviews each lasted between half an hour and an hour, though when groups congregated, the interviewing would stop in favour of discussions, themselves sometimes turning into arguments.

¹ Transferring data into standard measurements is a very difficult undertaking in a society in which, for example, local measurements are not always fixed by length or weight but often include a measure of quality (in, for example, land) or a time/season dimension (in grain measures). On some of the problems in the Ethiopian context see R. Pankhurst, 1969.

The data collected was on a diverse set of questions, such as household composition, educational background, use of services and structures both traditional and modern; amounts and yields from land and livestock, other income-earning activities, aid received, details on the sexual division of labour.... An analysis of these questionnaires provides the source of most of the quantitative data in the thesis. The sample size varies for a number of reasons, including interruptions and unclear data. I have therefore always indicated the size of the sample in the text or footnotes, as well as in Appendix B. I also administered a short questionnaire of students' backgrounds and aspirations.

- **Life-histories**

Detailed qualitative data was collected by spending whole days at a time with individual women. These sessions would often be organized beforehand so as to be on a day convenient and would usually take place in the woman's hut, though we would sometimes go on errands together. Usually, the woman would get on with her tasks in and around the hut: food and drink preparation, hut cleaning, watching livestock, spinning. Other people - household members, neighbours and friends - would be involved part of the time and the conversations would shift accordingly. I carried with me a set of questions about marital history, childbirth, and so on, and used these to initiate conversations at various times during the day and as a check-list to try and maximize coverage of different issues. About seventy women were interviewed in this way, varying in age from the late teens to the seventies, 'good' data on a range of subjects obtained in almost half the cases. Lengthy quotations in the thesis usually have their origin in these interviews. As with the case of the diaries, much was translated directly, though I also did some transcribing, particularly of an interesting or apt expression. Once when I started carrying the cards on which I recorded the life-histories in a rucksack, a friend commented that, these days, instead of my note book in hand, I slung my rucksack on my back as a woman did her child, carrying it wherever I went. Another neighbour added, 'her writing is her child'.

3 GERA, ETHIOPIA

I. Ethiopia

1. Physical geography
2. Culture and religion
3. The economy
4. Recent history

II. Menz and G e r a

1. Menz
2. Gera Peasants' Association

Conclusion

This chapter, the last in Part I, provides the setting for the empirical section of the thesis. The chapter is divided into three sections, in which the attention is narrowed from an overall introduction to the whole country, though a focus on Menz, down to Gera, the pseudonym given for the Peasants' Association studied.

I. ETHIOPIA¹

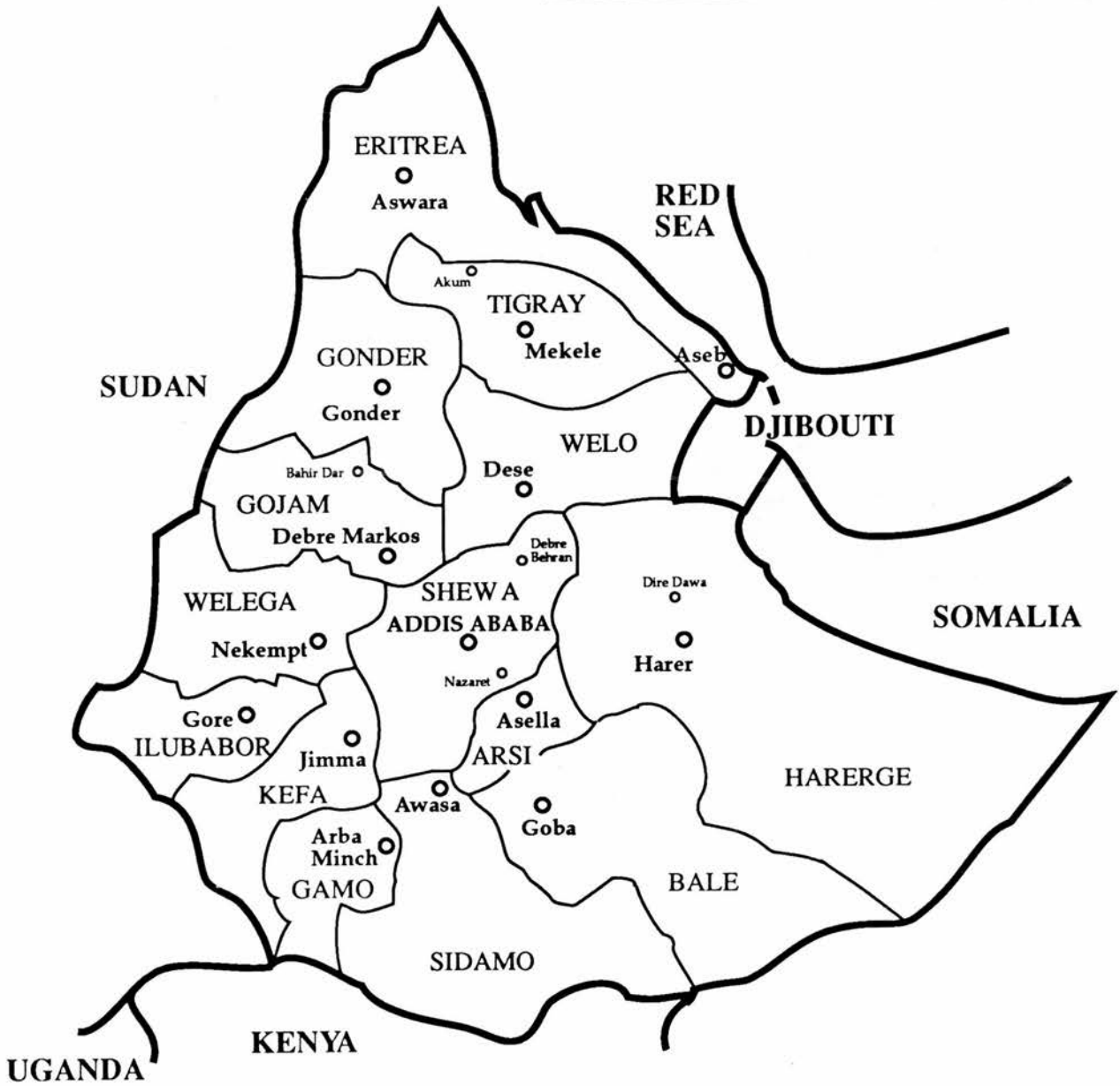
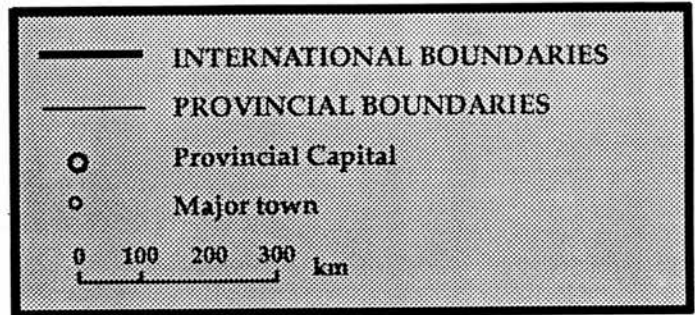
An overview of the country in four sub-sections follows. The first locates the country geographically, the second summarises issues of culture and religion, the third considers the economic situation, and the fourth provides an introduction to the recent history of the country.

1. Physical geography

Ethiopia is situated in the hinterland of the Horn of Africa, bordered to the north and west by Sudan, to the south by Kenya and Somalia. To the east it faces the Red sea coast, Djibouti and Somalia.

¹ Sources for this section include: Ethiopian Census of 1984; Entries on Ethiopia in: *Africa Contemporary Record*, 1985-86 and *Africa South of the Sahara* 1990; *World Development Report* 1989; *The African Review* 1988. Most of the statistical figures should be taken only as a rough estimates.

Map of ETHIOPIA



The country has been described as pear-shaped in appearance, with the stalk facing North. Elevations vary from 100 metres below sea level in the Dallol Depression to 4,620 metres on the peak of Ras Dashen in the Semien Mountains. A central belt of the country consists of the Ethiopian highlands bordered by the lowlands on the east and west. In the south, the highlands are bisected by the Rift Valley, within which lies a series of lakes. Much of the land has experienced considerable volcanic activity and subsequent erosion. Particularly in the north, tertiary lava has often been removed by erosion to expose limestone and sandstone rock faces.

Ethiopia is located in the tropics. The main rainy season falls between mid-June and late September; the small rains, less predictable, fall some time between February and April. The differences in altitude produce considerable regional variations in both climate and vegetation. Traditionally, Ethiopians classify the land into three major zones:

<i>Dega</i> , the highlands	-	Above 2,500 metres
<i>Weyna dega</i> , lower highlands	-	1,500-2,500 metres
<i>K'olla</i> , lowlands	-	Below 1,500 metres

It is estimated that 10% of the population live in the lowland region, 20% in the middle range and the great majority, 70%, in the highlands. The people in the lowlands tend to be pastoralists, whilst those in the higher regions are predominantly mixed farmers involved in livestock and crop production. The Northern Ethiopian highlands have a longer history of settlement than other parts of the country.

Ethiopia covers an area of 1,251,282 sq. km. According to the 1984 Ethiopian Census,¹ the population was then estimated to be 42 million and was expected to reach 50 million by 1990.² Until recently, the country was divided into sixteen administrative regions.³ The capital, Addis Ababa, lies in the centre of the country, in the region of Shewa, though for administrative reasons it is counted separately. Shewa, the area in which fieldwork was undertaken, is one of the largest regions, at 85,093.6 sq. km. It is also the most populous and the fastest growing, after Addis Ababa. The population estimate for Shewa, in 1989, was 9,333,735. The population density was estimated at 43 persons per sq. km.

¹ The 1984 census, by far the most comprehensive data source to date, is based on access to 85% of the population.

² The census gives an average annual birth rate of 46.0 per 1,000 (1970-81) and an average annual death rate of 18.1 per 1,000 (1970-81).

³ The fourteen major regions, Asseb and Addis Abeba.

2. Culture and Religion

Cultural and ethnic diversity characterize much of Ethiopia, with periodic migrations and intermarriage of races reducing the homogeneous nature of each community. There are said to be at least eighty population groups, and nearly one hundred languages spoken, some with additional regional or other dialects. The main languages can be divided into three groups, the Semitic, Cushitic and Nilotic.

Amongst the Cushitic group, Oromo is the native language of the largest number of people, spoken by roughly a quarter of the population. It is also the second language for many groups in the south. Amharic, a Semitic language, is estimated to be used as a native language by around a quarter of the population. However, it functions as the most important language, being the official one used in education, the media and the army; it is the one spoken in the capital and its environs, and is widely used as a second language. Other Semitic languages in Ethiopia include Geez, the old literary and liturgical language, and Tigrynya and Tigré, both spoken north of the Amharic-speaking regions.

The centralization of power within Ethiopia, and Amhara dominance, has been a cause of social and political unrest. In particular the people of Eritrea, Tigray, the Ogaden and some Oromo-speaking areas have all expressed demands for autonomy. Today, the so-called 'nationalities' problem is a major consideration in domestic policies. It has resulted in crippling human and financial costs, including civil war, major military expenditure, years of aggravated famine condition and the loss of Government control over large tracts of the country.¹

The Islamic religion is practised in the lowlands of Ethiopia and, overall, nearly half the population is Muslim. Christianity was adopted as the State religion in 333 A.D.. Ethiopian Christianity predominates in the highland areas of Ethiopia, and is followed by almost half the population. In 1986, the church was estimated to have 22 million members. A minority of the population include animists, Protestants, Roman Catholics and *Felasha* or 'Ethiopian Jews'.

In generalizations about Ethiopia, the diversity of cultures and societies tends to be forgotten, submerged by an over-representation of the Christian Amhara, and to a lesser extent by the Christian populations of the North who are the traditional

¹ Ethiopia is said to spend approximately half of its Gross National Product on military expenditure and to have, in absolute terms, the second largest army in Africa.

holders of power. This study is also located in the North and among the Amhara, and what is written in the thesis cannot be taken as representative of conditions in many parts of Ethiopia.

3. The Economy

Many different types of livelihood are undertaken by Ethiopians, but the dominant one is that of sedentary agriculture, most of which takes the form of mixed farming. Shifting cultivation in the South, and pastoralism with different degrees of transhumance in the arid lowlands, are also practised. There is also a 'modern' urban sector with manufacturing and service industries. The figures in Table I below shows the predominance of agriculture.

Table I. Estimated economically active population

	<u>MALE</u>	<u>FEMALE</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>
Agriculture, etc.	8,164,000	5,877,000	14,040,000
Industry	960,000	422,000	1,383,000
Services	1,547,000	623,000	2,170,000
Total	10,671,000	6,922,000	17,593,000

According to the 1984 census, the total labour force was 18,492,300.
The figures are 11,243,065 male and 7,249,235 female, a ratio of 1 to 6.

[Source: Statistical Survey, Ethiopia, *Africa South of the Sahara*, 1990:463]

The percentage of the population in Shewa living in rural areas is 90.65%, and this is the most urbanized region. Services clearly account for more employment than industry. Registered male employment in each sector is greater than female employment.¹ Natural resources are, by and large, unexploited. There are suggestions of considerable mineral, potash and petroleum deposits in various parts of the country, but these are still largely unexploited.

Data for 1983 suggests that 94.7% of the total cultivated land was farmed by small-holders, who, produced 95% of the country's agricultural crops, excluding coffee. Of the remaining land, 3.5% was in State Farms and 1.8% in collective farms and agricultural settlements.² A trend towards minor increases in State Farms and Cooperatives characterized the eighties. State Farms received preferential treatment and funding for services and facilities. By 1989, the Government had also introduced a distinction

¹ These figures must however be questioned since male labour is generally more visible than female labour, both because of a bias at the recording stage and due to the narrow definitions of labour usually used. See Leon, 1984; White, 1984, etc.

² Cohen and Isaksson, (b), 1987:443.

between high potential and low potential areas, the former receiving more inputs than the latter.

In the export sector coffee, hides and skins still predominate. Cross-border blackmarket activities are said to be considerable. Agriculture in the peasant and cooperative sectors is undertaken side by side with the rearing of livestock. Much of the livestock in the country is, however, owned by the pastoralist population. There has been little collectivization of livestock.

A summary of the basic economic indicators, are given in *tabula* form in Table II, below.

Table II. Basic economic Indicators.

GNP p.c. Dollars 1986					
Low Income countries	270		Ethiopia	120	
Average Annual GNP p.c. growth rate '65-'86 (%)					
Low Income countries	3.1		Ethiopia	0.0	
Average Annual inflation %					
		<u>'65-'80</u>		<u>'80-'85</u>	
Low Income countries		4.6		8.1	
Ethiopia		3.4		3.4	
Average Annual Growth % in the different sectors					
1 = Ethiopia 2 = Low Income countries					
	<u>GDP</u>	<u>AGRI</u>	<u>IND</u>	<u>MAN</u>	<u>SERVICE</u>
	<u>'80-'86</u>	<u>'80-'86</u>	<u>'80-'86</u>	<u>'80-'86</u>	<u>'80-'86</u>
Ethiopia	7.5	4.9	10.6	11.2	6.6
Low Income countries	0.8	-3.9	3.8	3.9	5.1

[Source: *World Development Report 1988*, Statistical Appendix]

Over the centuries, the country has experienced a long history of successive famines. The one in 1985 was estimated to have affected some 11 million people in most of the administrative regions. The 1986 rains were sufficient, but the harvests have been poor since then. In many parts of the country conditions have not returned to the pre-1985 famine levels; indeed the extreme North suffered drought conditions again in 1989/90.

The three-year intermediary development plan 1986-89, and subsequent policy declarations reveal a movement away from Socialist policies towards offering greater economic incentives to the population. This could be interpreted as a response to internal conditions, an attempt to survive in the face of increasing discontent and loss of control over much of the country. It could also be a realisation - as officially stated -

that earlier policies were not delivering. The changes can also be seen as having external origins. Pressure has been exerted from the West and aid-giving bodies, in particular the World Bank and the European Economic Community, which are funding development schemes in the country. Finally, the shift can also be explained as a response to *perestroika* and the fundamental changes occurring in Eastern European countries.¹

4. Recent History

Modernization, taken to mean the processes of urbanization, industrialization and the diffusion of infrastructure and nationwide services, started to take shape at the end of the nineteenth and the first years of the present century during Emperor Menilek's reign. During the latter years of Haile Selassie's rule, those representing the emerging modernizing forces clashed with those representing the 'feudal' interests in the society; they criticised the Emperor's autocratic form of Government, and the slow pace of development.

Dissent from Haile Selassie's rule took the form of an attempted coup in 1960 followed by student unrest throughout the sixties and early seventies; there were intermittent calls for land reform and denunciations of official corruption.² The 1972-74 Famine in Tigray and Welo, rapid inflation, particularly a rise in petrol prices, and unrest amongst the urban population, guerrilla activity in Eritrea and Bale and peasant disturbances in the South, set the scene for the second and successful coup, dubbed the 'creeping coup'. The remainder of this section briefly highlights the main events since this Revolution, in chronological order.³

In February 1974, a series of strikes in Addis Ababa and a mutiny in the Armed Forces led to major changes. Ministers were arrested; the Prime Minister since 1961, Aklilu Habte Weld and his cabinet resigned and he was replaced by Lij Endalkachew Mekonen, who was supposed to carry out reforms.

In June 1974, the Coordinating Committee of the Armed Forces, Police and Territorial Army was formed and took direct action resulting in further arrests. Haile Selassie was deposed on 12th September 1974 and died, under arrest, in August 1975. Power was thereafter exercised by a 'Co-ordinating Committee', the Provisional Military

¹ The Epilogue returns to a consideration of the changes that seem to be in progress.

² Some attempts at reform, such as a landlord-tenant bill, were blocked at the parliamentary stage in 1968.

³ There are a number of accounts of the Revolution, in particular see Lefort, 1981, Clapham, 1988 and Harbeson, 1988.

Government of Ethiopia (PMAC), also calling itself the *Derg*. It consisted initially of 108 representatives of the Army, the Air Force, the Navy, and the Police.

In November 1975, fifty-seven prominent Ethiopian politicians were executed. The same night, the Head of State and Chairman of the *Derg*, General Aman Andom, together with two other members of the *Derg* were shot, reportedly in a dispute over policy towards Eritrea. Brigadier General Teferi Banti became the next Head of State, with two Vice Chairmen, Major Mengistu Haile Mariam and Lieutenant-Colonel Atnafu Abate. In-fighting within the *Derg* continued in July 1976, with the next in command, Major Sissay Habte, and a number of other officials being executed. In February 1977 Teferi Banti and some other leaders were executed; in November the Vice-Chairman, Atnafu Abate, was likewise dispatched. All this made way for Mengistu Haile Mariam to become Chairman of PMAC and, eventually, Head of State.

Meanwhile the PMAC was increasingly adopting a Socialist model of Government to replace Haile Selassie's, which, despite the Constitution and Parliament, was a 'feudal' one. On 20th December the country was declared a Socialist State and more than one hundred companies and banking institutions were nationalized. In December 1975 the Confederation of Labour Unions was replaced by the All-Ethiopia Trade Union.

No doubt the most radical step occurred in March 1975 with the nationalization of all rural land. Students were sent out across the country to help organize a Campaign of National Development, the *Zemetcha* Programme. They implemented the Land Reform, setting up locally elected Peasants' Associations, and undertaking Literacy Campaigns. Elective, regional, provincial and district Associations were created. The schemes culminated in the first All-Ethiopia Peasants' Association Congress (AEPA), which took place in April 1978. The period also witnessed the beginnings of Cooperativization and the creation of communal farms. Where large commercial schemes had existed, State Farms were created.



4 Workers 'Party of Ethiopia



5 Our directive is Marxism Leninism'



6 'Revolution is a continual process'



7 'Comrade Mengistu Haile Mariam'

Meanwhile, in July 1975, urban land had also been nationalized and people with more than one house had all additional ones confiscated. *K'ebelé*, or Urban Dwellers' Associations were set up, also local and elective in form. Between 1977 and 1978, the years of the 'Red Terror', Ethiopia witnessed a period of unprecedented urban terrorism. The civil unrest was paralleled by internal rivalries within the *Derg*, referred to above, where various, mainly Marxist, opposition bodies were bidding for power. Thousands were arrested and many more killed in inter-factional fighting.

In 1978, the National Economic Development and Planning Organization was established. In December 1979, the Commission for 'Organizing the Party of the Working People of Ethiopia' (COPWE), emerged as the new focus of power, still dominated by the military.

In 1980, the Revolutionary Ethiopia Women's Association (REWA), and the Revolutionary Ethiopia Youth Association (REYA), were established at a national level. In 1981, a judicial system based on special People's Courts was established. The juries were elected by members of the Urban Associations and Peasants' Associations. The system comprises four tiers of appeal from the sub-regional, *wereda* courts, to the regional, *awraja* courts, the high courts, and finally the supreme court in Addis Ababa.

The year 1983 saw the organization of COPWE at the local and factory level and the foundation in March of an Institute of Nationalities. In 1984, the Workers Party of Ethiopia (WPE), was inaugurated as the 'Marxist-Leninist vanguard party'. It consisted of 135 men and one woman (in charge of women's affairs) full members, and 60 men and four women alternative members.¹ A Ten Year Development Plan was announced.

The years 1984/85 witnessed drought and famine in the North, affecting some nine million people. Action taken included relief and rehabilitation in the affected areas, and the controversial resettling of 600,000 people as an attempt at a partial long-term solution. The Ten Year development plan was abandoned in the face of the crisis. In 1985, a Villagization campaign started in parts of the country.²

In February 1986, the drafting of a new Constitution,³ under Decree 291, was set in motion by a Commission of 95. In June of the same year, the draft Constitution was

¹ Clapham, 1988: 84.

² See Villagization, Chapter Nine.

³ See 'Ethiopia: Constitutional Debate' in *African Affairs*, No. 180, 1986.

drawn up and publicized by the Workers' Party of Ethiopia with the dissemination of a million copies of the draft, in fifteen languages. It provoked widespread directed debate. In September, a three-year Intermediate Development Plan was published. In February 1987 the Draft Constitution was declared to have been endorsed in a referendum by 81% of the 12 million voters. On the 14th of June 1987, and on the basis of universal suffrage and the pre-selection of candidates, elections were held for the 835 seats in the legislature, the National Assembly or *Shengo*, with an 85.4% participation rate. Lieutenant-Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam and all members of the Politburo of WPE were returned as Deputies. Ethiopia was proclaimed a People's Democratic Republic in September 1987.

The new Constitution describes Ethiopia as a unitary Socialist State under the 'democratic centralism' of the Workers Party of Ethiopia, and vested considerable power in the President, elected for a term of five years. He is Head of State, Chief Executive, Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, and Chairman of the Council of Ministers, of the Defence Council and the State Council. The Constitution is supposed to grant all citizens freedom of press and of speech. Religious freedom is permitted conditional on it not being exercised to the detriment of the interests of the Revolution. The Constitution also allows for the equality of all nationalities and a degree of autonomy through devolution to unspecified administrative units. It expresses the equality of men and women. Yet the rights of citizenship and theories of equality are little more than empty words on paper. The purpose of the constitution is clearly one of changing the militaristic image of the existing power base rather than transforming and widening it.

The 1986-87 period saw the defection of a number of key officials. These included Dawit Wolde Giorgis, the Head of the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission, Goshu Wolde, the Foreign Minister, and a number of ambassadors, though some had defected previously. In 1987, a Resettlement programme was reintroduced, with the aim of relocating 200,000 people, though only a few thousand were in fact resettled. The Villagization programme became a nationwide campaign.

Since the fieldwork period, there have also been major developments. An attempted coup took place on the 16-18th May 1989, lead by Major General Merid Nigussie, Chief of Staff, and Major General Amha Desta, Air Force Commander. Twelve generals involved in the coup were tried, sentenced to death and executed in May 1990.

Since 1988 resistance movements, and in particular the Tigrean People's Liberation Front (TPLF), have increased their hold on parts of the country, capturing Mekele, the

Tigrean capital, then threatening Dese, the capital of Welo, and in November 1989 reaching as far south as Shewa. Mehal Meda, the capital of the Menz region of Northern Shewa, was briefly taken.

March 1989, saw a policy change away from Socialism towards a mixed economy. The motion for the change was forwarded by Mengistu Haile Mariam to the Central Committee of the Workers Party of Ethiopia.

II. MENZ AND GERA

1. Menz

Menz is situated in Northern Shewa,¹ some 300 kilometres north of Addis Ababa. The capital of Menz, Mehal Meda, is about 100 kilometres off the main Addis Ababa-Asmera road. The *awraja*, known until 1989 as Menz and Gishe, comprised seven *wereda*.² As of 1989, with the new administrative divisions introduced throughout the country, the former *awraja* of Menz and Gishe has been divided into two, Menz Mama Midir and Menz Gera Midir.³ One of the former *wereda*, Antsokia, is now included in Welo, and six Peasants' Associations have moved from being part of Menz to being included in Yifat. For the purpose of this study the pre-1989 administrative units will be used, as the new divisions were only just beginning to be set up by the end of the fieldwork period.

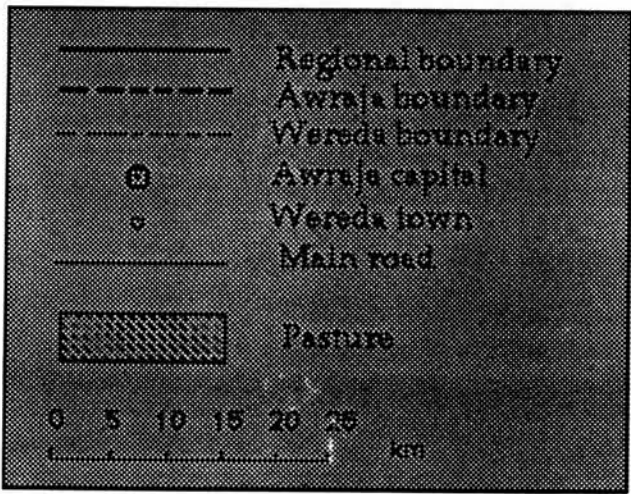
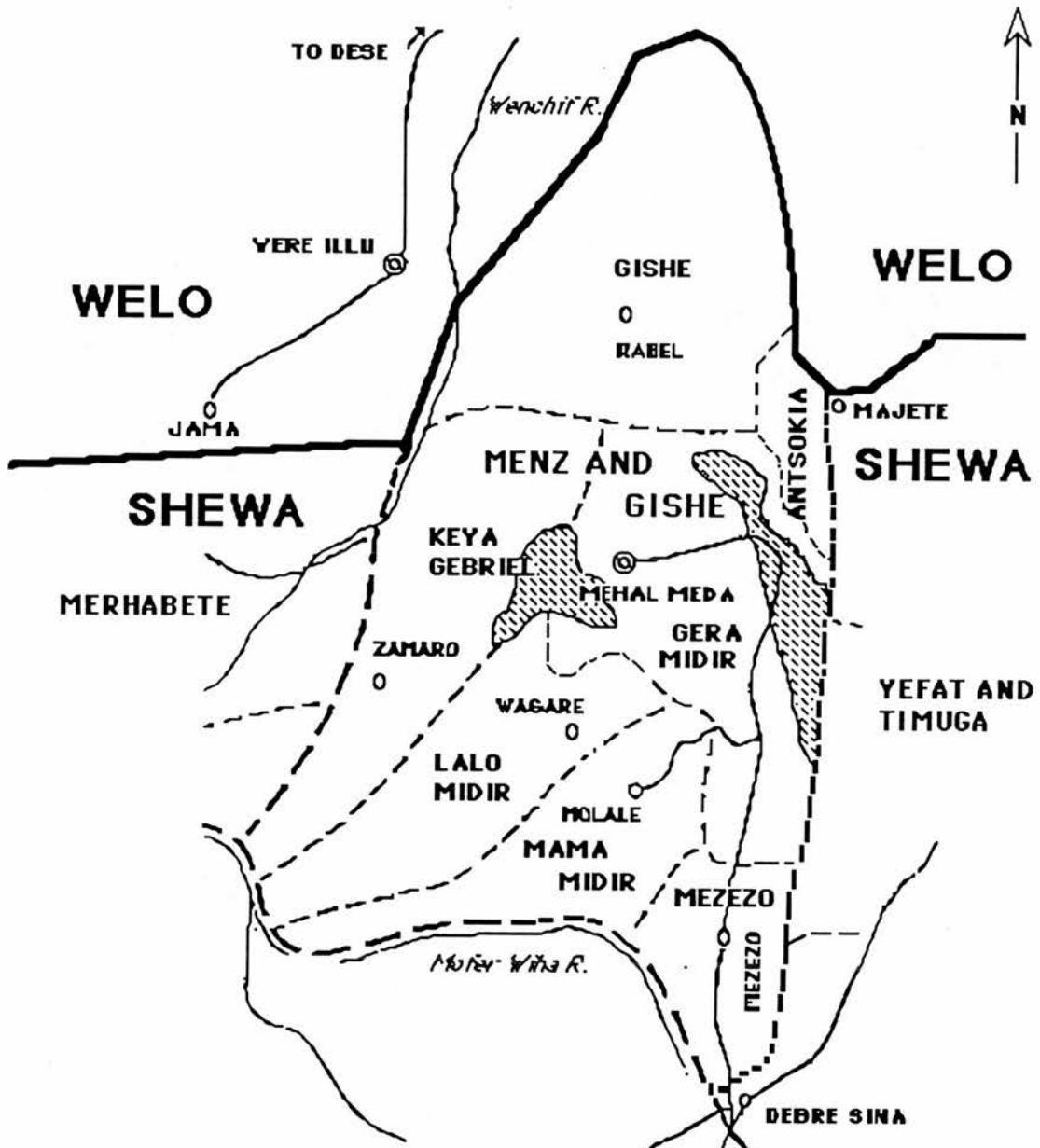
The land covered in the Menz and Gishe *awraja* is estimated by the Ministry of Agriculture at some 387,000 hectares. Of this, 54% is defined as agricultural land, 16% grazing land, 15% forest, 12% barren, and 3% inhabited lands. Gera Midir, the *wereda* in which the study took place, is by far the largest *wereda*, consisting of an estimated 38,749 hectares. Of this land, 33% is estimated to be agricultural land, 27% grazing, 12% forest, 24% barren and 4% used for human settlement.

¹ The term Menz is often used loosely by people outside the area to include a wider geographical location than that which applied to the regional boundaries until 1989.

² Gera Midir, Mama Midir, Lalo Midir, Mezezo, Keya Gebriel, Antsokia and Gishe.

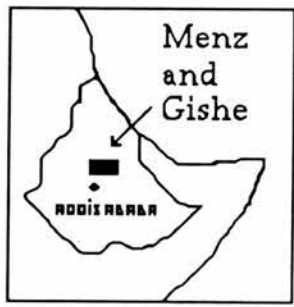
³ The first includes the former *wereda* of Mama Midir, Lalo Midir and Mezezo, the second includes the former *wereda* of Gishe, Keya Gebriel and Gera Midir.

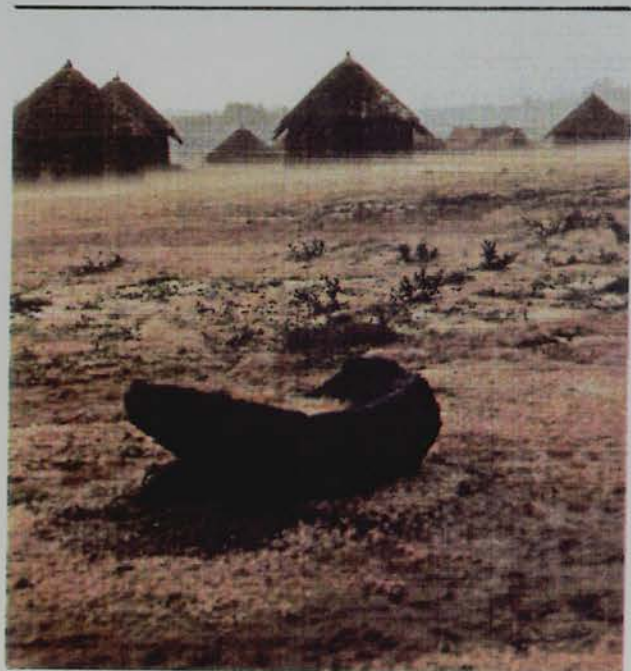
Map of MENZ



TO ADDIS ABABA
↓

ETHIOPIA





Menz had a population estimated at 315,888 in 1988/89 and is a predominantly rural economy and society.¹ The urban population is about 3% of the total.² Mehal Meda, the capital of Menz, is a new 'planned' town, said in the area to have been conceived of by Emperor Haile Sellassie, whose visit in 1964 'opened' the town. It has grown particularly fast, comprising 51% and 58% of the urban population of Menz in 1980/81 and 1985/86 respectively. Molale, the former capital, was just under half the size of Mehal Meda in 1980/81 and just under a third of it in 1985/86.

The official figures for the female urban population in 1980/81 and 1985/86 are 47% and 51% respectively. These and other figures show an increase in the proportion of women in towns, and suggest a tilt in urbanization towards a greater proportion of women. Furthermore, these figures are likely to be underestimates. Fewer women than men are likely to register as urban dwellers, many of them eking out an existence in the informal and hence less visible sectors of the town and its economy. They live in 'kitchens' of friends and relatives, or in various bars and hostels.³

The rural population is based on peasant household⁴ systems and subsistence production is predominant. It is also, however, involved in exchange circuits inside and outside the community. The high altitude, at which most of the population is located, results in constraints on the variety of crops being cultivated. As we shall see in Chapter Six, barley is the dominant crop, though wheat, beans and lentils are also regularly grown. The population practises a mixed farming system in which crop production occurs in conjunction with livestock rearing. In addition, handicraft activities have long been practised, in particular those based on resources existing within the community. The processing of wool is one such activity.

In Menz, the post-Revolutionary Government has impinged most visibly in terms of the Land Reform, the formation of Peasants' Associations, Service Cooperatives, the Literacy Campaign, and conscription for the war effort. The Land Reform was introduced in two stages. In the first, '*idget be hibret*', 'development through cooperation', took the land from the 'lords' and gave it to the tillers.⁵ In the second

¹ The local party figure for 1987/88 was 303,277.

² Taking registered population as the criterion 9,682 urban dwellers and 303,277 rural dwellers.

³ See Chapter Seven for a discussion of women and urbanization.

⁴ In this thesis, as in other studies Hoben, 1973; Bauer, 1977, the individual and the household are central concepts while that of kin is considered less important, see also Lewis, 1974. The family unit is rarely mentioned because it has little operative meaning in the society. As we shall see the household is a fluid unit in which members are not necessarily all related. The household is defined in terms of anybody who sleeps in the same homestead, usually, but not always, in the same hut.

⁵ This land reform was known locally as *shigshega*, redistribution.

stage,¹ Peasants' Associations were formed and the leadership redistributed the land with help from the Ministry of Agriculture. The Peasants' Associations became a local structure with which the State could interact. Each Association is headed by a Chairman, a Deputy Chairman and a Secretary, universally male, and, in Menz at least, a local person. Below them are nine other members of the Executive Committee, as well as a local police and a local law court. The Youth and Women's Associations are often identified with the Peasants' Association structure, but they are much less powerful, legally beholden to the Peasants' Association and, as we shall see in the following Chapter, of marginal impact.

Menz is seen as both the heartland and the backwater of highland Christian Ethiopia. It is the heartland because it is in the geographical centre of the Northern highlands, an area around which the capitals of the kingdom were located and it was a region providing a large proportion of the governing elite. It is considered a backwater because of its isolation and lack of development. More than sixty percent of the land is in the higher stretches of the *dega* high altitude range, and many of the *wereda* are almost exclusively in that altitude range.² Menz is synonymous, to insiders and outsiders alike, with bleak and cold conditions. During the day, and in the dry months, this reputation seems misplaced as the sun beats down unsparingly. However, at night, and in the morning before the sun has had a chance to warm the air, the highland cold is punishing. When the wind picks up, it is simply chilling, and there is little protection to be found, save the escape into huts. Even inside, the temperatures at night drops to freezing point.

The high mountain ranges with their steep eroded slopes support an increasing population. Gradual impoverishment of land and people has resulted in turning the area into an one of out-migration.³ This in turn reinforces the view of Menz as a centre, a homeland about which migrants and their descendants reminisce.

Nonetheless, the early settlers in Menz are themselves thought to have migrated from the North, and many place names and names of early settlers seem closer to Tigrynya than to Amharic. Although the area was more isolated than much of the Amhara highlands, there are also influences from neighbouring Oromo populations, as well as a Muslim influence from a short period of Muslim control. Despite having resisted the

¹ Known as *merét sizzeregga*, when the land was measured out.

² Ministry of Agriculture figures collected in the area give the following percentages: 62% *dega*, 20% *weyna dega* and 18% *k'olla*. The aggregate figure masks the fact that most of the *k'olla* area is accounted for by one *wereda* (Antsokia).

³ See McCann, 1984. In much of the South and in Harerge for example, some places are known to have a concentration of settlers from Menz.

Oromo encroachment, Menz was overrun in the early Sixteenth Century by Ahmed Ibn al Ghazi, commonly known as Ahmed Gagn or Ahmed the left-handed.¹ The image that the area carries with it, is of a relatively homogeneous population, but this picture belies the reality of a mixture of social and economic practices which have their sources outside the dominant local culture.

Many of Ethiopia's rulers have had a connection of some sort to Menz. The children of Menilek and the grandchildren of the legendary Saba, Queen of Sheba, and King Solomon, were said to have been born and to have settled in the area. Until recently, the name of these settlers would be invoked in the form of a poem, when somebody died, to voice their good lineage:

አፍቀራ፡ ደገሌ፡ ልጅ፡	Afk'era the son of Golé,
ደብብ፡ ደገገ፡ ልጅ፡	Dibibi the son of Tsegga,
ሞረት፡ ደገዱ፡ ልጅ፡	Moret the son of Tsedu,
ጊሼ፡ ደአሙሳ፡ ልጅ፡	Gishe the son of Awsabé,
ግደም፡ ደአታ፡ ልጅ፡	Gidim the son of Leta,
አራዳማ፡ ደአሰቦ፡ ልጅ፡	Aradma the son of Asbo,
አገንቻ፡ ደአምዴ፡ ልጅ፡	Agancha the son of Amdé.

A number of early medieval rulers, in particular Emperor Zera Yakob, spent some time in Menz. He is said to have seen in a dream that the proper resting place for a piece of the 'true'-cross² which was in his possession, should be at Gishen (in present day Welo), having first placed the cross in a number of churches, including one in Gishe, Menz. Emperor Tewodros, too, was said to have spent some time, also in Gishe, overlooking his kingdom from the highest mountain there. King Haile Melekot, Sahle Sellassie's son, had an affair with a woman in Menz when visiting the area and fathered the second Menilek, i.e., Emperor Menilek (1889-1912). Emperor Haile Sellassie's father was from the area, and the 1960 coup against him was led by the Neway brothers, whose father came from Menz. During the Italian Invasion, the colonizers built up a post called Hirut Ketema, some four kilometres from Gera. Finally, the area was one of the last to accept the Revolution of 1974, much of Menz being under the control of '*shifita*', (bandits) until around 1979, and today some people from areas which were most active in resisting the changes spend many an evening recounting tales about the exploits of the local leaders.

¹ Basset, ed., 1897: 283 mentions Menz briefly.

² The Cross on which Jesus Christ was said to have been crucified.

Menz is on the borders of the area that suffered the most from the famine of 1984/5 and it was one of the regions from which people were resettled. Poverty is endemic, a poverty that varies with the harvest, but has not, as yet, reached the scale of famine experienced in Eritrea, Tigray and Welo. Nonetheless, estimates of livestock depletion in the area, an indicator of famine conditions, suggest that up to 90% of stocks might have been lost during the famine years.¹

In attempts to understand the causes of this poverty, the literature points to different factors. The list includes: Neo-Malthusian population growth; inhospitable physical landscape, isolation, ecological difficulties and environmental degradation;² the *rist* and *gult* land tenure system;³ limited technology, saving and investment infrastructures; the lack of capitalist development or the opposite; the nature of the State, blamed either for lack of penetration or, on the contrary, because of the burden of tributes extracted. This is not the place to expound on the relative importance of these various explanations for the poverty of the area. As Vaughan has argued,⁴ there is no simplistic uni-causal explanation of famine to be found. Undoubtedly different factors fed upon each other, so much so that it is difficult to mention each one without tagging on another.

Yet despite all these explanations, I would suggest that the situation of communities like those of most of Ethiopia which are predominantly subsistence-based whilst still being involved in wider networks, such as in market relations, is crucial.⁵ Subsistence implies a lack of integration in exchange relations. It therefore means that any disaster is met with subsistence goods. But subsistence also means lack of investment and a lack of surplus. It is not coincidental that the two meanings are conveyed in the same word. In a subsistence society it is difficult to accumulate. Grain cannot be stored easily and the value of livestock, the main form of alternative investment, is highly sensitive to drought, and slow to recover.

¹ Alula Abate *et al*, 1988: 25.

² Mesfin Wolde Mariam, 1984.

³ *Rist* was a cognatic, ambilineal, inheritance system and *gult* rights accorded to lords of tribute. McCann: 1987:42-45.

⁴ Vaughan, 1987.

⁵ Bernstein 1977. Where such an approach has been taken, for example by Marxist economic anthropologists, the focus has been on theoretical constructs rather than a grounded local level study. Clammer, 1978, 1987.

In the subsistence-based peasant population of Menz, the disquiet with which people react to the occasional need to sell grain in order to meet other needs,¹ shows the primary concern with cultivation for direct consumption and the tendency not to see agricultural surplus as a means of expansion. It reflects the lack of a middle peasantry or a peasantry with urban links feeding back to the rural sector, and hence the lack of an investing sector. These traditions are in part results of the old tenure patterns of *rist* and *gult*, and have been strengthened by new laws restricting trade and capitalist development amongst the peasantry in single localities, across areas, and across the urban-rural divide. The weak links with other groups in the society and with State extension agents is also a cause of the dependence on the 'subsistence' situation and of the need to look inwards for help at times of stress. However, these are not purely subsistence peasants and the involvement in the State and nation has imposed its strains on the economy, e.g., the *gult* and tax systems of the past and the tax and other contributions to the present State. The goods that come from outside the community (e.g., salt, coffee, spices and kerosene) have also had a syphoning effect. These all represent important and increasing costs to a household.

Menz has been, is, and will probably long remain an area of endemic poverty. In 1988/89, 262,150 households, i.e., approximately 85% of the population, were aid beneficiaries.² In the previous two years most of this had been donated as aid by the Ethiopian Government's Relief and Rehabilitation Commission working with UNICEF, World Vision, the Baptist Mission and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. In 1989, most of the aid was given through cash-aid and food-for-work projects, in exchange for people's labour in constructing roads, planting trees, building wells, and in other development-oriented projects. Most of the aid was in wheat, and to a lesser extent some other grains, oil and milk powder, though some agencies also occasionally distributed clothes, and other goods.

2. Gera Peasants' Association

Gera Peasants' Association, estimated to cover some 720 hectares, is situated approximately 10 kilometres from Mehal Meda. Of the total land, according to Association figures, about 500 hectares are private agricultural land for Peasants'

¹ In the area the term '*meshemet*', to trade, when it was used in the context of selling grain had strongly negative connotations. If you sold other goods to buy grain it was because the harvests had been insufficient. If you sold grain, it was because you had nothing else to sell and had some cash obligation.

² According to the RRC figures for the area.

Association members, 70 hectares are communal agricultural land, and 30 hectares are recently reforested lands reserved for communal ventures. About 15 hectares are inhabited, and the remainder is grazing or barren land.

In 1988/89 the Peasants' Association comprised 423 households. The household unit consisted on average 4.4 persons¹ and most households were at least two-generational.² According to the Peasants' Association figures, 23% of households are headed by women. Single male-headed households, on the other hand, are extremely rare, only accounting for about 2% of the Peasants' Association. As will be shown in Chapter Seven, there is considerable fluidity in the membership of a particular household over time, especially because of the fragility of the marital tie. In addition, the children of either or both parents may leave the household and new workers can be brought in. According to my data, at least 16% of households have a relative's child living, and at least 4% have adopted a child who is not a relative.

The Peasants' Association is divided into eight geographical zones, and prior to Villagization, the number of households in each varied from forty-three to sixty-eight. Some of the households form a part of a single relatively large village, or *mender*, of up to sixty households. Most households, however, are more dispersed, dotted about the land in clusters of between one and ten households.³ Villagization was expected to regroup this population into fewer and larger units. The Villagized population of Gera was planned to house eighty heads of household, i.e., approximately 19% of the Peasants' Association. About sixty households were living in the village in 1989.

Gera unlike some other Peasants' Association, does not have a Producer Cooperative. The Service Cooperative used by Gera and two other neighbouring Peasants' Associations is located in Gera. It runs a mill, a store, and a shop.

¹ The Peasants' Association figures give a much larger figure since they estimate the total population to be 2,853. However, the average of 6.7 per household that this gives is not in keeping with national estimates, and is probably inflated in the hope of gaining more aid.

² According to the questionnaires, 71% are three-generational, 22% two-generational and 7% one-generational. Household sizes range from one to ten, with an adult mean of 2.3, a range from zero to five. The mean for the number of under 18 year olds in the household is 2.1, the range from zero to seven, see Appendix B.

³ Messing, 1957: 76, writes about the residential unit in Gonder, as being the nearest thing to a village and consisting of between two and a dozen huts divided into about five compounds. McCann, writing about Northern Welo, 1984: 23, suggests that the typical *mender*, which he translates as a hamlet, consisted of a cluster of thirty to forty households.

CONCLUSION

This Chapter has provided some basic background on Ethiopia, the *awraja* of Menz and Gera Peasants' Association. At the national level, geographic, cultural, and economic conditions were set out together with a brief historical calendar of post-Revolutionary events. Moving down to a focus on Menz, the historical importance of the area and conditions of livelihood were presented. Finally, the specific Peasants' Association studied was briefly introduced. We can now move onto Part II of the thesis and the empirical findings themselves.

4

THE ADMINISTRATION OF STATE

Introduction

I. Local structures

1. Land reform and the Peasants' Association
2. *Fird shengo*, the law court
3. *Sira zemecha*, *corvée* labour
4. Women's Association
5. Youth Association
6. Producer Cooperative and State Farm
7. Service Cooperative

II. Extension and Extraction

1. Ministry of Agriculture and Ministry of Health
2. Ministry of Education: literacy and schools
3. Relief
4. Resettlement
5. Military service and military resistance

Conclusion

INTRODUCTION

In research on the State, as on other aspects of society, there is a distinct schism between studies concentrating on a particular community and those that interpret conditions from the more general, national, perspective. In the latter case, the workings of the State, the structures themselves and the motives of the power-holders, becomes the focus of attention. Most studies of the post-Revolutionary State in Ethiopia have tended to analyze the State from the national view-point.¹ It is with such a perspective that the radical transformations undertaken by the Socialist Government are described, sometimes as a disaster and, more rarely, as highly praiseworthy. What is attempted here is a study of the local presence of the State. It

¹ Most recently, Schwab, 1985; Clapham, 1988; Harbeson, 1988.

will be seen that what emerges when policies are perceived from the ground, and from the specific, is different from the national perspective.

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first looks at the post-Revolutionary administrative restructuring of local political, production and consumption systems. Various forms of Associations and Cooperatives organized by the State will be discussed. The second section considers institutions which have been set up to interact with the local community but are placed above and beyond it. These include the ministries, relief and Resettlement projects, and military service. The issue of Villagization is treated, separately, in the following chapter.

I. LOCAL STRUCTURES

In this section, institutions within the Peasants' Association, including the law courts, the Women's Association, the Youth Association and the use of communal labour will be presented. This is followed by a discussion of Producer and Service Cooperatives which were envisaged as becoming larger administrative units than Peasants' Associations.

1. Land Reform and Peasants' Associations

Merét larashu or 'Land to the tiller',¹ was the slogan of student rebels prior to the Revolution. After the *coup d'état*, the implementation of this slogan was the main legitimizing measure undertaken by the Provisional Military Government.²

In 1975, land was declared the property of the Ethiopian people, the size of holdings was restricted, existing forms of land tenure and the hire of labour were abolished. Peasants' Associations were set up to help with the task of land redistribution.

The Land Reform proclamation and implementation was the first fundamental State action which had significant repercussions almost throughout the country. These were far from uniform within one region, let alone cross-nationally, and the literature suggests that the most fundamental changes were manifested in the 'feudal' South

¹ In ox-drawn cultivation, the tiller is universally a male figure, and in Amharic the masculine is used for 'tiller'.

² For the history of land reform in Ethiopia, see Dessalegn Rahmato, 1984; Cohen, 1981 and 1984. For problems with the implementation of the land reform Mengistu Woube, 1986. Also for the situation before the Revolution, Dunning, 1970.

rather than in the 'tributary' North. Everywhere, however, Peasants' Associations created by the Revolutionary Government became the administrative entities which transformed the one-off legitimizing event of the new State into an on-going link between the State and the rural population.

In Gera, the attitudes of Peasants to the Land Reform were mixed. Inevitably, those who lost out were bitter and those who gained, grateful. However, more than a decade after the event, conversations tended to steer towards current arrangements, rather than on what exactly happened during the initial reallocation. Respondents suggested that in the first stage of the reform, land was divided more or less equitably, in terms of the quantity received by a household of a particular size (since the size of land shares was weighted by size of household). However, there were variations in the quality of land received, and those in power ensured that they, their kin, and friends obtained the better fields. Furthermore, over the years, the variations in quality were compounded by variations in quantity. Almost all informants believed that the Peasants' Association leadership with control over reallocations of plots was increasingly nepotistic.

In over a decade, the number of official independent households in Gera has decreased from 438 soon after the land redistribution, to the figure of 423 in 1989. The decrease was explained by household dissolution and Resettlement. Yet the population is a growing one; hardly anybody acknowledges that they have been given additional land since the initial Reform, and there are far less than fifteen examples of recently formed households being given their own lands. Young householders in particular see themselves as casualties of the freeze on land.¹ In addition, although allocations were fixed according to the size of the households at the time of the Reform, most of these households have since expanded or contracted with little subsequent redistribution. The result is that current allocations, even ignoring other irregularities, no longer correlate to need.

The issue of women's access and control over land can be considered as an example of some of the problems. The importance of land rights lies not only in their value as a source of income and an asset, but also as proof of rights to residence and shelter. Some women have visible and direct access to land, and others have no rights. Where they do, these can be either active or latent; they may be held by women as minors or as

¹ Dessalegn Rahmato, 1989: 10.

adults, and even where women have active rights as adults, they may be paying the full tax, half, or, officially, none of it.

The question of who does the ploughing: relative, friend, ex-husband or present husband, will affect the amount of yield and control that the woman will have.¹ Other important variables include whether the woman is living in the area where she has rights to land, or whether she has moved, e.g., through the virilocal form of marriage. Connected with this is the length of her residence in the Peasants' Association, or, if she has left, whether or not she retained links in the area. The longer her connection with the place, the more secure her rights, *ceteri paribus*. The presence of children is also an important consideration, as children often reinforce a woman's rights to a share of the land.

There is thus considerable variation in women's entitlements to land - more so than men's. The categories below list some of the relationships between women and land:

- **Women with complete land use rights.** Many of these are widows who have inherited from their husbands. This land is most likely to be in the same Peasants' Association as the one in which the woman lives, though she might have moved to join the household of an adult child and therefore have less immediate control over the land. Other women in similar positions may be married or single, and will have inherited land from parents or other kin for a number of reasons, such as the departure or death of the initial male land holder.
- **Women who have inherited half shares to land rights.** This is the case for some women who have rights to land with an ex-husband, the land having been officially divided and each partner paying the full tax. The land might be either in the same or in a different location from the woman's present residence and is often ploughed by the woman's present husband who might, or might not, have land rights of his own.
- **Women who have a latent right.** This occurs where a woman has rights to a share of land from her husband should there be a divorce, but, in the meantime, the land remains in the husband's name. This is usually the case if the marriage has been in existence for a number of years, and is always the case if it pre-dates the Revolution.

¹ Women's land is likely to be ploughed after the male plougher's own land and at his convenience, making it more vulnerable to bad timing and hence poor harvests.

The woman thus has potential rights which can be transformed into direct ones in the case of a divorce, providing she can argue her case, or find people to do so.

- **Women with a minor's share.** Young women, who were minors at the time of the Land Reform, might or might not now have an adult share of land with their husbands. In either case they might retain a latent right to a minor's share of land with the household they were living in at the time of the Reform, though this minor latent share might have been lost when the adult share was allocated. The land might or might not be in the same location as their subsequent residence.
- **Women who have no active or latent land rights.** This can be because rights were ignored at the time of the Land Reform, because they were lost along the way, e.g. because the woman left the area, or because she was born after the Land Reform.

The degree of control that women have over land-related production is highly variable and difficult to quantify. Any confusion in terms of men's relationship to land is negligible in comparison. Women's rights cannot be ensured by empty notions of equality, and there is no clear governmental policy to oppose the reinforcing biases inherent in the social structure. This is a result of the absence of a commitment to understanding how gender relations are constructed, and hence how they can be reconstructed.

In pre-Revolutionary Menz, ambilineal descent systems allowed women some rights to land, though in reality these were less likely to be activated than the rights of their male kin. Use of land was thus acquired through descent rather than through marriage. Since the Revolution, though the reality of women's lesser control has not changed, the rights to land use are no longer a simple matter of inheritance. The attitude of the Peasants' Association leadership, descent and marital considerations can all have a bearing on whether and what land a woman can claim rights to.

Beyond the issue of land allocation, the Peasants' Association is conceived of as a mass organization and the primary channel of State administration. In effect, it is a tool of the State over the 'masses' who have little, if any, autonomy through the organization.¹ The leaders of the Associations have a crucial role as the intermediaries between State and society. They organize, among other things, regular

¹ For a development of this criticism, see Dawit Bekele, 1982.

meetings which the heads of households must attend, and which are used to inform members about Government directives. The Peasants' Association leaders moreover represent the State and implement State policies, at the same time as belonging to the society in which they have become powerful.

Corruption and nepotism, illustrated for example in the poems and expressions below, are increasingly visible. This is, perhaps, unavoidable as the initial Revolutionary enthusiasm wanes, and fatigue is felt at having to undertake endless administrative tasks without much acknowledged reward. In Gera, there were also isolated rumours of political rape, i.e., men in the leadership taking advantage of their power to conduct affairs with unwilling women silenced by fear.

ሊቀመንበር፡ ውሻ፡	The Chairman is a dog
ስራስካጅ፡ መጥማጥ፡	The officials filthy
አንደው፡ ለማዳን፡	Just for the role of judgment
ደሰው፡ ገንዘብ፡ መፍጥ፡	The money of people they swallow.

ከረ፡ ዳርጉ፡	Oh the <i>Derg</i> !
እናቱና፡ አባቱ፡	His mother and father
እያስቀረው፡ ነው፡	He is putting to one side [favouring]
ስራስካጅ፡ ኮሚቴው፡	The Executive Committee

[of the Peasants' Association].

'*Zaré merét yekomité new*'.

'Today land belongs to the Committee, i.e.,
the Peasants' Association leadership'.



11 ↑ Meeting of
the Peasants'
Association
Leadership



12 Local police →

In Gera, as elsewhere in the country, the Peasants' Association leadership is made up of local male peasants, predominantly from the richer stratum of the population. There has been little change or rotation in the leadership since the Revolution. Rather, there has been a continuation of a leadership structure based on *balabbat*, 'big men' in the community. The Chairman, now in his mid-forties, was a soldier for a short while, and attended Church School as a young boy. The Secretary, considerably inferior in status, yet the second most important figure in the Association, in his late thirties, has more education, having finished fifth grade. The direct coercion and policing within the community is ensured by the *t'ibbek'a gwad*, the local police. These are trained in the use of firearms by the police force in town. Now, as in the past, military and writing skills are a base to advancement and differentiation within the peasantry.¹

The population as a whole is aware of the hierarchy in position and wealth between themselves and the new leaders, but there has always been a tradition of such a division. The *dej t'inat*, the traditional waiting at the gate to obtain favours, has returned within a new framework and by all accounts with greater force. People express a pragmatic realization that unbalanced patron-client relationships are inevitable. At the same time they fear the repercussions of complaints or disclosures. Discourse about inequality within the community is therefore usually carried out in veiled terms.

All the forms of State action that will be discussed in this chapter are introduced to the community via the Peasants' Association. Regular meetings usually outside the Service Cooperative building, or alternatively adjacent to the Peasants' Association Chairman's home, are the means by which State directives are passed down. Passing on suggestions or complaints from the local community to regional or national State administrators, was almost unheard of. Women (female-heads of households) generally did not take part in any discussion. When I drew this to the attention of one such woman she commented, 'like the other women, I am scared to catch even their eyes [the leadership's], let alone to get up and speak if I have a problem.'

¹ A. Pankhurst, 1989 (b): 306, writing about Resettlement in Welega comments: 'Most of those who obtained key positions in the Peasants' Association knew how to wield either a pen or a gun, preferably both'. For a similar story of the new Socialist peasant leadership in Guinea-Bissau, see Rudebeck, 1988.

According to Reminick¹ the tax people paid in Menz, before the Revolution, was between 1.50 and 4.00 *birr*. Wood² gives similar figures of 1.50 *birr* plus dues and services to village leaders. With the Land Reform, this fee increased to 3 *birr* and then to 7 *birr*. Since then, the payments which the population labels as tax, *gibir*, has increased to 20 *birr*, and then 40 *birr* in 1989, though this figure is divided into different components: land use tax, agricultural income tax and some administrative costs. There are also additional payments for Association membership and donations 'for the motherland' during the famine and for the war effort. The increase can be explained partly by inflation, but for a community with severe constraints on production, and therefore on access to cash, the increases are nevertheless real. In addition, though nominally progressive, the tax is fixed at a single level in most parts of the country, including Menz. Socialism notwithstanding, it is therefore a regressive form of taxation.

2. *Fird shengo*, the law court

One of the structures introduced under the Peasants' Association system is that of the *fird shengo*, the local law courts, used to settle most internal disputes. The Peasants' Association *fird shengo* sends three-monthly reports, and the more grievous cases that it cannot deal with directly, to the *wereda* or *awraja* law courts. In Gera there are officially five members on the *fird shengo*. Of these only one is, in practice, an active judge and he is aided by two 'secretaries'. Once elected, they continue officiating and re-elections are rare occurrences. Though there were suggestions of nepotism among the Peasants' Association leadership, the judge, a fifty year old man of average wealth for the community, was generally regarded as just and impartial.³

There are two branches of Ethiopian law. For cases settled at the local level, the first, concerned with *wenjel*, crime, concerns disputes about insults and stealing of livestock, grain, cattle feed... The second, *fithabihér*, literally 'judgement of people', considers cases in which people have not met a commitment, e.g., have not paid back money or goods borrowed. In Gera more than half the cases tended to be in the first category, the total number seen being about ten a month. Most of these, though by no means all, are

¹ Reminick, 1973: 74.

² Wood, 1983: 529.

³ Significantly the one legal case which occurred during the research period in which foul play was suspected, the Peasants' Association leadership was involved. The case, which involved accusations of murder, was heard by the regional and not the local law courts.

brought by male rather than female litigants, and as we will see in Chapter Nine, there is often the assumption that women need a man to speak for them.¹

The local law courts have been instituted as part of the administrative structures of the new State, and in theory they stand separate from the executive, the Peasants' Association leadership. However, the legitimacy of the courts is linked to that of the Peasants' Association for which the courts act as legal arm. Furthermore, in practice important disputes are likely to go directly to the Association leadership rather than the courts.

If the link with the executive arm is stronger than might be expected, the link with a Christian ideology is even more entrenched. Despite its Revolutionary stance, the local State relies heavily on Christianity in the up-keep of law and order. Thus the oath taken in the local courts is:

ምስክር፡ በተቆጠርን በት፡ ነገር፡	For that to which we have been called as witness,
በእውነት፡ እንመሰክራለን፡	We will give evidence in truth.
በሃሰት፡ ብንመሰክር፡	Should we give evidence falsely,
በሰማይም፡ በምድርም፡	In heaven and on earth too
ክርስቶስ፡ አይለየን፡	May Christ not separate us [forgive us].

The theme of surviving religious ideologies and the use that the Socialist State makes of Christianity will be returned to in Chapter Nine.

Though this is the formal method of resolving disputes, it is a costly one, involving the expense of paper and the initiation of a court case in addition to any reparation fees. Furthermore, and especially given the case in Gera of only one active judge on whom all the burden of legal disputes rests, the procedure is a time-consuming one. Working in parallel with this form of law and order is the much preferred traditional *béte zemed*, 'relatives of the house', used by the law courts themselves in the case of marital transactions. More generally *ch'ewa* or *shimagilléwoch*, elders, are called in to settle disputes. Before there is recourse to any of the above, an even more informal and

¹ In this thesis, there is no separate analysis of legislation with a bearing on the position of women in Ethiopia. Such legislation is only relevant to the urban scene, and even there of symbolic rather than practical value. They include the 45 days paid maternity rights and the Labour Proclamation of equal pay in 1975.

impromptu dispute-settling system is set in motion, in which friends and relatives try to reconcile the disputing parties. As Mammit, an informant, noted wryly:

It is in the interest of those closest to you to settle disputes amicably; the officials, why should they care what decision is made as long as they can move on to the next case?

3. *Sira zemecha*

In the past, peasants were expected to provide tribute to the ruling aristocracy in grain, livestock and in labour. These tributes continue to this day, though the form and the recipients have changed.¹ Contributions of grain to the State at set price occur only rarely in this region. When they are required they are made through the Agricultural Marketing Board, or, as the occasional support for nationwide or local levies and, more regularly, through taxation and membership fees. Much more overwhelming in its continuous impact on local life has been the contributions of labour in the form of *sira zemecha*, working campaigns, or *corvée* labour. These can take place at the national and regional levels, though they mainly consist of the continual use of labour within Peasants' Associations. Any development work requiring labour, such as Villagization, improving water supplies, terracing, tree planting and road-making, is thus made possible by the availability of 'free' labour.

The amount of time that is spent at the Peasants' Association meetings and doing *corvée* labour is greatly resented. People generally encapsulated their attitudes to the work in the term *dingay* (stone), used as shorthand with little need for further explanation. This was because most of the labour involved the transporting and cutting of stones. Standard comments were 'tomorrow is stone again', 'did you do stone?', and the universal complaint 'the stone is killing me'. For a twelve month period my diary gives fifty-eight entries, and average of just under five 'stones' per month, each one usually lasting most of the morning, if not the whole day. The aggregate masks considerable seasonal variations, in 1988, the peak work period was between October and December. This is the slack agricultural period, but time that used to be employed in essential income-earning and maintenance work.

¹ With a few changes, Messing's writings could describe the current situation, 'At any moment, authority could decree that a bridge was to be built, a church to be constructed or repaired, at an appointed time and place. Thereupon every *gabbar* [peasant] would have to appear, carrying his own tools, to work under the direction of the feudal officer, governor or his lieutenants. Heavy fines punish failure to appear for this labour.' 1957: 240.

The activities undertaken were almost always a response to policies from outside and above, even if the product was envisaged for the community. Thus, most of the labour was part of the food-for-work relief scheme through which development programmes were undertaken, mostly within the area. This included reconstructing the road, which had been washed away during the rainy season, levelling a runway used by the Baptist mission for the distribution of aid to Gishe, tree planting and working on a number of water points under the aegis of a UNICEF programme. A number of wells were constructed, using cement moulds, one working with a tap, another with a pump. Time and effort was also spent on the construction of the new Villagized huts, and towards the end of my stay a school was under construction.

Much of the work was in fact developmental in nature, with results that the community appreciated. The level of antagonism to the time and work was therefore puzzling. During the fieldwork I never confronted anybody with this directly though I remember wondering about the considerable disjunction between an appreciation of some of their products and a constant refrain against the labour that made them possible. The resentment was always there, ready to resurface.

In retrospect there are several points to be made. The first is that the communal labour involved a considerable amount of waiting around until everybody was gathered together, or until the Chairman and other officials decided to start the work. It also involved being counted 'like sheep' and registered; having to justify absences and, in general, being at the beck and call of the leadership. Meetings and work were held at the behest of the leadership, inevitably the time chosen was inconvenient and a disruption to some of the population. Furthermore, time and energy had to be spent on the *sira zemecha* when people wanted to get on with their own lives. The occasional non-attendance would not be punished if a good reason was offered, however, repeated absences would incur a fine. Thus, because of the binding context within which the work was being undertaken, the value of the product for which they were slaving (i.e., the purpose of the labour), was forgotten, even when the community accepted its probable usefulness. The dislike was inevitably increased when the product itself was resented or irrelevant to the community. By and large, this was, as we shall see, the attitude towards construction of the planned village.



4. The Women's Association

The Revolutionary Women's Association of Ethiopia (REWA), established in 1980, is a nationwide organization with the stated aim of enhancing the political and economic position of women.¹ The rationale for the setting up of such an organization lies in the way that the Socialist ideology acknowledges the need for women's emancipation. However, it is also clear that the logic inherent in setting up such an organization also includes other considerations. The Women's Association, like the other Associations set up to organize formally unpoliticized groups, could at the level of rhetoric, widen the basis of power and decrease the relative importance of the former holders of authority. As we shall see, in practice this Association, like the Youth Association, operates only at the level of rhetoric because of the lack of real power vested in it. The Women's Association acts as a magnet to which all issues regarding gender can be attracted, out of the central political domain. Once so attracted, such issues are left aside, because of lack of clout and the administrative inefficiency of the organization.

The Association has branches at all levels from the national to that of the individual Peasants' Association. The membership is supposed to embrace all adult women. In 1989 Gera had 371 members, less than one woman per household.² Once a woman joins she is obliged to continue payment, though because of mobility, inefficiency or nepotism, a few women escape membership. At first, payment was made on a monthly basis, but it is now collected annually and amounts to three *birr* per annum, having increased from an initial annual contribution of 1.80 *birr*. This payment, together with all others introduced since the Revolution, is usually made by the male head of household, and, within the household, is not considered women's responsibility. Thus, just like the Youth or the Peasants' Association payments, the funds have to be found by the household; and the individual member is not considered solely responsible. In theory, half of the subscription money is then used in the community, the remainder being sent to the regional capital, Mehal Meda, or beyond.

According to the official propaganda, the objectives of REWA are listed as follows:³

- To propagate to women the theory of scientific socialism with a view to raising their political consciousness and cultural standards;

¹ For comparative data on the position of women *vis-à-vis* the State see, Afshar, ed., 1987.

² Compared with 423 household members in the Peasants' Association.

³ Ethiopia, Revolutionary Ethiopia Women's Association, 1982:25-26.

- To prepare women to occupy their appropriate position in society and to make active participation in productive social activities;
- To make every effort to ensure that the right of women as mothers is recognized and they, as well as their children, are well cared for;
- To liberate women from political, economic and social dependence and prepare them to join hands with their class allies and fully participate in the struggle to build socialist Ethiopia.

At the local level these words translate into a number of practical repercussions. Membership of the Women's Association is, in theory, used by women as proof of residence in a Peasants' Association. In fact, the system of identity cards is well established for Peasants' Association membership, and to a lesser extent for Youth Association membership, but has still not reached most parts of Menz in the case of membership of Women's Associations. Though in lieu of an identity card the Women's Association leadership could provide a paper confirming residence, this never occurs. If a letter is required, for example because a woman wants to travel and needs personal documentation, then the Peasants' Association leadership is more likely to be asked.

The fact that the Women's Associations do not function well also affects women's entitlements to land. The theory is that when a woman leaves her Peasants' Association for another, at the time of marriage for example, she is given proof of her initial residence, and any rights she has had there are transferred to her new location. Thus, land rights can be transferred from one Peasants' Association to another. In practice, once again, any such transfer occurs through the Peasants' Association leadership and not through the Women's Association structure. Furthermore, the absence of a clear policy results in women having very tenuous rights to land. Zewdé is an example of a woman's inability to activate her rights:

Zewdé tried to avoid paying the three *birr* Women's Association membership fee on the grounds that she was not given any land when she came here, so she should not have to pay as if she were a resident. The Women's Association leadership sued her for not paying, using the local law courts, the *fird shengo*. The judge decided that she had to pay, saying that Women's Association membership was nothing to do with rights to land and that she or her husband should put their complaint about not getting land to the Peasants' Association leadership. Zewdé's husband had tried doing so several times over the last two years, but without success.

Documented membership is the channel through which wealth (land, relief...) is distributed. In effect, for women, the link through the movement of resources and citizenship is restricted because most of them are not direct members of a Peasants'

Association and the indirect channel, the Women's Associations, does not function effectively. This situation provides a clear example of the State's bias towards a view of the household in terms of a single, male, household head. Since, by definition, household structures are complex and fluid, the straight-jacket cannot be made to fit and a token and inoperative measure is introduced to deal with women and mobility.

The outlook when it comes to the 'raising consciousness' or educational side of the Association is equally unsatisfactory. In Gera there have been no general meetings. There have, however, been training schemes for selected women. One woman was trained to make earth-based seats for the village. She built two, but then gave up because she had other things to do with her time, and people were not particularly interested in the kind of seats she had been taught to make. The same woman went on a training programme with classes in nutrition and a pottery-making course in Holeta, not far from Addis Ababa. She felt she had learnt something from the visit, through the experience of travel rather than anything else, and has not made use of her pottery skills because she does not want to be looked down upon as a lowly artisan. Another woman was trained in midwifery, but left when she got married to someone outside the Peasants' Association.

A few years ago, money from the portion of the Women's Association membership fee retained over the years for use within the community was used to buy a sewing machine. A woman was trained to use it, but never put her training to use. Although averse to it, she had been chosen for the project by the Peasants' Association. By the time I came to the village she had a young child. This gave her an excuse not to try using her skills, and she told me that she had forgotten most of what she had learnt. The machine, however, is currently generating an income, as it is rented at 15 *birr* a month to a man who sews clothes at a somewhat cheaper rate than at Mehal Meda and is thus an asset to the community. I was told that the money collected from the rent is used when demands for money come from the national or regional branches of the Women's Association.

During the period of research, the following activities were also undertaken by the Women's Association:

- For a number of years, there has been an attempt to raise money by growing garlic on a plot of land not far from the river. This involves women's labour on a few days: planting one day, weeding once or twice, watering slightly more often, and then

gathering the crop. In 1988, approximately 8,000 garlic bulbs were harvested and sold in the Peasants' Association. It was, however, difficult to escape noticing that the women were not interested, a reaction similar to that already described in the section on *sira zemecha*, the *corvée* labour. The planting was not repeated in 1989.

- For the anniversary of the Revolution, in September, the Peasants' Association Chairman encouraged all able persons to attend the ceremony in Mehal Meda, and the fifty or so women who turned up formed a separate line, as the Women's Association contingent.
- The Women's Association officials in the village occasionally receive letters from the regional Women's Association leadership in Mehal Meda. These sometimes direct the local Association to celebrate International Women's day in March, or some other such event. The messages were usually not understood, and tend to be ignored.
- When youths were selected for military service, the Women's Association officials were asked to arrange for some food to be brought to them for a couple of days. To do this, the Women's Association leadership met and, through the Peasants' Association leadership, demanded that each household contribute some food. This system had been in place for a number of years.
- During the period of fieldwork the only time there was an attempt to bring all the women together was to pay their contributions, and even this was disorganized and stretched over several months, many people having failed to appear.

In Gera, as in most other Peasants' Associations, the Women's Association is run mainly by women in female-headed households with land rights in their own name who were born and have remained in the area. In terms of wealth they are not as much above the average as is the case of the Peasants' Association leadership, though the Chairwoman of the Women's Association, now in her fifties, is the daughter of a former rich landlord, and her son is the Chairman of the Service Cooperative. Unlike the rest of the leadership, which is illiterate, the Secretary successfully finished the fourth grade before giving up school. Over the years, there has been little change in the leadership which was chosen initially in a meeting called by the Peasants' Association. It would seem that this ossification is not because the women have any vested interest in their status, but because the concept of re-elections is alien and

because there are no other candidates willing to take on the job of liaising with the regional organization.

In general, unlike the Peasant's Association structure which has an enforcement arm, the Women's Association has no direct way of commanding people, except by appealing to the Peasants' Association leadership or to the local law courts. The head of the Women's Association needs to ask the Chair of the Peasants' Association to organize payment or to hold other meetings, as she has no direct legitimacy.

More immediately worrying is the fact that the main activity in which the organization shows some efficiency and conviction is the extraction of the obligatory annual membership cost. Most of the other projects are rarely carried through and there is therefore little feedback to the particular society. In more than a decade, the garlic and sewing ventures were the only schemes with some benefit to the community, and at an outflow of over 10,000 *birr*.¹ The rest of the money was 'donated' to State ventures, used in Women's Association schemes at the district and regional levels,² and some was kept in a bank in town. In addition, some money was undoubtedly released to work in the form of corruption. Given such a record, it is easy to sympathize with the standard comment: 'Oh, for us, it is just another expense, there are no benefits'. The element of coercion, and the form in which policies were conceived and brought in from outside, work against local interest. In other words, not only is the Women's Association not perceived as a channel of support to women in the community, but it is equated with one of the organs of State oppression. Attitudes to the Youth Association are not dissimilar.

These findings are depressing, but are they inevitable? Why cannot the Women's Association structure provide the potential for improving the lives of women? It has, after all, a nationwide remit, and, as stated in its pamphlets, exists for the social, economic and political advancement of women. Turning to the literature, it is clear that in China, at least, the Women's Federation set up by the State in the early years of the Revolution made a positive contribution. It campaigned to provide younger generation

¹ The figure is for the total contributions since the Women's Association was set up. It includes the initial two years, payment at 1.80 *birr* per person, and the remainder at 3.00 *birr* per person; the population is estimated at 375. The total figures do not include the rent derived from the sewing machine, nor costs incurred by the ministries for the training.

² This is so in rural Menz as a whole. In the towns, there is more going on. In Mehal Meda, a cafeteria and a bakery are run by the Women's Association.

women with an independent income and gave them powerful support against family and kin in their attempt to break such traditions as early arranged marriages.¹

However, in a comparative survey of the position of women in Socialist countries Molyneux² has shed doubt on the possible emancipatory value of State organized Women's Associations. She suggests that they tend to reproduce the official policy, reinforcing the ideology based on class struggle. Where they do touch on issues pertinent to women in particular, they tend to reinforce gender stereotypes as well as diverting women from demanding fundamental change. This might well be the case at the national level in Ethiopia and in some ways applies also to the situation as observed from the local level. As seen earlier, the Association in Gera has no political power - it is a front, a pretence used to portray an image of gender consciousness. The activities it undertakes are rarely geared to the interests of the community, let alone to the specific needs of women.

I would argue that the failure of Women's Associations in Ethiopia is not a result of a misconception of gender issues, nor a fear of women's emancipation. The Ethiopian Women's Association never got far enough to challenge and hence threaten patriarchy or the primacy of class-struggle. The failure of the Women's Associations is essentially an administrative one, paralleling the failures of the Youth Associations and even Producer Cooperatives. The absence of an understanding of how to act towards women's emancipation is part of governmental mismanagement. The administrative problem results in part from the failure to understand the society and social responses to imposed change, and in part from the intractable problems of planning and execution at both local and national levels.

5. Youth Association

The nationwide Revolutionary Ethiopia Youth Association was formed in 1980. By 1981 there were 182 rural and 4 urban Youth Associations in Menz, with a total population of 23,734 of which 17% were women. By 1988, there were 43,946 members, an increase of 85%, in membership, of whom 31% were women. The data for Gera shows a membership of 210 in 1980, increasing to 403 in 1988. Much of the increase seems to be

¹ Croll, 1981 (a), 1983, 1985.

² Molyneux, 1981, 1985; see also Urdang, 1984. For contradictions in Women's Associations in a non-Socialist framework in the case of Kenya, see also Wipper, 1975.

accounted for by greater female participation, from 25 in 1980 to 145 in 1988. It would seem likely that this development resulted from a change of policy, probably in the form of directives from the national body alerting regional ones to the bias in figures. There is no simple definition of who should be considered a 'youth', since there are some people over 40 years old who pay, and others in the 15-30 age range who do not. The only obvious pattern is, once again, the attempt to ensure that no more than one person contributes in each household.

People's reactions to the Youth Association are similar to those towards the Women's Association. At an annual cost of 3 *birr* for a head of household and 1.20 *birr* for dependents, the Association is perceived of as just another form of tax. The organization had achieved little. In the past, its members had paraded in Mehal Meda on Revolution Day and this involved making a uniform and teaching people to march to music. No other activity was drawn to my attention; the Association appears even less active than the Women's Association. This probably reflects the notion of the greater importance of women as a category with more distinct needs than those of young people; alternatively, there may be a feeling that youth are already accessible to the State through the provision of education and military service, discussed later in this chapter.

6. Producer Cooperative/State farm

At the time of the Land Reform, State farms were established to take over large commercial farms where these were in existence. Since there were no such farms in Menz, there are likewise no State farms. Producer Cooperatives are rural production cooperatives, in which the means of production are held communally rather than privately. Three stages of cooperation are envisaged: *melba*, *welba* and *weland*, representing progressive increases in the extent to which the means of production are held communally, the last stage involving a larger-scale of operation and the inclusion of livestock in as a socialized resource.¹ In theory the Producer Cooperatives eventually supersede Peasants' Associations as the institutions with which the State interacts. The setting up of Producer Cooperatives is voluntary, those willing to join being given encouragements of various kinds, including better land and preferential access to State inputs and extension services.

¹ See Tegegne Teka, 1988. Poluha, 1987, 1988, 1989.

Menz has been none too enthusiastic about setting up Producer Cooperatives. Contrast the official view of the idea with the local one, both given below.

The official view, in a song taught at school

አራሹ፡ ገበሬ፡	The ploughing farmer,
አዎራቹ፡ ገበሬ፡	The Cooperative farmer,
ሶሻል፡ ኢትዮጵያን፡	Socialist Ethiopia
ይገነባል፡ ዛሬ፡	Is building today;
በዎድር፡ ቢሸከርከፈ፡	If they turn on the ground,
በሰማይም፡ ቢበፈ፡	Or flie in the air,
አንተነህ፡ ገበሬ፡	You are the farmer,
ዋልታና፡ ዋገፈ፡	The lynchpin that holds us together! ¹

The local version.

A hyena, a cat, a stork and a pheasant bought an ox jointly. They took turns minding it. When it came to the turn of the hyena, he took the ox and ate it. As the hyena was eating, the stork saw him and returned quickly to tell the others. The cat and the pheasant lamented at the news. When they went to look, they found the hyena finishing his meal. It was the end of the cooperative venture, the wealth of the four was thus consumed by the one.

In 1989, there were nine Producer Cooperatives in Menz, four of these in Antsokia, the remainder in Keya Gebriel and Lalo *wereda*. In total, there were only 269 household members, cultivating 836 hectares between them. The Producer Cooperative members are 0.4% of the total rural household population in Menz and Gishe *awraja*. This compares with the national average of more than seven times this figure.²

Producer Cooperatives in the whole of Ethiopia allocate an 'income' to their members based on a work-points system. In general, the head of the household works to earn these work-points. The head of household is usually a man, the proportion of female-headed households in Producer Cooperatives being lower than that in the country as a whole. The consequence is that many women, more than in the overall peasant population, are dependent on men for their access to resources. More generally, women's contributions to the household and to the community are not valued, since they are not

¹ Literally the last line refers to *walta*, the central pole in the hut from which the roof is constructed and *mager*, the bark or rope with which the thatch is held together.

² Based on the figure of 601,55 rural households from the regional Peasants' Association office.

allocated points for activities which are necessary to the society.¹ Furthermore, those women who are heads of households, or who manage to gain work-points as an additional member of the household, are likely to be rewarded with fewer points per unit of labour time, since physical strength, skill, contribution to 'production', educational background, and military prowess are the major criteria employed in the scale allocating points to different tasks.²

Looking beyond Ethiopia, the general history of cooperatives is one of disasters, especially where Cooperativization is a response to a State initiative rather than one born from within the dynamics of the community.³ In Ethiopia, not only was the 'Cooperativization' call taken up only by a small minority, but the stories circulating by the end of 1989 were that an increasing number of those Producer Cooperatives that had been formed were suffering from internal feuds. Some were even disbanding and returning to peasant production systems.⁴ In March 1990, de-Cooperativization was officially sanctioned (see Epilogue).

7. Service Cooperative

Service Cooperatives, *agelilot*, provide a vehicle for bringing infrastructure and services into rural communities. Through a nationwide Government organization, the Ethiopian Domestic Distribution Corporation, Service Cooperatives are provided with goods allocated on a rationed, fixed-price distribution system. In theory, the Service Cooperatives can procure crop extension services; market the produce of their members

¹ Mengistu Woube, 1986: 115, thought that Producer Cooperatives would contribute to female emancipation, because land was no longer privately held by men. The situation, however, is that land is now communally held *by men*. Also, in terms of work patterns, Poluha, 1989: 162, writes 'The producer cooperative can be interpreted as a reorganization of male activities which in no way directly affected female tasks.' For a similar story from Welega, see A. Pankhurst (b), 1989.

² For similarities with the Chinese experience of discrimination in work-points, see Stacy, 1979: 328, Diamond, 1975: 388.

³ Hedlund, ed. 1988; Worsley, ed. 1971: 23-38.

⁴ In one Peasants' Association in Arsi, the following parable is said to have been used by the elders to explain their decision to the officials from Addis Ababa. 'Once a upon a time a hare came upon an elephant. "My friend", said the hare, 'why are you eating this poor grass when there are fertile lands beyond. Come with me and I will show you places where you can eat until you say 'enough". Hearing these words the elephant was tempted, his pasture was indeed very poor, yes, he would go to better lands. So the elephant accompanied the hare. He walked on and on, following the hare, day after day, month after month, scrounging the most meagre of meals on the way, getting thinner and hungrier all the time. At last the elephant, hungry and exhausted stopped. 'Friend', he said to the hare, 'I cannot go any further. I know that there are richer lands beyond but getting to these places is killing me. That's it. I would rather return to the grass I left behind.'

as well as import produce from outside the region and the country; give loans; provide storage, milling and craft facilities. They can also be used to collect contributions required of the population by the Government. Membership is by household and is voluntary, the use of some of the facilities being denied to those who have not paid their membership fee. The extractive arm of the Association was the enforced sale by Peasants' Association members to Service Cooperatives of a quota of grain at State prices. This affects the whole population irrespective of membership. A policy change was declared in March 1990 to alter this, and according to the new policy, the Agricultural Marketing Board now has to buy on the open market with the result that grain prices are rising.

In Menz as a whole there were 50 Service Cooperatives by 1989, out of which 14 were in Gera Midir. In total, 203 out of the 206 Peasants' Associations in Menz had access to Service Cooperatives and, on average, four Peasants' Associations shared one.¹ The Service Cooperative used by Gera joins two other Peasants' Associations. In 1988 it had a membership of 824 households, about two-thirds of the total households in the area. Of the Service Cooperative members, 75 were female registered. The Cooperative was estimated, by the Ministry of Agriculture, to have a capital of 103,692 *birr*. Nominally, the Cooperative is run by a Committee of twenty-four, though in fact a smaller number are actively involved.

Of all the structures provided by the Government, the Service Cooperative is probably the most popular both in Menz and more generally throughout Ethiopia. This is because it provides a mill and a few goods more cheaply than any alternative, which are usually located in towns. The shops are valued because they sell salt (a basic good), and sugar (a luxury), at almost half the market price. Distribution of the scarce goods occurs on a quota basis whenever they are brought in, theoretically once a month, in practice much less regularly. When made available the ration is usually about 1.5

¹ The figure given by the Ministry of Agriculture on households having access to Service Cooperatives is 51,434; 14% of these are female, marginally lower than the percentage of female membership in Peasants' Association. This is probably because many female headed households are often amongst the poorest and therefore the least likely to afford the initial costs of joining, though see Chapter Eight for differences within the category of female-headed households.

kilograms of salt and 1 kilogram of sugar per household. Distribution is regulated by records in a booklet, though preferential treatment and misappropriation are common.¹

The mill is highly appreciated, but is out of order about half the time, either because of mechanical failure or because it runs out of diesel. Inefficiency, particularly with accounting and transport, is a major problem for the Cooperative. The stores for the Service Cooperative are usually empty, though at least the space is available when required. The problem of corruption also plagues the mills attached to the Service Cooperatives. In Gera more than 28,000 *birr* have 'gone missing', the leadership is highly distrusted and the patronage networks are sources of budding social stratification.

In much of Ethiopia, the value to the society of provisions made possible by the Service Cooperative has, to date, been dampened by its role in forcing people to contribute a quota of grain at official fixed prices, invariably below market prices. This system provides the State with a marketable source of agricultural produce which it can extract from households otherwise not involved with the State in terms of both production and consumption. In Menz, the Agricultural Marketing Corporation keeps a very low profile because of the acknowledged poverty of the area, and the series of bad harvests that it has recently experienced. For example in Gera, contributions have been requested only occasionally. In 1989 I was told by the Peasants' Association leadership that 72 quintals were demanded, i.e., 17 kilograms per household. Even then, this particular Peasants' Association cushioned the extraction from each household by using the harvest from communal lands² to fill the quota, rather than by asking individuals to contribute from their own supplies.

¹ Diary note: 'Went to visit the *Agelilot* [Service Cooperative] shop for the first time. It sells boots, razors, matches, pens, note-books, soap, 2 umbrellas hanging from the ceiling, a few sheets of corrugated iron. People were buying note-books (for the new school year) and soap which has just come in. No salt or sugar. Queues. Preferential treatment for scarce goods which are kept aside. I was told I could probably get salt if I asked. Booklet system with the rationed goods is a sham.'

² Gera, according to the Peasants' Association leadership, has about 70 hectares of communal land and 500 of private land, see Chapter Three.

II. EXTENSION AND EXTRACTION

In this section the extent of penetration by the Ministries of Agriculture, Health and Education will be considered in turn. The first two ministries will be treated very briefly, since in practice, they impinge only occasionally, whereas the more visible literacy and school provisions will be discussed more fully. This is followed by a review of relief and Resettlement programmes as they have occurred, and as they are perceived. Finally, the discussion turns to the burden of military service.

1. Ministry of Agriculture and Ministry of Health

The Ministry of Agriculture is involved in development schemes in agriculture and livestock improvement, afforestation and nominally in 'home economics', (a term used to apply to women's role in processing). The Ministry also collects statistics.¹ Aid agencies involved in various relief schemes often liaise with it. More often than not, campaigns or new policies launched by the central Government are implemented through this Ministry. Thus, Land Reform, the setting up of the different forms of Associations, Cooperatives and Villagization have all been channelled through it. Officials are all located in town, tending to call for the Peasants' Association leadership whenever there is any need for policy implementation. The Ministry has a wide range of responsibilities and is undoubtedly over-stretched; the peasants themselves having little direct contact, and therefore little to say about it.

The Ministry of Health has a very low profile, even compared with the Ministry of Agriculture. We shall see, in Chapter Five, how little contact people have with health services, even when it comes to mother and infant care. In all there are eleven clinics or health stations in Menz, most of them located in the towns. From these bases, nurses tend to make occasional forays into the rural areas. Complaints from those working in these clinics include shortages of personnel and insufficient medicine. There

¹ Respondents are often not told for what particular reason they are requested to take part in a questionnaire. After the event, rumours compete with each other. In one case, a Ministry of Agriculture/UNICEF questionnaire, which was aimed at an assessment of conditions subsequent to the setting up of improved water facilities, included questions about the kind of bed people slept on. One of the most humorous accounts was that people were going to be given cotton mattresses, and people joked about what they would use these for. More seriously, however, I became very conscious both of how much of an intrusion the questions could be and how poor the data collected in this way usually was.

are no facilities for any type of operation in Menz, and serious cases are always referred to the regional capital at Debre Birhan, some five hours away by bus, or directly to Addis Ababa, though even in these larger centres, the hospitals are suffering acutely from medical shortages. More impressive in terms of direct action in the area are the activities of the non-governmental organization ALERT, which focuses exclusively on leprosy, and over the years has made a concerted effort at reaching even the most isolated areas, and to keep track of their patients.

People in Menz remember with affection an American Baptist doctor and his family who lived and worked in the area in the 'sixties. The legend of his ability to cure was passed on to younger generations. There was also talk about the clinic in Mehal Meda being upgraded to a hospital by the aid agency, Médecins du Monde. This is not to say that suspicion over non-local 'modern' medicines does not exist, but rather that people believe in it as an alternative or an additional option to traditional cures.

2. Ministry of Education: literacy and schools

Literacy and education have been seen as one of the corner stones of the Revolution, even winning international recognition with the UNESCO literacy prize in 1980. In 1970 the illiteracy rate for those ten years of age or older was estimated to be 87% for the nation as a whole and even higher for the rural population. By 1983 this had been reduced to 45%. The literacy programme uses 15 languages and involves the whole population, irrespective of age.

Overall, the achievements have been substantial, yet there remain regions in which even the most elementary level of literacy - the ability to spell one's name - is the exception. Menz is one of these areas. Even nationwide, the initial impetus, the glorified campaign, seems to have simmered down to a lower profile with little follow-up to keep illiteracy permanently at bay. Ten years after the start of the Literacy Campaign, the situation remains depressing. Most people in Menz still resort to what they see as the degrading strategy of thumb prints in order to sign, and require help in reading or writing.

An education within the school system still involves only a minority of the population, and is more of an urban than a rural phenomenon. However, because of the growing population, finding jobs for those who do go through the educational system is becoming an increasing burden for the Government. In view of the high expectations and the need

to provide an income for those who are educated, the State cannot afford to raise the number of those with such expectations and incomes. Educational success is prized, to a great extent, as a way out of agriculture and into a secure job. The system is competitive to the extreme, a situation which seems to work against the attempt to instil a Cooperative Socialist ideology.¹

In terms of the household, educating an offspring implies forgoing that child's labour; on the other hand, the rewards lie in the distant and uncertain future. No household educates all its children, though on the other hand, it is usual to find at least one child who has, at some stage, followed literacy classes and sometimes entered the school system.

The scenario presented so far is, once again, a negative one, and yet there are positive things to be said. For those who have been educated and remain in their rural communities, there are increasing possibilities to use the education received both for personal advancement and/or for the community. Several of the activities undertaken by educated individuals are part of the State's administrative apparatus; thus, secretaries of the various association, and cooperatives, have usually had several years' schooling. However, even structures outside the State's sphere of influence increasingly, though still only rarely, make use of educated people. To give but one example, an *iddir*, a Burial Association formed recently in Gera, works on an accounting system in which members and their contributions are recorded by a literate member.

- **Literacy**

So far the discussion on literacy and education has been conducted at a general abstract level which needs to be made more concrete. In Gera, the National Literacy Campaigns² take place inside huts with mud-based benches, in three sites, the last one located near the new village by the administrative centre. There are two literacy rounds per year, each lasting five months. In 1989, the Campaign had reached its twenty-first round.³ Classes take place in the morning from 7 to 9 a.m., and in the afternoon from 1 to 3 p.m. They are mainly attended by children. At present there are 141 students at the village site, around 300 students being registered in total in the

¹ For a similar contradiction see Mbilinyi, 1979: 226.

² See Sjostrom, 1983, 1986.

³ In 1989, by the time I left the village, in the last week of July, classes had not started in Gera, although they should have begun two months earlier.

three locations. In the village site, where casual attendance is included, 76 adults and 66 children have been registered.¹ Only approximately twenty percent of these students attend regularly, most of them young children, and of the adults, most are women. Each session is divided into two groups in a hut partitioned into two by a low mud wall. The larger group learns the alphabet, while the smaller moves on to such subjects as arithmetic, health and 'politics'. There is also a third, higher level group which is supposed to attend on Thursdays and Sundays but rarely does so.

In the early literacy rounds there was a system of fines for non-attendance. These are still theoretically operative, but are not levied in practice. The equipment available to the teachers consists of a couple of blackboards, chalk, an poster displaying the characters of the Ethiopian alphabet, and a few other teaching manuals. The students buy their own notebooks and pens. There is no other direct cost of attendance, though one *birr* of the annual Peasants' association membership fee is said to be allocated for the Literacy Campaign.

The teachers, all men, are local peasants with some education. For example, the teacher at the village site had finished fourth grade, and the other teachers in the Peasants' Association have similar qualifications. In return for this service to the community, they tend to be exempt from the *sira zemecha* work campaigns, and the Peasants' Association leadership ensures that they are lent an ox in times of difficulty, or given help with such tasks as the pounding of their grain. Occasionally they are assisted by a twelfth grade student sent by the Ministry of Education. The student is given a salary of 60 *birr* a month, and, with two days' training, is sent out to help. One such student, the son of a neighbouring Peasants' Association Chairman, arrived for a month during the period of fieldwork. In Gera, external input into the Literacy Campaign in the form of administrative help or temporary involvement of students from outside the community has been rare.

The overall attitude towards the Literacy Campaign seems to be one of good will. The value of education is not challenged, nor is it seen purely as a political tool of the Government. The results are, however, disappointing. Most of the population remains illiterate, or at best only able to spell out an inaccurate version of their names. Reasons for this failure amongst the elderly are sickness, poor eye-sight and old age itself. Men comment on the lack of time and illness, adding frequently 'there is no point, it does not

¹ See data in Appendix B, village literact site.

enter', 'we just don't understand'. Women mention pregnancy and *mech'atinnet*, infant-care, which interrupts attendance. The reasons given for children's absenteeism are ill health and the extreme cold which keeps them huddled at home in the mornings, whilst during the day, they are engaged in minding livestock. The comment is often made that some people knew 'a bit' and then forgot. The problems of follow-up and the provision of post-literacy literature are therefore major ones.

- **School**

In February 1989, Gera competed successfully against a nearby Peasants' Association to have a school built on its grounds. Construction had begun on a primary school some fifteen minutes' walk from the village. The work was supervised by four men who were paid from funds accumulated for the purpose by withholding one month's instalment of aid.¹ Until 1990 most of the children attending school went first to a Peasants' Association primary school built with Swedish funds, over an hour's walk from Gera. A small number of children attend the Government-built primary school in an adjacent Association slightly further away. A few students continued beyond sixth grade by going to town. In 1989 there were in total 6 students from Gera in the Government-built school, 9 in the Swedish-financed school, and 22 in town. As in other parts of the country, the gender difference in attendance becomes increasingly marked as the students rise in the educational ladder. Students who do go to school tend to skip the first year, learning the equivalent at literacy classes.²

Non-attendance at school is partly due to financial problems. The cost, which has to be found in cash, increases from two *birr* per annum in first grade to about eleven *birr* in twelfth grade. Children occasionally contribute to this money through their own schemes, for example, by selling eggs. The cash constraint is a problem for the children at the beginning of the year when many parents, though theoretically in favour of their child being educated, find themselves hard up and are reluctant to part with the money required. In fact, for this and for other reasons connected with the harvest, schools rarely start in earnest in September. Instead, increasing numbers of children drift to school in the course of the first month. More important as a deterrent to school-going in the long-run is the opportunity cost, the loss of contributions to the pool of

¹ A minimal amount of grain was distributed that month. See section on Relief further on in this chapter.

² See Table III in Appendix B for break-down of figures on school attendance.

household labour resulting from school attendance. Finally, the comment is often made that 'we have yet to wake up', expressing a consciousness that education is a good thing, a means towards development, but that individual households do not have the determination or energy to make sacrifices for it.

Appendix B provides some data on the school nearest to Gera. It shows that the majority of students are boys. The total percentage of female attendance, 35%, is not as low as might be expected, although female attendance falls to 8% in sixth grade, the highest primary class. The reasons for the surprisingly high figures for female students in the primary school are peculiar to the time at which the questionnaire was administered, when there was a fear of military service round-ups of boys which had taken place in schools leaving a high percentage of girls in attendance. Female attendance in secondary school falls off very quickly.

Overall, the age range of the students in the primary school varied from seven to twenty-two, and the average was fourteen. This is likely to be significantly higher than the ages of students in towns. Age itself becomes a reason why most students do not continue their education beyond primary level.¹

In answer to the question, 'Why do you come to school?' most gave the answer 'for knowledge' or 'to learn'. Others added 'to help my family' or 'my country', and some specified, 'to find a job'. Another common answer was to learn about cleanliness, *nits'ihinna*. This was because of the scientific explanations for germs and diseases which they learned at school, together with the lessons about the way of combating these, in the form of improved hygiene. To the question 'What do you want to do in the future?', most mentioned continuing their studies and 66% wanted to become teachers. The next most popular ambition was to become a pilot, 10%. Of those questioned, 5% wanted an office job and the same number aspired to become doctors. Other careers mentioned were car or bus driving and one boy said he wanted to become the *awraja astedadari*, the regional administrator.

¹ In the primary school, age was accounted for by interruptions and a late start in schooling. In addition, 36% of the children had repeated at least one year.



13, 14 ↑ Literacy →



15, 16 ↑ School →



The answers point to the desire to move away from agriculture, and the importance of role models. The students came from peasant households and were aspiring beyond the 'peasant' life. The most contact that they had with people in the 'modern' sector was with teachers, and particularly for girls, this was almost their only model. The school lies above the flight path of planes flying from Mehal Meda to Gische with grain deliveries for the Baptist mission, hence the knowledge about planes, and pilots. The children would have seen car and bus drivers in the region's capital, Mehal Meda, and for a peasant child these were the high prestige, modern alternatives that they dreamt about. Finally, the regional administrator comes from the region and grew up in the countryside, and therefore provided a role model for the boy.

More than 65% of the students specified that they wanted to live only in a town, many of them wanting to go to Addis Ababa. A few other students did not mind whether it was in town or country, some of these arguing that it depended on where they found a job. A number of the children specified a region, Menz and Gische, Eritrea, and one student had set his sights at going 'abroad'.

3. Relief

Beigiziyabhérinna bemengist new minninnorew

'We are living by [thanks to] God and the Government'

The situation of drought, poverty and recurrent famine has already been touched upon in the previous chapter, here the discussion will centre on the famine relief projects. In Menz, there were stories of some aid being distributed before the Revolution. However, it is only in the last few years that aid donations have become part of the scene. In Menz, monthly rations began to be distributed soon after the Resettlement Campaign in 1985. Recently some credit schemes, such as loans to buy oxen with, have also been introduced.

Viewing distributions from the eyes of the population, there is an arbitrariness about who receives relief, and both when and what supplies are given to those selected. Sometimes the donations are perceived as free, at other times work has to be done in exchange for the goods. Sometimes it is money that is given (and this is by far the favourite form of contribution), sometimes it is grain of various kinds and quantity, and occasionally additional goods, such as oil or even clothes. The result of not knowing

whether a family will receive assistance, and if so, when or how much, contributes to the insecurity in people's lives and to difficulties in planning.

Yet the relief is greatly appreciated. At the best of times in terms of quantity, the donations are able to feed the household for one to two weeks in the month. It is the first mentioned, indeed the main contribution from *mengist* 'Government' that is valued. People use expressions like, 'That is why we are still standing', '*Yederg dabbo*', the bread of the *Derg* [The Provisional Military Government].¹ Appreciation of the relief was, however, tinged with a sense of the futility of the fight, for, as one woman put it, 'What is the use, we get aid all year, but it does not help us for tomorrow, it does not pull us out of poverty.'

A study² of aid distribution in different parts of the country found that corruption was particularly high in Menz. During my fieldwork period I often heard complaints such as: *belayé sew ch'emmerubign*, 'they added someone on top of me.' It was never clear to me, however, whether what was happening was actual corruption or whether people were expressing the confusion they felt about the distributions. These varied with time, condition and amount with different suppliers and distributors of aid, each with their own rules about who should receive aid and how they should be allocated.³

4. Resettlement

Resettlement is the name given to the movement of populations over large distances, mainly from drought-affected areas of the North to the areas assumed to be more fertile and less densely populated in the South and West of the country.⁴

¹ A note from my diary: 'Wheat has been distributed, more than usual and talk of a regular food-for-work programme starting. Also salt and sugar at the service cooperative. The reaction is such that good-will seems to extend to the Government. Two weeks ago I was getting only complaints, right now it is all different.'

² Yeraswork Admassie and Solomon Gebre, 1985.

³ My own sense of not being able to keep track is noted in my diary as follows: 'Aid. It is all so patchy, so uncertain, so many complaints. Can blame everyone: aid agencies with their own changing priorities, funds and supplies fluctuating; Peasants' Association officials because they control and alter who is and who is not a beneficiary; officials in Mehal Meda and higher up, who parcel up the areas and make plans that have no bearing on local conditions; the people themselves for their high expectations. And everybody sees the distribution from their own angle, crying out against dependency, inefficiency, unavailability...'

⁴ For accounts of Resettlement see A. Pankhurst 1986, 1988, 1989 (a), (b).

In Menz, four *wereda*, Gische, Gera Midir, Mama Midir and Mezezo, were areas from which people were recruited for Resettlement, mostly on a voluntary basis, though I also came to hear about a minority of accounts of pressurized and forced migration. The area in which all Menz people were resettled is Metekel in Gojam. According to the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission figures, in total 1,341 households (22% of which were female headed), or a total population of 7,431 (46% female) were moved. From the questionnaire I administered in Gera, 37% of respondents replied that they had at least one close relative who had been resettled.¹

There were stories of people having left the area to be resettled, often leaving relatives behind. Some told their relatives of their decision, others disappeared without a word.

Dessita

This child, Gebeye, is my own but the mother who gave birth to her left for Resettlement to Gojam. I knew her from meeting her on market days in Mehal Meda. She used to sell onions, and then '77 [1985] came. She told me she could not cope any more and was going to leave. Somehow I ended up telling her I would look after the girl who was then about two years old. So, one day I returned from the market with a child! The other mother, who knows, she might be alive somewhere, but she has never been back.

Yematawerk'

I got married to Cheré Gebré's son and they made me a beautiful house. We had been together, then he decided to go to Resettlement, sold all the grain that was left. He wanted me to go with him, but I refused to go. We had been together two years when this happened, his land was given over to the Peasants' Association leadership, but they left me my land that I had from before I married him, and aid distributions started soon after.

Feelings about the famine conditions and resettlement were also expressed in verse, as in the two following examples.

መገን፡ ሰባ፡ ሰባት፡	The year of '77 [1985]
ደሰራኸው፡ ስራ፡	The things you brought about!
ግማሹን፡ በመዋት፡	Half to their death,
ግማሹን፡ ሰፊራ፡፡	The others to Resettlement.

¹ Sample, 92. I used the term *yek'irb zemed*, 'close relatives', but did not define this, leaving the judgement to the respondents themselves. From a sample of 34, 104 relatives went to Resettlement, a mean of 3 per household.

ዎይ: ን ጸባት: ዎይ: ን ጸባት:
ብር: በነበረ:
የከገራ: ልጅ: ሁሉ:
ገጃ ም: ተ ሻገሩ:
Oh anger, oh anger,
If only there was money,
All my country's children
To Gojam have crossed over.
[i.e. to a Resettlement site there]

Whilst I was in Gera, there was also talk about settlers returning. Some would send word to relatives in Menz, asking for travel money, complaining that though there was grain to eat, there was no money for clothes or other goods, and, above all, expressing fears about malaria. Indeed, a number of funeral wakes took place, the families in Menz mourning those who, having left for Resettlement, survived the famine and the initial unsanitary conditions, succumbed to malaria once their troubles seemed to be over.

Those who returned did so unofficially, seeking employment in the informal sectors in Addis Ababa, in Mehal Meda or other towns. Sometimes they even came back to their rural homes knowing that they could not expect to be reinstated as members of the Peasants' Association, since they had lost their land rights. Wherever they went, they feared being punished, fined, or sent back to Resettlement. The exception, the recognition of returnees, however, occurs in the case of orphans. These were helped by a Relief and Rehabilitation Commission programme aimed at reducing the number of young children in State orphanages, by locating family members who had remained in their homelands and, if these members were willing to accept responsibility, returning the children to them. K'achilé, a thirteen year old who came from a Peasants' Association nearby, told me his story:

I used to live with my mother, one brother and two sisters; I was the oldest. I do not know about a father, we never had one, and the land belonged to my mother. There was nobody to help us, so, in February, she decided to try Resettlement. It took three days to get there. Many of us came from here, all being fed. We were in Pawé, ket'ena 2 village 11 [name of location]. There were about 500 households from Welo and Shewa. It was all right there, there was help with the work and we were given food, though village 5 where the Italians were [Tana Beles development project] was better.

My mother did not remarry. The following year she died; we lived one year in another woman's hut but she died too, they said it was malaria. Then in '79 [1987] they put us in an orphans' house. My brother and sisters died too, only I was left. In June I was returned here to my

grandmother, I had written to her on behalf of my mother while she was alive.

Returning to Menz was difficult too. It is so cold here, and school was much nearer there; also I will have to repeat third grade at school, since we were moved before the end of the year; I had nearly finished, I regret this (*yik'och'egnna*).

It was usually the most vulnerable households that went to Resettlement. This is both because those unable to support themselves were more willing to take their chance, and because the selection procedure carried out by the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission was aimed at convincing or 'volunteering' those least able to survive in Menz. The State took on the responsibility of finding a solution for the hardest hit. Yet, as the subsequent return of orphans shows, the aim was not one of simple dependency. Orphans, without any social ties in their new locality, i.e., without a family, were considered a problem. Ironically, the solution undertaken was to return the children to dependence on traditional kinship support systems.

Consciously or not, because of the erosion of kinship and other traditional forms of support, the Revolution itself has contributed to the creation of a section of the population dependent on it. Thus the Land Reform took land allocation away from the household and increased the role of local State representatives, whilst both Cooperatives and Associations provided new forms of resource allocation. The social transformations that the State was attempting inevitably weakened existing social structures. When the famine occurred, the society facing it had, to some extent, been changed; vulnerable groups in society were less mobile and less able to turn to previous forms of support. Likewise we will see in the following chapter, on Villagization, that it was some of the more vulnerable sections of the society that, with the lessened possibilities in the forms of traditional action, found themselves more involved in the new structures and services brought by the State.

5. Military service/ *Shifta*

Ethiopia is now technically a Republic ruled by the Workers' Party of Ethiopia, yet, many of the leaders of the Party are members of the *junta* which carried out the Revolution. There is an element of continuity in the importance of the military, given that, before the Revolution, the Ethiopian State was largely held together by a military aristocracy. Traditionally, and still today, a soldier's life provided some men

with a means of escape¹ from home. Writing in the mid-nineteenth century, Parkins commented 'The whole country was always more or less in a chronic state of war.'² Nearly a century later Weissleder wrote:³

Today, as in the past, a history of military achievement and renown is still the most direct and promising road to any position of real consequence.

More than twenty years later, despite the supposed move from Feudalism to Socialism, the comment is still applicable, from the national level right down to that of individual rural communities.

The military history of Menz includes resistance to the Italian invasion, and then to the Revolution. Though the recent anti-Government rebellions were concentrated further north, in Eritrea, Tigray, Gonder, and Welo, there are isolated rumours of active rebellion in this part of Shewa. Most of this form of discontent rears its head at the time of call-ups. In 1989 there were two recruitment drives in Menz. In one of these, the quota for conscription for the *Awraja* was estimated to have been five hundred.

There are in fact two types of soldiers. The first, nicknamed, *weddo geba*, 'having wanted he entered', are those who volunteer to join and are given an income by the State. The second group are 'volunteered' from the area to serve their country, and it is the increase in these round-ups that are bitterly resented, feelings aired in poems such as those presented later on in this section. The Peasants' Association leadership are given a quota that they must fill, and the Association is responsible for the upkeep of the household from which this person is chosen. The Association members thus plough and harvest the land of the recruit, the labour being one of the duties of *sira zemecha* work campaigns.

There are rules about who can and who cannot be called up, with criteria of age and fitness, and rules that more than one person cannot be chosen from a single household.

¹ In Ethiopian history women have also played a small role in war. Thus, a few aristocratic women were known to have fought alongside men, until the Emperor decreed a prohibition on women's enlistment in 1935. Tsehai Berhane Selassie, 1979/80, also Weissleder 1965: 67. The Northern rebel movements have made a point of involving women in the fighting. I was told during a visit to Gojam, that there is also one rebel group that is said to be led by a woman with a personal vendetta against the Government because of deaths in her family, in particular her father's.

² Parkins, 1868: 21.

³ Weissleder, 1965: 61.

In 1989, five people were initially selected from Gera in the first of the two Campaigns. Two of these were brothers, but since they lived in different households the rule about not taking people from the same household was technically followed. Of the five, two were attending school in fifth and eighth grade respectively, and one was married. All five were rounded up by the Peasants' Association leadership and imprisoned overnight in the Peasants' Association offices, the local police, the *t'ibbek'a gwad*, watching over them. In the middle of the night we heard shots when the guards found that one of the youth had escaped through a window, much to the silent joy of the population.

In Gera numerous *weddo geba*, often young boys, have joined up over the years, on their own initiative, usually on the spur of the moment, in anger or frustration and against the wishes of their families. One estimate, by Bek'ele, a man from Gera who had returned with a leg injury after eight years as a soldier, suggested that in total, at least 100 people had gone to military service from this Peasants' Association since the Revolution, and 59% of my respondents answered that they had a close relative who had, or was, undertaking military service.¹

There is a heavy sense of disruption and loss when the young boys and men decide to sign up or are taken away, especially as recruitment has been going on annually for more than a decade. Furthermore, recruitment is of young men, some of whose households have been supporting them through school, others being married, with elderly or young dependents. The distress is augmented by social tensions in the community and talk about nepotism or bribery in the selection procedures, all of which not infrequently result in exchanges of blows, not only between representatives of the State and the population, but also between the local leadership and its members, or even between different members of the local leadership.²

There are many stanzas commonly known that express some of the distress caused by military service. They include the following three:

¹ From a sample of 93 questioned, 53 had close relatives who had been on military service.

² During the recruitment drives almost each Peasants' Association had a story to tell. In one case the Peasants' Association Chair and his brother were shot by the relative of a boy who was chosen; in another the leadership itself came to blows when some of them acted against the decision of the others.

ኢትዮጵያ፡ አገራ፡ Ethiopia my country
አፈረ ድህረሁ፡ I judge you!
ጄግ ኖቶ፡ ማንድ ሞቼን፡ My heroic brothers
ገብረ ልህረሁ፡ I have given you in tax [tribute].

የወንድ ልጅ፡ እናት፡ The mother of a boy,
ታጠቁ፡ በገመድ፡ Tie your stomach with rope;
አዋራ፡ ነው፡ አንጂ፡ It will be a vulture,
አይቀብረውም፡ ዘመድ፡ And not a relative, that will bury him.

ጉንዳን፡ ሲንገገ፡ As the ants swarm,
ወፎቶም፡ በረሩ፡ The birds fly,
መገን፡ የመንዝ፡ ልጅ፡ Woe is the child of Menz
ዘመተ፡ ለአገሩ፡ He fought for the country.

Overall, it seemed as though the national issue was forgotten because of the local disruption it was creating. There was little concern over the validity or otherwise of the underlying causes: that of national unity and the legitimacy of the current Government. Thus there was never any question of whether or not the population had to fight to preserve the Ethiopian nation; nor was there any discussion of conscientious objection. Most of the discussion was about how many and who it would be this time, and when the next recruitment would occur, in other words about the direct impact on the society. Mammit, one of my friends in the village, who had a seventeen year old son said to be mad and possessed by a spirit, commented:

"They say this world of ours is healthy/sane, *t'énégnna*, yet I have a son who is not healthy/insane; were he sane I would have lost him to military service. This is what is called sanity.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has covered a large number of separate, essentially administrative, structures which form the basis of the peasant-State relationship. It would, perhaps, have been more interesting and analytical to drop some of the empirical detail and present the actions of the State in terms of concepts such as social reconstruction, control and legitimization.¹ However, such a framework would have centred on a lengthy attempt to justify the particular categories chosen, and would have resulted in the loss of an understanding of how people view specific policies. Furthermore, though initially I was interested in abstract notions of power, the 'whys' and 'wherefores', of State action; my respondents were not. They were confronted on a day-to-day basis by the particular and the concrete, and it was these, i.e., the 'this' and 'therefore' which they had to live with.

To the extent that general comments can be made, a number of factors come to mind to summarize the relationship between peasants and State. The first is that the relationship is not as developed as might be assumed given the rhetoric of radical transformation. Massive campaigns and talk of Revolutionary policies amount to little in the face of the daily struggles of the peasantry. In particular, there is little engagement between women and the State. On the points of contact between State and peasantry, the peasantry perceive the relationship as intrusive, unbalanced and extractive. When offered, the State's help tends to be acknowledged, but such inputs are submerged by the costs they impose.² In the words of a respondent: *Mengist band fit deg, band fit kifu new, kifunnetu bezzabin inji*, 'The Government with one face is kind, with the other cruel; but the cruelty has become too much for us.'

The relationship between peasantry and State is mediated through local officials, so that the new structure appears like the patron-client relationship of old. In the past there was a hierarchical relationship between lord and peasant, with any influence of the Government being minor and structured through a patronage system. Now the representatives of the Socialist Government and its institutions are the local 'lords'. The only difference is that there is a somewhat greater, though similarly patronage-based, influence of Government.

¹ Wrong, 1979.

² Such comments echo much of the literature on State-peasant relations and current trends of disengagement, Rothchild and Chazan, 1988; Scott, 1985. They also return to the older literature on the 'rational' analysis of integration made by the peasantry, Lipton, 1968; Popkin, 1979.

Looking at the policies from the local level, from the ground up, almost always yields the theme of a gap between what the Government thinks it is doing and what is perceived by the people to occur in practice; what it wants to do and what it actually achieves. The scene is one of universal, though usually latent, discontent. In my interpretation of people's complaints, two of the main problems with Government policy can be described as the *tabula rasa* fixation and the campaign method.

The *tabula rasa* fixation summarizes the desire to recreate a society into something which looks modern and scientific. There is no appreciation of existing structures, such as the social and religious associations which might be built on for development purposes. The population therefore suffers from a kind of schizophrenia: the need to accept new structures of which they are suspicious, and reject existing social and economic beliefs that have proved their worth in the past. Moreover, as seen in some of the discussion of new services in this chapter, the Government's assumption that objectivity will automatically follow from the new structures ignores the existing forces, the ties and the feuds that are inherent in social formations and which are merely reshaped during the so called 'radical transformation'.

The campaign method¹ results from the State's desire to create radical transformation - fast. To do this, all efforts are marshalled on the one issue. However, the speed of change inevitably results in distress and, where actions are not sensitive to individuals, they tend to be antagonizing, irrespective of their potential worth. In addition, the result of such methods is usually superficial rather than fundamental transformation. Thus the source of discontent is not always, or even predominantly, because of a purposeful exploitation by the State, but rather the consequence of institutional failures and the methods adopted. This conclusion should perhaps be tempered by questions about the direction in which the Government is moving. There have been signs of a growing awareness of the population's alienation, and lessons are being learnt from previous mistakes.²

Another theme that perhaps does not emerge strongly enough in the text, is the complexity behind the uniformity of discontent. Or rather, the overall impression of discontent hides a much richer situation, one in which a diversity of reactions can be

¹ For a critique of this method see Clapham, 1988: 192.

² See Epilogue.

observed which reflect a variety of particular interests at different points in time. The different behaviour and attitude of the population to State policies were only briefly mentioned here, though if a whole chapter were devoted to each policy, these would emerge more strongly, as they will, for example, in the detailed analysis of the single policy of Villagization considered in the next chapter.

5

VILLAGIZATION

Introduction

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INTRODUCTION

The chapter begins with a general overview of Villagization in Ethiopia. It then moves on to my own findings which fall into three separate parts. The first deals with the different kinds of huts, how they are used, and who occupies them. The second is concerned with the composition of the village, and the question of who has entered the new village and who has not. The final section attempts to evaluate Villagization. The discussion is based primarily on the population's attitudes and opinions, though my observations and impressions are also presented. The section is divided into, on the

one hand, costs and complaints associated with the policy, and on the other, its benefits. Finally, the question of coercion is considered.

I. OVERVIEW OF VILLAGIZATION

The Ethiopian Villagization campaign began in late 1985; by 1986 the aim became one of moving the majority of the rural population into the new villages by 1995. The policy can be seen as part of the Ethiopian Government's drive towards agrarian Socialism in an underdeveloped, predominantly peasant-based, rural society. Although the implementation of the operation is focused on creating a new spatial structure, moving people closer together into a grid-patterned village, the change is intended to have a radical and uplifting effect on the economic, social, and political life of the population.

Broadly speaking, Villagization increases the size of rural communities and locates the population in a 'planned' physical setting which simplifies both the task of service provision and that of tax collection,¹ and control over the population. In terms of Socialist ideology, the villages are supposed to create non-exploitative and highly productive farming groups, while increasing peasant involvement in the wider society and nation.

More specifically, the aims of Villagization as laid down by the Ministry of Agriculture, and formulated in its publication *Mender*, (literally, Village) are:

1. To ensure that basic development infrastructural facilities and services are provided for the enhancement of the livelihood and socio-economic uplifting of the rural masses.
2. To enable the rural population to develop the tradition of 'familyhood', in other words, sense of community self-help and coordinate efforts towards the solution of rural problems.
3. To ensure that the rural population, in close cooperation and collaboration with local organs entrusted with the tasks of education and agitation, raises the level of its consciousness and discharges to the full its role in the nation's socio-economic life.

¹ The issue of Villagization increasing the State's ability to tax people was mentioned to me on a visit to Harerge, see H. Pankhurst, 1989 (a). In Menz, it was never mentioned specifically, perhaps because the Peasants' Associations already had considerable access to their population.

4. To provide the means for enabling the rural masses, more particularly the peasantry, to safeguard local peace and security as well as protect their own property.
5. To help arrest the galloping tendency in the unwise use of the nation's valuable natural resources and make judicious utilization of the same.
6. To create conditions whereby expert advice and the benefits of latest technology to promote agricultural productivity are brought within easy access of the peasantry with a view to improving its livelihood.
7. To create the means whereby the rural population is enabled to get maximum access to basic infrastructural services like roads, irrigation facilities and dams which are vital for transforming the quality of rural life, but which, in the present stage of economic underdevelopment, cannot possibly be created through individual means and resources.
8. To create the condition whereby the peasantry gets an opportunity to channel its exploitation-free produce to Service Cooperatives and obtain industrial products and commodities needed to uplift its livelihood and thereby narrow the current imbalance in urban-rural exchange of goods and services.¹

The rationale behind Villagization is seen rather differently by others, such as Cohen and Isaksson, authors of a Swedish International Development Agency report on Villagization in Arsi, and a Survival International team who wrote a short document on Resettlement and Villagization. These commentators, among others, see Villagization as part of a continuing Revolution aimed at increasing the power of the State and extracting resources from the peasantry. For example, in terms of economic and hence political control, the Villagization policy makes parallel illegal markets more visible, and hence more difficult to operate.² In general Villagization increases the extent to which the peasantry is homogenized³ and integrated into the economic and political system.

Two sets of experiences in the South-East of the country provide the background to the nationwide programme. The first is the Villagization of Bale (1974) and Harerge

¹Mender, Ethiopia, National Villagization Co-ordinating Committee, 1987: 14. The draft constitution summarizes the aims in Article 10, clause 3 which states: 'The state shall encourage the scattered rural population to aggregate in order to change their backward living condition and to enable them to lead a better social life.'

²Cohen and Isaksson, 1987 (a): 456.

³Ironically, given the subsequent Villagization Campaign, in a preface to a book on the different types of houses in different parts of Ethiopia, Fisseha Geda, Commissioner of COPWE and Central Committee Member, wrote: 'Dwellings are an expression of the life, the culture and the environment of the people who live in them ... the homes of the Ethiopians are nearly as varied as the costumes they wear and are another important aspect of cultural expression which the Revolution is dedicated to preserve and develop.' Last, 1981: 1. Villagization put an end to most of the variety.

(1984), carried out for strategic reasons in response to the Somali invasion and the guerrilla activities of 'liberation fronts'. The second is the Resettlement of peasants evicted from lands transformed into State farms in the Wabe Shebelli valley, involving the creation of show-case villages organized into Producer Cooperatives. Villagization became a nationwide campaign in September 1986, though First Secretaries of the Party in a number of regions, including Gojam, Arsi and Welega, had already started, allegedly in response to Mengistu Haile Mariam's approval of the developments in Harerge.

Unlike the introduction of the new Constitution, which was preceded by consultative procedures throughout the country, Villagization was based entirely on decisions by senior Government and Party officials without any consultation with the population at large.¹ To quote Cohen and Isaksson:

The Villagization campaign was designed and implemented from the top down. The *Guide-lines* were formulated centrally in the National Planning Commission and the Ministry of Agriculture, under the direction of the country's senior government and party leadership. The authors found no evidence that any regional Committee members were involved in conceiving, justifying, or designing the overall programme. Once formulated, the objectives and the guide-lines were then communicated to local officials and peasants in the target areas through the Agitation and Propaganda sub-Committees.²

Tanzania and China probably provided the inspiration for Villagization, but there is little evidence that the experience of those countries was evaluated, though it is reported that some Villagized communities in Tanzania were inspected.³ The absence of debate during the conceptualization of Villagization, and the mere cursory glance at the experiences of other countries, contrasts with the thorough research that preceded the drafting of the land-tenure reforms, some studies of which even pre-dated the Revolution.⁴

¹ Cohen, 1981, Clapham, 1988.

² Cohen and Isaksson, 1987(a): 450.

³ For Villagization in other countries, see Coulson, 1977; De Viries & Fortmann, 1979; Hyden, 1980; Mittelman, 1981; Mwapachu, 1979; Thiele, 1986.

⁴ See for example, Dunning, 1970; Aster Akalu, 1982; Mengistu Woube, 1986.

17

↓ Old settlements →



18



19, 20 ↑ Villagization →



The Villagization programme is administered at three levels: national, regional and local. At the national level, it is directed by the National Villagization Co-ordinating Committee, and similar structures exist at each level, down to the Peasants' Association.

The first phase of Villagization stretched over a period of four months. It started in December 1985 and covered eight regions, the focus being on Shewa, Arsi and Harerge. The programme involved 5,530 Peasants' Associations, and approximately 4.6 million peasants were housed in 4,500 completed villages. By late 1986, 12% of the rural population were living in the new villages. In Arsi region alone, the population was housed into 856 villages, with nearly 1 million, approximately 75% of region's population, being Villagized. At the same time, and on a smaller scale, Villagization started in Gojam, Sidamo, Welega, Kefa and Ilubabor.

Villagization began in areas cultivating annual grain and pulse crops rather than areas in which cultivation involved long-term crop investments. The regions covered by large-scale Villagization were, at the same time, the most important ones in terms of national agricultural production. They accounted for 33% of the farming population, produced 40% of the nation's cereal crops, and 55% of the State-run Agricultural Marketing Corporation's grain purchases.¹ Arsi, in particular, is one of the major surplus grain-producing areas of the country. The fact that the population had, historically speaking, fewer roots in the land, and were therefore likely to be less sensitive to being moved over a short distance, was probably also a consideration. Many of the peasants of the region were settlers - or descendants of settlers - from the North.²

By 1987, and the second phase of the programme, there were twelve regions in which Villagization had occurred and the goal was set to gather 1,012,320 households in 9,438 villages. The policy continued to receive attention in 1988, and current estimates suggest that 40% of the rural population has already been Villagized, see Table III for a regional break-down.

¹ Cohen and Isaksson, 1987(a): 437.

² Including Menz. For a historical study of out-migration, see McCann, 1986.

TABLE III. Villagization, by region
Regional Breakdown of percentages of heads of households
and percentages of the population Villagized

July 1988

	% HEADS OF HOUSEHOLD	% POPULATION
Arsi	70	78
Bale	67	93
Kefa	59	61
Gojam	57	59
Harerge	51	61
Ilubabor	51	54
Shewa	40	25
Welega	31	28
Gonder	38	39
Gamo Gofa	12	15
Sidamo	11	11
Welo	3	3
Tigray	0.2	0.2

[SOURCE: *Mender* Vol. 2: 16]

Villagization never took off in the Northern-most parts of the country, in areas in which the Government lacked effective power. Thus the issue of security seems to have hastened Villagization in areas in which the Government was in control but felt the need for defensive measures (Harerge and Bale), whilst the Government's inability to maintain an active presence in other areas (Eritrea, Tigray and Northern Welo) almost completely ruled out the possibility of implementing Villagization.

According to the first English edition of the journal, *Mender*, which gave data up to September 1987, the average number of dwellers already resident per village was 1,106 as stated in the text, though the table in the same publication gives a lower average figure of 755.¹ The plan subsequently proposed by the National Villagization Coordinating Committee in 1986-7 was to create villages with an average population of 500 households.² According to the second Amharic issue of *Mender*³ the national average for heads of household in the new villages for 1988 was 122 per village, with an associated resident population of 570. The above figures suggest that the size of the

¹ *Mender*, National Villagization Co-ordinating Committee. In the text 5,725,530 dwellers in 5,176 villages, page 28. In the table (page 30) 3,899,634 dwellers in 5,164 villages.

² *Mender*, Ethiopia, National Villagization Co-ordinating Committee. 5,725,530 dwellers in 1,138,265 villages, page 29.

³ Survival International Report, 1988, uses a resident population figure of between 500 to 2,500, but it is unclear where this data comes from.

population in the Villagized communities has been falling, both in the plans and in the actual settlement pattern.

Villagization should not be confused, as it sometimes is both by Ethiopians and by the external media, with policies of Resettlement or the establishment of Producer Cooperatives, both of which involve a more drastic transformation but affect a much smaller population. The link between the three policies is that they all represent attempts to rationalize the economy by reducing rural vulnerability whilst increasing productivity and, at the same time, establishing a structure for rural Socialism. However, at least in the short term, Villagization is best seen primarily as a change in settlement pattern, which is used to induce economic, social and political transformation. This is unlike the Resettlement and Cooperative schemes which involve a change in the relations of production from the outset. Ethiopian Villagization, unlike Villagization in Tanzania, does not involve any change in the ownership of resources, or the social relationships of production. Ethiopian villages are not collectives.

The reason for the confusion between Villagization and Producer Cooperatives lies in the view that Villagization has been undertaken as a first step towards future collectivization. However, at present, the two policies must be distinguished and assessed on their own, the more so since only 2-3% of the rural population has been collectivized, whereas the majority of the rural population have been, or may expect to be, Villagized. In future, villages may be collectivized, but it is equally possible that collectivization policies will be shelved and the new, tighter spatial structure used to bolster market forces and encourage petty commodity and service production, trade etc.¹

Unlike the Resettlement and the Cooperative programmes, which are heavily subsidized and hence costly for the Government, the expenses involved in creating villages are mostly borne by the rural population itself. With the exception of administrative and publicity costs, it is only when services materialize that the policy is likely to involve the Government in financial contributions. If and when this occurs, costs will have been reduced by the nucleation of the population.²

¹ See Epilogue for a recent shift in Government policy towards this position.

² Non-governmental organizations have so far had only limited involvement in Villagization, and have provided no direct funding for the programme.

II. THE VILLAGE

The figures for Shewa for 1988 show that 40% of the population had been Villagized, with an average of 75 heads of households, and 295 dwellers per village. The Villagized population in the *awraja* of Menz and Gishe is considerably smaller than the Shewan average. Gera, for its part, has a single Villagized community which is one of the largest in the *awraja*.

The issue of Villagization for Gera was first raised early in 1986. During two Peasants' Association meetings, Ministry of Agriculture and Party officials from Mehal Meda spoke about the value and advantages of the policy, set up a Villagization Committee in the Peasants' Association, and asked people to raise their hands if they were willing to take part. A large number of the population did so, and by the second meeting, a list was drawn up. The Ministry of Agriculture officials then decided that a village of 80 households would be feasible, and the Villagization Committee together with the officials, began work deciding on location, measuring out the plots (40 metres by 25 metres for each household), and allocating people to them.

Work on village construction was then started with campaign labour. The principal effort was on building a maximum of main huts, though a smaller quantity of secondary huts were simultaneously being erected. Work proceeded on one hut at a time, workers were divided into the eight zones of the Peasants' Association working on eight huts at a time. In addition, a neighbouring Peasants' Association in which Villagization had not begun was recruited to construct a further eight huts. Once the stone walls had been constructed, the individual for whom the hut had been allocated had to provide wooden poles, thatch and other materials, such as rope, nails and doors, with which the structure could then be completed, still using communal labour. When the hut was finally finished, the workers would be invited by the owner to have some bread and beer, as part of the traditional hut-warming ceremony. Sometimes, however, the building of the hut never progressed beyond the erection of the stone shell.

1. Principal huts

The majority of the principal huts are circular, a few others being rectangular. The huts are large, stone-walled and thatch-roofed constructions varying in diameter from 4.5 to 6 metres. Occupation of the huts started in 1987. Another village some twenty

minutes away was also planned, with 30 huts due to be constructed in 1990. It is, however, unlikely that this second village will be built this year, since building of secondary huts in the existing village and the building of a school were, at the time of my departure, taking precedence over the construction of another village from scratch.

The construction of 80 main huts implies that about 20% of households have been Villagized. However, of these 20%, many allocated a plot have not yet abandoned their old settlement area to move into the village. At least 36 households, i.e. almost half, have thus far not destroyed all their old huts. The fact that so many huts have not been destroyed suggests that, for a large proportion of the 'Villagized' population, the break from the old homestead is not yet complete.

The case is even clearer for 19 households, or 24% of the potential inhabitants, who have had a hut constructed in the new village but have never lived in it. In 13 households, or 16% of the cases, this is because the new hut has not been completed, and for the remainder, the primary reason given is the absence of a place in which to put the livestock, i.e., the absence of a secondary hut.

In some cases the new huts are occupied by part of the family which operates in both old and new areas, the two units either remaining closely tied or using the situation as a means towards family separation. The new house may thus provide a place to put an unwanted mother-in-law, or a solution for a couple divorcing with one person setting up a new household in each homestead. An example of a couple splitting up is that of Gétachew's household, which initially lived in one zone. Gétachew's wife refused to join him in the new village, and he has been married twice since then. Taddese, on the other hand, retains contact with his old wife and household in another zone in Gera, but now lives with his new wife, Sindé, and her daughter in the village. Sindé in turn keeps her ties with her old hut, in another zone currently occupied for her by a male relative.

In other cases, the owners do not occupy their huts, but allow others to do so. This arrangement is often sanctioned by the Peasants' Association leadership: for example, in the cases of three female-headed households: a single woman regarded as somewhat senile, a poor woman with three dependents, and myself, were all given the use of a hut in this way.

Though an empty hut is traditionally frowned upon and thought to be a sign of calamity, some huts in the new village remain empty because their owners move out of the Peasants' Association, for example through marriage. For example, Almaz has currently closed her hut after her husband, with whom she had quarrelled and who had left, abducted her again. She is now living with him and his parents elsewhere in Gera although she told me that she will be coming back. The gender behind the mobility of individuals is not specific. Mulatu, for example, closed his hut after living there for only a few months and went to live with his wife in her old house in another zone. Another case of a hut remaining empty after initial habitation was when Ayele's wife died. He closed his hut in the village, and went with his infant son to live nearby with his mother, until a new wife was found from another zone. At this point he returned with her to the village.

2. Secondary huts

One of the theories behind Villagization given by officials is that for reasons of sanitation, people should be encouraged to have separate living quarters, kitchens and cattle-sheds. Villagers concede that it would be cleaner to have the three huts for different uses, but at present, the kitchens and cattle-sheds constructed have not been used for the purpose for which they were built. Moreover, as we shall see, the people have their own reasons and logic for subverting central external plans.

• Kitchens

The kitchens are circular, generally smaller separate huts usually located behind the main ones. Eleven have been built, but none of them are used as kitchens. This is because fuel is far too expensive in Gera for people to be able to afford the cost of two fires, one for warmth and protection against the bitter cold in the main hut, and the other for cooking in the kitchen.¹ Furthermore, households and guests are accustomed to gather together over meals and coffee, and the isolation of the cooking and eating from living would be unacceptable. For example, coffee drinking is a lengthy process involving

¹ If fires were lit in both huts, they would both become kitchens, *ch'is bét*, literally 'smoke huts', since dung, in particular, produces considerable smoke. In some model villages, more sophisticated standing stoves were introduced in some huts. These consisted of a chimney which reduced the smoke. These were not successful, in particular because they were constructed for use with wood and not dung and women needed to sit down, since they were often nursing a child or involved in some other activity at the same time. The stoves were not constructed in Gera.

drinking, eating or rather munching, incense burning and much sitting around talking to neighbours and friends, often whilst women spin wool or cotton and attend to children. The separation of socializing from consumption on a daily basis would be inconceivable.

The result is that 'kitchens' tend to be used as store huts, cattle-sheds or as another living area. There are interesting examples of the latter case. For example, Felfelé's sister's daughter quarrelled with her husband and came to Felfelé's to give birth. She was given the main hut whilst Felfelé and her adopted daughter moved into the kitchen.

Another case is that of Teshome's household, or rather two households. He lives in the main hut with his current wife, Zewdé (who has recently given birth), an adopted son, and Zewdé's daughter by a previous marriage. His ex-wife, Shewazab, lives in the kitchen with her adopted daughter. The Zewdé and Shewazab units of the household are economically linked since Teshome is the only official land owner, and there is constant communication, friendly or otherwise, between the two units, as well as sharing of tasks and equipment. When Zewdé gave birth, it was Shewazab who looked after the mother for the *aras* period, the first few days of convalescence discussed in Chapter Eight. Perhaps a similar situation will develop in the Taddese household, where Taddese's current wife, Sindé who has land in her own name, is wondering whether the Villagization policy will continue or be abandoned. If it continues, she says, she will pay for the construction of a kitchen, in case she quarrels with her present husband. In the eventuality of a divorce, this would allow them both to have a place in the village and reduce the squabbling over who should go where.

- **Cattle-sheds**

Six rectangular cattle-sheds have been erected in the village. Each is supposed to be used by two neighbours, and is therefore sub-divided into two compartments. Although three of these huts were completed by the time I left, none were being used for animals. The livestock of those now in the village are kept in the main hut, in the 'kitchen', or in the old huts where some of the household remains. The reasons given by those not using these sheds are that they are too cold, and that hyenas can come and eat the cattle, i.e., that the livestock are more vulnerable in the cattle-sheds, because they are somewhat removed from the principal huts. The dislike of sharing is also undoubtedly a factor behind the non-utilization of these sheds. Completed ones were used to store fodder.

Sometimes, as in Zegene's case, the kitchen has been built and is used to house the sheep, whilst the humans and the cow reside in the principal hut. Another strategy adopted by Taddese and Sindé's household is to use the empty main hut of neighbouring Tesfayé to keep their sheep and those of Ayele, another richer neighbour for whom they mind some sheep under a *ribbi* arrangement.¹

Though additional huts are desired, none of the kitchens or cattle-sheds are used for the purposes envisaged. The externally perceived rationality behind the proposed division is accepted, but the planned allocation of space is not found to be as practical as other options. The result is that a different strategy is adopted, one better suited to the local situation and to individual households' needs.

III. COMPOSITION OF THE VILLAGE

There are currently 56 household heads in the village, with a total resident population of 218, an average of 3.9, ranging from one to seven persons per household. If those allocated a hut but not yet resident in the village are included, the figure increases to 73 heads of household, and a population of 356. No data is available for another 8 households, and one resident died before he moved in. The population of 73 households also gives an average of 4.9 per household, suggesting that those outside the village have larger households, thus pushing up the average.²

It would be satisfying if a clear pattern emerged as to who chose or was forced into the village and who remained outside. In some parts of the country the logic is a simple spatial one, whole areas moving one by one. In Gera, however, there was no simple rationale, and the decision to enter the village was determined by a combination of factors: geographical, social, and material (the condition of people's old huts). Often the decision involved a number of considerations, some attracting people towards the move, others acting in the opposite direction.³ In all 80 cases the heads of households, who were predominantly men, made the decision. Surprisingly, given the amount of cooperation within households, in almost all cases they did so, according to my

¹ See section on livestock as described in Chapter Six.

² Compare these figures of household size with those for Gera in Chapter Three which lies between the two.

³ For a similar story in terms of factors involved in the decision of whether or not to join a Producer Cooperative, see Poluha, 1989.

respondents, without any significant consultation with women members of the household.

1. Geographical factors

The people who used to live near the current Villagization site were specifically mentioned and given more encouragement to 'volunteer' for Villagization. It was argued to be in their economic interest to move into a village near their land and current assets, rather than be forced to move, in a few years time, into a second Villagized site which would probably be at a greater distance from their current homestead, and therefore more inconvenient. A considerable proportion of the population in the Villagized community therefore comes from the nearest zones within the Peasants' Association which, concomitantly, are the zones most clearly depopulated by Villagization.

2. Social factors

Family links, and ties of friendship, had a role to play in who decided to move to the village. Many people have close consanguineous relatives outside their immediate household, but within the village, a not uncommon situation in other parts of the Peasants' Association where close neighbours are often related.¹ The decision to move was sometimes influenced by the fact that some other relative had chosen to be Villagized, or the motive could work the other way, influencing the decision of households to keep away.

There are people who joined the village to escape old ties. One man left a wife in his old hut with their children and married a woman who joined him in the new one. They quarrelled, and he is now living there with another. In another case, a poor couple were living with the wife's very demanding relatives. Villagization provided an excuse for reducing their dependence on these relatives and setting up an independent household.

¹ At least three intra-village marriages have occurred within the last year. In addition, given the large number of re-marriages, it is not surprising to find a number of the ex-spouses within the village. The issue of marriage and divorce will be treated more fully in Chapter Seven.

3. Positions of authority in the Peasants' Association, traditional and modern

Those who started to build in the village at an early stage included the Chairman, Secretary, Service Cooperative Chairman and shop-keeper, Women's Association Chair and Secretary, one member of the local law courts, several Peasants' Association Committee members and two of the local police.¹ Many of these people also had authority in the area before the Revolution. To these can be added the literacy teacher, and three priests. All these were encouraged to set an example. Ironically, given the instinctive dislike of the Villagization policy, this is a case where power in the community, correlated with greater wealth, has been seen to have its disadvantages.

4. Wealth

As mentioned in the section on principal huts there are a number of poor and vulnerable people who have been given a place in the village; Dessita and Yilfu have households lacking a supportive social network. Similarly others, mainly female-headed households and vulnerable households, have come to the village on their own initiative, attracted by the greater security of village life, as well as by easier access to labour. The household of Bek'ele, who returned with a leg wound after eight years as a soldier, and for whom the Peasants' Association ploughs and performs other duties, should be included in this group. He is now married and has a baby.

The richer households are those least likely to want to move to the village as they have more capital invested in existing locations, such as a larger number of houses, trees, grain-storage facilities, mills, etc. Furthermore peasants who were better-off than the average, fear close proximity to poorer households because of the pressures to lend and fears of envy, theft, and so on. However, the richer households are also those more likely to be able to afford the expense of building equipment for the new hut. The result is that there are a number of richer people who have started or even finished building their huts, but do not yet inhabit the village. Most of the finished huts in the village not yet occupied belong to richer households.²

¹ See Abrahams, 1987, for the 'vigilante groups' which in the Tanzanian case were internally introduced at the time of Villagization, rather than brought in by the State.

² Note also the earlier comment about the size of households within the village being smaller. It should not therefore be assumed from this that *all* larger households are richer; a number of cases in Gera clearly illustrate that a few of the larger households belong to some of the poorest section of society.

5. Condition of existing huts

In a few cases I have heard the comment that an old house was falling down in any case, and that it was just as well to build in the village directly, rather than take the chance and have to rebuild twice, duplicating money, work and time if the Villagization policy continued.

6. Miscellaneous

There are people who are motivated by an attraction to the idea of change rather than suspicion of it; some who felt that if they were going to toil on the building of huts for others, they might as well have one for themselves, and those who believed that since Villagization was inevitable, they might as well 'follow the Government's orders'. The person with an outward going character was more likely to 'give it a try', than a suspicious or cautious individual.

IV. EVALUATION

Having attempted to set the context and to describe some of the characteristics of the population, the task of a generalized assessment remains. This is an alien notion to the population affected, who, like Ethiopians throughout their long recorded history, tend to recognize that the State has the power to impose its will regardless, and fear that debate on the 'pros and cons' of Government policy will be seen as tantamount to sedition. Though it is not always visible, peasants in the country operate in a long standing coercive framework. This is not to say that the impact of Villagization is not a subject of conversation, rather that there is an element of caution when critical opinions are expressed and a 'why talk about it' type of fatalism resulting from a belief, no doubt justified, that their opinions are, in any case, irrelevant in the wider scheme of Government decisions.

A particular Government policy exists in a context of other policies and conditions in which no action is envisaged. Each policy also has wide ranging effects and varying implications for different individuals and households. In this chapter we have already attempted to look at how different people make decisions when faced with Villagization. In general, there can be no question about the fact that most people do not like the idea of Villagization, but have and will proceed with it if instructed to. In

the words of one farmer: 'if the Government tells you to throw yourself in a gully you do so'. The following two poems express a dislike of Villagization, in veiled terms.

ብበሻም፡ ባልበሻም፡	Whether I eat or do not eat,
ጥራ፡ ነው፡ ስራቴ፡	My dinner is [raw] grains,
አዲሱ፡ ከተማ፡	In the new town,
ጌራ፡ ነው፡ ስቤቴ።	At Gera, is my house.

ይሰራዋል፡ ስራ፡	Work is done in it
ይቀቀስዋል፡ ወጥ፡	Food is cooked in it
ደግሞም፡ አይደገምም	Having happened it will not be repeated
ታይቶም፡ አይታወቅ።	Nothing like it has been seen before. [Having seen it, you do not recognize it, i.e., they are all the same.]

There was considerable variation in the density of population within Gera prior to Villagization. The changes resulting from Villagization are greatest for those previously living in isolated homesteads and unused to village life. Another distinction seems to be that because of habit and attachment to their existing homestead, the elderly tend to have a more unfavourable attitude to Villagization than the young, while the children tend to be quite positive about it, since they can play or carry out their duties with more friends.

In general, it should be emphasized that complaints are more often heard about increased labour on *sira zemecha* work campaigns and its effects on reducing time available for income-earning and leisure activities, than about Villagization *per se*.

1. Costs and complaints associated with Villagization

The lack of fit between the Government's and the peasant's perceptions can be illustrated linguistically. The rationale behind the grid-pattern is some Government sense of order and a clarity of layout. The people of the area, however, use the term *kimichit* to refer to the new villages. The term carries connotations of piling up, 'haphazardness', confusion. Thus to the local population, the new villages are chaotic

whilst the old hamlets have a logic connected to the micro-ecology of the area, and the demographic or social connections between households. On the other hand, to outsiders with their new, neat plans, it is the old types of villages, with huts seemingly illogically heaped up upon one another that should be called *kimichit*.

The cost of the whole exercise in joint and individual labour time, effort and material is usually resented. Grass for thatching involved a day's walk to the area from which it would be brought back by donkey on the following day. Wood usually had to be bought, and doors and other fixtures made. Nails, hinges and other items had to be purchased at the market or Service Cooperative. The average cost for a new house in monetary terms is 300 *birr*, about the equivalent of the cost of an ox, and this is without including any measure of labour cost or opportunity costs, nor does it take account of such things as the inevitable breakage of household equipment, or goods left behind during the move. In the building years 1987 and 1988 the cash burden was, however, considerably lightened by the UNICEF Cash for Work aid programme then in operation.

One of the first points people in Gera tend to make is that the new location disrupts their way of life, and, in particular, that it increases the distance to grass-land and creates problems in livestock management. There is no area in the village where the livestock can graze under the watchful eye of a household member. If left unsupervised for a moment, the animals are likely to trample over a neighbours' territory, eat grain left out to dry, etc. Under the new arrangements, the allocated grass-land is likely to be up to half an hour's walk from the village, sometimes on the other side of a river which becomes unpassable for the livestock during the rains. It is difficult to ensure that other people do not graze their livestock on private land, and the time and distance to get there means that it is sometimes not worth while herding. The passage-way to the huts in the village is moreover often too tight: the way this is put is that there is no room for the livestock to 'enter and exit'. The feelings of being hemmed in are expressed in the following poem.

መ ሬት፡ ምጣኗ፡ ሆኖ፡	The ground having become a stove,
ሰማይ፡ አከገባሎ፡	The sky a lid;
መጠቆጠቆያው፡ በረት፡	The source of quarrelling the cattle-sheds,
መውጣ፡ መግባቢያ፡ ጠፍቶት፡	Having lost a way in and a way out,
ይፍተገል፡ ፍጥረት፡	Creation [life] is rubbing against each other [friction].

The problem of 'entry and exit' is aggravated during the rains, when all the trampling contributes to a squelchy muddy terrain from which lambs, in particular, have to be rescued.

As already mentioned, livestock owners are faced with other problems, such as where to put the animals, especially if they are numerous. Another worry on the part of farmers with a relatively large herd is a fear of their wealth being made more obvious in the village. Visibility increases due to the higher density of population, especially immediately after the move, with a heightened novelty factor. This fear of 'being seen' is expressed in terms of the evil eye, as well as an open acknowledgment of the problem of resisting pleas from impoverished neighbours and relatives, as mentioned earlier. The mirror image of this problem is the pressure on the poorer sections of the population who feel obliged to do as their neighbours. For example, during festivals and other occasions it is much easier to know exactly what and how many chickens were slaughtered by a particular household. Where economic differences are more visible, there is social pressure on the poorest to show that they can keep up appearances.

In the general perception of Villagization and in the literature increased distance from agricultural land is often considered its primary economic cost.¹ This is not often mentioned as a problem in Gera - perhaps because the traditional pattern of *rist* holdings was characterized by fragmentation of land into widely dispersed plots,² because people did not move from far, and because the actual time spent in the fields is low.³

Fuel is more often mentioned as a problem. One of the issues is distance from trees planted around the old compound, with the added question of theft when there is nobody to keep a watchful eye. A comment made in this context and also applied to land formerly nearer to people's huts is that Villagization would not be as much of a problem if everybody moved, as was the case in many other parts of the country. Tensions and fears of theft thus result from a situation in which one household moved to the village whilst a neighbouring one stayed behind, thus obtaining free rein over the area.

¹ Cohen & Isaksson, 1987; Thiele, 1986; Mittelman, 1981.

² R. Pankhurst, 1965; Hoben, 1973; Markakis, 1974.

³ In many areas of the country crops need to be guarded against wild animals that destroy or consume the harvest, Berihun Teferra, 1988. In this part of Menz, however, wild animals are not a problem, see Chapter Six.

The reason that wood shortages were increased by Villagization is not only that the trees are still in the old location and vulnerable to theft, but also that many reserves of wood were exhausted in the building of new huts. Timber is used for pillars, doors, the roof beams on which the thatch is laid, and sometimes the odd window. Much of this wood was found by cutting down trees belonging to the household rather than moving the parts of the old hut, either because of the strategy of keeping one foot in the old location, or because the hut was old and its wooden base decayed or otherwise unsatisfactory for a new structure.

In the meantime, people have been slow to plant new trees, because of a sense of dislocation, a policy of 'wait and see', and also because constant supervision is required to protect seedlings from humans and livestock. In order to encourage people to plant trees, the Peasants' Association provided a number of households with eucalyptus saplings, nursed within the Peasants' Association. Only some of these have survived the unusually heavy long rains of 1988, the dry season, and the trampling. There has been no attempt to grow the other types of trees that used to surround compounds. This suggests that there may be a danger of a decline in the variety of flora, as well as the loss of some plants of value for medicinal and other uses. In addition, although deforestation is widespread in the country, the new vicinity of the new villages in particular are characterized by the absence of almost all kinds of shrubbery. Not surprisingly, the population concentrated in one location has worked outwards to forage anything that will burn.

The dung economy is also jeopardized by the move - a result of the problems already mentioned in the discussion on livestock and which will be returned to in Chapter Six. Instead of collecting dung in the general vicinity of its habitation, as was formerly the practice, the household's supply is now more limited.¹ The visibility of dung reserves is also a problem since in the village there are more neighbours at hand likely to come begging.

Some households formerly grew garlic and cabbages during the rains in a garden plot within the homestead. In the same way as tree planting was interrupted during

¹ In other regions, where dung is used as fertilizer, people are complaining that the labour involved in collecting it and transporting it is an increased burden, in some cases households have decided to forgo the custom and Villagization has thus contributed to a drop in land fertility.

Villagization, the practice of vegeculture was also discontinued in the first two years. By the third year, however, two families had resumed it, and the number of vegetable growers is bound to increase in the future.

Other complaints voiced around the village concern the huts themselves. These were often made too quickly with the emphasis on speed rather than quality and with the inevitable resultant problems of leaking roofs. The walls are made of stones held together only with mud. Traditionally, dung and ash were added to the latter to make a better cement. Some of the newly constructed walls have had to be re-built, having caved in, and many already show unhealthy signs of damage. Complaints are also rife about the 'coldness' of the new huts as opposed to *yemok'e bét*, the old, warm huts. This includes both a 'psychological' component caused by the barren-looking new location and the heart-wrench of moving from an old and perhaps long-established locality, and a 'real' component which includes the location of the village on open terrain, and the absence of protective fences and trees. Also, prolonged occupation, and more specifically soot from the cooking fires, have yet to impregnate and thus insulate the buildings. Finally, the placement of the village has also been criticised. A group consisting of *awraja* and *wereda* Ministry of Agriculture and Party personnel, in consultation with the Peasants' Association leadership, decided on the present site on account of its proximity to the river, the Service Cooperative and the road; the site is, however, disadvantageous in that the land is muddy, even swampy in the rainy season, and dampness seeps into the huts from the ground.¹

Fears attendant on the densely constructed new structures include those of fire and disease. A fire could spread through the settlement in minutes, thus affecting the whole community.² Contagious diseases could likewise cause havoc. This latter fear surfaced early during my stay in the village, when one man was suspected of having typhus, a disease spread by fleas. People remark that the denser the population the greater the hazards, and, thus far, there have not been any improved sanitation facilities, such as latrines with which to counter this problem. Despite the embarrassment of this situation, everyone is obliged to defecate in public view, anywhere. There are, theoretically, plans to build latrines in future and three

¹ Finding the perfect site of a village is an almost impossible task given the different criteria that have to be considered. Some complaints from one direction or another are inevitable.

² This is not as much of a danger in Menz as in areas where the huts are wood rather than stone-walled.

projected ones appear already in the official Peasants' Association statistics for 1988, though there is no visible sign of them on the ground.

A complaint from one vested interest is that the area on which the huts have been built is agricultural land, and people who previously had plots there say that the land allocated to them as compensation was insufficient or of worse quality. The following poem voices the disturbance felt during the parcelling out of plots.

ጌራ: አምስረታው:	At Gera, in the Villagized place,
በገረመው: ሰፈር:	In Geremew's [Chairman's] neighbourhood
ፍሪ ዳ: ተባሎ:	Having laid down the ox [to be slaughtered]
አንቢ: አስ: ቢ ሳው:	The knife said no
ፍብ: አፍቆርባም: ብሎ::	I will not cut hearts. ¹ [I will not cause heart-break]

Another special case is that of people living near, but not in line with the new huts, and who will have to, or have already had, to rebuild them within the rigid grid system. Similarly, given that Villagization aims at bringing the population closer together, those already living in a zone of dense traditional settlements see little point in everybody having to move to a completely new Villagized location. The issue is more than purely geographical, since groups already existing in social and cooperative units tend to be devalued as a result of the emphasis on the 'modern'.²

To these factors expressed to me, the following problems can be added. The first issue concerns the rigidity of the new structure. It is cast in a mould which does not have built into it the dynamics of social units or the physical wear and tear of buildings. Traditionally, at the peak of the demographic life of a household, children would split up to form their own households. Often sons, and to a lesser extent daughters, would form an adjacent autonomous but linked unit. In the village, there is no room for such an expansion next to the first unit. Unless sufficient households leave the area vacating their huts, new households can only be tagged on at the extremities of villages which, in the village under review, would mean eating increasingly into agricultural land. Furthermore, a common sight in the old settlement pattern is an abandoned hut next to a used one, many of the stones of the former having been used in the building of

¹ The poem, like so much Ethiopian verse, is elliptical, with *double entendre*. It is couched in terms of the slaughtering of cattle for meat, the hidden meaning is to the unhappiness caused by the division of land into different plots when the village was first laid out.

² As we will see in the case of male *mehaber* in Chapter Nine. Also see Dore, 1971 on the difficult relationship between Socialist and traditional forms of cooperation.

the latter. When the present Villagized huts need to be re-built, the operation will be much more awkward, especially if there is rigid adherence to the grid formation.

A second point concerns policy implementation, and reflects many of the population's complaints. The campaign has, characteristically, been ambitious and quantity oriented. One line of criticism outsiders tend to make is that instead of bringing people to an empty and potentially more 'backward' environment, the change would have been more appealing if the necessary huts, accompanying fences and other requirements, as well as a few services, were installed first, thus acting as an incentive to people - the carrot rather than the stick.¹ The Government reply is that such a policy would need time and money, and that if people are first brought together in villages, their integration itself can be more easily harnessed towards development. Yet even if this is the rationale, the attempt to speed up the pace of change causes considerable hardship and the lack of consideration for the problems of individuals and particular communities mars the general goal of improving conditions.

Nonetheless, in Gera, there is no significant open opposition to Villagization. This is not only because of the acceptance of higher authority, but also, as already argued, because, in the population's conception of things, there is a clear association between the Government's provision of services and aid, 'them helping us', and the Government's extraction or other interferences, 'them taxing us and telling us what to do'. It may be put in another way: 'Even if we don't like it we will do whatever the Government asks since they are helping us to 'stand', to 'survive'. In particular because of the aid the peasants have received and expect to receive, most are not willing to oppose the Villagization policy actively; they are bound by rules of reciprocity and are therefore not disposed to disobey, though large numbers will 'opt out' if they are given a chance.

Reports from other areas suggest that people may fear that Villagization is the first step to collectivization of land or cattle. No such fears were expressed to me in Gera, nor was the question of loss of independence ever discussed. However, many people explained their decision partly in terms of the belief that those that did not Villagize

¹ The same type of logic induced the Relief and Resettlement Commission in its first Resettlement campaign to move men first, thinking of laying the grounds, for later settlement by their families as a whole; however, this policy was later abandoned because of its hardships for single men's and settlers' sense of dislocation. A. Pankhurst, 1988 (a).

would be likely to be discriminated against in the unpopular selection of people for Resettlement. Villagization seemed to them the better of two evils.

2. Benefits

The population waxes less than lyrical when it comes to listing or explaining the benefits of the new villages. There are vague answers, like *shegga new*, 'it is nice', or more specific ones, such as 'it brings people together', and 'awakens them.' In general favourable comments resulting from Villagization refer mainly to the potential for improvement and development. The respondents also day-dreamed about a clinic, electricity and other facilities being provided in the near future.

Provision of water, nearer and cleaner, education in the form of the literacy hut nearby, and the school under construction in 1989 are already visible changes. Households are now also nearer the mill, the Service Cooperative shop, and the administrative centre, where various registrations occur and where the infant vaccination and feeding programmes occasionally take place. Valuable facilities have undoubtedly come to the Peasants' Association, yet to date, these have not come as part of Villagization as such, but rather as part of the general and preceding State policies, those discussed in more general terms in Chapter Four. Villagization is in fact an extension of many of the administrative and service-oriented programmes of the Revolutionary Government. It is therefore impossible to look at the benefits of Villagization in isolation.

Associated with the view of Villagization as part of the 'modern' way of life is the evidence of people shaking off some traditions. Some women used to burn tobacco, *tumbuho*, [*Nicotiana tabacum*], outside their huts as a way of honouring the *adbar* spirit, on Wednesdays and Fridays (see Chapter Nine). In Gera at least, it is unheard of to have such smoking in the new habitat of the village. The way this is expressed is that it is good that the area has not 'learnt' the tradition. Only if a compound is used to having the smoke, does it bring bad luck to stop the custom and 'it is a good thing moving to an area where you don't have to bother.' Another example given was that the ceremonial slaughtering of livestock was consciously reduced after households had Villagized.

It therefore seems as if the move to the Villagized settlement tends to be used as an excuse to give up a custom which is seen by its practitioners to be 'outmoded' or more fundamentally perhaps, too expensive. Men and women in the village both talk about

the abandoning of such practices in a positive light, and represent it as a gain in liberty. However, as we shall see, since the spirits are a form of support to women where loss is felt, it is by them, rather than by men. Ironically, the change is probably more a consequence of impoverishment, i.e., an economizing measure rather than a positive reaction to the Government's policies.

For those formerly living in more isolated forms of settlement the benefits of Villagization are significant. The social and economic benefits of a denser population are particularly important to smaller households that would otherwise have fewer choices, essentially because of labour shortage. For the community as a whole Villagization increases the speed with which distress can be dealt with, a point made in the context of the 1985 famine when aid distribution in more scattered settlements in other areas of Ethiopia was hampered by inaccessibility. More generally, any call for help is likely to be heard and people are easily available when someone is ill or having difficulties during child birth and has to be carried to the clinic in Mehal Meda. This is an immense benefit to female-headed households which are otherwise particularly vulnerable. Villagization is likewise seen as lessening the dangers of such factors as thieving by those outside the community, and as discouraging hyenas from attacking livestock.

Information is also more quickly shared and passed on. The villagers are often one of the first groups to know about a new policy or event affecting the whole Peasants' Association, for example when officials are due to come and visit the area, when there are changes in the rules governing the use of the *Gwassa* pasture land, or when new stocks have arrived at the Service Cooperative shop.

There seems to be a good deal more borrowing and informal trading taking place in the village than previously, even when compared with the 'old village' communities. This includes the borrowing of household goods, such as a kettle for pouring beer, a Chinese teacup for an extra guest at coffee time,¹ and borrowing food, e.g. asking for some spice when your neighbour has just made some and yours has run out. It also includes the sharing of tasks: helping each other with the milling, leaving the children in

¹ The change is partly a function of need, since the necessary equipment often has not reached all households, some being retained in the old settlement, etc, but whatever the reason it has increased interaction. In Ethiopia the local beer is commonly poured out from metal kettles, used almost exclusively for this purpose. Likewise, small handle-less teacups made in Taiwan and mainland China are used as coffee cups.

someone's hands when collecting dung or water, getting someone else to buy onions from the market.

In terms of communal work campaigns, people in the new village have an advantage in that they usually have less distance to travel to the work area. This is because the village is near the administrative and geographical centre of the Peasants' Association, and, increasingly, the services for which labour is needed tend to be established for village use. Also, in terms of the meetings often preceding the work, instead of coming early and sitting around until others and more specifically the Leadership arrive, the villagers can get on with their own lives until names begin to be called and then they can slip in with the others. I often heard bantering between those inside and those outside the village, the former mocking the latter for having to hang around, and those outside the village, for once, bemoaning their fate and the distance back to their huts.

If pressed, women admit that as a result of Villagization they are more likely to meet people, and drink coffee with others rather than remain alone. Spinning is now often undertaken by small groups of women. The potential of the close settlement is appreciated, and there is even talk of starting an internal *ik'ub*, a sort of women's rotating club in which each member in turn buys enough cotton or wool to make one garment, allocates the raw material to her fellows, and hosts a weekly social gathering.¹ The difference in lifestyle brought about by Villagization is greater for women than for men, in that the latter formerly had more possibilities for socializing than women whose lives revolved more closely around their own homes. Women are now less likely to be isolated and enjoy getting together. The reverse of the coin, however, is the danger of a greater amount of friction resulting from closer living, see for example the poem on page 98. In addition, socializing has not universally increased, and there are some women in the village who rarely communicate with more than a few neighbours.²

Some forms of household are also made more stable than would otherwise be the case. For example, for a man whose wife has gone to her relatives to give birth, it is easier to survive alone in the village than in a more isolated social structure. He can rely on a larger network of neighbours and relatives, and this reduces the pressure on his wife to

¹ For more on *ik'ub* and a comparison with *mehaber* and the State run Women's Association see H. Pankhurst, 1990 (b).

² See Arnesson, 1986.

give birth in the village, away from her kin. It could equally be argued that increased social contacts contribute to social stress and, therefore, to the break-up of households. This would occur, for example, because there are greater possibilities of infidelity and its greater visibility. It is not clear which way the change is working, and it is my view that any aggregate conclusion would be unsatisfactory in that it would fail to take account of the variety of experience.

Villagization increases the income-earning possibilities of some households, though there have been some attempts at prohibiting activities associated with enterprise and social stratification. Trade takes place regardless. As we shall see in Chapter Six, some women earn money by producing and selling *arek'i*, a distilled alcoholic drink made from barley, or the simpler and cheaper local barley beer, or by buying *arek'i* in town and selling it at a profit in the village. These types of activity went on in the old settlements, but since the new village has a denser population the income yielded is likely to be higher. There are no crafts-people such as blacksmiths, potters, or even weavers, and the village relies on Mehal Meda and neighbouring Peasants' Associations for such services. Villagization here, as elsewhere, may lead to the emergence of local artisans.

One of the results of Villagization, and no doubt a component of the logic behind the policy, is its tendency to reduce differences in the number, size and quality of houses between rich and poor. Some differences nevertheless still remain and, for example, it would not be difficult to guess which is the Chairman's abode. Finally and perhaps flippantly, abandoning an old house for a new one also has a number of health-related advantages, namely that many bugs are left behind and it takes time for the migrant bug population to reproduce in quantities approaching those in areas inhabited for a long time. For example, at present, the flea population is said to be smaller in the Villagized huts than in the older huts in the area.¹

In summary, it is too early to tell what the long-term social effects of Villagization will be. At present an increase in both socializing and friction² can be observed. Which way the balance tilts is difficult to evaluate for the individual let alone for the

¹Though, in this respect, churches are the greatest offenders. Communicable diseases are, furthermore, a greater danger in the more densely populated new villages.

² I once heard an Ethiopian official observe that, given the Menz people's affection for their sticks and for fights, Villagization was 'like bringing fire next to a mountain of kindling.' On views about the character of the Menz peasantry, see Levine, 1965; Reminick, 1973.

community. My observations, however, suggest that both on a day to day basis and even more so in emergencies, the benefits of close and numerous neighbours is appreciated more than resented. Having stated this, it is also true that to date, a feeling of close unity or community has not yet formed. Cultural events are still celebrated by the old groupings. Thus, there was no single village bonfire light to honour the day of the Finding of the True Cross, *Mesk'el*, which most villagers celebrated in their old localities. Likewise for Christmas, *Genna*, the villagers did not get together to buy one ox or cow for slaughtering. Instead those living in the village bought a part of the ox or cow slaughtered in the area in which they used to reside. In the organizational context the Peasants' Association *corvéé* labour is also still organized in the old zone system. At present villagers who used to live in one particular zone attend with that group, whilst their present neighbours also work with their old unit. It should be emphasized, however, that the village is still only in its third year, arguably too young for group consciousness to have developed.

3. The politics of Villagization and the question of coercion

The polarization of opinion about Ethiopian Government policies is nowhere more extreme than on questions concerning the use of coercion. The conventional Western view conjures up the bleakest picture of physical and physiological coercion,¹ whilst Ethiopian Government publications speak only of popular actions and voluntary decisions, labelling any discussion on coercion as subversive.

It is important in this context to remember that the machinery of control and coercion² exists within the Peasants' Association structure - it is not a factor which can be attributed specifically to Villagization. Furthermore, I would argue that since Villagization at the local level was organized by the Peasants' Association rather than by cadres or other outsiders, the policy was implemented with consideration towards the population's feelings, since the Peasants' Association administrators themselves had to abide by the new directives and were the first victims having to Villagize themselves.

Variations in methods adopted throughout the country are considerable, and depend *inter alia* on the Peasants' Association structure and the freedom with which the

¹ See the *Survival International Report*, 1988: 29-36.

² Coercion is no new factor in the lives of peasants in Ethiopia, R. Pankhurst, 1961, 1965.

Association could act.¹ In Gera, there was a policy of encouraging the population to take part in the new scheme, and people willing to fill the eighty houses were found with only a limited amount of pressure. The whole hut building procedure was moreover slower in Menz than in most areas, because of the tradition of stone walled dwellings: replacing these was a more time-consuming venture² and the scale of the campaign in the area was therefore smaller. Since most people were not to be settled in one go, those particularly antagonistic to the policy have so far kept away from it, though they are inevitably involved in *corvée* labour. How the dissenters are treated in the future remains to be seen, though it may be hoped that if the campaign is expanded to include everyone, the provision of more services and familiarity with the whole concept will reduce much of the trauma and conflict during displacement.

In terms of psychological pressure, it is reported that at the initial meeting on Villagization in Gera, the officials who came from Mehal Meda to speak about the campaign, used the threat of Resettlement against those who refused to Villagize. However, the threat is an empty one, at least until a greater proportion of the Peasants' Association members have actually been given the chance to register their names for occupation in the Villagized communities.

An enforcement problem did arise in the area during the settling-in stage of the programme, with people refusing to occupy the new houses and a few fines of thirty *birr* being handed out. The strategies for delay are numerous. As we have seen, lack of cattle-sheds was given as a reason by many; furthermore, some specialize in a pretence of occupation when necessary. They come and visit their Villagized huts, sweeping it out and leaving some objects inside. Should, for example, the Peasants' Association leadership learn that a Party official will be visiting the area, a pretence of occupation can be orchestrated. Other households have someone, related or otherwise, in occupation. Another strategy adopted by at least two people has been to take their time over the roofing of the huts, the delay and exposure of the half-finished building to the weather resulting in part of the wall collapsing and further delays. This has happened twice in the case of one person's hut.

¹ The *Survival International Report*, 1988, divides its findings into two. The Villagization programme in 'stable' areas, and that in 'war zones'. It is much more critical in its findings in the latter area. The point about different experiences is also discussed by Clapham 1988.

² Stone is a better protection against the cold. In any case, the shortage of wood in the area would have prevented a change to walls made of wood. As it is the shortage of wood even when used only for roofing is causing a problem.

During my stay in the village I never witnessed the use of physical coercion in the Villagization context, and no complaints along those lines were made to me. This is perhaps not surprising in that the Chairman himself is more often than not in his old house, and some of the Committee members have as yet not even made an appearance in the village: they are therefore not in a position to put pressure on others. The awareness that they 'should' be there nevertheless remains, and discomfort is felt by those 'not obeying the Government instructions', whilst those who have settled tend to mock and jibe at the absentees.

CONCLUSION

A Villagization programme would be inconceivable coming from within the society because of the considerable initial and perhaps even long-term costs to individuals. The policy could only have come from outside the society. Villagization is but one in a series of rural programmes undertaken by the present leadership of the Ethiopian Republic. In keeping with the historical record on such matters, it is a paternalistic, top-down policy conceived of for the rural population, by urban officials. According to one researcher, 'it provides the most striking evidence of the Revolutionary regime's capacity to re-order life in the countryside.'¹

Reaction to the Villagization policy by the population was, at the time of research, almost universally unfavourable, in particular because of a perceived incompatibility between the livestock economy and dense human population. Many households were involved by and large successfully, in delaying and 'wait and see' tactics. However, some people expressed a will to believe in its future beneficial potential, for them there was a disjunction in time between perceived costs and benefits. This was summarized to me by the comment *yemminimotew, lijochachin indinoru new* - 'we are dying that our children may live'.

A reversal of opinions over time can also be found within the community, in that in the initial, building stages it was the richer sections of the peasantry that could more easily afford the change, and the poorer population who found the burden of construction the greatest. Once the work has been completed and the cost expended, it was, in general, the richer population which had the most to fear, and the poorer ones who had the most to gain, or the least to lose, from the closer density of settlement.

¹ Clapham, 1988: 177.

The change is greatest for women who tended, previously, to be more isolated than men because of their domestic duties. Some comment favourably, arguing that socialization has increased, others complained about the increased friction. The benefits were felt particularly by some female-headed households. To list but one final comment from all the other patterns described, the policy has been resented least by the youth who find numerous companions, and most by the elderly with both emotional and material attachments to their old homesteads.

The possibility of Villagization bringing with it an improvement in life-style is clearly accepted, and in Gera these improvements are materializing, though the gap between the goals as presented by the Government and the gains as voiced by the population remains. The majority of the complaints centre around short-term dislocation and the way the programme was implemented. There are, however, fundamental complaints about the long-term incompatibility of human and livestock habitation in the new format, and to a lesser extent about the increased distance from agricultural land.

As we have seen, in assessing the impact of Villagization it is important to set this policy in the context of other actions or inactions of the State and to disaggregate the population. It is possible that in future the distinction between Villagization and collectivization might be erased with all villages being collectivized, but it is equally possible that collectivization, which is in any case very slow, will be shelved¹ and the new spatial structure used to bolster market forces, and to encourage petty commodity and service production, trade etc. Given the current political instability in the country, it would be premature to hazard anything more on Villagization. National, as well as international forces, have still to determine the extent to which Villagization will continue, and the extent to which, if it does, it becomes the means to imposing stricter Socialism or creates the potential for greater economic liberalisation.

¹ Recent proclamations made in Addis Ababa point this way. See Epilogue.

6 THE HOUSEHOLD ECONOMY

Introduction

I. Arable land: cultivation and processing

II. Livestock and grazing land

III. The wool economy

IV. The dung economy

V. Trade

Conclusion

INTRODUCTION

The first two empirical chapters considered the State on the basis of the infrastructural and administrative interventions it has attempted. One of the conclusions reached is that radical transformation has not been achieved at the local level. The subsequent chapters move on to a description of the central activities and attitudes prevalent in the society. Only where relevant is the impact of the State discussed.

In Menz, as is the case in much of Ethiopia, the household retains a primary economic and social role. Production, reproduction and consumption are all oriented towards the household unit, and much work takes place around the homestead.¹ Chapter Three introduced us to some of the empirical features of households in Menz. The subject of this chapter is to develop these in terms of how people meet their needs, and the resources on which households depend.

¹ Household economies vary considerably between different societies in Ethiopia. Although this thesis is about the Menz population, much applies more generally to Amhara society. In some other societies, such as the Gurage, the scene is very different both in terms of work done and the sexual division of labour, Shack: 1966.

The discussion starts with a consideration of arable land and cultivation, and moves on to issues of livestock and grazing land, wool processing, the fuel economy, and trade. All activities mentioned after the initial section on cultivation are ones which are central to the household, yet ones which tend to be ignored in both studies and policy formation. Not surprisingly, it is in these issues located away from the male preserve of cultivation, in which women's labour plays a key role.

All the quantitative data in this chapter should be treated with caution. The need for considerable care arises from the inevitable distortions that result from the suspicion that people feel when asked to measure their resources, in particular when they communicate in terms of local, subjective values, while the researcher is looking for universal objective ones. For example, the answer to the question about what a household had harvested in the previous year was often 'nothing'. In fact this 'nothing' could be 'translated' to mean different number of bags of grain depending on the speaker, the year and expectations. Conscious of this problem, I found that after some discussion we could usually put a figure to the 'nothing'.

I. ARABLE LAND: CULTIVATION AND PROCESSING

1. Land holdings and types of crop
2. Production and processing
3. Cooperation in crop production and processing
4. Crop improvements
5. Crop yields and consumption needs
6. Predicaments in crop production

In this section, I will consider the crop production scene briefly, describing its major components.

1. Land holdings and types of crop

In Gera, land holdings per household varied from 0.75 to 3.2 hectares, with a mean at 1.4 hectares.¹ These holdings are fragmented into 2 to 13 plots, the mean being 5.6.² Peasants rely predominantly on one cropping season per annum, and unlike the more

¹ These figures are from my questionnaires; the sample is 94 .

² From questionnaires; the sample is 88.

usual pattern in Ethiopia, this is the *belg* or short-rains crop. The importance of the *belg* crop is repeatedly emphasized in conversations, the implication is that all is well if the *belg* is good (*kebelege*). Nonetheless, some land is also reserved for the *meher*, long-rains season. Furthermore, if the short-rains fail, most of the land will be re-ploughed and sown for the *meher*, the long-rains crop. In addition, double cropping is attempted if the short rains start early; one or two plots, (under a quarter of the land), can be planted with a relatively fast-growing crop, such as lentils. Under favourable conditions, this crop can be harvested and the land made ready for the second crop of the year sown at the beginning of the long-rains.

Averaging good and bad years, these strategies result in an estimated overall figure of 55% of land holdings being sown for the short-rains, the yield being proportionally greater, at 60% of the total.¹ The following tables based on the questionnaires I administered, give the areas sown and yields obtained in 1988, a bad year, compared to what respondents would expect from past experience in a 'good' year. Areas are given in *t'ind*, approximately a quarter of a hectare, and yields are measured in *silicha*, a sack, approximately half a quintal.

Table IV. Area sown in *t'ind*, during short and long rains

	Area sown, 1988		Area sown, 'good year'	
	Short rains	Long rains	Short rains	Long rains
Barley	284	71	322	82
Wheat	29	96	46	100
Beans	4	95	10	100
Other	18	22	22	38
Total	335	284	400	320

Table V. Yield in *silicha*, during short and long rains

	Yield, 1988		Yield, 'good year'	
	Short rains	Long rains	Short rains	Long rains
Barley	279	76	1405	362
Wheat	30	86	158	329
Beans	8	58	31	426
Other	14	10	31	79
Total	331	230	1625	1196

¹ The total number of *t'ind* plots were added up and the *belg* was taken as a percentage of the total. The calculations were made for the 1988 crop (a bad year), and a good year's crop separately, the figure in the text being an average of these two figures.

The main crops in the area are, in decreasing order of importance, barley, wheat, beans, lentils, peas and castor oil seeds. By far the majority of peasants rely only on the first three, barley being the single most important and basic requirement for subsistence. In 1988, barley accounted for an estimated 84% and wheat 9% of the *belg* harvest. The figures for the *meher* were: barley 33%, wheat 37% and beans 25%.

Three varieties of barley are still in existence in the area. These are called *ferké*, *mawgé* and *t'emej*. The last of these is no longer grown in the Peasants' Association, though it can be purchased at the market in town. It is said to be the most temperamental of the three crops, and one which most people can no longer afford to gamble with. It is the variety of barley with the largest grain, the one that would be reserved for direct consumption, roasted and eaten as a snack, as *k'ollo*. *Mawgé* is another variety of barley which is becoming rare. Most of the barley crop is now of the *ferké* variety. The *ferké* and *mawgé* are often contrasted in the following ways: *mawgé* is white, *ferké* black. *Mawgé* is sown mainly in the long-rains and needs careful treatment, in particular it is often grown on the *dej-merét*, the garden plot on which, as we shall see in the section on dung, ash is sometimes strewn as a form of fertilizer. *Ferké* is a more reliable crop which can be sown in either season, though it is normally sown in the short-rains. *Mawgé* is preferred for uses such as in *dabbo*, bread; *injera*, savoury pancakes; *injera* sandwiches called *annebaberro*, and *besso*, a kind of crumble or dough made from barley. *Ferké* is less highly prized and of lower value at the market. It is used to make *t'ella*, the local beer, and for the previously mentioned dishes when there is no *mawgé*. In the most important crop, barley, there is thus a clear trend towards less diversification and increased dependence on the most reliable, though the least preferred, of the barley varieties.

A similar picture emerges when we look at beans and wheat, the main supplements to the barley diet. The bean crop is the complement to barley in subsistence consumption, though it is needed in smaller quantities. The beans are ground and then used as the basis for *shiro*, the sauce with which the barley *injera* is consumed. Lentils are used for the same purpose.¹ Beans are also eaten fresh, toasted, or dried and then boiled or toasted. In times of scarcity their use is reserved for *shiro*, since this was a way of making it 'go further'. Wheat is considered a luxury good, reserved mainly for use as

¹ Lentils, however, cannot be relied upon. People say of this pulse, *libs yelewim*, 'it does not have clothes', meaning that the pod is very thin and can therefore be easily damaged by excessive water and frost.

bread on ceremonial occasions. Respondents suggested that less wheat is being sown, both because plots are reserved for the more vital barley crop, and because wheat is the dominant form of food-aid and can therefore be obtained without cultivation.

2. Production and Processing

Land is ploughed twice in preparation for cultivation. The harder ploughing is done in September at the end of the long rains. The easier and quicker ploughing task occurs in February/March after two to five days of rain, for land prepared for the *belg*, and in June/July, for a *meher* crop. It takes a man and his oxen about six days to plough a field of approximately one quarter of a hectare. Oxen are the preferred animal for this task, though other livestock, such as horses and cows, (which do not feature in accounts by nineteenth century travel writers)¹ are increasingly used.

Work'u, a neighbour, commented that it would have taken him two weeks to plough his land with a pair of oxen, but it took him three weeks with one horse and one ox. The plough consists of a wooden shaft with a metal tip. The metal needs to be sharpened, preferably every year. Increasingly smiths in Mehal Meda provide the service at a cost of one *birr*. Eventually a new plough is bought, currently costing about 15 *birr*, and the old one is recycled into a hoe. Together, with a sickle, an axe and a threshing fork, these are the main pieces of agricultural equipment at the population's disposal.

Men do the ploughing and in Menz; it is unheard of for a woman to do so. The grain to be used as seed, about half a quintal per *t'ind*, or quarter of a hectare, is measured up and put in a sack, by women. The sowing itself is done by men. During the ploughing and sowing period, the men and the livestock used in ploughing will be fed and given water, both in the fields and at home, by the women of the household.

Peasants in Gera have comparatively little work to do on the crops between sowing and harvesting. Unlike other, mainly lower regions in the area, there are no monkeys to ward off, and the absence of trees means that birds are not much of a problem either. Mice and porcupines are the major field pests, neither of which are guarded against. High altitude results in minimal plant growth and therefore little weeding to be done.²

¹ Harriss, 1844; Parkins, 1868.

² See Appendix B for some of the questions I asked about agricultural work. 5% said they did some weeding, 3% some guarding of the land.

Only the bean crop is said to produce weeds. These tend to be pulled out by both men and women, around February, and are used as fodder.

Most harvesting is done in June/July and November/December for the *belg* and the *meher* harvests respectively. The harvesting of barley and wheat is an exclusively male activity. Harvesting of beans, peas and lentils is done by men or women, though it is also predominantly conceived of as a male activity. The threshing of both crops is often delayed until around December when the winds pick up. However, if the household is suffering from food shortages before the long rains, some of the *belg* harvest will be threshed immediately. Threshing, which is carried out using livestock, takes an estimated one day for the yield from a quarter of hectare. Men are the main threshers, though women can help with activities such as driving the livestock over the grain. Once threshed, the grain is taken into the house or put into a separate granary just outside.

There was a tradition that men put the threshed grain in *gotera* or *rik'*, large granaries. When requested, they transferred grain from these stores to *dibignit*, smaller granaries located inside the hut, which the women in the household control. I was told that the tradition is no longer upheld because there was not enough grain to necessitate such a division. Most households store the grain directly in the hut under the auspices of the head woman in the household.

The processing of grains is almost exclusively women's activity. The tasks include pre-cooking and cooking activities. Only the former will be discussed here, though, there has already been, and there will continue to be, references made to different types of food made by women, throughout the thesis. Pre-cooking tasks include setting out the grain to dry, washing, pounding and grinding - only after this, can the transformation into 'food' take place. All these activities take place in the hut or just outside it.



21 ← Frost hit, bean crop



↑ Ploughing: with horse and cow



23 ↑ Making *t'iresho*, unleavened bread

24 Collecting water →



On a sunny day the grain, spices and other goods are set out to dry on a sack outside the doorstep, somebody inside keeping an eye out, to protect the goods from marauding hens and from other possible mishaps. The grain is then pounded either by a woman on her own, or sometimes by two women working together. Men can sometimes be seen pounding, though this is only for *gés*ho, the leaf used in brewing beer.

Milling, carried out on a grinding stone, is, undoubtedly, the most laborious of household tasks. Women tend to get up early in the morning, and work for at least an hour, a couple of times a week. Below are two *ingurguro*, milling poems, that women sing to while away the time. They express the desire to get it finished quickly.

ወፍጠዬ፡ መጋል፡	My grinding stone,
ቶሎ፡ ቶሎ፡ ብለህ፡	Be quick, be quick!
አንገሳገል፡	Let us be rid of this,
ሳንተም፡ ይካልህል፡	For you too it is better
ሳትወጣ፡ ጀንበር።	Before the sun rises.

ኸረተው፡ መጋል፡	Oh come on stone grinder!
ወፍጠዬ፡ መጋል፡	My grinding stone,
አንተም፡ አጅ፡	You too, my hand,
ቢመሽ፡ ለምኒዬ፡	Why should it get late?
ቢነገ፡ ለምኒዬ።	Why should it dawn?

The Service Cooperative mill is increasingly used for the milling of barley. However, it does not always work, runs out of diesel and generally cannot be relied on. In addition, poorer households find the few cents required too expensive, and still rely on the labour of women. Other crops, beans, lentils and spices are still always milled by hand.



25 ↑ Milling



26 ↑ pounding

Both men and women are involved in the minimal vegetable culture practised in the region. Garlic and cabbages are sometimes planted at the beginning of the rains. The garlic is used in the preparation of the chilli-based spice *berberé*, and can be stretched to last the whole year. The cabbage serves for a couple of months around September. The sexual division in vegetable culture is not strict. Usually men prepare the land with a hoe, and women take over from there. The whole of this activity, however, requires little labour. In addition, the diet is supplemented a few times a year with nettles collected by women and made into a sauce.

3. Cooperation in crop production and processing

The forms of cooperation discussed here are those that operate traditionally within the society rather than ones introduced by the State in post-Revolutionary Ethiopia. The latter have already been discussed in Chapter Four.

Most agricultural work in Menz is carried out by the household, appropriate tasks being allocated by age within the overall gender division. However, in addition to the household labour, neighbours and kin are also brought in throughout the cycle of food-production. As mentioned previously, the preference for oxen in the task of ploughing, and the fact that many households do not possess a pair, results in various sharing agreements. This is usually in the form of two households taking turns to lend each other their ox without the sharing of human labour, though this might also be part of the agreement.

Livestock are also pooled when it comes to threshing. For example six households share the use of livestock in the case below:

Wesené.

The threshing took us three days last year. Work'u, Tafese and Wendwessen each put in one donkey, T'ilahun contributed his horse, we had two calves, and Belet'ew two oxen. When each person had done his, he passed on the animals to the next one, until we had all finished.

Whether the constraint is in terms of labour or capital, households cooperate in different ways as, and when the need arises. Most of this cooperation is informal, small-scale and works along gender demarcations. Thus a man will ask for the help of another in harvesting; a woman will ask for the help of another in milling. More

occasionally whole groups of people may be called in to help. In the case of Zenebech below, a woman organized a group of men to do the harvesting for her, because her husband was absent.

Zenebech.

He [husband] was not here when the harvest was ready, this was in 1978 [1986], he had gone to work in Debre Birhan. I brewed beer, made some food and asked people to come and help - this is called *debo*. We know who we can call on, and they remember too. Sometimes in the past it was up to twenty people who came, not recently though. It is good when everybody's crop is ripe at the same time, since you can be quicker this way, but it is mainly if you are in difficulties.

Thus, households rely essentially on their own labour and the sharing of tasks with a few other friends, relatives or neighbours. Large scale cooperation as a self-motivated project is increasingly unusual. However, it still occurs to help households through emergencies, as in the case above.

4. Crop improvement

In Gera, the use of natural fertilizers is limited by other requirements as we shall see in the section on dung. Likewise, before 1989 only 2% had ever used chemical fertilizers. During the time I was in Gera a meeting was called and everybody was told to buy five *birr*'s worth since the Service Cooperative was provided with fertilizer for that year; even then only 50% used the chemicals on one or two furrows.¹ Most were suspicious and antagonized by having to pay for something in which they had little confidence. This is not, I think, because they were not willing to believe that fertilizers could increase the yield, but because of the bullying involved, because money is scarce. Furthermore, the amount needed to make a difference, even were it available, would not have been thought worth investing in the land, given the high possibility of crop failure.

Rotation is a common feature of the agricultural system in Menz, both with regard to the types of crops grown on a particular plot, and in respect of which rainy season is used. In particular beans, nitrogen fixers, are never sown on the same plot twice in succession. Rotations are decided upon in conjunction with the timing of the rains, taking into consideration the characteristics of the particular plot and consumption needs. To the observer, the decisions are complicated:

¹ Sample size 94, see Appendix B.

Arega.

I have five pieces of land. At the moment one is sown with beans and two with wheat. Two have been left for the *belg*. If the *belg* is good, I use it all, but this year the *belg* did not come so I planted three of them for the *meher* season. If it rains in January, I use the bean land for lentils, otherwise I leave it until the next June and alternate it between beans and lentils. It is the *belg* that we need.

In Gera there is no practice of land clearing or burning between crops, although in the past, there was one of keeping lands fallow. This is no longer purposefully done for more than one year, though such a practice was said to have existed amongst large land-holders in the past. Where the rains fail or, more rarely, because of constraints during the ploughing season, a plot might not be used for a year. Alternatively, because of unseasonal rains and/or the decision to change from using that plot during the short rains to using it during the long ones, land might be left un-ploughed.¹ Most land is sown regularly once, and sometimes twice a year. As with natural fertilizer, the benefits of keeping land fallow are well known, as is the knowledge that the land is 'tired' from over use. Nonetheless people observe that they have no choice, given land-shortage and the poor harvests. These very conditions are increasingly forcing them to maximize the intensity of cultivation. Land left uncultivated is therefore increasingly associated with crop failure. My questions about this were answered with bitter comments such as 'Do not talk to me about fallow land, it is no longer our choice, we are forced by present conditions to keep *all* our lands fallow!'²

Monoculture is the commonly established form of production in the region, although there are some exceptions. *Masesha*, the seed used to grease the flat pan used in bread and *injera* production, grows or rather used to grow wild. Several respondents in the area commented that this had ceased, and that they were now obliged to purchase these, or other seeds used for the same purpose, in town. Peas are generally considered the lowland equivalent to beans, however, some households in the highlands sow a mixture of the two crops, using predominantly beans, but adding a proportion of peas for variety. The two crops are then harvested together. Finally, two different crops can be seen growing together on the same land if a previous season's crop, which initially failed, grows together with the new crop, the following season.

¹ For example one respondent gave me the following example of rotation for one of his plots. It includes a whole year of fallow: *meher* (beans), *belg* (nothing), *meher* (beans) *belg* (nothing) *meher* (nothing), *belg* (*ferké* barley).

² In the questionnaire, 16% said that they did sometimes keep land fallow. It was never clear however, whether this was because of irregularities of rainfall or whether it was a conscious policy. The more qualitative data suggest the former.

Terracing, though an old established practice in parts of highland Ethiopia was not much practiced in Gera, respondents suggesting that unlike areas in the immediate vicinity, the land in Gera was not steep enough to require it. Some plots were terraced by *sira zemecha* campaign labour, soon after the Revolution, and a revival of terracing seemed to be underway just before the end of my fieldwork. The revival was an attempt orchestrated by the Ministry of Agriculture to reduce soil erosion, and was introduced together with a policy of bunding, to reduce gully formation.

Irrigation of crops is also known in Ethiopia, but is rarely practised in the area. Where it exists it amounts to hand-watering of vegetable plots and tree seedlings, both those of individuals and those grown communally by the Peasants' and Women's Associations.

5. Crop yields and consumption needs

Mammo.

What can I tell you, you see the way we are... We are poorer now. Before in good years, I would harvest 15 to 20 sacks [1 sack = approximately 1/2 quintal], now little more than one sack. Even if you have land it is useless.

Ishetu.

Only in '79 [1987] did we have some respite. '77 [1985, the drought year] has not cleared up, has not let us go (*allek'ek'enim*). In '80 [1988] there wasn't even enough for the livestock. First not enough rain, and then too much when it was time to harvest. I harvested only three sacks of barley, no wheat or lentils.

The record of impoverishment is stamped on everything and everyone, but is visible particularly in the context of crop cultivation records. The data from the questionnaires makes possible a comparison between both the amount of land sown and the yield in a good and a bad year. For the *belg* and the *meher* seasons in total the aggregate data suggests that although in a bad year only 14% less land was sown the harvest was 80% lower.¹ The data also suggests that the difference between expectation and reality last year was a factor of five. The fact that the difference between good and bad years is mainly accounted for by yield suggests that the problem is essentially one of rainfall rather than constraints at the time of ploughing and sowing. In a bad year, most people

¹ The difference in plots sown was between 722 and 619 plots sown, whereas the yield difference was between 2821 and 560.

plant, but have little to show for it, the loss is therefore also a loss of investment in grain and labour.

However, some households are undoubtedly richer than others, though the degree of stratification is considerably less than in the past. In the past, rich and poor could be separated by as much as several hundred sacks. Now, the difference is less than a factor of ten. To this, however, must be added considerations such as uneven access to aid and other services and differing costs associated with the greater penetration of the State.

6. Predicaments in crop production

Even in a good year the harvest is insufficient to cover the nutritional needs of the household, let alone other expenses. In a bad year, the harvested grain can support a household merely for only a few months. Households have increasingly become reliant on other income-earning activities and on aid.

The population sees the plight of Menz first and foremost as the outcome of rain failure and land degradation. However, there are a number of other hazards to which land is susceptible. During the period of research, the barley suffered from an infestation of worms which were said to appear under dry conditions. When the rains did come they were torrential, leading to flash floods and the loss of harvested grain for some peasants who had stored their grain near rivers. Most households also found that the rains starting when the *belg* crop was ripe but had not yet been stored and covered, resulting in a proportion of the seeds sprouting (*bik'il*). These grains can be used for *t'ella*, but cannot easily be made into *injera* and their taste is disliked. The reasons behind crop failure are numerous but to mention one last one, the bean crop of a number of people often fails because of frost. This disaster happened to the person in the photograph 21 page 118, just as the crop was ready to be harvested.

• Fragmentation

The land of one household in Gera is rarely all in one place. As mentioned previously, a household's land could be subdivided into up to 13 plots. Given the small total land holdings, this considerable degree of land fragmentation would seem to be a problem, and indeed it does increase the work of treading the oxen during the ploughing, and decreases the amount of time likely to be given to each piece of land. At the national

level, the extent of land fragmentation is seen as a severe constraint by agriculturalists, economists and planners.¹

However, to the question 'Would you prefer your lands to be less fragmented?' only 27% said they would.² On the other hand, 73% preferred their land to remain fragmented, because of the benefits to be derived from micro-ecological variations in soils and climate. In other words, precautionary considerations overrode others. Indeed, even among those people who voiced a preference for less fragmentation, the reason given was that they were getting old and tired, that otherwise, it was safer to have the lands in as many different plots as possible. Fragmentation was preferred both to maximize the chances of recouping some kind of harvest, and in good years, to find plots that were suited to additional types of crops such as lentils. A policy such as land consolidation would not be appreciated in a community like Gera. What seems to be progressive from the outside is arguably undesirable at the local level.

II. LIVESTOCK AND GRAZING LAND

Livestock has always been a key element of the economy in the mixed-farming systems of Northern Ethiopia.³ Moreover, the importance of livestock could be argued to have increased as a consequence of the closer control exerted by the State since the Land Reform. Land was redistributed, but livestock was not and the State collectivization of land was conceived of as the first stage of Cooperativization, that of livestock only at a subsequent, higher level of Collectivization. Independently, the role of livestock in subsistence strategies has increased because of poor crop cultivation records. It is nevertheless important to stress the close relationship between crop and livestock production. Livestock needs to be fed from land and its products; land needs to be cultivated with livestock. The dung of the livestock fertilizes the land and the yield from the land is threshed with the livestock.

The discussion below will focus on grazing and access to fodder. However, the issue of livestock care is considerably more complex. Apart from feeding and drinking, there is the cleaning and general care of animals. In all of these activities a sexual division operates, one in which the division of work involves women more centrally than rights

¹ Fassil Gebre Kiros, 1980.

² Usable sample size 41.

³ Messing, 1957: 119.

to animals.¹ In this sphere, work allocations are not rigid, although, where there are men and women in a household, women generally do most of the dirty work required.

There are four sources of fodder available to households which will be discussed in turn. These are:

1. Private pasture lands,
2. Direct feeding of stubble after the harvest in which the private crop land is transformed into communal pasture,
3. Private fodder from the crops harvested,
4. Communal pasture lands.²

At the time of the Land Reform, most households were allocated small grass plots as well as significantly larger agricultural plots. In Gera, according to the Peasants' Association Secretary's estimates, the grass plots could be up to 450 square metres, with a mean of 100 square metres. This land was divided into as many as twelve different plots, though the mean was about three per household. Those without livestock rent out the land informally, or let the grass grow, cut and sell it.

The second source of pasture is from agricultural land on which the crop has already been harvested. There is a general acceptance that anybody is free to take their livestock to graze on such land, which provides additional fodder from the stubble that remains on the ground.

The third form, the feeding of livestock from the chaff of one's own crop, provides a greater contribution. More importantly, it is a source of fodder which can be stored for use when necessary, though in practice the shortage is such that many households often run out of cattle-feed. We have already seen that the barley crop is sometimes weeded for fodder. Cattle can eat the chaff from all harvests, whereas smaller livestock do not digest the chaff from wheat and barley and are therefore fed from the remains of other crops such as lentils and beans. The husks and chaff are generally stored in two different piles from which they are fed as required to the different forms of livestock

¹ A similar pattern emerges in other countries, see Deere, 1976.

² In the past the pattern in much of Northern Shewa was one in which cultivation plots were redistributed, whilst pasture lands were maintained in common within the descent lineage, McCann, 1984: 23. This pattern of private use of cultivation plots and communal use of pasture lands was not altered by the Land Reform.

by both men and women in the household. Once again households without livestock can use their chaff as a source of income.

In the cases mentioned so far, grazing tends to be a private household affair. Exactly who does the herding depends on the household composition. If there is a young child above the age of about nine, male or female, this child is likely to be responsible at least for the sheep and/or goats. If there are several children, they will take turns or herd together. Larger livestock generally need the supervision of an older person, male or female. During much of the year, men are likely to shoulder half the burden of looking after the livestock, husband and wife arranging to herd on alternative days. However, sometimes the burden falls more heavily on the woman and this is often a source of bitterness and quarrels. One woman remarked to another: 'There are two things I hate in this world. Herding and water.' The reference to water arose from a fear of crossing rivers because of the deadly flash floods in the rainy season, and, less dramatically, because of the daily drudgery of collecting water. But it was the first comment that the listener picked up and the conversation developed into a more general complaint about herding.

Often households with livestock that do not have the necessary labour, will lease out their animals to another household in a *clientage* scheme known as *ribbi*. Under this system, the livestock owner and the livestock herder divide equally all offspring produced during the time, and usually half the wool shorn from the sheep. According to responses to my questionnaire, 18% of the sample said that they were looking after the livestock of others and 12% claimed that someone looked after their livestock under a *ribbi* system.¹

Finally, there is the *Gwassa* land, which constitutes one of two communal pasture areas in Menz. If they so desire, all forty-two Peasants' Associations in Menz can come and graze their livestock on *Gwassa* and *Amed Gwaya*, the more distance pasture land from Gera. In practice, it is usually the adjacent Peasants' Associations which regularly resort to the area. The estimate by the Ministry of Agriculture in Menz for the *Gwassa* area is 30,000 hectares. It also estimates that in 1989 around 15,000 cattle, 50,000 sheep and 5,000 equines were brought to graze there. The value of the *Gwassa* is highly

¹ The sample for these percentages was 94. In practice given the drought and the small stocks that people had, I was not conscious of much *ribbi* being organized for cattle, but it existed at the level of sheep and goats.

appreciated, as made clear by such comments as: 'the *Gwasssa* is vital to our livestock, we cannot live without it.'

From October to July, i.e., for nine months, cattle, pack animals, sheep and goats are kept there if possible. Some households, however, always keep their donkeys, horses and mules at home. More generally, during ploughing or threshing time oxen and other livestock will be returned to the homestead, and cows that can be milked are also kept at home. In addition, pack animals are often needed, especially before the long rains, to carry brush-wood for fuel or grass for thatching. Finally, for parts of the year, sheep and goats can be herded by young children in the vicinity.

The *Gwasssa* has been a communal pasture area as long as people remember. However, there is a legend that tells of times when the land was prime agricultural land.

The *Gwasssa* area used to be of the best *t'eff* land in the region [*t'eff* (*Eragrostis-teff*), is the favoured grain in Ethiopia]. A monk called Ch'é Yohanis or Abba Tséhos, depending on source, used to live in the area. He was a very good and wise person, who took his duties seriously and would give blessings, right across the land, always arriving on time and then rushing off for his next appointment. Once upon a time, a woman gave birth claiming that she bore the child from the monk [who, by definition, was supposed to be celibate]. She swore in front of him and others that he was the father of her child, adding; 'Let me turn to stone if I tell a lie'. Even as she was swearing, she was transformed into stone. The monk, not satisfied with this act of retribution, and angry with the populace for believing her, abandoned the area with a curse saying: 'Let this land turn cold and bleak for evermore, and the rich *t'eff* become scrub'. As he spoke the weather changed, the *t'eff* became the present-day *Gwasssa* scrub-land.

Many years after the curse had reduced the area to poverty, the elders of the land decided to beg for mercy and forgiveness. They searched far and wide for the monk, but heard that he had long since died. It was then decided to search for his body and, in due course, some shepherds found his bones. These were unearthed and re-buried in the *Gwasssa*, in the hope that the monk's spirit would take pity on them. The bones were re-buried near Firkuta Kidan Mihret a long time ago, but the land has remained under the curse. It is also said that when the bones were being transported, a drop of blood fell to the ground from the skeleton. At that place, near Welde Ch'erech'er's homestead, there is now a tall fir tree. The wind picks up whenever someone touches the tree.

The above story portrays the *Gwasssa* land as a bleak and unwanted curse and it is a parable about poverty and its rationalization through self-blaming. The more prevalent attitude to the pasture area is that it was, and is, a valuable source of

pasture. In the past, in the times of *rist* tenure rights, there used to be a stratified and rigid system of rights of access, and an annual *Gwassa* tax of three *birr* at a time when the land tax was seven *birr*. Furthermore, if lowland people were found cultivating the land they would be shot at, and even if the livestock of those who had rights to the area strayed where they were not allowed, there would be trouble and/or fines. Then, as now, access would sometimes be stopped for a while to allow the grass to recuperate.¹ It was suggested several times that, unlike conditions today, in the past the restrictions would be in times of plenty, when people had enough husks from their crops to supplement their private grass plots. At such times use of the pasture would be prohibited to allow for re-growth.

Recently the Ministry of Agriculture has attempted to control and reduce the use of the area because of scrub and grass depletion. This has happened because of the sudden demand for new thatch as a result of the Villagization campaign, but also as a consequence of the drought and fodder shortages resulting in increased reliance on the land. At the beginning of my research period, there was for a couple of months an attempt to ban people sending their livestock to the area. The policy was later dropped in response to pleas from the population through the local leadership. Just before I left, there were rumours that the restriction was being re-introduced as a temporary measure, and also talk about fencing off some of the area, perhaps in connection with a UNICEF sheep-breeding project.

From time immemorial, grazing has been done communally, under a rota system, called *Gwassa tera*. Ten to twenty people join together and usually two people take turns to look after the joint livestock, lots being drawn once a year. The sheep and goat rota is usually separate from the large livestock rota. However, sheep need more supervision, given the danger of attacks by hyena and jackals, and many households prefer to keep sheep and goats outside the *Gwassa* area, for as long as possible. The amount of time each person stays at the *Gwassa* depends on the quantity of livestock they have, usually one night per head of large livestock and one night for five sheep/goats. People often stay out for two nights at a time, taking some cooked food with them. Boys can, and usually do, take their father's place once they reach their 'teens. If someone fails to turn up they are fined bread and beer or two *birr*, paid to the person who had to stay on an extra night.

¹ At present the directives banning use are coming from the Ministry of Agriculture.

Only men are involved in the *Gwassa tera*, and the idea of women going there was found preposterous. In practice, this means that households without adult men are excluded from a free and relatively abundant form of pasture. Very often such households will keep their livestock with a relative who has the required form of labour. Of those people questioned, around three-quarters had joined a *Gwassa tera*.¹

For those households that do make use of the *Gwassa tera*, there are times when part, or all, their livestock will be kept at home and will need looking after daily. Furthermore, households with only small amounts of stock are likely not to bother entering the *Gwassa tera*, and to use family labour and grass nearer at hand to feed their livestock. The forms of pasture should really be seen as complementary strategies. Which one is used depends on the season, the type of livestock, the condition they are in, and the type of labour available to the household.

To summarize, there are four different forms of pasture and fodder available to households. Very small amounts of private grass land; free grazing after the harvest on agricultural land; fodder from chaff and weeds from the bean crop and finally, communal *Gwassa* land. With the exception of the last case, herding is a private occupation by some member of the household; in the *Gwassa* case, herding is done in groups, with people taking turns and staying away with the livestock for two days.

The livestock economy is complex, with different types of animals and various requirements at specific times. Livestock are of vital importance to survival, a source of both investment and consumption. Livestock usually require the attention of all members of the household, and nowhere is the unity or disunity of the household more clearly apparent than in the complex arrangements made to ensure that the livestock are cared for, while at the same time the other labour commitments of household members are also fulfilled.

III. THE WOOL ECONOMY

The processing of cotton into cloth occurs in many parts of Ethiopia, though the increasing availability in the countryside of factory-made cloth has decreased the reliance on hand-spun and hand-woven fabrics. At present in most parts of highland Ethiopia, as in Menz, the two coexist, with some people preferring one or the other and

¹ Sample size 85, the percentage is 74.

most being happy with either. Factory-produced fabric is often not liked as much as the warmer and traditional white cloth, though the status of a 'modern' look competes with the status of the traditionally correct one. In terms of price, there is little difference between the initial cost of the two, though a home-spun cloth may be a little cheaper. This is, however, often outweighed by the longer durability of the machine-made fabric.

Cotton processing is, for most households, a use-value production undertaking. Wool processing on the other hand is also an exchange-value production. Both are based on very rudimentary technology, and in both cases spinning and preparing the fibre are considered a common project for women to take part in, at the same time as they undertake their domestic chores. Weaving on the other hand, is done by a smaller number of men, the job being considered a specialized one. It is one, however, which has the craft taboo attached to it.¹ The discussion here will concentrate in some detail on the wool economy, both because it is more central to the Menz household economy, and because it is relatively unusual in Ethiopia.

Tradition holds that wool has long been spun in Menz. In the past, and until a generation or so ago, wool was used to make *bernos*, a type of cape made from black wool, worn by the wealthier male population. These are rarely seen today, though the other predominant use as *bana*, blankets, remains a central strategy against the cold, windy and damp conditions characterising Menz and other highland parts of Ethiopia.² These *bana* are worn by boys and men as a warmer alternative to the more common cotton *gabi* or *shamma* worn in much of Ethiopia. Some men despise this apparel and prefer factory blankets which are smoother in texture and more colourful. This is particularly the case for urban population and those with higher status in the rural communities.

Women do not wear *bana*. The reasons stated by both men and women is that the material is too coarse for them, and that they prefer cotton products. However, at nights and in the huts, the distinction is forgotten, and the whole family will be found buried under as many *bana* as are available. A growing market for spun wool also

¹ This point will be returned to the section on *buda* and spirit-beliefs in Chapter Nine.

² Harris, a traveller in the mid-Nineteenth Century noted: 'This fabric ... furnishes a costume indispensable in so rigorous a climate, where the bleak unsheltered hills, swept by a cutting easterly wind, rank among the coldest portions of Abyssinia', Harris, 1844, II:348.

derives from the carpet-industry, now located almost exclusively in the urban centres, Addis Ababa in particular.¹

Sheep are shorn twice a year, around June and November. The yield per sheep from one shearing is between half and two kilograms of wool, though improved breeds produce more - up to four kilograms in the best conditions. The improved breeds also yield wool that is easier to process, especially if the sheep are washed before shearing. The male sheep yield more wool than the female. Much of the wool on the market in Menz comes from Tegulet in Shewa, and from Welo, rather than from local sheep. It is bought from there, shorn by local farmers or, more often, by people from Menz involved in seasonal out-migration. Thus, a Menz peasant sometimes leaves his home for around a fortnight, shears thirty or so sheep, gets half the wool in return for his services, leaving the other half for the sheep-owner to sell, or buying his share off him, for about ten *birr*. The total amount of wool will then be sold in Menz for at least forty *birr*.

Wool preparation is seen as women's work. It involves first picking out the dirt from the wool. The wool is then teased, beaten to fluff it up, with the use of a *degan*, a simple instrument consisting of two pieces looking like a bow and arrow, which are made of wood and gut. The wood is from a lowland tree and is bought at the market. The whole piece costs about 1 *birr* and can last a life-time. Next, spinning is carried out with a spindle, a simple piece of equipment consisting of a stick (sold for 10 cents), attached to a circular head made of wood (50 cents), on which there is a metal hook (25 cents). Women spin using their right hand to hold the spindle, rubbing it against their thigh and letting it spin for a moment whilst they hold the teased wool with their left hand. The whole spindle can last its owner a life-time, though the hook sometimes becomes loose and is lost, whilst the stick can wear thin and need replacing. The components are usually bought in the market, or made by the woman herself, or by a more knowledgeable friend.

Spinning cannot be carried out on the Saints' Days that the spinner honours. These usually number about six per month, though at the extreme they can be as many as thirteen.² In addition, Saturdays and Sundays are Holy Days. Most women consider

¹ There is also a small urban market for white wool *bana* that are then embroidered, for example, with a lion motif and a geometrical design on the borders.

² Lideta, Abbo, Hanna, Mikaél, Egziéram, Kidane Miret, Gebriél, Maryam, Giorgis, Tekle Haymanot, Medan Alem, Ammanuél, Bale Weld. See Chapter Nine, for more on the religious influence on work.

only the spinning as disrespectful on Holy Days, and continue with the rest of the wool preparation, though a few women consider all such work unacceptable.

The most time-consuming activity is the spinning itself. After it is completed, the wool is wound into large balls, the separate pieces being knotted together to form a *cub*, or ball. One *cub* weighs about a kilograms. White wool sells at up to four *birr*, brown or mixed wool, up to three *birr*. The work yields a profit of between half and one *birr* a kilogram. At this stage it is often taken to be sold at the market. When these balls of wool reach the weavers they are wound onto bobbins ready for the weaver. The winding is considered women's work.

Women can spend up to fifteen days per month, six hours a day, on wool processing, i.e., ninety hours work. Of the fifteen days, six are on the *fato*, separating out the wool, seven days *fetil*, spinning, and two day *aker*, winding it up.

Men's work in wool processing consists of shearing the sheep (at the beginning of the process) and then (at the other end), weaving and 'felting' the wool. Far less than half the men are involved. Of these most are occupied with felting and they are young adults. The felting is a way of shrinking the garment by putting it in water and stamping on it. Near the rivers, a basin is constructed with one side built up into a short wall of stone. The basin retains water and the wall is used for support as the men felt the material. A *bana* bought for twenty *birr* can be trodden and sold for up to twenty-six *birr*. Men are, therefore, likely to receive between two and six *birr* profit from their labour. It takes about two days to felt one *bana*, which is then stretched out, held in place with stones and left to dry; this work ceases during season.

Weavers of the *bana* are less numerous than the felters but more so than cotton weavers. The 'woollen' job is easier and quicker than the more delicate cotton weaving. It takes a weaver less than a day to work wool for one *bana*, and he is usually given up to three *birr* for the work. The pieces are about twenty-five centimetres wide by six metres long as they come off the loom, and are then cut and sewn together by men to make the *bana*. One *bana* is two by three and a half metres pre-felting and about one and a half by three metres once felted. It is made from between six and eight kilograms of wool. The traditional wooden loom costs about thirty *birr*.

When questioned, many men do not admit that they weave. This is partly the consequence of the general taboo against crafts in Amhara society, and the associated

beliefs that artisans work spells, have the evil-eye, etc. It is also partly a reflection of the fact that many people only occasionally practise their skills and therefore do not think it worthy of mention. All men involved in some aspect of the wool economy complain that the amount of time they can devote to the work has fallen because of *sira zemecha*, communal labour (see discussion in Chapter Four).

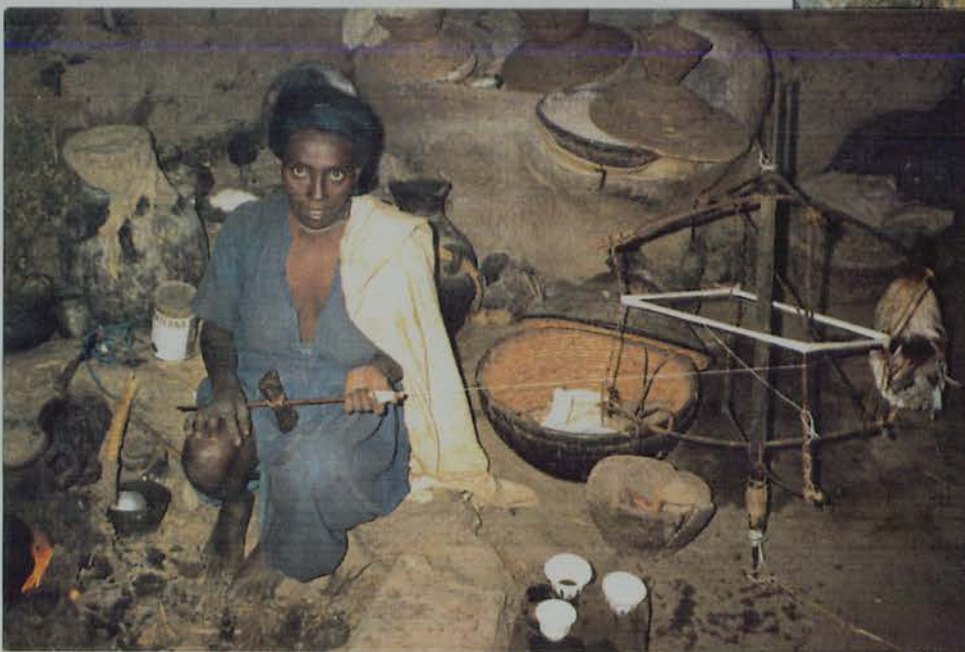
Carpet-making has been practised by the Amhara since at least the first decade of the Nineteenth Century but has become increasingly significant in recent times. There are half a dozen places in Mehal Meda where carpets are made, the spun wool being bought from the market. The carpets produced are sold there for about half the price at which they are sold in Addis Ababa. The relatively modern activity does not have a rigid sexual division of labour attached to it.

In terms of marketing the processed product, women tend to sell the spun balls directly as a source of income, rather than accumulate it for processing by men into a complete blanket for home use or for sale. They comment that although the latter option gives the higher profit, households cannot afford to wait, since they are reliant on the weekly income as a source of cash. Women in a household can spin between half and three kilograms a week. They tend to work the mixed wool more often, as it is more readily available, although the profit that can be made from white wool is usually greater.

There are various strategies for stretching the profits made. For example, women can spin parts of the wool very coarsely and hence more quickly, or they can increase the weight of the wool by putting it in water, and finally they sometimes hide pieces of stone or un-spun dirty wool in the centre of the *cub*, thus increasing its weight.

The *cub* are sold by men or women at the market in the nearest town, usually at the Saturday market. Adult household members, e.g., husband and wife, often take turns, though there are other considerations, such as health, preference, and other work in need of attention on the market day. In general even when it is the men that do the selling, the income is seen as women's. The story is different if the *bana* is sold, in which case, even where the women have been the main producers of the article, men have a greater control over the larger sum of money.

27, 28, 29, 30 Cotton and wool processing



The trade in the complete *bana* is usually undertaken by men. Price is determined by size and colour as well as whether the *bana* are trodden or not. A large, white, trodden one can be sold for up to sixty *birr*. The minimum cost of an un-trodden mixed-colour *bana* is about eighteen. A pure black one lies somewhere in-between. If used on the bed a *bana* lasts about ten years; if it is worn it lasts about half that. The *bana* are sold both locally, and in Welo, as well as further north.

There is not much seasonal change in the prices of wool and *bana*. The cheapest season is just after the time when the sheep are shorn (June and November) and the more expensive when the wool is growing. The trade in *bana* has gained momentum over the last decade. People used to make them for themselves, and then leave the rest of the wool to rot. Now the Menz population is much more involved in making and selling any quantity of wool it can acquire. The change is probably a reflection of both a gradual impoverishment resulting in the need to look beyond crop production for household survival, and an increased awareness of the market potential of wool production.

Prices of *bana* have doubled in the last five years, because of an increase in the price of wool and increased profits to weavers and felters. The inflation in un-spun wool, however, seems to be less than that experienced by other goods. For example, the price of sheep in the period has tripled and grain prices have more than doubled. In particular, the cost of goods imported into the area has risen sharply, and is associated with the increase in the urban population and a greater involvement in exchange circuits by the peasantry. The relatively low inflation in the cost of wool is probably a reflection of an increase in supply because more wool is coming onto the market as other forms of income are threatened by drought and Government policy and because of the UNICEF sheep breeding projects.

Significantly, however, the profits to the women spinners do not seem to have increased in line with the profits to male labour inputs and the increases in the price of wool, let alone with the higher inflation rates elsewhere in the economy. The explanations are firmly rooted in the position of female labour within this society, as elsewhere, and the unspecialized nature of their skills. The trend is one in which the profits that they reap have been declining, although the wool economy is becoming more important in supporting an increasingly precarious existence, and although the bulk of the labour in this economy is women's.

To conclude, the wool economy is central to Menz, though it has rarely been analysed and is in many ways invisibilized at the level of the society. It is a regular form of modest income for most, if not all, women. The activity is undertaken at the same time as domestic and reproductive activities, for example while keeping an eye on an infant and on the cooking pot. The income women derive from the work is a regular and relatively reliable one (e.g., in comparison with the income from butter, eggs and young chicks, also considered as women's income, which is dependent on the animals' reproduction). Though men might be the ones selling the wool, it is still perceived as women's money, and they can exert control over it, especially when sold in the form of *cub*.

The wool economy is the most flourishing manufacturing sector in the area. It is also the only such activity that embraces almost every rural household. As such it plays a role in reducing the reliance on crop production not only for direct domestic consumption but also to meet exchange and cash requirements. Revenue from the wool production is significant in providing a source of money to meet the considerable weekly cost of the purchase of coffee and of a few other outlays. In general, the local market for spun wool seems to be a good one, with possibilities for expansion. In addition, there is room for increased sales by diversifying into carpets, and coloured and decorated *bana* production. This would complement the existing large trade in a rural 'basic' good with a growing trade in a parallel urban 'luxury' good.

In terms of the sexual division of labour it should be noted that men's involvement in crafts, be it wool or cotton processing, is a specialized activity which only a few men undertake, whereas women's involvement is more general, and though the time spent on the activity is considerable, it is a part-time occupation which is integrated into the domestic economy. This reflects a general comment that can be made about the sexual division of labour in the household, namely that female labour covers a greater range of activities than male labour. In one day most men do a fewer number of 'jobs' than women, which suggests that men are placed on a more specialized terrain, and this in turn, according to economic theory, would suggest that they are able to be more productive in their tasks. This comment is sometimes made in connection with the introduction of modern technology and the increase in a productivity gap.¹ Here it exists even despite the most rudimentary of technologies.

¹ For example, Boserup, 1970: 213.

Even considering the traditional rudimentary technology, that which is used by men, the loom, is considerably more advanced than that used by the women, the spindle, the difference in costs of implements being at least twenty-fold. However, the amount of practice needed to learn how to operate the loom is considerably less than that needed to be able to spin, using just a spindle.¹ Also ironically, the weaving done by men is considered a craft, and as such has a taboo associated to it because it is not agricultural production, while, on the other hand, spinning is not considered a craft and is therefore not viewed negatively. Nevertheless, spinning is not highly esteemed either, because of its location in a female sphere of the sexual division of labour.

IV. THE DUNG ECONOMY²

1. Uses of dung
 - i. Fertilizer
 - ii. Building
 - iii. Fuel
2. Kinds of use and amount of preparation
3. Users' choices

It is part of conventional wisdom to assume that vocabularies of any language expand in proportion with the importance to its population. The example often cited is that of the Inuit Eskimos who have a large array of terms for snow. In Menz Amharic there are at least fourteen terms for what is called dung or manure in English. The Amharic terms qualify the kind of livestock producing the dung, and the forms in which it is collected and used.³ The following table provides a list of some of the words used.

¹ The Baptist mission tried to introduce spinning wheels in one community in Menz but they had to leave before the wheels were established, these have been kept locked in a store.

² An earlier and longer version of this section has been published under the same title, see Bibliography.

³ I translated parts of this section which I had written up for a conference to a couple of my women friends in the village. Both laughed, and, when I had finished, one commented: 'That is right, you have written well, it is only chicken droppings that you have left out.' (The Amharic was: *Tikikil, bedemb new yet'safshiw, yedoro terekus bicha new yek'erresh*).

Table VI. List of dung terms

• <i>Azeba</i>	Wet ox and cow dung, same as <i>ibet</i> ;
• <i>Bet'et'</i>	Wet or dry sheep or goat dung;
• <i>Cubbet</i>	General term, usually referring to all dried dung;
• <i>Dirdir</i>	Dried dung-cakes piled up into a circular stack;
• <i>Fig</i>	Fine dung-powder of crumbly consistency from sheep and goat, horse, mule and donkey;
• <i>Gelebuna</i>	Ox and cow dung collected off the ground outside the hut, not made into cakes but left to dry directly;
• <i>Godeda</i>	Usually sheep and goat dung collected outside the hut in the area where livestock are kept enclosed overnight. The term is sometimes also used for donkey, mule and horse dung dug-up from inside the hut;
• <i>Gucho</i>	The term refers to small wigwam-like stacks of dung, and is also used for the dung itself. Dung from ox, cow, horse, mule and donkey;
• <i>Ibet</i>	Same as <i>Azeba</i> ;
• <i>K'imit'</i>	Same as <i>Azeba</i> ;
• <i>Sheleshel</i>	Same as <i>Gelebuna</i> ;
• <i>T'ibot</i>	Impure dung which has earth or mud mixed with it;
• <i>T'ift'if</i> or <i>T'ift'afo</i>	Dung cakes made from the dung of all livestock, those made during the rains specified as <i>yemeher t'ift'if</i> , long-rains cakes, or <i>yebelg t'ift'if</i> , short-rains cakes;
• <i>Yeahiya fando</i> or <i>fandiya</i>	Wet or dry donkey, horse or mule dung, before it has crumbled into <i>fig</i> .

Dung plays a central and complex role in the economy and society of many countries, but has been the subject of little research.¹ This is probably because of a combination of its connotations, an unfamiliarity with its usage which invisibilizes it, and perhaps also because dung-work has a low position in the division of labour and is often seen as women's work.

¹ My thanks to Patricia Jeffery for alerting me to the issue early on in my research. See Jeffery, *et al*, 1989.

In Ethiopian society there is an ambivalence in the conception of dung as a whole as well as differences in attitudes to the different kinds of dung. On the one hand it is excrement, considered as dirty, and unpleasant to deal with. On the other, it is vital to the economy and is used as a metaphor for prosperity.

The role and uses of dung in Gera will be presented here. The area suffers from a shortage of wood, and dung is therefore the major source of fuel. Dung is also employed in the building of huts and furniture, and other household articles, as well as valued as a fertilizer. These uses are usually complementary to the value of dung as fuel, since ash, the by-product from the burned dung can be re-used in building and as fertilizer. However to some extent, dung can be applied directly in building and as fertilizer, in which case the uses are exclusive. Unlike Chinese and other East Asian societies, Amhara society does not utilize human dung.¹ The livestock used in the dung economy are oxen, cows, horses, mules, donkeys, sheep and goats.

This section describes the three uses of dung, the kinds of preparation involved in transforming dung into fuel, and considers how households make choices and decisions regarding dung use. An attempt is then made to give some figures on the quantities and prices involved. Finally, some changes in the dung economy are discussed.

1. Uses of dung

- Fertilizer

In the part of Menz under consideration, dung is rarely employed directly as fertilizer, though its value as such is known and people remark that: 'the *k'ollegngna* [lowlanders] practice this and it is good; but for us the need for dung as fuel is too great to be sacrificed.'² The comment suggests that survival and consumption-needs place too great a demand on the resource for it to be released for productivity-increasing investment.

¹ Chicken, cat, dog and human excreta are a taboo topic, considered much more negatively than that of the livestock discussed in the paper, and not seen to be of any value, though in the absence of latrines they must contribute to the fertility of the garden plot.

² References to the use of dung as fuel are made by Messing writing about Northern Shewa in 1957: 104.

However, some dung called *t'ibot* is applied as fertilizer if it has been too diluted by contamination with earth or mud to be used as fuel. More generally, once the more important fuel-needs are met, most of the dung, now in the form of ash, is scattered as fertilizer on the *dej-merét* - the small back-yard plot.¹ Such dung will fertilize the small quantities of cabbage, garlic and onions that many households plant at the beginning of the long-rains. A few households sell some vegetables at the market, in which case the ash may also go towards income-generation.

Ash is commonly used on the *dej-merét*, and sown with wheat, beans or the two kinds of barley, *mawgé* or *ferké* (see earlier section on cultivation). The favourite crop is *mawgé* barley, and it is this crop which is said to be grown almost exclusively on the *dej-merét*, because it is a 'temperamental' and unreliable crop which needs to be looked after. The *dej-merét* crop is carefully tended and its yield is estimated to be up to twice that produced from other land.

Regardless of the fact that in practice dung is not extensively used as fertilizer in Menz, the concept of *fig* dung is retained in the language as synonymous with prosperity² - the metaphor being derived from the potential of dung to fertilize the land. The association is particularly strong between *fig* dung and *dej-merét* - the former term being used sometimes to designate the latter.

• Building

Dung is used as an all purpose plaster in much of Ethiopia. Huts in this area of the country are stone-walled and thatch-roofed. The walls are constructed by men, preferably using an ash-based plaster between the stones. Internally the walls are usually plastered by women, with dung or a mixture of mud and ash. Inside the hut, partitions, benches and the fire-place are made of dung and then periodically re-

¹ The *dej merét* is usually a small area representing between one-fifth and one-tenth of the household's land-holdings.

² Several years after the great rinderpest epidemic of 1888-9, which resulted in large-scale cattle mortality, Emperor Menilek arranged for the re-introduction of livestock in some of the worse affected areas. People came from afar in search of animals which were, however, insufficient to go round. Some of the famine-victims, unable to obtain any cattle, are said to have picked up dung, and taken it back to their homesteads. It seemed, according to chronicler Gebre Sellassie, the 'sweetest of scents'. See R.Pankhurst 1966 (b).

plastered with it. The floor is likewise smeared with dung.¹ All of these activities are performed by women.

Much household furniture and other articles are also made of dung. These include the *akimbalo*, the lid to the *mit'ad* the large pan used for baking. The *akimbalo* can also be made of clay, but dung ones tend to be preferred as they are lighter and less fragile. Dung combined with thatch is also made into bowls, used as containers to hold wool and grains. Other goods made from dung include the base on which the grinding-stones are constructed, *wefch'o*, and two sizes of grain-stores, *dibignit* and *rik'*, which are kept inside the hut. The construction of most of these articles is considered women's work, the only exception being the larger grain-stores, the *rik'*, which are usually considered too high and difficult for women to make.

• Fuel

Dung is the main source of fuel and therefore has use-value. Dung is also of exchange-value when sold by households that have a surplus over their consumption needs. The different types of dung have different attributes and are used by women for different purposes. Thus, for slow and lengthy cooking, such as when making *shiro*, sauce, dung cakes are preferred as they produce a low but constant heat, do not require much looking after, and are relatively economical. On the other hand *injera*, a pancake-like bread, requires a stronger heat over a shorter period of time, for which the loose bits, *fig* and *godeda*, are preferred. When *dabbo*, a large, thick piece of bread is baked, low but constant heat is wanted, both from the top of the *akimbalo* on which burning pieces of dung are placed, and from underneath the *mit'ad*. Here the *t'ift'afo* are useful, while *fig* and *godeda* are not at all appropriate.

Finally, the fire is usually kept burning overnight, since matches are only beginning to make an appearance in the area. To ensure that the fire is not extinguished, the ideal combination is first *fig*, then *godeda*, and finally a layer of *t'ift'if*. Should her fire burn out, a woman will light it again by going, or sending a child, to a neighbour, armed with two broken pieces of *t'ift'if* into which embers will be placed.

¹ In some areas of Menz, though not in Gera, the threshing floor outside the compound is smoothed out with a layer of dung. This is again women's work.

II. Kinds of use and amount of preparation

Dung is collected and prepared in different ways. Young boys, girls, women, and more rarely men, will pick up dung from the land surrounding their homestead, from a wider area of land in the vicinity, or from land further afield. The dung from the larger kinds of livestock is taken back to the hut and stored either directly or after being left to dry in the sun. It is not processed in any other way. The collecting of dung from the homestead or vicinity is a relatively easy and spontaneous activity while collecting from further afield is a greater enterprise involving more planned allocation of time. Collection of dung from the *Gwassa*, the pasture area discussed in an earlier section of this chapter, is rarely undertaken by itself, though very occasionally it will be combined by young boys and men with the collection of *ch'irinfé*, brush-wood, also available in the area. A spatial consideration thus enters in the sexual division of labour and fuel types. Dung accessible mainly nearby, is collected by women and forms the primary source of fuel. Dung from a considerable distance is rarely collected and if so, usually by young men. Men in turn focus more on the collection of brush-wood, a more distant secondary contribution to the provision of fuel.

Dung produced during the night from a household's livestock is taken out of the hut daily, to be patted into dung-cakes approximately thirty centimetres in diameter and two centimetres thick. These cakes are left to dry, first on one side, then on the other. Women, often the young girls in the family, will be involved in this task. When dung is taken out of the hut, some of the sheep and goat dung, which consists of very small bits, tends to remain embedded in the floor. Men are periodically asked to dig this up which they do with a pick or axe. Depending on consistency, this dung is called *fig* or *godeda*, and when burnt produces particularly strong heat.

During the long-rains, June to September, but to a lesser extent also during the more unpredictable short-rains, which tend to begin around February and finish in April, the drying of dung and making of cakes has to be interrupted. The strategy adopted at this time is to collect the dung in *gudgwad*, literally holes. These *gudgwad* are holes in the ground, about one metre deep and one metre wide, the sides of which are reinforced by a stone wall. They are dug within, or just outside, the compound and the dung is thrown in daily.



31, 32, 33 Dung work



After the end of the long rains, and usually on a Saint's Day, the hole will be 'opened'. This event is important and sets the scene for a traditional type of communal labour, mainly carried out by women, see photographs on previous page. Groups of people start by discussing when the holes should be opened and households then pick their day. Several in the vicinity, often open their dung-holes on the same day, although neighbours and friends arrange to take turns at opening their holes so that they can help each other. A few days before the allocated day, the women begin brewing beer. On the actual day the woman in charge of the household, or some other woman in the family, will call female relatives, neighbours and friends, and then return to the hut to bake *dabbo* and *injera*, and to make *shiro*. Meanwhile the women who were summoned will come, making a team of up to ten people.

Some of the women begin by bringing water to the hole where the dung is 'trodden'. The treading takes place inside the hole and is carried out by a man from the household. He enters the hole and starts working the dung with his feet, loosening it up. Water is added as necessary, to soften the dung's consistency, and to make it more malleable. As this is done, the dung is thrown out and piled beside the hole, whence a woman will take it to a patch of grass nearby, pat it into a cake and then repeat the process. As the cakes are made, they are spread out, left to dry for a few days on each side, and then piled inside or outside the house. In the latter case, they are often covered with thatch.

Once the work is done the labourers partake of the feast prepared for the occasion. Eating and drinking takes place amidst a lot of joking and fun, and it is not unusual for other guests to be asked to join in the merry-making. The dung-opening day is considered quite an occasion, and one marked by considerable comment and conversation before, during and after the event. Its importance is surprising in that all work connected with dung is considered to be of low-status, and is described as 'dirty' work, which people would rather avoid doing. Even on this occasion it is the less important people who do most of the 'dung' work.¹ Importance is here defined primarily in terms of age and gender, but it is also a question of status or wealth, and some of the discussion surrounding the event focuses on who was found to be treading, and making the cakes.

¹ The sexual division of labour within the dung processing accords the few men that are involved a degree of ceremony and reward since they are the ones primarily involved in the opening of the hole. Also, there is, perhaps, a distinction between their work in treading, which they do primarily using their feet, and women's work using their hands.

The events described above are those associated with the end of the long-rains. There is less ceremony attached to dung collection during the short-rains. In this latter season, the hole may be opened several times, whenever the rain stops for a few days, and the women of the household make the cakes without the help of others. If the short-rains are lengthy people start using their stocks. However, they are reluctant to deplete their reserves which should be kept for the long-rains. During the rains, it becomes difficult to collect and then dry the dung. In fact, this is the season when people are most likely to search for alternatives.

III. Users' choices

Until now the discussion of dung as fuel has proceeded with only occasional reference to the existence of other fuels. However, dung in this area is rarely used exclusively since people have access to other sources of fuel. Mention has already been made of expeditions to the *Gwassa* highlands, to collect brush-wood, *ch'irinfé*. An alternative is to go to a *k'olla* lowland area, where there is a greater quantity of wood, or twigs, that can be gathered and brought home. More locally, there is some *kochelé*, a type of cactus, and some people have or buy, wood, leaves and seeds of the eucalyptus which can grow in the area but is presently in short supply.

The combination adopted by a household will depend on:

- Ownership or access to different types and quantities of livestock, and location, in particular whether brought home at night or herded in the *Gwassa* area;
- Supply of labour, in particular whether it is male or female, male labour being seen to be able to travel greater distances and being therefore more involved in *Gwassa* brush collection, while women are more involved in dung collection;
- Season, the rainy seasons being difficult times for the collection of all fuel, but of dung in particular;
- Ownership of wood and cacti. Any such supplies are likely to reduce dependence on dung;
- Household preference. This may vary, though in general households prefer to use wood rather than dung, the latter being looked down upon because it smells and produces acrid smoke. Some people, if they can afford it, will make the switch to wood and brush when guests arrive, or for special occasions, such as *mehaber*, a traditional rotating social and religious gathering discussed in Chapter Nine.

In the comparatively recent past, wealthy households would have a sizeable number of livestock: two oxen, a cow and calf, a horse or mule, two donkeys and up to fifty sheep. Such households would have up to three dung holes and the number of holes was sometimes used as a quick indication of wealth. Such households would often have additional attached labour, male and female, increasing their ability to release labour from other tasks for wood and dung collection. They were also likely to have planted some eucalyptus trees as source of fuel and timber and as an investment.

Today, even if a household has a surplus of dung-cakes the dung is not thereby released for use as fertilizer. Dung-cakes will continue to be made and will then be sold, often in June, just before the long-rains, at which time those without fuel reserves will be stocking up for the rainy months when more dung is needed, and when it is more difficult to collect and dry. Rich households have the luxury of a choice over the type of fuel they use, yet the scarcity of fuel in the society results in the reservation of dung for use as fuel rather than as fertilizer. The pattern also reinforces the picture of a society in which even those who have a choice decide against an investment in the soil, in favour of the conversion into dung-cakes, a more reliable and liquid asset.

Poorer households are most reliant on dung. This is firstly, because they are less likely to have their own stocks of wood; secondly, because if they must buy fuel, dung is cheaper than wood; and thirdly, because they are less able to afford numerous days of labour used in expeditions to *k'olla* or *Gwassa* areas in search of wood.¹ However, poor households are also less likely to have their own livestock, sometimes having none at all, more often having one large animal (ox, cow, horse, mule, or donkey) and a couple of sheep. Such households therefore have less access to dung. Some households will solve this problem by looking after the livestock of others under the *ribbi* patronage arrangement discussed previously, under which the livestock-minder is usually given total rights over the dung. Others are likely to spend more time picking *sheleshel* dung in the vicinity, or collecting half-dried *cubbet* dung which they bring home and make into cakes, and all will maximize the use of the dung from whatever livestock they have.

To conclude, in Gera Peasants' Association as in many other Associations throughout the country, there is a severe wood shortage. Dung is, therefore, reserved primarily for

¹ The assumption here is that poor households are often poor in labour as well as in land and capital. This is usually most visible in the case of young or elderly small units, i.e., households at the beginning and at the end of the demographic cycle.

fuel. However, wood is preferred to dung as a source of fuel because of the latter's smell, smoke and negative associations. There would be an increase in welfare if afforestation produced a sufficient amount of wood to allow people to switch to wood as their source of fuel, in accordance with consumers' preferences. There would also be some value in increased afforestation to the extent that the switch of fuel from dung to wood would release dung for other uses, in building and as fertilizer. The use of dung in building would result in the making of articles that are more durable and therefore of 'better value'. Moreover, were dung to be used in greater quantities as fertilizer, this would lead to an increase in income through a productivity increase of crops. The present situation is one in which dung is used for consumption rather than being invested or used in the improvement of capital goods. As a consequence of the use of dung as fuel, the durability of 'capital' goods, such as hut and furniture, is reduced and an investment-potential is being drained by current consumption needs.

V. TRADE

Though the role of the bi-weekly markets in town has undoubtedly increased over the years, much of the trading that takes place within Menz, both of an intra-and inter-community level, takes place outside the market place. Trading exchanges are more diffuse both in time and space and tend to remain invisible to the outsider. The tendency of observers to focus on the market place ignores a significant amount of formal and informal exchange that characterize Amhara peasant livelihood. The Government, however, tends to ignore even the market place, seen as a backward practice to be superseded by more 'modern' and 'rational' forms of exchange such as the Service Cooperative shops.

Every household is involved in some trade and both consumption and production needs are increasingly met by an involvement in exchange circuits. In terms of consumption, salt and *berberé*, the ubiquitous spices, and coffee, have to be bought continuously. There are also occasional expenses, some other foods, grains and manufactured goods such as needles, razor blades, kerosene, matches, cloth, shoes, and even DDT, with which to spray flea-infested homes. Non-monetary exchanges are also transacted within and between communities. Anything can be bartered, ranging from dung-cakes to raw-wool, from an *injera* to an ox, from a few coffee beans to a bottle of *arek'i*, a barley-based alcoholic spirit.

These consumption needs are met by selling something or by eating into previously earned cash. Usually women are involved in the former, men in the latter form of exchange. Thus men will tend to sell livestock and return home with a considerable amount of cash. The household will then gradually use up the money on weekly expenses, either the wife or the husband actually attending the markets. Women tend to be more involved in the small-scale exchanges, the selling of some spun wool, eggs, or a small quantity of grain, in order to meet the consumption needs for the coming week. Various payments to the State, taxes, levies, and membership fees, all have to be paid in cash and are thus met through involvement in trade circuits. Production needs are also increasingly met through the market. These include the buying or repairing of tools and agricultural implements.

The trade mentioned above entails on-going expenses which are seen as considerable to the individuals involved, though they appear marginal when compared with a peasantry involved in cash-crop production. It is at this point that I should like to return to comments made in Chapter Three about the explanations of poverty in terms of an uneasy relationship between subsistence and exchange. I argued there that the term subsistence had two meanings which were related, the first implying a lack of involvement in exchange, i.e. self sufficiency, the second implying an existence on the margin, or rather having 'just enough' to survive. The Menz peasantry has been experiencing a long-term impoverishment jeopardizing their self-sufficiency, in both senses in which the term is used.

As mentioned above, the daily needs of the peasantry in terms of consumption (the word being used in its economic context, i.e., spending for immediate use rather than savings or investment) necessitates an involvement in trade. This involvement is increasing in magnitude and the costs seem to be rising along with a decrease in the relative terms of trade between manufactured and some agricultural goods, such as coffee, and the locally produced agricultural goods. More fundamentally, the population is facing growing difficulties in producing enough to consume, let alone enough to find something to sell, hence the importance of the exchange-value processing roles of women described earlier in this chapter. However, the very inability to produce enough to feed one's own household means that, with increasing frequency, something must be sold in order to buy the basic barley and beans.

As a way of coping with the agricultural short-fall of their own production, or less dramatically, as a way of supplementing their resources, some households become

involved in trade circuits. Thus they might take part in the retail marketing of sheep, buying them in Gishe, the northern-most part of Menz, and selling them in Mehal Meda or even in Addis Ababa for a higher price. The Government has attempted to control these entrepreneurial activities by demanding that those involved should take out trading licences. In practice, many peasants have continued their involvement in trade, operating without licences.

Those with less capital but an equal enthusiasm for such ventures tend to trade in grain and vegetables. They take some of their own crops or buy crops that are produced in the highlands, transporting them down to the lowlands where they fetch a better price. They then return with goods which are comparatively more expensive in the highlands. These are then sold or stored for future use. Examples include exchanges of beans, barley or lentils from the highlands for onions or sorghum from the lowlands.

In Gera as elsewhere, there is a category of women who earn some money by being involved in the sale of alcoholic drinks. Some women are known as brewers of *arek'i*, a barley spirit, or *t'ella*, local beer. They either sell the drink locally, retail or wholesale, or take it to sell in town. Another group of women, usually those without the capital and/or equipment to make the distillation, buy the *arek'i* from others, sometimes even from town, and sell it retail in their homes which become drinking houses. Female-headed households and married women alike are involved in this trade.

To recapitulate, the household economy in Gera at first hand looks as if it stands alone, reliant on its own production for its consumption. In practice this is far from being the case. Undoubtedly some households are more self-sufficient than others, but because domestic production and trading relations are so intricately interlinked, it is not always clear when or why particular categories of people are trading in a particular good. To give but one example, people at the poorer and the richer end of the population might be seen trading more than the average households. At the richer end, the ability to trade is a reflection of the ability to make choices about different forms of consumption or production; at the poorer end, the greater involvement in trade is a reflection of the inability to provide for subsistence, in both meanings of the term.

Before concluding, a comparison can be made between the extent of State penetration and the penetration of the market. This is done in the context of the debates about the

African peasantry in the literature. Hyden's¹ presentation of a peasantry independent from capitalist forces and the State because it operates through cultural patterns of obligation within the community, i.e., the economy of affection, fails to portray the situation in Menz. As we have seen, people attempt to minimize the costs of State actions whilst also taking advantage of any beneficial policies, i.e., there is an element of reciprocity in the relationship. They are minimally involved in some, but not all, forms of trade, primarily because they have little to sell. The key to understanding the subordination, and the extent and kind of actions that the peasantry are involved in, lies in the relationship between them and both the State and the market.²

In terms of cultivation, the influence of both State and market is minor, though the State has attempted, generally unsuccessfully, to improve production through the provision of extension-services. The peasantry in Menz is, however, involved in cash-raising activities, predominantly through the livestock economy, in order to meet consumption needs and pay State duties.³ The influence of market and State alike is significant both negatively, as an added burden in meeting consumption needs, and positively as safety nets, providing a way out when subsistence production fails (the State distributing aid, trade providing a way through which capital goods can be sold to buy grain). In addition some individuals within the society are particularly linked into a long-distance trading circuit as some are more centrally involved in the State apparatus. However, those involved in the long-distance trading circuits, tend to do so unofficially, 'behind the back' of the State since Government policy is to discourage or at least tax entrepreneurial activities. The parallel between the extent of State and market penetration and conflicts between involvement in these two spheres is useful in describing a peasantry essentially going its own way, but yet, sometimes to its own detriment and sometimes to its advantage, it is inescapably bound to external forces.⁴

¹ Hyden, 1980, 1983.

² See Kasfir, 1986, for a critique of Hyden which develops this argument.

³ Unlike the pattern in other parts of the country in which cultivation is sometimes geared to the market.

⁴ In Chapter Three, I argued that this relationship of dependence within a context in which production is independent lies at the heart of an understanding of impoverishment and sets up the conditions for famine.

CONCLUSION

The poverty and increasing precariousness of conditions is a constant theme in this chapter, reference to the deteriorating situation being necessary in each section, each component, of the household economy. Nevertheless, I was told that indebtedness is not as common as it was before the Revolution. In my sample, only 28% of households were in debt at the time of the interview. This percentage, and in real terms the amounts involved have dropped significantly since the Revolution.¹ Explanations for the reduction in indebtedness lie partly in reduced stratification as a result of the Land Reform. However, as we have already seen, households are far from being equal. The relatively low figures of indebtedness is a reflection of absolute poverty, of the economic difficulties of even the comparatively well-off, rather than the absence of comparative difference.

In this chapter, attention was given both to the sexual division of labour, and to the material conditions under which the community strives to survive. The core of the argument running through the chapter is that there is more to production than crop cultivation. Thus the importance of livestock with associated fuel and wool economies, as well as the involvement of the household in trade was documented. Dung was seen to provide the dominant source of fuel, the spinning of wool provided a regular income, and for some wealthier households, butter and eggs provided a more occasional revenue.

The role of women in the domestic economy helps to explain their position in the household and society. On the one hand, there is a tendency, by both men and women, to dismiss and belittle women's work. Furthermore, the menial tasks they are allocated in the sexual division of labour, e.g., their involvement in dung-work, reinforces the social devaluation of their labour. On the other hand, this social attitude is belied by the consciousness of women's economic contribution and their paramount importance to the running of the household on a day-to-day basis.²

This chapter has examined the work that people do, and the valuation of this work both from within the society and by policy makers working from outside. Underlying

¹ Sample size, 90. 66 were not indebted to an average of 40 *birr*, see Appendix B for questions asked. Writing just before the Revolution about a community in Tigray, Bauer, 1973, gave a figure of 57% of households indebted to the richest 8%.

² As we will see in Chapter Eight, there is a similar ambiguity in the perception of women through their reproductive role.

the ethnographic details was the theme that activities which are central to the economy are not necessarily perceived as such. In the case of the livestock and wool economies devaluation is essentially an external phenomenon; despite their importance to the household economy, the State has had no direct involvement. In the case of the dung work as in many other activities in the female sphere of the sexual division of labour, devaluation starts within the community. The need to distinguish between social and real or economic valuation and take heed of activities beyond cultivation has theoretical, methodological and substantive relevance beyond this particular case study.

7

CAREERING THROUGH MARRIAGE

Introduction

- I. Types of marriage
- II. Serial marriages
- III. Endowments and transactions
- IV. Space and time
- V. Church and State
- VI. Divorce and remarriage
- VII. Single women and female-headed households
- VIII. Towards an explanation
- IX. Trends

INTRODUCTION

This chapter is concerned with marriage, divorce, remarriage and single households. Why are certain kinds of marriages sought? Why divorce? Why so many remarriages? What is the position of single and female-headed households? What trends and changes are currently under way? What does all this suggest about the question of power and rights across generations and between spouses in the past and at present? The data conjures up a number of intriguing questions about the rationale behind people's decisions, questions to which I will hazard some answers.

The marital histories are puzzling because they portray a situation which is a far cry from the primacy accorded to questions of kinship and lineage in the literature on

African marriages.¹ They are also puzzling in their complexity, and neither the practices at any point in time nor the trends are easily unravelled. The wide choice of behaviour, in terms for example, of the kinds of marriages possible seems surprising. Moreover, it is not immediately evident whether the overall complexity of the marital scene is a function of a wide choice of situations experienced at different stages by individuals, or whether the variations arise from the aggregation of people with different experiences, or both.

Underlying the form of the presentation is an attempt to provide explanations of the ethnographic details in terms of gender relations and trends since the Revolution. Given the complexity of the scene, it is only in the last two sections that I concentrate on so doing. First the data are presented in a way that describes the variety of considerations pertinent to marital histories.

I. TYPES OF MARRIAGE

Marriages can be divided into six types, each of which will be considered separately. The categories are far from satisfactory, as will become clear later on. They obscure conceptual distinctions between categories, differences within and similarities across them. In the course of interviews it quickly became apparent that even with in-depth life-histories, many marriages could not easily be fitted into one or other type, hence the absence of statistics in this chapter on the prevalence of the different kinds of marriage. The categories, however, provide a useful starting point.

1. Of all the marriages, the *serg*, the ceremonial marriage, involves the most prestation and rituals.

Wesené

I was first married at the age of fifteen, after two months my period started, but I only gave birth after about 6 years. My marriage happened like this: My uncle [her father's brother's son] went from here and married and stayed there, where I come from. My uncle returned here for a visit and found Tesfayé making coffee for himself. He suggested Tesfayé get married and that he would look for someone himself. I was living with my father's mother at the time. She said she would give me as a bride. My uncle returned and told them there, and I came, *beserg*, with a marriage ceremony.

¹ 'In Africa a marriage is not simply a union of a man and a woman; it is an alliance between two families or bodies of kin. We must consider the marriage payments in this connection also', Radcliffe-Brown, (1950) 1986: 51.

First his party came on a Sunday, about ten of them, with a lot of noise and singing. At our place there was a feast with food and drink. One ox which had been slaughtered, twenty *gan* [large pots] of beer. He dropped [gave] a scarf, a dress, a mirror, and a glass. People from my side picked up the gifts and gave them to me on another day, after the two parties had mixed. Also when they came they contributed twenty *birr* but it was returned during the *millash* [return feast given by the family of the other party to the wedding]. That took place after eight days. My own mother and father gave me the name Alem; here everybody calls me Wesené, it is my *yemirat sim*, the name that my mother-in-law gave me during the wedding.

The *serg* is almost exclusively a phenomenon of the bride's first marriage, i.e. a divorced woman will not be remarried with a *serg* marriage. Though not very likely, it is possible for a divorced man to be remarried at a *serg*. The term *serg* focuses attention on the form of wedding rather than on the characteristics of the rights within the union. The rituals associated with the *serg* include considerable feasting and dancing at both homesteads in turn; the offering of gifts, a spoken and/or written contract, display of defloration, and the giving of a new name by the groom's mother to the bride who enters her homestead. The *serg* is a match orchestrated by the parents or other kin and comes the closest to the pattern of African marriages described in the literature. Another description is given by Yirgu:

Yirgu

My first marriage was to Gétachew. I was aged about fourteen. He was a neighbour a bit older than me, about twenty-five. It was arranged by the parents on both sides. I was not told. Beer and food were prepared at my parents' place, I thought it was for a *mehaber* [socio-religious gathering] or something, I did not ask, I was ashamed to do anything when I found out. There was a big feast, five days in our place. Then five days in his household. I stayed on and the others; my kin who had come with me, returned. I was given a dress, shawl, scarf, cotton belt, glass, mirror, neck-ring and a ring. I still have some of these things. Then it came to speaking the words, to seal the marriage, they asked me to say 'Gétachew is my husband'. I said nothing, it was a friend who said it for me.¹ 'He' [the groom] also spoke and said I was his wife. The first day I slept in our hut, the second in the one in which he was put. At first I cried, said I would not sleep with him, but there was nowhere to run.

After six months, both our families gave between them: one calf, five sheep and two goats, this was celebrated with one *gan* [large pot] of beer at his place, some of my relatives came for the occasion. The signature was at the beginning, I saw them write, but it was my parents

¹ Chapter Nine returns to the question of the unequal rights to expression and language that sometimes exists between spouses. This is clearly enacted in the *serg* ceremony when the wife often does not speak the words of the marriage 'because she is too shy', a friend 'speaking for her'.

who signed, and kept the paper. I was still a child, I lived there in his parents' hut for two years.

The marriage is sometimes preceded by an engagement period lasting from a few months to a few years, at the beginning of which some of the gifts from the groom might be offered.

2. *K'urban* or *aklil*, literally the 'eucharist' or 'crown' marriage is a religious marriage. It is the first and only type of marriage sanctioned for priests and their spouses. In this case, the marriage is usually contracted by parents of the spouses, the fathers themselves often having a religious background. The same terms are also used for the second step after an earlier form of marriage, a deeper level of commitment, that lay couples, in particular the elderly, may decide to make. This marriage is theoretically indissoluble. *K'urban* marriage is perhaps the rarest form of marriage, and even priests and their spouses are known to remarry, thereby retracting their vows. Given the highly religious nature of the society, it seems curious that religion and the Church play such a small role in most marriages, a fact which will be returned to later on.

3. The *semanya*, literally the 'eighty' marriage is a civil contract, commonly known as a contract of equals. The marriage, especially if it occurs early in an individual's life, tends to be organized by kin or friends of both parties. A couple might decide on a marriage informally and subsequently refer to it as a contract marriage. Particularly in this case, the term is often used by women in conjunction with expressions such as *dolegn* or *amet'agn*, 'he brought me in'. However, when the marriage is formally instituted, it involves a witness and usually the signing of the contract on two pieces of paper, one for each party, either at the time of the marriage or at a later date, once the union shows signs of being successful.

Dessita

Yilfu's father asked my mother, she was agreeable, I also agreed. I did not know him, but he was my age, it was said he was a good man. The feast was in my parents' house. We did not prepare much, then I went with bread to his place. After two to three months we did the writing up. Everything for both, in an equal *semanya* contract. The scribe was a student; there were also two people on both sides. We had acquired some wealth, four or five sheep and one cow from my parents and his. I stayed with him for four years, then I left. We tore up the contracts.

If the term *semanya* is used loosely, it implies little more than a union, and applies to all marriages, with the possible exception of the *demos* marriage (see below). When used strictly, the *semanya* marriage is less common than more informal contracts though

it still overlaps with the formal arrangements in the other categories, including *serg*, *k'urban* and *k'ot'assir* marriages. In urban centres and to a lesser extent, in some rural communities (though not in the one here discussed) there has been an attempt to set up a marriage registry for equal contract marriages.

4. *K'ot'assir* is a form of marriage in which a young boy comes to work and live in the household of the girl who will eventually become his wife. The *k'ot'assir* marriage defines little more than the existence of groom-service and, in all likelihood, the young age of the bride.

Zenebech

First I was living with my parents, I must have been about twelve. He was much older, more like my father, when he came to work in our household. At that time, we slaughtered a white sheep, a red chicken, we ate bread and drank beer and coffee.

After three years and six months he said *darugn*, 'give her to me in marriage', so then there was a *serg*. My parents wanted him to continue working for them so they agreed. ...For the marriage the ceremony was in our house then after two months, *millash*, the return. We stayed one month with them... For the main event with us there was a bigger feast than when he first came, for which we slaughtered one ox, and had beer. There was also meat at the *millash*, the return feast.

The *k'at'assir* marriage is usually an arrangement between the families and speeds up the time at which the kinship can be created and, perhaps more importantly, labour and capital are exchanged. The arrangement was common, in particular among the wealthier households with a daughter and a shortage of male labour.

5. The *gered*, servant, or *demoz*, salary, form of marriage. This involves a stipulated payment by the husband to the wife, in the form of a monthly or annual salary usually, paid in cash or in grain. The marriage is often a temporary event, though it might be transformed into a permanent marriage with the question of payment forgotten, at least until it crops up again at the time of divorce. The *demoz* marriage is associated with urban populations and the contracts of traders and warriors far from home. Nevertheless, it is and long has been, considered a form of marriage amongst the sedentary peasant population of Menz. It is a form of marriage which is more common in the area than the religious, *k'urban* marriage.

6. The *t'ilf*, or abduction form of marriage¹ is really the overall term used for a variety of non-arranged marriages.

Asnak'ech

The third marriage lasted three months. Isheté came and took me. I cried, I was forced. My mother had previously also said no to him. He got some of his friends together and they carried me. I was kept there by force for three months. He had children and wanted me to look after the house. I eventually left him, walked home, about two hours distance, and stayed once more with my mother.

Asnak'ech's account is one of abduction. Three of Sindé's marriages could be described differently:

Sindé

I was first married at the age of about fifteen, he was aged about eighteen. It was a *t'ilf* marriage. Well, what happened was a *t'ilf* because I had problems. You see, he lived in Gera also, but my parents had died. He took me because I could not arrange anything, so there was a bit of feasting at his place, nothing much, no signing or words spoken. His parents had liked the choice, the union had been decided on even before my parents died. I had accepted it, we grew up together, we were from the same river. I lived with him for five years and six months. We got on well. The divorce happened because we were young, seeing other people we both wanted others. I left, and went back to my sister. We had not quarrelled. I went with another man initially. He left me after one week.

My next husband was somebody brought by someone we know who recommended him; I agreed. Meanwhile someone else was going to take me so we plotted and I ended up with him. I stayed with him until he died; he had some stomach problem.

When he died I took food to the church. On my way back, Bogale, who did not have any children saw me with Taddelech on my back and took me (*t'elefegn, wessedegn*). I did not know him well, but by name. I said I would not go, closing my hut. He said, 'Do not worry I will look after you'. I stayed with him for nine months. Then came the Revolution. Since they had started counting the huts, I decided to come back to my hut rather than lose it. He accepted the decision. I was stupid, it was good with him, no problems with food and he looked after me - I should have stayed.

As the above quotations show, the *t'ilf* marriage can be either premeditated or impulsive and can include various degrees of co-option of either parents and/or the 'bride'. Thus, the term which implies the taking of the bride without her consent, might well be used to describe an elopement. In the case of a real abduction or when the

¹ *T'ilf* marriage was the subject of a comedy by the Ethiopian playwright Mengistu Lemma, an English translation of which was given the title: *Snatch and Run or Marriage by Abduction*, 1964.

ritual is enacted despite consent, the 'bride' is captured by the 'groom' and his friends, often on her way to or from the market, from collecting water or from school. When carried off, the woman will often scream and fight her 'attackers' even when the match is to her liking. The abduction might be a prelude to a *semanya* or even a *serg* marriage, with negotiations subsequently taking place between the two parties. The term *t'ilf* is widely used, as is the loose use of the term *semanya*, for a union in which the bride was brought into the groom's household without much ceremony. My respondents suggested that this was an increasingly common form of marriage. Abduction is therefore a form of marriage which is associated with the impatient, the desperate or the impoverished.

It should be clear from the above summaries that the categories of marriages are far from satisfactory concepts to be working with, given the confusion between and within them. What they do suggest is that a number of considerations are taken into account in the form of marriage chosen. These include varying degrees of formality, of ceremonial and expenditure; different expectations about the direction of labour exchange; differences in the individuals involved in the selection of spouses and reasons for marriage.

To this already complex scene must be added the existence of polygyny and extra-marital relations. Though monogamous relationships are the rule, there is also a considerable amount of polygamy. This is sometimes openly acknowledged, both wives living together; or it is kept quiet, the women living apart. Where the two wives are separated, they might not know of each other's existence, in particular in the case of a town 'wife' unknown to the rural one. Where the two wives cohabit, the arrangements are more often than not because the first union was thought to be barren, in which case the two women are referred to as the barren one, *mehan*, and the fertile one, *wellad*. Polygyny might also occur where a previous union is patched up, despite the fact that a new one has theoretically replaced it.

Alem

I went to my mother's place, there Assefa saw me almost immediately. He had another wife and children. Assefa took me having asked my mother and my uncle Cheré. I said first we should sign. We both signed. There were six people who signed and two pieces of paper, one Assefa kept, one stayed with my uncle. I went to live in Assefa's Peasants' Association, about one hour from here. Now he had another wife, Gét'énes, from before. We lived together for nine years. It was good. Then Gét'énes left and then he had a daughter from someone else. In the end I left too. My uncle married and divorced us in his

house in Mehal Meda. First I left without anything, then came back and took my clothes. He married another woman who gave him a child.

Yematawerk'

My third husband was Isheté. I went to his house. We discussed it first, then he got rid of his old wife and brought me. The old wife went to her father's place and soon after gave birth. I did not give birth then, but she did! He counted her and the child as his, and wanted to bring them back. There was some discussion with *ch'ewa*, elders, and then I agreed saying, 'I do not mind why doesn't she come back'. He went to get her and meanwhile I disappeared to my mother's house only to find out that I was pregnant too. Then I returned to him. We got on all right. She had given birth to a son. She was the one together with his mother who looked after me during the *aras*, [the convalescence period after delivery]. After I had given birth, after ten days, I took Bizunesh [a girl], with me and left. I did not like the arrangement, but she was a good woman. In total I stayed about two years with him.

Yétimwerk'

I had seen Mulaté at the market, he came to the house, then I went to his, following him. He had another wife and had told her he was looking for a woman to bear him children. As we returned to his house we met his wife on the way, she told him to send me back, he said no. In the end she stayed, she and I lived together for a long time, then I got rid of her, *abbarerkwat*. When I became pregnant like this, he suggested she come back to help, I said no, that I would go back to my relatives. When I had gone he called her back. Now I do not want to go back there.

[Soon after this discussion she returned to her husband.]

Even where there is no polygamy, a man is likely to retain an economic and social tie with one or more previous wives. Assets, in particular land, which remain in common and children provide a rationale for a continued link.

Alem

Arega, the husband I had at the time of the Revolution, the one with whom I have land, he is 'my brother'. The three I have been married to and divorced since then, I do not know any more, we do not stay in touch; but Arega, 'my brother', now ploughs for me, pays the tax, and gives me my share of the crop.

Extramarital unions, *wishimminnet*, are also frequent. Below are two examples from my diary:

Fight over the latest affair. Atsede is caught in between. Beyene has become Bek'elech's lover, he is officially living with her since his gun is kept in her hut [He is one of the local police]. Beyene's wife, Nigist was particularly close to Atsede, in fact one of Nigist's children is Atsede's god-daughter. In the past Bek'elech was also a friend of

Atsede's. It ended in insults only, but talk about Atsede and Nigist having planned to attack Bek'elech who guessed a trap and kept away. [Nigist went to her parents not long after this. Beyene is now 'married' to Bek'elech, they use both huts.]

Bombshell, (at least to me). Mekonnen [Prominent official in Gera] is rumoured to have had an affair with a relative of Asfaw. The woman already has two sons out of wedlock. The story is now in the air because it is time for the christening of her latest son. The christening was delayed apparently because of ambiguity over whether Mekonnen would declare himself the father. On Friday Mekonnen's parents told Mulu, his wife, that they wanted to contribute to the payment of the ceremony, thus recognizing the child. Mulu says she wants out of the marriage.

[Another note in the diary continues the story]
Mekonnen claims he is not the father after all, another man has been named. Mulu was reconciled to him after he bought her a dress. [Mekonnen and Mulu only have daughters. Mulu's younger brother seems to have joined the household, providing male labour.]

Most of these extramarital relationships seem to be temporary; however, some turn into marriages. Neither these nor the polygamous relationships are ones that come out in the questionnaires, though they do in jokes and poems. Below is one such poem in which a duped husband bemoans his fate.

አይደረስባችሁ:	Let it not happen to you;
ደርሶብኛል፡በኔ:	It happened to me;
በግንቦት፡አግብቼ:	I married her in May,
ዎስዳች፡በሰኔ።	And she gave birth in June.

They were also mentioned in the in-depth interviews and I, together with most other people in the community, followed the rumours about current goings on with interest. There were four polygamous households among the eighty allocated a hut in the new village, and extramarital affairs abounded. In the past, these were associated with wealthy individuals, though more recently the Peasants' Association leadership has been linked with such affairs - one individual in particular is said to 'use' whatever woman appeals to him and to have 'twenty-nine' women of his own.

II. SERIAL MARRIAGES

For an outsider, probably the most remarkable feature of Amhara households is the frequency of divorce and its correlation, the high incidence of serial marriages, in what

is a strongly Christian community. The replaceability of wives is vividly portrayed in the following stanza:

ትመጢ እንደሆንኑ፡	If you want to come, come;
እኔ፡ አልማልደሽኖ፡	I will not go begging;
በሌት፡ ሌት፡ ይተካል፡	For a wife, another can take her place;
እናት፡ አይደለሽኖ፡።	You are not my mother.

In quantitative terms my data, based on 95 questionnaires administered to heads of households, gave a range for the number of marriages per adult from nought to twelve, and an average of 3.3 marriages per adult head of household.¹ The table below gives the frequencies of marriage. These can be taken as an underestimate, since respondents had a tendency to simplify their complex marital histories.²

Table VII. Frequency of divorce

No	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Frequency	1	24	22	10	14	10	5	5	1	0	0	0	3

The data also suggested that taking all marriages for which duration was given, a total of 260 cases, the range was from 8 days to 50 years. Marriages lasted under five years for 49% of the sample.³ Much of the discussion that follows is concerned with trying to understand the factors that lie behind the marital scene and the frequency of divorce.

¹ The literature provides a similar picture: In a study of Menz, Reminick, 1973, comes to a figure of up to fifteen divorces per individual. Bauer, 1973, gives an average duration of 2.7 years for all existing marriages in a community in Tigray.

² In the in-depth interviews, there was a significant difference between the number of marriages people initially told me about, and those that emerged in the course of the life-histories.

³ The data also gives a mean of 6.74 years. First marriages lasted a mean of 3.89 years, ranging from 20 days to 45 years. Last marriage lasted 10.95 years on average ranging from 2 months to 40 years. The duration of single marriages was a mean of 16.13 years, ranging from 2 to 50 years. Total sample under 5 years = 128, i.e., 49% of sample

Table VIII. Duration of marriage

Duration	<1 month	<1year	1-2years	2-3years	3-4years	4-5years
No	5	45	31	23	17	7

III. ENDOWMENTS AND TRANSACTIONS

Traditionally, the literature on marriage has been presented with an anthropological angle which focused on the exchanges that occur and the implications these have on the social formation in terms of control over generations. It has tended to be much less conscious of the gender dimension of these marriages and thereby fails to elucidate a whole area of power relations.

The data here are not presented within a paradigm constructed to fit a single theory of equality or hierarchy between men and women within and between generations. This is partly because this is not the way the population would attempt an explanation of their behaviour, but also because of the very flexibility of interactions alluded to earlier. Even when we do focus on endowments and exchanges, and without falling into the anthropologists' habit of treating women as objects,¹ the picture is a complex one. A generalization which can be made is that the transactions are constructed to facilitate divorce and the redivision of wealth between husband and wife. Theoretically both are in an equal position, though in practice women can more easily be marginalized. It is the wife and husband themselves rather than their kin who, after the initial wedding, are given restitution for the labour invested in the marriage. This section will examine in turn feasts, presents, exchanges of livestock and land, and questions of labour and reproduction.

• The wedding feast

As mentioned in the previous section, in the case of a *serg*, or any other form of marriage which is celebrated formally, the wedding feast is usually celebrated first at the bride's homestead. This is then followed by a feast at the groom's homestead. The costs of the groom's feast should be equal, or less, than the bride's initial celebrations. In the case below, Asselefech's marriage is 'wrong' and unsatisfactory because the rule is not abided by.

Asselefech

My first marriage was arranged by my father's sister with my mother. At the time I had gone to a christening. I returned to find it all arranged. ... The feast was mainly at my place: bread and beer were prepared and chickens slaughtered. The groom came in the day, in the

¹ 'Most of the literature on marriage negotiations and transactions takes a social or androcentric perspective in which marriageable women are portrayed as passive objects rather than active participants whose livelihoods are at stake.' Bossen, 1988: 127.

evening we went to his place with my brother; a goat was slaughtered there. The next day my brother returned. It was his mother that did not want much of a celebration in our place. We were angry: *igna keswa inansallen indé, iswa tillik' igna tinnish*, 'Are we then going to be less than her, her great and us small?' We only slaughtered a chicken, they a goat. He had come with three relatives and there were not many of my relatives either. When we reached her place there were lots of her relatives [the groom's mother's] and only two of us.

The marriage did not last long. I did not quarrel with him, but with his mother. It started because of the feast, as I told you, it was wrong. I liked him, now we sometimes meet, but are very shy of each other. I was aged about 16, I got up and left, it was less than a year since the start of the marriage. There was no attempt to get us together again. She [husband's mother] did not give me anything, no *demos*, no salary for the work I did whilst I was with them.

The groom's party is expected to contribute to the cost of the animals slaughtered for the first occasion and *vice-versa*.¹ Some kind of food and drink is likely to be organized, regardless of how many marriages have preceded it and however informal or impromptu the event. This might be no more than a simple meal and the carrying of a loaf of bread between the two households.

• Prestations

For *serg* marriages, it is customary for the groom to give some trinkets to the bride. Sometimes the groom also gives money to the bride's mother, usually specifically for a scarf or some other article of clothing. As we have seen, the presents to the bride may include: a mirror, pieces of clothing, such as a scarf, or sometimes even a dress and rings to be hung round her neck. The groom's parents may be involved in meeting the costs. The fact that this tradition is only for the first marriage and would not apply to a *fetté*, a previously divorced woman, would suggest an association of these gifts with the physical consummation of the marriage and the 'gift' of virginity. The presents are given to the wife who keeps them regardless of what happens to the marriage.²

No payment or dowry is expected to go from the bride's family to that of the groom. The only exception is the fine paid in the case of a wife abandoning a priest-husband in the case of a *k'urban* marriage, since this behaviour is liable to compromise the priest's

¹ *Lekebtu waga yit't'alal*, 'Money is thrown [given] for the cost of the livestock [slaughtered]'.
² 'There is also in Africa nothing exactly corresponding to the English 'morning-gift' regarded as a payment for accepting sexual embraces, though it is usual for the bridegroom to give gifts to his bride.' Radcliffe-Brown, (1950), 1986: 46. I would argue that the presents here *are* 'morning-gifts' given for the consummation of the bride's first marriage.

future. A priest, like any other man, needs a wife; if he has to remarry, he can no longer officiate.

- **Livestock and land**

When livestock is brought into a marriage, a contract is likely to be drawn up ensuring that, in case of divorce, the person who brought in the animal retains rights over it. Theoretically and almost regardless of the form of marriage, any livestock reproduced during the duration of the union is divided equally.

In terms of land, as we saw in Chapter Four, traditionally in Northern Ethiopia women did not receive land rights through marriage. Instead they were granted usufructuary rights through an ambilineal inheritance system. In theory these rights were equal to those of men. In practice, the virilocal form of marriage and a whole social structure which placed men before women, ensured that men were the ones who activated their rights to land, and were thus the major resource owners. The situation in post-Revolutionary society no longer relies on inheritance rights but rather on membership in a Peasants' Association. Once again, in theory women are equal, although, as we saw in Chapter Four, their membership in the Peasants' Association is indirect, *via* their husbands. One of the results of the Land Reform has therefore been the friction between spouses over the issue of rights to land. Conflicts over land within marriage are beginning to emerge, though these are bounded by the notion of rights based on residence, a system not dissimilar to that of inheritance within a community. I will return to the question of changes and trends in the final part of this chapter.

- **Labour**

The labour expended by the party who leaves a homestead is, theoretically, repaid in the event of a divorce. The recompense is to the individual not to the family, and operates regardless of whether it is the man or the woman who has contributed. Labour can be translated into grain, livestock or money, and the exact amount to be paid can be negotiated between representatives of the two parties. The implication of this is that after the first marriage, parents of both parties cease to have any control over what happens in terms of compensation. They will, however, have a hand in the selection of new spouses and provide a base for people, particularly women, between marriages.

As has already been hinted at several times, the theory of equality is not universally upheld in practice, since women's ability to ensure that they are repaid is considerably lower than that of men. The case of Lak'ech is not unusual.

Lak'ech

I have had four marriages including this one. The first was with Damma. We lived in the same country, in a neighbouring Peasants' Association to this one. His father had come looking for a wife for him. The marriage was a *serg*. ... Altogether we stayed together more than two years. He was a *kés temari*, an apprentice priest, I am the one that made him 'chuck it' (*iné negn yast'alkut*). ... I do not know why I divorced, it was a childish thing (*yelijint neger*). He would get drunk, I was very young. I returned to my father but quarrelled with him and went to my mother. My father said 'return to him' but I refused. In the end he was given 100 *birr* by my parents and relatives because I left him and they were rich people.

[series of marriages]

Of the four only the first had been signed. I always made the decision to leave. Only in one case was I given grain or anything when I left, that time I got two sacks of grain, that is about fourty *birr*'s worth. From the others I was supposed to get grain, but never did. What woman has not been 'eaten' [cheated]! ... I do not have land with anyone, I abandoned it when I left the husband who then went to Resettlement.

The custody of children varies according to circumstances. Nevertheless, some generalizations are possible. Until the child is past weaning, the infant will almost always remain with the mother. After this stage, the pattern of expectation is sometimes along gender lines as mothers are more likely to keep daughters, and fathers, sons. However the needs of the father tend to be considered first, and both boys and girls stay with the father if he desires to have them as 'labourers', in particular to help with cattle minding, an activity that even a seven year old can be expected to perform. Fatherhood is usually claimed and some support provided, openly or in private, regardless of what happens to the marriage.

Overall, the position of endowments in the marital scene is determined in a way that allows mobility. Feasts are, in general, of an almost equal nature, although the parents of a bride can spend more on the first *serg* ceremony; wedding gifts are on a small scale and are made by the groom; land is not exchanged, livestock rights are clearly defined for ease of separation, and labour expended on a homestead can be translated into grain or money, and can thus be repaid.

IV. SPACE AND TIME

The picture that is beginning to emerge is one in which there is considerable flexibility, not only in the type of marriage a person undertakes, but also in the sequences, in the marital histories of individuals over time. The marital possibilities seem to point to adaptability and to a lack of great formality; options are chosen and rejected as and when necessary. This point becomes clear when we consider the spatial and temporal nature of unions.

- **The spatial dimension**

The overall pattern is one of virilocality, husbands bringing in a bride first into their parents', and then into their own homestead. The locality has implications in terms of whose labour is being transferred, but also in terms of where shelter and the establishment of a home is undertaken. Both *t'ilf* and, in the rural setting, *demoz* marriages are, by definition, virilocal.

In the case of a minor argument, the wife in a virilocal marriage escapes her new homestead seeking refuge with a relative of her husband, such households being nearer than those of her natal relatives who sometimes live at a distance of several hours by foot. If the quarrel is more serious she is likely to return immediately to her parents' home. Meanwhile her husband, who lives near his own relatives, will find a sister or mother to look after him until the quarrel is resolved or a new wife arrives.

Uxorilocal marriages in which the husband's labour is brought into the homestead can also occur. *K'ot'assir* marriages are, by definition, uxorilocal, at least in the first few years of the union. The assumption, both within the society and in the wider literature on Amhara populations, is that uxorilocal marriages are the minority. Although my data confirms this, it also suggests that they are a *significant* minority; 32 percent of the marriages on which I collected data had a uxorilocal period, and 22 percent were completely uxorilocal.¹

Where the marriage is uxorilocal, reasons were given in terms of the wealth of the bride's family, or their greater need for a male labourer. The position of a man who marries into his wife's community is considered lower. From this, the implication is

¹ From the in-depth interviews out of a total of 71 marriages that 23 women described.

sometimes drawn that women in uxorilocal marriages are better off, that they have more power within the household since they can call on their own relatives for support. I was alerted to the fact that this was not always the case, that a woman in a uxorilocal marriage was sometimes particularly vulnerable since she had nowhere to escape to if her parents wanted the marriage to continue in order to keep their son-in-law's labour. Uxorilocal marriages in which the wife is an adult with independent means is generally to the woman's advantage. This is not necessarily the case when the bride is young and under the control of parents. Yétimwerk', for example, had difficulty obtaining a divorce:

Yét'imwerk'

I used to refuse to sleep with Arega. After five years, *kobiliyyé hédku*, I got up and left, escaped to Mehal Meda and went to some relatives there. He had not hit me or anything, I just did not like him. When I had gone Arega left the house and I returned home. Earlier I had asked my father to get rid of him, but my father needed him for the work so he refused. When Arega eventually left, he had to be paid for the work he had done, I do not know how much, it was in grain.

Bride and groom are preferably sought from neighbouring communities rather than from great distances. Traditionally for a *serg* marriage, the number of neck-rings that were included in the trinkets that a groom had to offer his bride increased in proportion to the rivers that had to be crossed between the two homesteads. The custom points to distance as an unfavourable factor, for the woman at least, since she is due recompense proportional to distance. A man is said to be more likely to lose his wife if her own family lives nearby; he has control over her if she is far from her natal home. For him, proximity of wife's kin tends to be looked on unfavourably. There are, nevertheless, some benefits, in particular during his wife's pregnancy.

Moreover, there is a rule against the marriage of kin within seven generations which encourages the searching beyond immediate surroundings. The rule is associated with a religious stricture and is common to other places in the world.

Asnak'ech

I returned to my parents after eleven years with Alemayehu. The next one [husband] was Molla; it did not last long because they said he was a husband of a relative by four 'houses' [generations]. They had given me by mistake before they knew. He lived far away, at Amed Washa, about four hours walk. He came with bread and one relative and took me. Then, we returned for the *millash* taking bread with us. Mother and father slaughtered a sheep. He and I got on well, but, after all this, it was discovered that we were related. He had two children. The children did not want me to leave. I did not either, but had to.

In Menz, the rule preventing marriage within seven generations is also applied to socially created kinship, for example, women in the same socio-religious gathering, the *mehaber*, are not supposed to marry a man previously married to any of the members. In both socially created and biological kinship, the rules are not always kept, especially at the more distant levels of kinship. The conflict between the desire for geographically close marriage ties and the dangers of breaking the kinship rule means that compromises are inevitably negotiated.

- **The temporal dimension**

We can now look at marriages with reference to time by considering the different steps that can be taken in the marriage process. This need not start with a wedding, a contract, or any other single occasion.¹ In fact a series of different events can be associated with a single union. They can be listed as follows:

- The existence, or not, of an engagement period, sometimes associated with an exchange of gifts and/or labour.
- The wedding feasts, usually first in the bride's homestead, then in the groom's and then sometimes once again in the bride's. The interval between first and second feasts is usually approximately one week, though it can be considerably longer. Sometimes a third feast is organised by the party who hosted the first event. In this case the interval between the second and the third feast can be several months.
- The setting up of an independent household, *gojo mawt'at*. This can be a separate event or might be established from the beginning.
- Sanctifying the wedding as a religious *k'urban* one, from the beginning, in the case of priests, years later, for lay couples in old age.
- Signing a contract, at any stage in the course of the marriage, sometimes several years after the wedding. If wealth is brought into the union from either or both sides of the marriage this is more likely to involve a signed contract as Wesené's rationalization of the negative case makes explicit.

Wesené

Troubles come my way, this is how we are now, without anything. Earlier on in the marriage when we had livestock we had planned to be signed, but then this happened, we lost everything and decided that since we did not have any wealth there was no point, so we have not signed.

¹ This is also the case elsewhere, yet, in the literature and in particular in theory, there is a tendency to simplify and conflate marital transactions. For a critique see Bossen, 1988.

Marriages might contain any combination of the above transactions. In general, though not necessarily, the wealthier the household, the more likely will be a greater formality over the occasion and the larger the endowments. There is also a correlation between duration of marriage and investment in it - the longer it lasts, the more likely that, over time, economic and ritual investments will be made. The correlation also applies the other way round. Thus marriages which do not involve significant outlays are more easily dissolved. However, this does not mean that all or even most ceremonial marriages are stable. Even in the case of the most lavish *serg* marriage, the expectation is still that divorce will ensue.

V. CHURCH AND STATE

• The Church

So far we have seen that the Church is involved in the *k'urban* marriages, as well as being responsible for the rule about not marrying to within seven degrees of kinship, and the suggestion that polygamy is to be shunned. It is surprising, however, that in a society in which religion is so important, the Church plays such a minor role in marital unions. In Chapter Nine I will return to the way that Christianity affects the daily actions of individuals, provides the scene for social interaction and in many ways defines the community. In the next chapter, it will be shown that most life-cycle events including birth and death make reference to Christian belief and that a priest presides over the events. So why then is the Church's role in marriage so minor? Why are Church marriages not the rule? Why no tradition of parish registries?

It might be argued that it is not the Church itself that forms the focus of the religion, but rather its priests. Though the church building used to define the parish and the community, the latter rarely came together under the auspices of the Church. Regular mass attendance of services are not as central to the religion as they are in many other societies. Yet people go to church for christenings and funerals, why not for marriages? And if priests are mobile enough to attend and play an officiating role in other events, why do they not do so for most marriages?¹

¹ This is also in contrast with Islam in which the marriage has to be sanctified by a religious leader.

The absence of a parish registry of marriages is perhaps easier to explain in terms of the absence of a tradition of recording any life-cycle event: births, marriages or deaths. It is all the more surprising that when a contract is written out, and a priest is sometimes sought to write up the two copies of a marriage contract, his services are called upon as scribe, but not as priest.

The only explanation that seems credible is that marriages are too unstable for the Church to want to be involved or for the population to think of sanctifying unions. Where the Church has tried to regulate practices, it has had little success. It has attempted to prohibit polygamy, yet the practice is far from abolished. It has imposed its own form of indissoluble marriage for priests, yet there are many who fail and there are numerous accounts of trainee priests giving up a future in the Church because their marriage, supposed to be until death, breaks up well before.

• The State

Assuming then that the Church is impotent in the face of the forces that lead to high divorce rates, what about the State? Both in the past, and in post-Revolutionary Ethiopia, it has attempted some action to modify the forms of marriage. For example child marriages have been declared illegal. Thus *k'ot'assir* is an illegal form of marriage, and if the couple come to court on some other grounds, their parents might be fined for having organized such a union. In practice, there is little enforcement of the law and the practice has not stopped.

As mentioned above, polygamy is prohibited by the Orthodox Church which was the State religion under the previous *régime*. With the Revolution came the lowering of the status of Christianity, and equality with Islam which allows polygamy. The Draft Constitution, Article 38, Clause 1 stated:

Marriage is based on the consent of a man and a woman who have attained majority. Bigamy is prohibited. Spouses have equal rights in their family relations. Marriage shall enjoy the protection of the State.

Significantly, the sentence 'Bigamy is prohibited' was dropped in the final version, in deference to Islamic pressure. Whatever the exact reason for its inclusion and then its exclusion, the rationale for the prohibition lay at least in part a sense of greater equality in marital relations and it was abandoned when found to be antagonistic to Islamic customs.

In unions involving a contract marriage most oaths in the past were sworn in the name of the reigning Emperor. This has been replaced by specific reference to the *Derg*, the name given to the Provisional Military Government, to Chairman Mengistu, or by not calling on any individual or body, and referring rather to the Law, *be-hig*. Thus in contract marriages an oath is made in which legitimation may be achieved through mention of the State. However, the oath does not carry any implication of 'til death do us part'. It is made as an acknowledgment that union has occurred and as a way of recording the wealth that each individual brought into the partnership.

In the past, most divorces in Gera would be settled locally through elders. However, the State has been involved in setting up organizations to hear divorce cases. When a case comes to court, the Law refers plaintiffs to a local committee of elders who return their decision back to the Court. More recently the Peasants' Association leadership has been involved in the informal settlement of disputes. The concern of each of these bodies is always to dissuade the couple from divorcing, if at all possible.¹ Within the formal dispute settlement organizations, delays are instituted in the hope that tempers will cool, and reconciliation ensue.

It remains the case that the State, both in the past and at present, has had little direct effect on marriage and divorce. If we summarize the involvement, it amounts to an attempt to limit some forms of union, such as child marriages, and, ironically, a more significant contribution in the whole realm of divorce procedure. Registration of civil marriage remain unheard of in an area in which written files are kept of divorce.

VI. DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

Because women are one-sidedly viewed as the objects of marriage, their contributions, strategies, risks and rewards as makers and breakers of marriages are unexamined. Until we begin to consider women as individuals with their own economic interests and strategies, our theories will remain deficient.²

In an article entitled 'Amhara Marriage: The Stability of Divorce',³ Weissleder argued that if a rational, material basis is suggested as an explanation of marriage, the

¹ Divorce Committees were set up in Resettlement areas, A. Pankhurst, 1989 (b): 456-475.

² Bossen, 1988: 142.

³ Weissleder, 1974.

motives for divorce should not be sought elsewhere. If marriage is based on economic considerations, rather than emotional ones, divorce is likely to have the same motives. The argument seems sound, but the evidence from my life-histories points to the futility of advancing a strictly materialist reduction of complicated marital decisions. The discussion about whether divorce is an economic or a emotional/social decision, or even the attempt to decide which of these motives is the more important, runs counter to the mix of factors behind an individual's rationale for action, not to mention the varied considerations relevant in a multitude of cases. Perhaps the only generalization that can be made runs counter to the Weissleder thesis. Thus I would argue that in Amhara culture, marriage is most often perceived of in economic terms, and emotions are not taken into consideration since the individuals usually do not know each other. Divorce, on the other hand, tends to be explained in more complex terms of incompatibility - emotional and economic.

Two types of reasons are almost always given for divorce: the precipitating factors and systematic ones. Men complained of such factors as wives' adultery; barrenness of wives; not keeping house properly; disobeying them and challenging their authority. Women had a greater number of grievances. These included being beaten and ill-treated by their husbands', especially after a bout of drinking at the Saturday market; husbands' wasting money; committing adultery; giving them too much work including obliging them to mind cattle; bad relations with the mother-in-law; restrictions on their activity and mobility, and being obliged to have intercourse more often than they desired - with attendant fears of pregnancy. Other reasons women give include escaping from a barren union and, especially in the case of first marriages, homesickness and a great difference in age.

Men and women alike suggested that women were the prime initiators of divorce, though this is not a universal pattern.

Yirgu

I became homesick, that is why I left. I just got up and went. They, his parents, came to try and get us together, but each time I would flee; several times this happened. There was no particular reason, I did not want a marriage, it was a childhood thing. He was one used to hitting (*dulleгна neber*). I left after two years, asked for a divorce. I think there was a settlement with elders, *shimgilinna*, but my parents went, I did not. Our cattle were divided, we kept our own and shared the sheep that had been born over the period.

Bek'elech

Tidar, marriage, did not suit us. There was the stick. He would hit me and there was forced intercourse, is that not what makes for dislike? (*yemiyast'ella yaw aydelle?*) I lived approximately three years with him. He said, 'Go, this is my house', so I left. Relatives tried to get us together, but I went to my mother's place. It was not a long marriage, so I was not given much. Words were spoken by elders to end the marriage.

Almaz

We got on well, but he used to get drunk and jealous. Once he came back and was abusive and I decided to go. I do not really know why, I started not liking him (*k'effefegn*). Also I did not get on with his mother. There was lots of work and I was tired of it all. I left without telling him, he would have hit me, had I told him. My parents lived about twenty minutes away.... There is always disagreement, it would have been best to be with one man, if you get on, if God wills it.... It is the person who has grievances, who has been damaged/hurt (*bedel yalew, yetegodda*) who leaves.

So much for the push that results in divorce, but why do people remarry, especially given the likelihood of repeated divorces? The first answer is that the position of a single person is more precarious than that of a married one. This is particularly so for men. In peasant economies, the household is the centre of production and consumption, and the sexual division of labour within the household requires male and female labour. Men's contribution to the household is of a more episodic nature, women's contribution more continual (see Chapter Six). Thus a man cannot easily survive in a peasant economy without the labour of a woman, who, amongst other things, will process the harvest into his daily meals. He is also socially stigmatized and made fun of, should he have to fend for himself. An adult woman is also in difficulties without a male protector and labourer. Social and economic vulnerability apply, particularly if there is no adult labour of the opposite sex within the household, namely no substitute male figure in the form of an adult son.

Thus one reason for remarriage is to escape from being single. Another is the search for an ideal union. Almaz's comment quoted piously is often made, namely that if a marriage is good, there would be no reason to look elsewhere, but that otherwise the search must continue. The nearest I got to a generalized discussion about divorce was with a group of three women, Abeba, Dessita and Felfilé, who offered the following statements.

Felfilé

In general divorce is about anger, about other people or about not having offspring. It is usually the woman who leaves, but if it is the woman's place, he goes. She says *botahin fellig*, 'find your own place'. It is best to stay with one man if you get on, it is a lot less hassle that way - *géta talew*, 'if the Lord says it can be so'.

Dessita

Divorce, it happens sometimes when they see someone else, sometimes because of growing poverty and a feeling that the spouse is not good with money. More often it is the woman asking for divorce, but it is best to live with one [husband] if it works, otherwise, to try all over again!

Abeba

Men cannot live without women, women cannot do without men... well, they can, but if there is nobody to help it is useless, *mewdek' new*, 'it is to fall' - you cannot call it a life without a man.

In Menz, divorces are usually demanded by women, but this is not always the case. Moreover, just because the petitioner or the one who walks away from the home is usually the woman, does not necessarily mean that she is the main 'mover'.¹ In a virilocal society, the husband's effective control over the home is greater than that of the wife and she in turn can find more support by returning to her natal community.

But what are these patterns telling us about gender relations? At this stage, a look at the literature might be rewarding.

Is divorce a reflection of female power? Data in support of such a thesis comes from studies of the position of women in Cuba and China² where increases in the divorce rates were registered when women were released from economic subservience by Socialist structures. In the case of Cuba some researchers pointed to the ten-fold increase in divorce rates between 1958 and 1970, adding 'this gives a succinct indication of one enormous change: women are no longer locked into the prison of an oppressive marriage by economic necessity.'³

There is a difference between these cases in the comparative literature which focus on a rise in divorce rate and the situation in Northern Ethiopia, and Menz in particular,

¹ 'Petitioners in divorce cases are usually women, regardless of where the fault lies or who actually wants the divorce. The man customarily ejects the woman from the household and keeps all the property, forcing the woman to initiate action if she wishes her share.' Messing, 1957: 301.

² Cuba: Bengelsdorf, 1985; China: Stacey, 1983.

³ Bengelsdorf and Hageman, in Eisenstein, 1979: 291.

which is clearly an area of on-going high divorce rates. Nevertheless, the long-standing history of rights to divorce in Ethiopia has been similarly explained as women having power within the household, even before any talk of Socialism. Poluha has such a perspective phrased in terms of the tradition of women's 'economic independence and respected right to leave partner and area'.¹ Reminick² writing before the Revolution seems to explain high divorce rates in terms of the instability of an egalitarian institution of marriage in a society which in all other aspects is hierarchical. Both these explanations on their own are not very convincing, if only because the so-called equality in marriage is a partial and debatable one, indeed the very ambiguity of the position of women is part of the dilemma.

Furthermore, what about the association of high divorce rates with economic difficulties? In *The Story of an African Famine*, Vaughan³ suggests that famine leads to an increase in the divorce rate and a fall in the marriage and birth rates. Brown⁴ in 'Love Unites Them and Hunger Separates Them', writing about the Dominican Republic, suggests that the number of serial marriages increases as economic conditions deteriorate. Given harsh economic conditions, and a context in which women fear that men will squander resources on luxuries, serial marriages give women greater flexibility, freedom and control over their own money, all of which would be denied to them otherwise. In the society, the ideal remains one of a single partner. Similarly, Stack⁵ in 'Sex Roles and Survival Strategies in an Urban Black Community' argues that household mobility is regarded as a strategy for dealing with poverty, and that under such circumstances household boundaries become 'elastic'.

The data on divorce seems paradoxical. It is seen negatively as a reflection of economic and social considerations which produce dissatisfaction and tension rather than cohesion. At the same time it seems that divorce is a positive tool used by women as an expression of their economic independence and a means of improving their livelihood. To put the argument differently, mobility is often the last option for those in distress, as the history of refugees and famine victims has shown. Perhaps the fact that so many women in Menz so often abandon the homes that they have toiled to create is similarly a sign of hardship.

¹ Poluha, 1989: 63.

² Reminick, 1973: 316.

³ Vaughan, 1987: 34.

⁴ Brown, 1975.

⁵ Stack, 1974: 120-122.

What both the literature and the data point to is that the high divorce rates seem to reflect both women's power and their dissatisfaction: the power to exit from a relationship in search of a better one, and dissatisfaction resulting from stress, poverty and oppression. Furthermore, divorce can cause hardship for women in the cases instigated by a husband against the wishes of his wife, and the ideal remains one of a stable union.

In the attempt to portray the amount of marital instability - people careering through marriages, I have failed to give more than a cursory glance at dispute settlement. Yet marriages are sometimes put right if the offended party, usually the woman, is recompensed. Thus in the section on extramarital affairs, I mentioned the case of a marriage being repaired by the gift of a dress from the husband to his wife. Reparation usually takes this form,¹ though for a lesser offence or more impoverished household payment is in other luxury goods associated with women such as coffee or honey. The picture in marital dispute settlements confirms the story presented here of the woman as the plaintiff, and the husband as the one making amends with a present to his wife.

VII. SINGLE WOMEN AND FEMALE-HEADED HOUSEHOLDS

So far I have made little mention of women without husbands. In the following Chapter we will see that women are expected to marry, that spinsters are an anomaly. Widows who do not remarry are more common, though remarriage is still the rule. For simplification I would like to divide the population into two categories of single women. The majority consist of a transitory group of divorcees or widows between marriage; the minority consist of those disillusioned with marriage and seeking an alternative career. The division is artificial if applied to an individual over time, since a woman who seems to have settled down alone might well enter a union in later years, and *vice-versa*. However, for discussion of the general position of single women the division is helpful.

The transitory group reside either alone, if they have the means to do so, or otherwise with relatives. The distinction in terms of wealth is significant, but will be developed

¹ See A. Pankhurst, 1988 (b), for an account of the function of dresses in the settlement of marital disputes. Dresses also play a central role in other societies. Radcliffe-Brown, (1950) 1987: 74.

here in terms of the second category, that of permanent single women. In the permanent category of women with few resources are those most likely to abandon their community and migrate into urban centres. There they will attempt to earn a living by working in bars, hotels and restaurants, work which almost invariably involves prostitution. They might also find an income, for example, by being a water porter, bringing pots of water to people's homes; by petty trading or by making and selling alcoholic beverages.

There also exists, however, a category of female-headed households. Thus there are women with direct rights to land, a hut and some livestock, for whom the decision to keep away from marriage is not uncommon. In Gera, households that seem to fit this category are a significant proportion, 23%, of the total. However, the figure is deceptive since some of these have retained their own wealth despite being remarried. At any point in time, the figure of single women who are registered as heads of households is nearer 15%.

The picture for single women and female-headed households is thus confused by the conflation of two factors. In local terms, *sét adari*, is the woman who lives (literally sleeps) alone, and *sét abal*, literally woman member [of the Peasants' Association], the woman who is the head of her household. The two do not necessarily go together. The single status, the absence of a man in the household, is not desired since it results in vulnerability and the likelihood of a greater burden associated with household maintenance and marginalized social status.¹ However, the economic position of the single woman is highly dependent on whether or not she is a head of household. In general those women with independent incomes but in a stable marriage are considered to be in the best position.² Marriage provides an element of security whilst the independent wealth provides security against the husband. In addition to this distinction, there is a difference between female-headed households that contain an adult male, usually a son or a husband figure, and those that do not. The first have a more secure access to necessary male labour.

Before returning to the issue of marriage and divorce, this section can now be summarized. Most single women are a temporary category between marriages. Their status and economic position tend to be unfavourable since they have both the stigma of not being in a union and are dependent, usually on kin. There is also a permanent group

¹ H. Pankhurst, 1987.

² For the argument, in the context of Botswana, that female-headed households are not necessarily marginalized, see Peters, 1983.

and, amongst these, some women without kin or resources to rely on, who tend to migrate in search of an urban career.

Female-headed households, *sét abal*, are not necessarily single. Those that are not, about 8% in Gera, are in the most favoured position since they have the security both of an independent position in the community and husbands protecting them from stigma and providing the source of male labour. Women heads of households with another source of male labour, in particular that of adult sons, are also in a favoured position.

When looked at in the broader context of women's status in society, the position of single women without independent resources lies at the least favoured, most vulnerable, end. Married women lie in the centre with different degrees of worries according to the character and means of their husbands. At the most favoured extreme lie a few women with independent rights, *sét abal*, and with secure access to male labour, preferably in the form of a 'satisfactory' husband.

VIII. TOWARDS AN EXPLANATION

What emerges from the six categories of marriage with which we began, is that there is considerable flexibility in the type of marriage that can be contracted. The various forms allow for the different conditions and rationales underlying a marriage. The differences can now be briefly summarized.

A distinction can be drawn between first marriages which tend to involve greater outlay and ceremony and the subsequent ones which are simpler affairs. The special significance of the first marriage reflects the greater likelihood that the marriage involves a bond between households, rather than a personal arrangement by bride and groom and, more universally, it reflects the value put on virginity.

Another distinction can be drawn along the lines of differences in wealth and status: the wealthier the households the greater the event, be it formal or informal. A difference was also made between the clergy, who can marry only once, and the lay population. The more informal and contractual forms of marriage reflect the desire for, and the necessity of, female labour within a household. Finally, the *t'ilf* abduction marriage provided a socially sanctified means of getting round parental or the bride's aversion to a match. Thus one explanation for the variety of forms of marriage lies in

the various settings within which marriages occur and the stratified society within which marriages provide a demonstration of differentiation.

What about women's position in this marital scene? We have seen that the *semanya* marriage is the form of marriage assumed as the norm. Here the theory of equality, and individual rather than parental rights is clear. However, a number of structural conditions exist in practice to ensure that women are not in fact equal. These include such factors as the pattern of considerable age difference between wife and husband, especially for a first marriage where this can be in the order of up to twenty-five years. A number of asymmetric customs also operate, such as the one that dictates that a woman should stand up when her husband enters the hut, that a wife should wash her husband's feet, be humble and, in general, servile in front of husband and master. Male adultery and polygamy are considered far more acceptable than female equivalents. At the symbolic level, the *serg* marriage presents women in a particularly subordinate position. It includes such factors as the fasting of the bride and feeding of the groom, and the display of defloration.

Yet despite all this, we have seen that women are not powerless, a point that also emerges from poems such as the following one in which a husband is made fun of by his wife:¹

ሙ ቀ ጢ: እንደ ወቅጥ: አዛኝ:	Having ordered me to grind,
ሙ ቀ ጢ: ስወቅጥ: ትስቅ ብኛለኛ:	When I do, she laughs at me;
በእጅሁ: እሳት: አምጣ: ብሳ: ታዘኛለኛ:	She asks me to bring her fire in my hand,
ፈጅኝ: ብዬ: ስሳት: ትስቅ ብኛለኛ ::	When I say it burns me, she laughs at me.

The theory of equality finds its say both in the day-to-day organization of the household and in particular in the rights that many women have at divorce. Women can take action: they exit from a marriage more frequently than men purposefully eject them. I have already stressed that this does not mean that women are the prime actors in all cases, and even then, their actions are often in response to male power - sometimes to the physical expression of patriarchy - when they are beaten. For many, however,

¹ But note that the second poem in this chapter points to the greater valuation of a mother compared to a wife. Divisions and distinctions between the experiences of women is an important area of research. However, it is one which needs considerable attention and which cannot be covered in this thesis.

this power that women have to act, is the right to choose the least-worst option within a context that provides dissatisfaction and marginalization.

The society is one in which men are dominant and women are subordinate in a number of different but integrated ways, and marriage is no exception. However, women are an indispensable component of the household; their needs thus have to be considered and where they are not, the pattern emerges of women's dissatisfaction and constant search for better opportunities. The marital scene is therefore one of the negotiation between men's greater and women's lesser powers of action.

IX. TRENDS

To conclude, we can now bring together a picture of the marital situation in the context of the changes that informants mentioned. The most noticeable of these is the decrease in *serg* marriages.

Asselefech

There is no more *serg* here. It is different in the towns, there is more ceremony there.

Bek'elech

In the past the *serg* was a big thing, many people came and feasted and danced. Now there is no more of this, it has stopped, all that happens is the woman coming into the homestead. Today with the Revolution the whole thing has been left, the 'ho ho' [noise associated with the event], has been abandoned (*kenehullum serg k'erre beabyotu, 'ho, ho', serg k'erre*).

There has been a reduction of ritual and expenditure for formal as well as informal marriages, combined with a shift towards informality. This can be explained by a reduction in stratification brought about by the policies of the State, in particular the Land Reform, and the on-going impoverishment of the region. We saw in Chapter Four that, increasingly, the leadership is considerably better off than most of the population. However, display of wealth in the traditional way, through feasts and celebrations, is not common. Even where the degree of current stratification would allow for differences, the absolute poverty in the region, together with the Socialist image, ensures that these are not displayed. As Asselefech and Bek'elech record, *serg* marriages, the most formal and costly of them all, have almost totally ceased.

In parallel with the disappearance of *serg* marriages that embody rituals of women's subordination, there seems to have been an increase in women's say in marriage. Where the marriage is a *t'ilf* one, it is usually of the elopement rather than the abduction kind and the bride is in league with the groom. *T'ilf* and informal *semanya* are becoming the standard forms of marriage.

The increase in women's decisions over their choices of partner is illustrated with exaggeration in the following poem. In which the poet argues that it is no longer the man who does the wooing.

የዛሬው ስፍቆር፡	Well, the love of today
አዲስ፡ ሱሪ፡ ታጥቋል፡	Has put on new trousers;
አባከኸ፡ ቀርቶ፡	Please to a woman has gone,
አባከሀ፡ ተለቋል፡።	Please to a man has taken its place.

The verses are meant to amuse but they are also picking up on a trend in which women are seen to be more active in the marital scene.

Women's greater say in marriage occurs partly because first marriages occur later in the life-cycle.

Wessené

In the past, here, the woman was about Bizunesh's age [16] when she got married, but now it is mainly older people.

There is also a delay in the setting up of a separate household. These changes are a result of the new rigidity in land allocation, labour mobility and hut construction. Given chronic land shortages, a growing population, and increasing corruption, it has become clear that most aspiring young households have to wait a long time before the chance of being allocated their own plot of land. In addition, the sale of labour within the community and seasonal migration in search of work are not supposed to take place. Livestock cannot by themselves provide a means of livelihood and are, in any case, being depleted by the worsening economic conditions. Finally, since Villagization, even building a new hut has become problematic. Thus, in Menz, delayed marriages are occurring both as a consequence of impoverishment and the indirect effects of State activities. They are not happening as a response to conscious Government intervention

as has been the case in China, for example, where exhortations and incentives for late marriages have been applied.¹

The implications of these changes in terms of the power between generations are unclear. On the one hand, the importance of elder kin is declining in this and other spheres of life. As we have seen, in the case of marriage this gives the individual a greater say. On the other hand, there is an increased dependency on parents and the Peasants' Association in the context of decreasing resources in the community as a whole.

Despite the earlier argument about a relationship between economic hardship and divorce, the current impoverished conditions seem to coincide with a decrease, or rather the expectation of a decrease, in divorce rates. As Asselefech tentatively put it:

Asselefech

Now it is all more difficult. I think there is going to be less divorcing than in the past, now we try and stick together....

In the current situation, other factors, and in particular the problems of land allocation since the Land Reform seem to be putting a break on the pattern of divorce and serial marriages. Undoubtedly it has resulted in married women who were allocated land with a husband staying with him, attempting to separate her land from his, or retaining socially-created 'kinship' ties with him.²

A clearer pattern is the reduction in the distance from which a bride or groom is sought, in particular making marriages within the Peasants' Association attractive. As we saw earlier, the proximity of natal kin tends to be favoured by women and disliked by men in virilocal marriages. Given the practical problems of transferring land-rights between Peasants' Associations, marriages across even neighbouring communities have become more difficult if both parties have rights to land. However, some marriages across several communities continue to take place. This can best be explained in terms of the creation of two categories of men, and to a much greater extent, two categories of women. One category has some degree of rights to land. They retain these in the locality in which they remain, or they leave the land in the hands of a relative or (in the case of a woman) with an ex-husband, returning to it between marriages. The other

¹ Croll 1985.

² As we saw earlier in this chapter, in the case of Alem and her ex-husband Arega whom she now considers 'a brother'. He ploughs the land for her and they share the yield.

category consists of people who have lost their rights to land or were too young to acquire them. These people, predominantly women, tend to be more mobile than the former category.

The side-effects of some forms of State intervention as well as impoverishment resulting from climatic and environmental stress, seem to be operating in the same direction, namely towards less ceremony, a more narrow choice of marriage format, partners from geographically closer communities, and later unions. Poverty and hardship notwithstanding, divorce rates might also be falling as an indirect consequence of State policies in general and Land Reform in particular. A local adaptation to restricting conditions has resulted in a reduction in both the flexibility and complexity of marital arrangements. In terms of the State's influence overall, the changes are unintended repercussions of other policies rather than a planned intervention in marital relations.

It is unclear what the effects of these changes have on the issue the relationship between generations. The younger generation is likely to be dependent for longer on the older one, but it has more control over the partners acquired. The situation in terms of gender relations is also ambiguous. On the one hand, equality in marriage has been increased, as seen for example in the reduced expectation of a wife's symbolic subservience to her husband. On the other hand, if marriages are more stable, that means that women are less inclined to walk out on marriages, in other words that they are constrained from a long-established form of action. More research on these trends is necessary before confident statements can be made. Doubtless, the patterns could be picked up and explained more easily by disaggregating the category of women and looking at women in different situations, particularly *vis-à-vis* access to resources.

8

MATTERS OF LIFE AND DEATH

Introduction

I. Life and reproduction

1. Blood and water
 - (i). Hymen blood and menstruation
 - (ii). Pregnancy and delivery
 - (iii). Circumcision
 - (iv). Aspersion and christening
2. Reproduction and contraception
3. Beyond the common experience
4. Women and kinship

II. Death

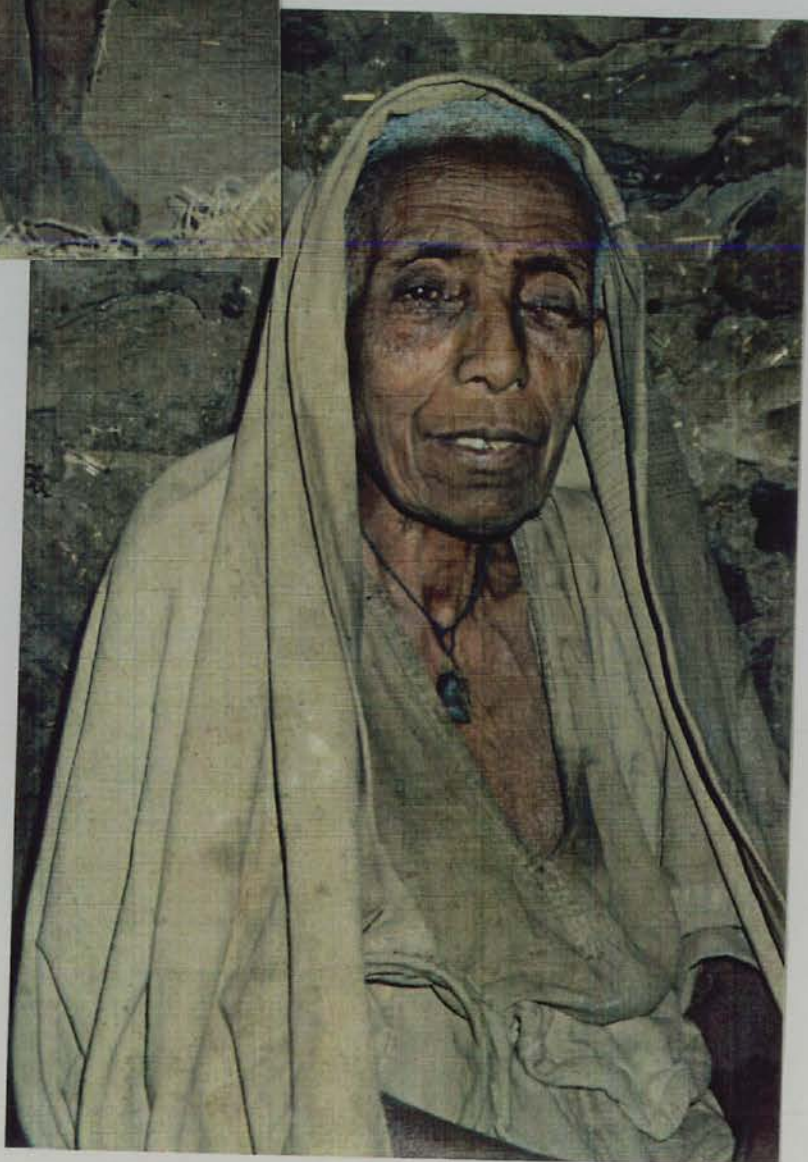
1. Death and post-funeral remembrances
2. Burial Associations
3. Mourning

Conclusion

INTRODUCTION

To continue with the task of describing and explaining the present conditions in Gera, as well as gender perceptions and entitlements within the community, this chapter focuses on some of the issues associated with the life-cycle. The focus is being narrowed in the thesis, from the household in Chapter Six, the creation of that unit in the discussion of marriage and divorce in Chapter Seven, down to the present consideration of the individual.

The role of women in reproduction, nurturing and child-care is central both to the work that they do, and to the construction of their social and economic position. It is in this chapter that we look at the attitudes to fertility, at the material effects of women's biological make-up and at the consequences of their central position in reproduction.



In the issues that we will be covering in this chapter, as in the last two, the penetration of the State is shown to be minimal, changes being more an adaptation to economic conditions than to the Government's influence. Yet there is little of more importance to individuals, households and society, than life and death. In issues of birth and reproduction, the absence of the Ethiopian State is telling given the precedents of the involvement of other Socialist governments, for example in population policies and the provision of nursery facilities. Curiously perhaps, no Socialist government to my knowledge has been involved in the opposite end of the life-cycle, in providing funeral arrangements except for heroes and leaders who are given a military funeral. This is despite the religious character that funerals take and the ubiquitous existence of traditional systems of social and economic support for such eventualities.

Before continuing it is important to note that life-cycle events are closely linked to the economic conditions of the household, and to religious practices, the subjects of Chapters Six and Nine respectively, whilst the issue of marriage has been completely taken out of this chapter to be considered separately in Chapter Seven. The obvious connections between chapters highlights the inevitable simplifications arising from rigid chapter compartmentalization.

In Menz, as in much of Northern Ethiopia, there are few symbolic markers of the stages of life. A number of ceremonies take place in the first few months of the child's life and these will be discussed in Part I. The next stage of importance is marriage, or rather the series of marriages and household formations, which involve unions between individuals rather than events focused on a single individual, and these have already been considered. Finally, we come to death, which will be considered in Part II. Most of the discussion in that section will focus on mourning and *iddir*, Burial Associations.

The aim in this chapter is to draw attention to the links; the social, economic and political contexts within which reproduction and life-cycle related activities are situated. For this reason, I have not focused on a description of the nurturing process, on the continuous task of child-care that occupies most women for many years of their lives. Nor have I attempted a study of the process of growing up and ageing. Such an approach is undoubtedly needed as an illustration of the different kinds of work that

men and women do at distinct stages of their lives.¹ However, most of this chapter is given over to an examination of the roles and institutions associated with life and death, as well as to considering the attitudes attached to reproduction.

I. LIFE AND REPRODUCTION

1. BLOOD AND WATER

These biological considerations are extremely important. In the history of woman they play a part of the first rank and constitute an essential element in her situation. Throughout our further discussion we shall always bear them in mind. For, the body being the instrument of our grasp upon the world, the world is bound to seem a very different thing when apprehended in one manner or another. [de Beauvoir]²

(i). Hymen blood and menstruation

Sindé

My period comes monthly, often on the same day. It lasts about seven days with most of the flow in the first few days. I think I first had it when I was about eighteen, that is soon after my marriage to Hagmasu. I would not have had it if I had not had intercourse. It always comes with marriage and then it stops by itself when you become old. Most of the pain is in my stomach when it starts and just before. I cannot eat grain and find it difficult even to drink. Once the blood flows properly there is no problem, no, there is, what I mean is that it does not hurt but spills instead. We do not use anything to prevent it spilling. If we go out we try and put on proper clothes but otherwise there is nothing, no cloth or anything. The person that is not a woman rests! (*sét yalhone arefe*).

As the quote from Sindé suggests, hymen blood and the onset of menstruation are not clearly distinguished in Menz culture. Both are associated with penetration. A first degree of explanation of menarche is thus linked to the coupling with a man rather than being explained in terms of the biological development of the girl/woman. Events sometimes disprove the cultural explanation, since unmarried 'innocent' girls experience menstruation. However, this eventuality is generally overlooked and wherever possible action is taken to ensure that it does not happen by arranging a marriage in time.

¹ In particular given the tendency to perceive women's work is natural, physiological and therefore, somehow, less important, Harris, 1984.

² de Beauvoir, (1949) 1972: 60.

In the previous chapter, on the section of *serg* marriages, we saw that what distinguishes this first form of marriage from other subsequent ones is that the bride is considered a virgin. Defloration is heralded to neighbours and kin with chants and the display of a blood-stained cloth, counterfeited with chicken blood if necessary.¹ Moreover unlike brides in subsequent marriages, the virgin bride is given presents that remain her property regardless of subsequent events. These presents from the groom are a form of payment or reward, an acknowledgement of the event.

In Amharic, the menstrual period is called *yewer abeba*, literally the monthly flower, a term with connotations which as in many other cultures, associates fertility with flowers, as in the English term to 'deflower', or the French '*prendre la fleur*'. Such considerations point to a positive attitude associated with women's blood or, more precisely, the symbolic appreciation of the male capture of women's 'flower'. The taking of women, symbolized by the discharge of hymen blood is what is desired and that for which the woman is repaid. In this case the blood is not only a fertility marker,² but is also seen as a proof that 'no other man has been there before'.

So much for the symbolic attitude, but there are also pragmatic reactions to the monthly flows. The earlier quote referred to the pain and inconvenience. Alem, in the extract below, is not unusual in seeking divine help:

Alem

I first got married when I was about fifteen. My period had not started then, it came when I was about eighteen in '79 [1987]. It comes about monthly, but not always, it starts and stops. When it flows it is really too much during the first four days, that is because of the 'evil eye'. I used to have a *gedem tsifét* (an amulet) to reduce this. Now I put on trousers but I have no other protection. I just let it run.

Menstruation can start when a girl is thirteen years old; however most of the women in Gera give an age of between fourteen and eighteen as the date of menarche, and whilst I was conducting my fieldwork none of the girls I knew who were born after the Revolution, fourteen years previously, had started their periods.³ The age at which

¹ Similar traditions exist in many other countries, e.g. France. See de Beauvoir, (1949) 1972.

² In this thesis I do not look at menopause and the position of women once they have ceased being involved in reproduction. This is partly because I was never made aware of menopause as a clearly defined stage or post-menopausal women as a distinct category in society. This is not to say that attitudes of and to women might not change at this stage in the life-cycle.

³ From 149 cases of women using contraception facilities in Mehal Meda, the average age of menarche (for a predominantly urban population) in the area was 15 years; it ranged from 11 to 18.

most women begin to menstruate seems comparatively late both by national and international standards, doubtless a reflection of high altitude and poor nutrition'¹

As is the case with women world-wide, the period lasts about seven days. It is often irregular and women expressed complaints of all kinds, including premenstrual pain, as well as heavy flows. The difficulty women encounter in dealing with their menstrual cycle is very visible to all women in the society. It is a regular problem and one that they deal with efficiently. However, it is not much discussed and remains invisible to outsiders. This is not the same kind of constraint as childbearing or many other of the more obvious and dramatic 'female burdens', yet it is in such seemingly insignificant realms that the economic poverty and the conditions of life are particularly wearying for women.

Some women keep an old piece of cloth which they tie between waist and legs; a few have trousers and even fewer possess underwear of some kind. Most have no protection, as mentioned in the two quotes made earlier, and they lie down when the flow is heavy, or just let the blood drip to the ground. Cleaning up is not easy, given the need to fetch water from the cave or the newly erected pipes.

To discomfort should be added embarrassment. In the case of girls or young women attending school, there is the fear that their period may begin when they are in class. Given the lack of sanitation facilities the problems of menstruation are particularly acute. Many do not even attempt to come to school during this time, and therefore they can miss up to one week in every four. Even if this happens only a few times every year, it can amount to significant absenteeism.

There is an association of women's blood with pollution in this society, as elsewhere, which operates at a pragmatic level in which menstrual blood soils. It is, however, particularly developed in the religious sphere. The Church sees menstruating women as unclean,² hence the prohibition on their entering the church and on their drinking from the *tsiwwa*, the symbolic pot, from which members of *mehaber*, socio-religious

¹ In many ways, however, it was the beneficial side-effects of the late menarche that struck me. The earlier menarche occurs, the more restrained a girl's life, the sooner she is married off and the greater the likelihood of numerous pregnancies. For the link between high altitude and late menarche see Malik and Hauspie, 1986.

² See Young and Albert, 1965, for a study and interpretation of the menstrual taboo as a social separator and abasement. For a positive valuation of menstruation, see Powers, 1980.

associations take turn drinking.¹ Parallel with this, in the spirit-belief system discussed in the following chapter, a woman will not honour her *ch'ellé* spirit during menstruation.

(ii). **Pregnancy and delivery**

A sixth grade student summarized the local explanation of reproduction by saying: 'When she has intercourse with a man, the period ceases and the blood sets inside and becomes a child.'² Thus a pregnant woman is one with an accumulation of blood in her stomach. This is a condition which is 'camouflaged' for as long as possible. Women who are pregnant do not tell people of their condition, sometimes not even their mothers, and nobody talks about it openly.

Alemitu

I was thirteen when Abeba was born. After I became pregnant I started eating a lot and when I started being ill my mother-in-law knew. I tried to keep the knowledge of my pregnancy secret and they did not mention it, but people knew, they would say 'get out of the sun', 'be careful', and so on. I was embarrassed, I was still a child. The child became big inside me, but I said nothing, I was too embarrassed, nor did anybody else say anything.

People learn for themselves by observation or from veiled references by others. To act more obviously would be inviting trouble from the spirits (see Chapter Nine). This is not to say that the condition is not known and commented on obliquely, but rather that there is a fear, a superstition against acknowledging the situation. Concern for the pregnant woman can be expressed by all with such comments as, 'Do not do this work, it is too hard for you', 'rest', and the continuous 'Keep out of the sun'³. The pregnant woman will also often be given a protective charm, *shotelai*, by her husband, usually around the seventh month of pregnancy.⁴

The themes of camouflage and protection are repeated in sundry ways throughout the pregnancy and continue even after delivery. They include the construction by the new father of a partition for the new mother and child. This is made soon after delivery using fragrant plants - in the past, *weyra*, the wild olive tree [*Olea Africana*], and now

¹ See Chapter Nine.

² 'Kewend gar bemitigenagnibbet gizzé, yewer abebawa yik'erinna dem yireganna lij yihonal.'

³ For the medical repercussions, see May and McLellan, 1970: 502.

⁴ Similar to other societies. See, for example, Cesara: 1982: 140.

eucalyptus branches and leaves. During the convalescence period, incense is burned twice a day after delivery to keep evil away. Protection is also the logic behind the careful burial of the placenta, called *ingida lij*, literally the guest of the child, by the father of the new infant. It is buried inside for a boy and outside for a girl, probably as a symbolic expression of the virilocal tradition in which boys marry in and girls marry out of the homestead.

The new mother is constantly told to keep herself and her child out of view, out of the sun. A metal knife is put on the bed after delivery and the mother often wears a metal chain when she begins to move around.¹ Both during the delivery and at circumcision, the new father is supposed to stand guard with a spear in his hand. All these different forms of metal are aimed at warding off evil and safeguarding women and their offspring. Prayers are also offered at this time, almost always to the Virgin Mary. This is also the case after delivery when the greeting from anyone who comes to visit is *Inkwan Maryam marechihu*, 'It is good that Mary spared you,' to which all those in the hut answer: *Maryam tanurachihu*. 'Let Mary make you live/feed you'. When a pregnancy ends in miscarriage or death soon after delivery, precautions are found to have been wanting or an explanation is given in metaphysical terms: *Géta t'elto gn new*, 'It is because God took a dislike to me'.

Food taboos also operate during pregnancy and these are described by women as a form of protection for mother and child alike.

Wesené

When we are pregnant we cannot eat milk, nettles and cabbage. These foods would change the colour of the child, they would be on the child (*liju lay yihonal*). Most other things women can eat, except after birth we do not eat roasted grains, *k'ollo*, since it breaks teeth at this time.

Yematawerk'

I could not eat *shiro* [a spicy sauce], or coffee unless it was cooled first. They say it is bad to eat hot things; also milk and castor seed are bad, these stay on the head of the child and will not come off, they will not wash off. *K'iraré* [diluted beer] is good.

The birth of a child is also celebrated with the consumption of certain kinds of food. *Genfo*, a dish of boiled wheat or barley, is prepared for all who attended the birth. It is eaten soon after delivery. *Intiktik*, a drink made from wheat or barley, is prepared for the mother during convalescence, especially if she is having problems breast-

¹ For parallels with other parts of the world, see Maloney, 1976. Jeffery *et al*, 1990: 90.

feeding the infant. After delivery, one or two chickens are slaughtered. They are often of a particular colour and sex, almost invariably a cock which is *gebsemma*, the name given to describe a mixture of black and white, and a red hen. The chickens are made into *wet'*, stew, expressly for the mother although in practice other members of the family also partake of the meal. The slaughtering of chickens is carried out in the hut, rather than outside, as would be the case if the slaughtering was merely a way of acquiring meat. Unless present during the delivery, well-wishers should not come until after the third day, because of the blood in the hut, both from the delivery and from the slaughtered chickens.

Slaughtering occurs even during a Christian fasting period.¹ If the fast is a short one, the meat is consumed when the fast is broken, otherwise it is given to children under seven years of age, who do not have to fast, or it is thrown away. The symbolism behind the slaughtering of chicken was never explicitly explained, though it is clearly a way of greeting the propitious event. There is also a parallel between the ritual blood of the chicken and that discharged by the woman during delivery, and the association between women and chicken is one which occurs repeatedly, a theme which will be returned to in Chapter Ten. The event of a birth is surrounded with symbolic rituals which, given cultural differences across different societies, also act as ethnic markers. Births provide a sphere of tradition which defines the community and provides group identity.

Perhaps the clearest indication of society's concern for the mother can be seen in the tradition of *aras*, up to eighty days of convalescence for the new mother.² During this period the new mother will be looked after by her mother in either her natal or her current homestead. At present, the convalescence period is far from assured and usually lasts only ten to twenty days. During the *aras* period the new mother is not expected to help in the running of the household. The new grandmother or another female relative has to be released from her own household's duties to take on those of the convalescing mother, and this other woman also has to be fed. I was told that the marked decrease in the convalescence period that most mothers could expect was the result of gradual impoverishment, and a shrinking sense of responsibility between generations of households.

¹ The fast includes the prohibition against the eating of meat products on Wednesdays and Fridays, and during other longer fasting periods. See Chapter Nine for details on the rules of fasting.

² For similar figures see Messing, 1957: 428.

To summarize, most of the examples given above show how a pregnant woman is carried through her delivery period by a set of culturally created protections. The fear seems to be less one of woman's fertility *per se*, and a need to control it, than a dreading of the dangers that she and her child might encounter. The fears are founded on the real dangers of mortality. Figures on this type of data are perhaps the hardest ones to obtain since women do not like to remember their losses. For the thirteen women that I knew best and on whom I gathered a full pregnancy record, eight had lost a child before it reached the age of three. Three of the women had had two miscarriages, one woman had had one miscarriage. An additional three women had lost a child under one year's old. Two more children died to the women before they reached their third year. Maternal deaths were also a real danger, though I only knew of one case in the immediate neighbourhood.

The attitude towards women's blood in the context of pregnancy and delivery is most clearly associated with fertility and reproduction. The fundamental importance of birth is culturally hidden, introducing a negative connotation to a development which, if successfully carried through, is very positively valued. As in the case of menstrual blood, an unfavourable stance is set and compounded by the religious association of all women's blood with pollution. People who have been near a newly delivered mother are unclean in the eyes of the Church, and both they and the child will need to be ritually cleansed. Before attempting to draw conclusions, let us move on to the issue of circumcision and then return to an overall analysis.

(iii). Circumcision

Unlike the forms of blood discussed up to now, which are rooted in developments within the female anatomy, circumcision is a culturally created event, and one which in Menz affects both infant boys and girls. However, the circumcision of boys and girls remains located firmly in the female sphere of expertise since it is a woman who performs the operation. Furthermore, as we will see, the operation is deemed to be more important for the female sex.

In the case of boys, the operation involves the removal of the foreskin. In comparison to that performed in other societies, the circumcision of Amhara girls is a mild

operation.¹ It involves no infibulation, i.e., no sewing up or joining together of amputated edges of the genital organs. However, both clitoridectomy, the removal of parts of the clitoris and labiodectomy, the excision of the *labia minora* and *labia majora*, can occur. Although infibulation does not take place during circumcision, it is reportedly quite common that during childbirth, the skin will be cut to 'ease' the child's passage. Even where this does not occur the skin sometimes tears and is then left to heal on its own.

In Amhara society circumcision of boys should occur when they are eight days old or on any even day thereafter. Girls should be circumcised when they are seven days old or on any odd days thereafter; both operations are carried out on infants, much earlier than in many other societies.² The basis for the distinction between boys and girls is a representation of the belief that girls are on the left side of Jesus, boys on the right side. This is a symbolic division which unequivocally values boys more than girls; it is one in which boys exist on the right and even side, and girls on the left and odd side: the Amharic word for odd is *godolo*, which means something missing.

Also connecting circumcision with Christianity is the tradition that sometimes, though rarely, the operation is found to be unnecessary because the child is said to have a '*ye-Maryam girizat*', 'circumcision by Mary', meaning to be born already circumcised. Despite the above links made with Christianity, circumcision in the area seems to be pre-Christian and pre-Islamic, Herodotus amongst others suggesting that in many areas, including Ethiopia, female circumcision was known five hundred years before Christ.³

Explanations as to why girls are circumcised centre around custom and tradition, and whether rightly or not, the operation is connected with Christian faith. The custom is sanctified on the grounds of the problems that would occur if the event does not take place; thus there is a negative rationale for its occurrence. Stopping the practice, it is argued, would bring problems of premarital sex, dishonour and trouble in marriage since uncircumcised women are said to be more selfish and both sexually and generally

¹ Following Harris and Bond's classification, into clitoridectomy, labiodectomy and infibulation; used in Passmore-Sanderson 1981: 18.

² Male circumcision on the eight day as a covenant with god in The Bible, Genesis 17: 10. In areas across the world in which circumcision is practised, this can take place into the teens, and this is the case even in neighbouring Islamic societies, Passmore-Sanderson, 1981:19.

³ Passmore-Sanderson, 1981: 27, although this might refer to other parts of the country, or a wider undefined area referred to as Ethiopia.

demanding. Men are therefore less likely to marry uncircumcised women and a husband might even sue the parents if such a union took place without his knowing. In pregnancy, uncircumcised mothers are said to have difficulties, making a successful birth impossible or at least more difficult. More generally, it is considered unclean, immodest and polluting not to be circumcised, for a boy and a girl, but in particular for a girl. The difference seems to be that for a boy it is shameful to him only, whereas an uncircumcised girl shames her whole family. Uncircumcised boys are more common than uncircumcised girls.

Dessita

You ask 'why does it happen?' - It is because of our tradition, our belief. It is done to ensure that when the girl grows up she can give birth, that is why. Also it is an insult for the boys and girls, and to the boy it brings disease, *yibelawal*, it eats him [causes itching]. It brings them more pain when they are corrected [circumcised] later, in particular for a boy who feels it for about a month, the cut for the girls is less painful. Everybody is circumcised...

...This one [a son, aged about two] I have not had circumcised. The one who died was, so I have not yet had it done to this one.

The complications associated with female circumcision, even in this mild form, are numerous. They can include haemorrhage, which, given the anaemia prevalent in the area, is particularly dangerous; infection and complications including swelling, incontinence, the possibility of dysmenorrhoea (painful menstruation), blockage of vagina and hence partial or total amenorrhoea (the absence of menstruation), painful sexual intercourse, infertility; complications during pregnancy and childbirth; worry and anxiety if any of the above occur. In the case of male circumcision, the dangers are less, though haemorrhage and infection can also result in the child's death.

There is no public ceremony attached to the circumcision act. Nor is it perceived as an initiation, a rite of passage, since it is done in infancy, almost before the child is given an identity.¹ In Menz, as in Amhara culture more generally, it is seen as a private event, which takes place for the individual infant who has reached the right age rather than *en masse*; within the household and not in the wider community. This is not to say that there is no symbolism or ceremony attached to the event. On the appointed day, food is prepared, and as the child is operated on, the father or some other man stands by the entrance to the hut with a dagger or another metal tool, a repeat of the role enacted at the time of delivery.

¹ This occurs at christening, more than a month later. Unlike some communities in which circumcision is a more communal ritual, e.g., the Sandé, MacCormack, 1977.

As we have seen, there are specific days on which circumcision is supposed to take place, in the first few weeks of the child's life. However, it is not always easy for a family to find a woman to circumcise their child on the right day, since women with the skill are scarce. It might also be an inconvenient time for the household. Other reasons for delay may include the child's frail condition. If the infant seems unwell, or if the mother has lost infants in the past, there is often a reluctance to expose the child to circumcision quite so early. Especially in the case of boys, where the shame of being uncircumcised is less of a condemnation than it is in the case of a girl, the operation is sometimes postponed. My data from ninety-seven interviews suggests that 22 boys between the age of 1 month and 22 years were not circumcised. The corresponding figure for girls was 12, and the age range was smaller; I did not obtain any data on uncircumcised girls above the age of 14.¹

The rule that boys are circumcised on even days and girls on odd days is not always followed.² This can probably be explained by a practical reality which does not always manage to fit into the rigid distinctions that the culture requires. There are time constraints on both the household and the 'circumciser', and there is the need to find some cash and/or food with which to pay the woman. It could also reflect the fear of performing too much by the letter of the rule, yet another way of deceiving the Spirits intent on doing harm to the child.

As we have seen, circumcision occurs because people believe that to do otherwise would have dangerous repercussions. Nonetheless, the operations are feared. They themselves might be the cause of, or more precisely, the vehicle through which evil forces can weaken and kill the child and, in the case of the mother, lead to complications during delivery. Beyond these feelings of fear and negative associations (both if the operation is undertaken and if it is delayed) is the practical attitude of 'getting it over with' - mothers cover their ears and turn away from the sight that causes pain and can be dangerous, but that they believe is necessary.

¹ It should be noted however, that the numerical data can be used only as an estimate of a minimum, given that many parents would have been too embarrassed to own up to having an un-circumcised child.

² Ten cases of circumcision on an uneven day for boys and eight on even days for girls were recorded.

(iv). **Aspersion and christening**

Aspersion, or purification with holy water, usually takes place in the hut in which the mother and infant are living. It is a ceremony undertaken by a priest, usually the father confessor of the household.¹ The twentieth day is said to be the most important for the event, though many households also call their father confessor on the tenth day, and in reality the exact dates are not always strictly kept. One such aspersion is described in my diary as follows:

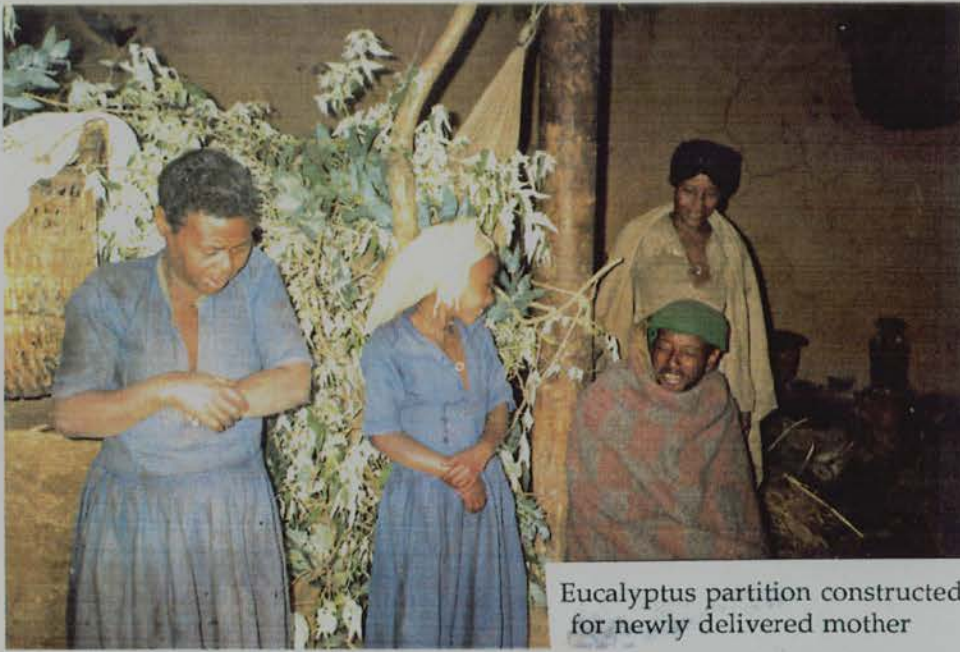
Ayele called me at seven in the morning for the aspersion of his infant brother, aged twenty days. The whole thing lasted about half an hour. The people present consisted of the hut members: Mammit, the mother, Zegene, the father, Ayele and Alemayehu the sons, and a daughter. Then there was the *nefs abbat*, the father confessor, the new mother's brother, and various neighbours who were invited to receive the holy water if they wanted to. The ceremony consisted of simultaneous, but not synchronized recitals in Geez, by the father confessor and Zegene, himself a priest.

After about a quarter of an hour of this, the father confessor started spraying us with water, each person mumbling *yeftugn*, 'release me', as the spray hit their foreheads. The water was taken from the household's domestic water jug. The father confessor started the spraying with Ayele, the oldest son, a child that was known to be afflicted with a type of madness, then the rest of us. Mammit and her new child undressed in a corner and received most of the water, being drenched rather than sprinkled with it, a gasp escaping Mammit since the water was cold.

That was it, the priest was invited but refused to stay to lunch, he also tried half-heartedly to refuse one *birr* that Zegene was giving him but then accepted. The brother of Mammit then gave her one *birr* for 'coffee money'.

Sindé, a neighbour, was called but didn't come, perhaps because she was going to be working on opening the dung-hole of Dimmim, another neighbour. Abeba, a neighbour, was called, got sprayed and left. Asnak'ech, also a neighbour, turned up late with her young son Babush after Zegene and the father confessor had left. She wanted to be sprayed with the holy water, and after some discussion, Alemayehu, the twelve-year old son who is studying to be a priest was persuaded to do the job; his initial reluctance turning to enjoyment at the fun of splashing people.

¹ The Father Confessor is a priest chosen, usually by the household head, to carry out the religious offices for the household. He is the priest most likely to be present at life-cycle ceremonies and to visit during Christian holidays.



36

Eucalyptus partition constructed for newly delivered mother



37↑ Baptism

38 A hair cut →



Much more central to the life-cycle, in Amhara society, is the christening or baptism. This occurs for boys on the fortieth day and girls on the eightieth day after birth.¹ On the appointed day, kin, friends and neighbours are invited to church and then to the celebrating household's homestead, see photograph 37 on previous page. Considerable preparations revolving around food and drink are organized in advance, and the guests usually contribute gifts of money, from fifty cents to about two *birr*, or presents of cloth or beads.

At church a christening name is given to the child, which the priests say has a bearing to the day of the year. This name is kept relatively secret, and rarely used, since once known, those with evil intentions can do harm by to the individual by using the christening name. It is not unheard of for the day of a boy's christening to be delayed until the eightieth day, the date for a girl's christening, in cases where the 'proper' fortieth day is inconvenient.² A godmother or godfather is selected, usually along gender lines, a form of kinship which will be discussed later in this chapter. Once again, the rules about gender are sometimes ignored, in this case when a godmother is chosen for a boy and vice versa.

Yeshewagét' is among the women known in the village as good midwives. She is also a friend of Nigist, a recently widowed woman. When Yeshewagét' gave birth to her son, Nigist was the one who helped her with the delivery. Yeshewagét' told me that she had given her son to her friend as a godchild to thank her.

Thus although gender distinctions exist, with different rules for boys and girls when it comes to the dates of circumcision and christening as well as in the choice of godparent, the distinctions are not always found to be practical or desired, and are sometimes circumvented.

We have seen that both men and women see the connection between women and blood as the women's source of power and value, but also as a fearful, dangerous and polluting involvement.³ Yet women are not secluded at the time of menstruation, and midwives -

¹ The date of infant baptism is not set in the Bible, but the date is related to Saint Thomas's statements about the soul entering the body after 40 days for a boy and 80 days for a girl. For parallels, see de Beauvoir, (1949) 1972.

² The christening ceremony should be delayed if the child is ill, otherwise bad feeling between the parents and the godparents will ensue, the former perhaps blaming the latter if the child should die, and the latter feeling that the parents expected the death and wanted to blame it on them.

³ On Purity and Danger, see Douglas' book by that name, 1966.

the women whose acknowledged sphere of specialization is by definition the reproductive - are not marginalized in society. Water, purified ritually by a male priest, cancels the negative associations. There is also an extent to which symbolic valuation is forgotten in the way men and women cope with the blood in the more pragmatic day-to-day living.

But where in all of this, if anywhere, does the State make an appearance? In practice, none of the various organs of the State has influenced the ideology or the practices discussed. The clinics under the Ministry of Health have not been given the kind of funding and resources to organize systematic and on-going education and services. There has been no question of setting up tampon or sanitary towel factories, for example. Pregnant women do sometimes attend the clinic to receive a tetanus injection, and if there are complications the woman will be carried on her bed to the nearest clinic. In addition, nurses visit Peasants' Associations so that infants can be inoculated.¹ However, the support is so insufficient that even the casual mention here overplays the amount of health provision.

In the case of circumcision, I was informed that in the early days of the Revolution, people were given a lecture against circumcising their daughters. They were told the practice was dangerous and 'backward' and that they should bring their sons to be circumcised under more hygienic conditions in clinics. These instructions did not carry much weight in the face of traditions and were never followed up. The dangers of infection, complications and death from the operation are acknowledged locally, but the fear of repercussions from not having children circumcised is even stronger, fears that a few words by an official can do little to assuage.

2. REPRODUCTION AND CONTRACEPTION

Childbirth is a cause for celebration, especially if it is a couple's first child. Barrenness is considered a particularly sorrowful condition. Women who have not given birth successfully are often openly worried about it, and spend time and money on priests and soothsayers. Barrenness is seen as the woman's fault, until proved otherwise. When so proven, reality tends to be ignored. Thus despite the knowledge that the man or the woman can be infertile, the assumption is different.

¹ Vaccination of BCG, Polio, DPT and measles. The mothers are vaccinated against tetanus.

The birth of twins is considered unfortunate, since the infants are less likely to survive and the ordeal for the mother is considerable. A woman is considered to have problems enough ensuring that one child at a time has enough milk, without having to cope with two.

In Ethiopia, abortion is illegal and culturally taboo. As elsewhere in the world, this does not, however, prevent the practice. Women use mixtures made from plants such as *kosso* (*Hagenia abyssinica*), and *indod* (*Phytolacca dodecandra*), which they make into a drink. *Sindedo* a long thin type of grass, or any other sharp long instrument is also poked through the vagina. Finally, some women are known to use contraceptive pills available from the clinic in town, taking a large quantity of them in one go.

The issue of controlling fertility is rarely broached directly. When questioned, both men's and women's first reaction is always that God decides such matters, and the more He gives the better, that they would be happy with as many children as possible and that it is none of their business to think or plan conception in any way.¹ However, this reaction hides the knowledge that most households do regularly practice birth control, the most common form being extended breast-feeding and the decision to sleep separately. Disagreements over sexual intercourse because of women's greater fears of pregnancy were often mentioned to me as a cause of marital tensions and break-ups.

Tat'ere

What I have is enough. I have two boys and one girl. Men are the ones who want more, they would be angry at the thought of stopping the numbers.

Some men and women commented that these were hard times, and that it was therefore better to have fewer children.

Asnak'ech

I have never used any kind of contraception, I have heard about such things but I do not think they are good. 'It is drying up a fertile area' (*limat madrek' new*), one gets everything by giving birth and being replaced. Besides, they say that you become ill if you do it, if you take the medicines. If I were rich and well, then there would be no problem about giving birth, the older children would help in the household. But I am poor, what am I to feed them with?

¹ For a similar story see Pausewang, 1973: 70.

There are clinics in the area that provide contraception facilities on two days a week through the organization of the Family Guidance Association which in turn works through the Ministry of Health. The contraception clinics are appended to the health clinics in the area, most of which are located in the towns (see Chapter Four). Initially, the facilities were available only to women with husbands, and to those women whose husbands were willing to let them use the facilities. As of 1982, these two conditions were relaxed when Ethiopia, together with 87 other countries, signed a United Nations Convention which aimed to give women greater control over their own lives.¹ The forms of contraception available include the loop and condoms, but the use of pills is the most common. There are no possibilities of sterilization.

Since 1983, 809 women have registered in the Mehal Meda clinic, and there are presently some 397 who regularly come for more pills. By far the majority of patients were urban dwellers. None of them came from Gera Peasants' Association. I analysed 149 of the cases, which yielded the following data: the average age of women attending the clinic is 24, the range estimated to be between 16 and 45.² Just under half (47%) of the women had schooling, and for this group, the average number of years at school was six, the range being from one to twelfth grade plus two years of college. The women who make use of the contraception clinics are therefore considerably more educated than the average, rural or even urban population.

Returning to the data on Gera, for those willing to give a figure for the kind of children preferred, the questionnaires indicated that the difference between desired boys and girls was at the aggregate level, a 12.5% greater interest in male children.³ Dessita explained the situation to me in the following way:

Dessita

We can give birth to up to 12 children, but what do you do with them. They die. We only want about five, that is if we are rich; these would be let us say, three boys and two girls. A poor person is happy with three, two boys and one girl. Boys are better, they are more important in terms of making a strong relationship outside. The girl will marry and leave, though until then, she is the one that will help her mother.

¹ Cook and Maine, 1987.

² Data was also collected on how many children the women had had before registering for contraception. From a sample of 149 cases, this ranged from none to ten, the average being 2.4. The age of first pregnancy was available in 64 cases, and ranged from 11 to 31, the average being 19.4.

³ The total number was 198 male and 154 female children. It should be noted that this figure, on its own and out of context, is ridiculous. But it can be used among a number of indicators which reveal a significantly greater value attached to men than to women.

In the questionnaire, the preference for boys is also reflected in real terms, though to a lesser degree, in the gender composition of offspring. When we look at the aggregate of children said to have been born to the households, there are 5% fewer girls.¹ This distinction is also reflected in the data on the region, women being 46% of the population, and this despite the constant recruitments of boys and men for military service.² It is difficult to explain the reasons for a lower proportion of female births without relying on an explanation in terms of reduced social visibility. Girls and women have a lower profile *vis-à-vis* the community and thus might not get picked up in figures. The low female figure among the adult population can be explained by proportionally fewer girls surviving because of the preferential care given to boys, women's greater vulnerability, in particular during childbirth and women's greater out-migration.

Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that, in Gera, the kind and amount of ululating with which a successful childbirth is greeted is the same for boys and girls. This is in marked contrast to the reported more widespread custom elsewhere in Ethiopia of ululating more for boys than for girls. For example, Parkins³ gives a figure of twelve ululations for boys and three for girls. Even after the event, one of the first questions is never, 'is it a boy or a girl?', and neither relatives nor neighbours automatically know the answer even when the question is put to them. Given the importance of gender divisions in society, and the tradition of a different degree of celebration between the genders in similar areas, the lack of interest in the sex of the child is surprising. An explanation might be sought in the considerable amount of infant mortality in the area. Until the child survives, it is perhaps irrelevant whether it is a girl or a boy. The tradition of not specifying the sex might also be part of the wider fear that asking about, looking at or talking to the child might somehow cause harm.

The discussion so far makes it clear that the State has had little impact on the ideological or material conditions in which reproduction occurs, despite its importance to the society, and the conditions of and attitudes towards women that it engenders. The issue of family planning and population control, however, provides an example of how factors that affect women in particular are broached in the light of the

¹ 134 male children to 120 female.

² In 1989, the total Menz population was estimated by the Party to be 303,277, of which women account for 138,482.

³ Parkins, 1868: 252.

Government's own priorities. It is becoming increasingly clear that a population policy might be on the Government's agenda, as one component in the fight against famine. Statements such as those given below are appearing in Government reports:

It is essential that a population control policy be adopted as a very high priority.../...consideration should be given to introducing incentives/disincentives similar to those which have succeeded in China and other Asian countries.¹

The question can perhaps be asked why the Government has not attempted a grand population control policy. Clapham's suggestion is that of fear of opposition:²

There has been no sustained government attempt to control the rate of population increase... the government is increasingly aware ... any attempt to reduce the birth rate would require a large-scale campaign which would tax its resources and possibly bring it into headlong confrontation with peasant attitudes and religious convictions.

I would argue that the answer lies not in an inability to do so, but in the location of birth in the private domain in general and 'women's business' in particular. This is not to say that if, and when, the Government woke up to the issue and acted, peasant attitudes and religious convictions might not be found to oppose the new policies. However, the history of the current *régime* is one of massive campaigns (Villagization, Resettlement, military service) most of which have been unpopular and yet have been implemented regardless of 'current opinion'. As for the issue of 'taxing [economic] resources', money could be gathered by forced national contribution as it has been for military campaigns and the famine.

Should the State decide on a population control policy or contraception campaign this will not be because of an understanding of women's position and condition, but rather because of a Malthusian association of poverty with population increase. The State might take action as part of its developmental objectives, in which case political and economic backing will be given to it.

Such an event could be a liberating development for many individual women and households. However, where population policies have been introduced as a strategy of the State in the past, the record is often one of oppression not liberation. Thus the

¹ Constable & Belshaw, 1985: 24/25.

² Clapham, 1988: 188.

evidence on the one-child policy in China¹ suggests that it resulted in ill-treatment of women and female infanticide, given a social context in which boys and men were more valuable to a household than girls and women, in particular because of virilocality. More generally, the policy created increased social pressure on individual women and their households, because kin and State priorities conflicted and economic incentives and disincentives were in force. Given the history of Government schemes in Ethiopia, it is not an increase in personal family planning facilities but rather a top-down emergency population programme that would be instituted.

Returning to the evidence from Menz, we have seen how little impact the clinics have had on the population's perceptions, and how much more would be needed for any significant change to occur. At the same time, women and their households might well be better off without significant State involvement in contraception and exposure to insensitive mass campaigns.

3. BEYOND THE COMMON EXPERIENCE

The life-cycle is an important component of the individual's position in any society, including that of Menz. This is particularly so for women, since their role in reproduction is culturally emphasized. The heterogeneity of women's experience lies not only in issues of differential wealth and status, but also in whether or not they have given birth and the number and gender of their offspring.

Yet the situation is complicated by other conditions. For example, I argued in Chapter Seven that there is a difference between the position of married, single and female-headed households. In addition to these differentiating experiences, the involvement of some women in events surrounding reproduction introduces additional considerations. These will be considered briefly before considering the opportunity for social kinship creation that these events afford. A number of women in the society have acknowledged skills. These include those known as midwives, those who perform circumcision, healers, fortune tellers, women who interpret dreams and witch doctors of various kinds. It is the first two of these that will be examined here, while the role of some women in fortune telling and mediation with spirits will be considered in the following chapter.

¹ Davin, 1971, Croll 1981, 1983, 1985.

• **Midwife**

When contractions start, a midwife is called and female neighbours and relatives come to show support. The birth takes a few hours if there are no complications. The midwife's role is to keep an eye on developments, offer advice and take charge of the practical aspects of the delivery. When the time comes, the midwife catches the baby, ensuring it is protected on entry into the world. She cuts and ties the umbilical cord, and often smears a bit of the liquid from the umbilical wound on the child's lips. A mixture of egg and dung is then rubbed on the umbilical wound. The midwife finally cleans the baby and puts a small pat of butter in its mouth. It is usually other women, such as a younger sister or, if there is nobody in a lower social position, the new grandmother, who wipes up the blood.

Midwives in Menz, unlike their counterparts in India for example,¹ are not despised. There is little degradation associated with midwifery, or rather, the negative views about blood and pollution are countered by a valuation of ability and knowledge. Thus midwives, *awwalaj*, are often also called *awak'i*, those who know. They are not a separate category or class of people: any woman who is thought to be knowledgeable can be called upon.² She is not normally rewarded through any direct and immediate form of payment.

• **Circumciser**

Usually on the day before households plan to have their child circumcised, the father goes in search of a circumciser. In Gera, most men go to a neighbouring Peasants' Association looking for one particular woman. Some men also ask a woman from the town of Mehal Meda to come and help. Many more women had a reputation as midwives than women who were known to do the circumcision. This latter occupation seemed the most feared because of the dangers of causing the infant harm or being blamed for any subsequent illness. If this is so, circumcision would seem to be a more dangerous event in an infant's life than entry into the world. Circumcisers seemed to be given a lower status in society than midwives or other skilled women, for which reason it is outsiders to the community who are sought.

¹ Jeffery, *et al*, 1987.

² Unlike Brigit Negussie, 1988, I did not find a separation between relative midwives and professional midwives.

After the operation, the woman helps to heal the wound by putting something on it. According to the preference of the woman who does the operation this can consist of egg and dung, oil, alcohol or juice from medicinal leaves. In exchange for doing the job, the woman is given a meal after the event, processed food to take home, such as a *ch'ibbit't'o'* (a ball of *injera* with *berberé*), and/or unprocessed food, such as grains and eggs. Increasingly some cash is also expected, up to two *birr* for one operation. These rewards are in contrast to those given to the midwife which are less formalized, probably because the midwife is chosen from within the community and can be thanked at some later date. The thanking includes the tradition of choosing the midwife as the godmother, particularly in the case of a baby girl.

Respondents suggested that it was experience that made a woman knowledgeable, that you were not born a midwife or a circumciser, but made yourself one by reputation. In practice, women also branched out from one particular skill until they are known for a number of different ones, for example, as circumcisers, healers, interpreters of dreams and fortune tellers, as both midwives and beer brewers.

In Gera, skilled women were often, though not exclusively, in female-only or female-headed households. This was explained to me pragmatically, it being said that such women could go to the people who call for them without having to make lunch and supper for their husbands first. It is also likely that such women are the ones who are more likely to look out for means of supplementing their livelihood.

4. WOMEN AND KINSHIP

In the introduction to this chapter, I presented the structure of the thesis in terms of a progress leading to the individual, from the earlier treatment of households in Chapter Six and marital relations in Chapter Seven. However, the movement down to the individual is in many ways contrary to the way in which women perceive the life-cycle. In particular, the first few years of a child's life are intimately linked to that of its mother, thus the study of the conditions and attitudes towards infancy easily develops into a study of motherhood. Furthermore, as seen earlier in this chapter, women's kin become important during the *aras* period, the time women turn to their mother to give birth and be looked after. In addition, the importance of reproduction is

such that the time is used not only to activate biological kin but also as a way of creating social kinship in the form of 'eye mothers' and 'godparents'.¹

- 'Eye mother'

In Menz, the woman who holds the infant as s/he is being cut during circumcision becomes known as the '*yeagn innat*', 'the eye mother', a very loose bond between the woman and the child which is rarely officially activated. The woman chosen is usually a close friend of the mother who can be trusted to hold the child. The mother herself tends to be unable to bear the sight and sounds of the child being operated on; she looks away and blocks her ears in order not to see and hear what is going on.

- Godparent

Alemitu

The godmother I chose for my child was my stepmother. I liked her, and gave her my child; it was a way of making sure the friendship would last even if she left and divorced my father. She had told me I should give it to the woman who was the midwife, but I gave the child to her instead.

A godmother or father is selected by the parents before the christening. The kinship thereby created is sometimes kept active, with friendship and the gift of presents from the godparent. Sometimes it ceases to operate altogether and it is also possible for parents to offer the child to the Church rather than to a living individual. A godparent is initially chosen in order to create a kinship between the godparent and the child's parents, and only if this relationship endures is it likely to develop into a relationship between godparent and child.

It is not obvious who benefits more from the tie or whether it is an equal one. The only picture that emerges from my data suggests that the kinship can be between equals or unequals, in cases where it represents an expression of friendship often between neighbours. The tie can also be made by a poor person to establish patronage from a rich or powerful one, as a form of homage and with the hope that it will be beneficial to the

¹ People are involved in other forms of kinship. As we already seen, households also have *nefs abbat*, 'Father Confessors', to whom they turn on matters religious. In the past, and to a lesser extent today, full ritualized adoption was adopted in the form of 'breast' father or mother, *yet'ut' abbat* or *innat*, or the weaker tie often used for a stepfather or stepmother, *injera abbat* or *innat*. Thus relationships of varying importance are constructed beyond consanguineal and affinal ties.

parent. The kinship is hardly ever created by a richer household to link it to a poorer one. The choice of godparent tends to run along gender lines, women being more important in the choice of a godmother for their daughters and men for their sons. In the cases I was acquainted with, there also seemed to be a pattern between women using this opportunity to solidify a friendship and men using it in a more calculating way to create an obligation.

II. DEATH

1. Death and post-funeral remembrances

In Menz, as in Amhara communities more generally, birthdays are not usually recalled and are never celebrated.¹ This is in marked contrast to death, which is commemorated several days, months and sometimes years afterwards. The most important of the commemorations usually occurs on the fortieth day, the *tezkar*, though it can also take place nearer the time of death or several months later.² The Church and its priests play a central role in all events associated with a death. These range from the last rites to burial on consecrated land. The Church provides the ritual, and local Burial Associations the material and social support. In contrast to the role of the Church, the State has had no involvement whatsoever in events associated with death. The absence of participation results in the irony of party officials being buried on Church land, under the jurisdiction of priests. It also means that the State is cut off from an event that is central to individuals, their households and the wider community.

In the funerals of the past there was an attempt to de-beautify clothes and express grief through lack of ornaments. Thus the oldest clothes were worn, sometimes smeared with soot. This tradition is being replaced by one that encourages clean attire and the wearing of 'best' clothes. Increasingly, women's mourning is indicated by the border of their scarfs being turned up. The physical expressions of grief can be extreme, including tearing one's face and beating oneself. The death is announced by wailing, but also by

¹ With the exception of Christ's birthday.

² Messing, 1957: 485, observes that even the peasant in 'modest circumstances' slaughters 'about 5 sheep and two old oxen'. As in the case of marriages, even the richest peasant would not celebrate as fully today. Similarly Bauer, 1973: 118, writing about Tigray, notes that attendance at a funeral is more important than at a marriage.

shots being fired into the air, especially in the case of the death of an important person. These traditions are ones that the State has been trying to abolish.¹

Rather than go through all the ceremonial and ritual elements of a funeral, I will focus here on the *iddir* - also known as *k'iré* - the Burial Associations, and then conclude with a brief comment on mourning.

2. Burial Associations

In the past, very strong informal forms of support existed at times when households faced personal distress, and where custom required expenditures which were so high that they could not be shouldered easily by the individual household. In Gera, though not in other regions of the highlands, these help-lines have only recently been replaced by *iddir*, geographically defined Burial Associations. Through urban influence, these Associations are becoming formalized. Several of my informants observed that *iddir* did not exist in their parent's day and one added, *yezará lij new gud yawet't'aw*, 'it is today's child that has come up with amazing things'. But in the case of the *iddir* she added *k'il aydellem*, 'it is not stupid'. Several *iddir* had come into being recently, though during the time of my research many people in the Peasants' Association had not yet joined.

The model for the new forms of Burial Associations in the rural communities can be seen from the town of Mehal Meda. The town has two *iddir* with around five hundred members each. To one or other of these most people, including Party members and Government employees, belong. Each association has a card membership system with an entry fee and monthly dues, and hence a capital. Tents and equipment can also be borrowed or rented out for other occasions. The *iddir* heralds its members with a trumpet when a member or a close relative of a member has died. One hundred *birr* and some grain is provided to the family with which a feast is prepared for people to eat on their return from the church and burial, as they take turns to pay respects to the relatives. There are fines if people do not attend.

Membership is usually in the name of the head of household. If a couple are married, the husband's name will be used, unless the wife had previous membership, in which

¹ Previously, Emperor Haile Sellassie also tried to reduce the amount of self-mutilation which resulted from expressions of grief.

case it might stay in her name. It is mainly the women of the household who attend, even on the membership list there are many women, since there are many female-headed households.

Returning to Gera, in 1989 there were two functioning *iddir*. The most active one was in one of the eight zone of the Peasants' Association, which had gathered together everybody from that zone. This *iddir* started soon after the Revolution, as a result of locally generated interest in formalizing the existing system. In 1989, there were about sixty people in the association, with an executive of fourteen men. People used to meet weekly but since the advent of Villagization ten of the sixty members have moved and meetings have thinned out and become more irregular.

Belonging to the *iddir* entails broadcasting the death of someone when you are alerted of it and giving a quantity measured out as three *birch'ik'k'o* [glasses] each of barley and beans. It also involves going to church for the burial and a number of gendered tasks such as, for the men, carrying the body, digging the grave and burying the body, and for women, helping with such tasks as taking food and drink to the church.

Payments are made to the *iddir* only when someone dies. However, the Association works in other ways as well as in relief for relatives of the deceased. When a person incurs the condemnation of *iddir* members, if they steal or their cattle eat the grain of others, the *iddir* can impose a fine, usually of between two and five *birr*, according to the severity of the fault and the warnings previously given. These fines can be applied not only to *iddir* members but also to those outside the community. If someone commits an offence and is not an *iddir* member, he or she is still perceived to be liable to *iddir* law. This legal system works in parallel with the officially State sanctioned *fird shengo*, the law courts mentioned in Chapter Four.

More recently there have been attempts to start an *iddir* in the Villagized community of Gera. This association had come into being just before I left, and had a membership of about twenty. It was based on monthly payments of ten cents. In addition, when someone dies, members contribute one tin of barley, and two dung cakes. The *iddir* from Gera, unlike the main *iddir* in the town, does not observe strict definitions of the relatives for whom an *iddir* is activated. In the future this matter will probably have to be defined, since, as we have seen, the process of change towards formalization of the support system is already under way.

Some people felt that they were bullied into joining the *iddir* in Gera. Being closely linked, social and economic pressure could be put on those who did not want to join. For example, the *Gwasssa tera* involves groups of up to twenty people in a system of communal herding; those who initially refused to join the *iddir* were told that if they did not, the *Gwasssa tera* would disintegrate, an event which could lead to considerable trouble and hardship until a new one was organized. This situation should be taken as a warning against seeing the State as the only coercive institution. However, the sense of a reciprocal relationship which I argued can explain the limited acceptance of State policies is much more actively negotiated in the case of the local urge for more formalized Burial Associations. Furthermore in this case the change is characterized by debate, discussion and a general involvement in the new policies through community pressure.

Ironically, however, the formalization of *iddir* rules in town has proved wanting, at least according to some women. They have introduced something known as a *sét iddir*, 'the women's *iddir*'. It is a comparatively small *iddir* of about thirty individuals who can be called upon when any relative dies, and not only a close relative as is the case with the 'dominant' *iddir*. In this *sét iddir*, the women each bring twenty-five cents and some wood with them on the day of the death. They all mourn the dead and are supportive of the bereaved women. The formation of *sét iddir* in the towns suggests that some women felt the need for less formalized structures, and left to their own devices, these are re-instituted in parallel with the formal Burial Associations.

3. Mourning

This chapter ends with a section on mourning, most of which will be taken up with examples of dirges delivered at funerals. The first three examples below are delivered by people who are known as *alk'ash*, literally one who cries, mourners, or even as professional mourners. Both men and women, though the latter predominate, are called upon, usually if they have experienced considerable losses themselves. They are repaid in kind or cash for their services during funerals. The task of these mourners, and all mourners in general, is to make the funeral a success (*endidemk'*), meaning to have tears and sorrow expressed loudly and lengthily.

እናት፡ ትሙት፡ አሉ፡	They said let the mother die,
እናት፡ እንዴት፡ ትሞት፡	How can a mother die?
ሳትጠይቅ፡ አታደርም፡	She will not stay away without asking
የልጅ ገ፡ አድራሻ፡	For the address of her child.



አለጎ፡ ሙዳዬ፡	My reed basket,
አለጎ፡ ማሰከንባዬ፡	My reed lid;
አባትም፡ በልጅ፡	Is a father
ይጠቅናል፡ ማይ፡	Unrelenting towards his child?
አንዴ፡ ብቅ፡ ብለህ፡	Will you not just
አታየንም፡ ማይ፡	drop by to see us once?



እናት፡ የሌላችሁ፡	Those that do not have a mother,
እንሂድ፡ እንግዛ፡	Let us go, let us buy;
አባት፡ የሞተባችሁ፡	Those who have lost a father,
እንሂድ፡ እንግዛ፡	Let us go, let us buy;
እሀት፡ የሌላችሁ፡	Those whose do not have a sister,
እንሂድ፡ እንግዛ፡	Let us go, let us buy;
ባልም፡ የሞተባችሁ፡	Even those who have lost a husband,
እንሂድ፡ እንግዛ፡	Let us go, let us buy;
ልጅ፡ የሞተባችሁ፡	Those who have lost a child,
እንሂድ፡ እንግዛ፡	Let us go, let us buy;
እኔ፡ አልመልስም፡	I would not return them,
ዋጋም፡ ቢበዛ፡	Even if the cost is too great.

As the three previous examples make clear, the purpose of the mourning is not just to honour the passing of a particular person, but also to express the sorrow felt by those left behind. The dirges are often at the general level, addressed to 'those who have lost a father, mother,...'. The function of mourning is thus a time for communal remembrance; a time during which all participants together recall their own previous losses. Sometimes the departed are remembered explicitly by name, people joining in by adding their own laments. The following two dirges are examples of verses that people recite when they feel the need to add their own accounts of woe and want to use the occasion of another funeral for remembering their dead.

አልቃሽ: አዳ መ ጥኩሽ:	Mourner, I listened to you
አዚህ: ቅም: ብዬ:	Standing here;
ጥላሁን: በዩነ:	T'elahun Beyene [name of deceased]
ተስፋዬ: መ ስፍን:	Tesfaye Mesfin [name of deceased]
ትያለሽ: ብዬ::	Hoping you would say.

አልቃሽ: አልቆሺና	Mourner, mourn and then
መልሺልኝ: ለእኔ:	Return [the verse] to me;
በረዶ: የመታው:	As if hit by hail
ሆንዋል: ወገኔ::	Have my relatives. [I have lost all my relatives]

The end of a person's life is an important event, its cultural importance underscored by considerable economic outlays. The funeral itself is organized with the aid of an *iddir*, a social organization instituted with this need in mind, although its importance is such that it transcends the specific to incorporate additional uses. The whole funeral and mourning occasion stresses the sense of community and duties to kin and friends alike, each individual funeral reminding people of the death of others and the scene creating mass catharsis. The importance of these events hardly seem in keeping with the story sometimes told by outsiders of a peasantry that is so individualistic that households cannot cooperate without suspicion and ill will.¹

CONCLUSION

The first part of this chapter considered issues of reproduction and attitudes towards women's blood. I argued that reproduction, nurturing and child-bearing are realms in which women see themselves and are acknowledged to be important and pivotal. At the same time, there is a tradition of camouflaging, fearing and suspecting any disclosure or representation of reproduction and fertility. Such attitudes have their source in the fear for mother and child and suspicion of spiritual and human evil-wishers. There is also a negative association expressed through Christian values in

¹ The ubiquitous image of the peasantry. In the Ethiopian context see Levine 1965.

which women are polluters, contact with their blood needing to be countered by the blessings of water and the prayers of a priest. There is, in addition, a conflict between these forces encouraging seclusion and the way in which the culture requires the heralding and celebration of life, with births, circumcision and baptism all ritualized. Moreover, it is often these very events, located firmly in a female division of place and action, which define the community and its roots.

The overall effect is an ambivalence towards women, by women themselves as well as by men, a sense that women grow up valuing and devaluing themselves because of their role in reproduction, their sexuality, and in the events associated with birth. Finally, there is also a realm in which symbolic valuation or devaluation is interfered with by prosaic practical problems of dealing with such matters as menstruation, which results in a down-to-earth unashamed attitude towards the body and bodily functions, an attitude that sends warning signals against giving too rigid a picture of women's power or oppression based on an interpretation of symbolic rituals.

The second major component of the chapter considered death, the way that it is observed and commemorated. It was noted that it involves the community as a whole, not just the household which suffered the bereavement; that the Church plays a central part and the State none whatsoever - a situation which echoes that drawn in the section on life. The State is almost invisible in its extension of health care or in any other sphere of reproduction and birth and is completely absent in issues pertaining to death. Life and death are therefore socially constructed and economically enacted without the State's direct involvement. In contrast, the Church was seen as playing a central role in life-cycle events.

Current trends include reduced expenditures as a result of scarcity and impoverishment, nevertheless, internal structures of support continue to evolve. The trend towards an increasing formalization of Burial Associations was also discussed.

The gender construction of death is less categorical than that of birth. Men, being of higher status in the society, are likely to be mourned more fully than women and they preside over the religious component of the event. Membership of a Burial Association is predominantly in their name, as heads of household, however, women tend to

participate more in attendance of associations. Women are the more vocal mourners; they perceive themselves, and are perceived, as the main bearers of sorrow.¹

¹ An exception to the relative voicelessness of women, discussed in the following chapter.

9 BELIEF AND LANGUAGE

Introduction

I. Religion

1. Christianity

(i). *Mehaber*

2. Spirit-belief

(i). *Adbar*

(ii). *Wik'abī* and *zar*

(iii). *Ch'ellé*

(iv). *Buda*

(v). *Aganint*

(vi). Links with Christianity

(vii). Summary

II. Language

Conclusion

INTRODUCTION

In Gera, it is on the ideological front that the State has had the least direct effect. It will be argued here that religious beliefs remain fundamental to the population both as explanations of natural and social phenomena and as an arena within which gender relations are negotiated.

This chapter provides an illustration of the relationship between society and culture, or, more specifically, between society and religion. In it I will discuss the forms of belief that have an effect on individuals and play a large part in moulding the community. Indeed, the traditions associated with these beliefs impinge upon many events that have already featured in each chapter of the thesis. Beyond a description of the supernatural, they provide explanations for a whole host of phenomena, from personal fortune or tragedy, to communal boon or disaster.

Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity is an ancient form of Christianity with significant Judaic influences. It is one in which communication with God is mediated through a

multitude of Saints, as well as through Jesus and the Virgin Mary. The range of divine figures breaks down the monotheistic religion into one which allows individuals an element of choice in worship. Belief is expressed in numerous ways, including, for those who can manage it, membership of *mehaber*, a form of rotating religious gathering. *Mehaber* are usually gender specific, cutting across geographical location, and based on kinship and friendship. I shall argue that women's access to the dominant religion is restricted, yet that they find elements of support therein, particularly in the figure of Mary, and *mehaber* gatherings in her name.

Alongside this official Christianity is a disparate range of spirit-beliefs. Using the literature as theoretical backing, I will argue that this 'peripheral' and 'non-legitimate'¹ religion exists 'in opposition' to the dominant Church-based ideology. The spirit-belief has been subject to attack by the State and is considered with suspicion even within the society. The demands of these spirits are increasingly perceived by the women practitioners, as well as by others, in a negative light.

Though the two religions, Christianity and spirit-belief, are described as separate and in opposition, there is a syncretism between them, and the two are sometimes interwoven and difficult to untangle.²

In Part II, the discussion shifts to a more tentative consideration of linguistic features. After providing the setting which shows that, in general, language portrays and perpetuates a gender hierarchy, we move on to a study of a phenomenon which cuts across this division. It will be pointed out that, at times, gender reversals in language can be heard. This situation could, perhaps, be explained away in terms of a 'laxity' in the way people express themselves, yet such a rationalization seems dubious enough to require further thought.

I. RELIGION

1. CHRISTIANITY

Under the Imperial *régime*, Orthodox Christianity was the State religion, the culture supporting and legitimating the power of the ruler. In Socialist Ethiopia, Christianity has officially been down-graded at the national level and given a status equal to

¹ Lewis, 1975; in Ethiopia, Reminick, 1974.

² On the syncretistic tendencies of what he calls pagan and Christian beliefs, see Molvaer, 1980: 113.

Islam. In the early years of the Revolution there were attempts to discourage fasting and the honouring of Saints' Days through work prohibitions. *Sira zemecha*, communal work, now often occurs on Sundays, much to the chagrin of the devout, who perceive this act as the cause of many evils and disasters. However, at least in Menz, the attempt to reduce the role of Christianity in society has had few successes.¹ Indeed, even at the national level the Socialist Government has accepted elements of the Christian culture. Thus, five of the thirteen official holidays are Christian in nature.² Furthermore, in Menz, a Church tax has been established which is enforced by the new administrative structure, legitimating and perhaps even strengthening the role of Christianity in the community. Also, at least at the Peasants' Association level, the leadership remains closely in touch with the Church and is in the forefront at all religious ceremonies. At the local level, much more so than at the national level, State and Church are far from disassociated, a reflection of the endurance of the religious ideology in the face of change. This is not to say that the State has had no hand in altering some religious practices. The case of limiting work restrictions has already been mentioned, and changes in the male *mehaber*, will be described in greater detail below. In general, however, it can be concluded that though uncomfortable about it, current 'Marxist' power structures have had to defer to Christianity, sometimes even operating symbiotically with it, especially at the level of local Government.

The actions of individuals conforming to the 'Christian' culture include fasting and abiding by the restrictions against certain types of work on Saints' Days³ and on other Holy Days. Fasting involves abstaining from all animal products, and, in theory, neither eating nor drinking until the afternoon. Although abstaining from animal products is strictly upheld in Menz, the delay is a token one of a few hours and most people no longer wait until after midday for their first meal. Women, in particular, forgive themselves for breaking the fast because of their addiction to coffee, (*yebuna sus*). Work restrictions include a total of 150 to 250 days in which some activities may not be undertaken. These operate in both male and female spheres of the sexual division of labour e.g., men do not plough or harvest; women do not spin or grind.

In addition, Ethiopian Christianity is expressed through food taboos, with vows, pilgrimages, offerings of various kinds to Churches and belief in faith healing. As we

¹ In the country as a whole, and in particular in urban centres, circumstantial evidence suggests that there has been a resurgence of religious belief and observances since the Revolution.

² Three of the official holidays are celebrations associated with Islam.

³ Certain days of the month are associated with individual Saints e.g. Saint George on the twenty third. In addition to the monthly celebrations, a specific month or months is particularly important, e.g., in the case of Saint George on the twenty third of April.

have already seen, most lifecycle events are also predominantly expressed and celebrated through religious rituals. Some young boys from within the community were, and still are, trained to become deacons and priests. The training centres around the learning of Geez, the ancient ecclesiastical language.

Women's only official role in the Church is as 'servers', helping with food preparations, a role that can be taken up by 'nuns' - elderly women who have vowed celibacy thereby expressing their commitment to the Church. Women are excluded from the Church hierarchy of bishops, priests and deacons, and all women have to stay on the outer edge of the Church, without entering the inner sanctum, where the *tabot*, the symbolic Ark of the Covenant, is kept.

Many households in the area practise expressions of their faith through actions that might not be visible to the outsider, but which have an important bearing on household behaviour and action. The fact that the honouring of Saints' Days is done partly by not doing certain types of work, means that households are involved in complex calculations of time allocation. Furthermore, there are additional restrictions and rules which some individuals follow. Thus, in addition to the Saints' Days, some women do not collect water on *senbet*, Saturday and Sunday (collecting enough on Friday to last the weekend), as a religious expression of honouring that time. A smaller number of women also do not grind grain, pound coffee, or take out the dung from the hut on these days.

The argument that Orthodox Christianity is more the domain of men than of women might seem an odd statement to make since women make up such a large proportion, more than half, of the devotees. However, the claim is based on the power that is vested in men, their dominance, and the subordination of women that it encourages. Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, Christianity plays an influential part in the beliefs and actions of women who find support and explanations of their world in terms of Christianity. They are more likely than men to make vows and regularly present offerings to the Church.

Within Christianity the figure of Mary stands out as one to whom women can turn. As will be seen below, women's rotating gatherings, their *mehaber*, are almost exclusively in her name. Mary is also central to cultural traditions associated with childbirth as we saw in the previous chapter. *Filseta*, the Fast of the Assumption, celebrated in

August, has its origin in the death of Mary and her assumption to heaven with the aid of Jesus.¹

(i). *Mehaber*

In 1989, out of a sample of 97 households, 46 men and 39 women were *mehaber* members. At least a further 8 men and 14 women had belonged to one until recently. Except for three elderly women, mothers of the head of household, all of these were the main adults in the household. The figures suggest that almost half the principal men and women of households² are members of *mehaber*, and that the numbers are marginally greater in the case of male membership. The gender difference is accounted for partly by a recent reduction of women members unable to sustain the cost. Most of the members tend to be above twenty years old, though occasionally a younger person might join.

Mehaber tend to unite groups of between ten and thirty people, who meet approximately once a month on the day of the Saint that they have chosen to honour. The members take turns at hosting the event in their own homes, providing food and drink for the guests who usually come on the late afternoon of the appointed day, stay the night, and depart after a morning meal. The *mehaber* are overseen by a priest who is a member, and comes to give his benediction to the event. If he is unable to attend, another priest will do the office since without a priest's blessing, the ceremony would be considered invalid. In particular his blessings over a large loaf of bread is required. Most of the loaf is then cut up into chunks which are distributed for consumption amongst all the members at the very beginning of the celebrations. However, once the necessary prayers and blessing are delivered, the priest may well depart without jeopardizing the meeting. If he stays on, he is likely to offer a few prayers at different stages during the celebrations. Men with Church schooling recite prayers together with the priest in *Geez*, other members standing up for the prayers and delivering *Ave Maria* and other incantations when told to do so. In general, friends, kin and important people in the area in which the *mehaber* is being held will be invited to make an appearance and join in the consumption.

A considerable amount of religious significance is attached to this event. As previously mentioned, it occurs on a Saint's day and is known by the name of that Saint, for

¹ Walker, 1933: 74. In addition, one of the national Christian holidays has an association with a female figure. Thus the story goes that *Mesk'el*, the Finding of the True Cross, originated in the early Christian era, when Queen Eléni [Helena] went in search of the cross of the crucifixion and announced the finding by lighting a torch that her people could see Messing, 1957: 366.

² Household head and spouse.

example, the Saint George or Saint Michael *mehaber* for men, or the Virgin Mary *mehaber* for women. The *mehaber* might also be linked to the Church of the region. Most men in Gera attend a *mehaber* of 'the Saviour of the World', i.e., Jesus, since that is the name of the Church associated with the Peasants' Association. In Menz, practically all women who belong to a *mehaber*, are associated with Saint Mary, the men having a greater number of Saints from which to choose.

Sometimes the group also meets on another Saint's Day in some particular months. This tradition, *ch'immir* (literally addition), is often a consequence of a member having made a vow to a different Saint, and having asked that that day be incorporated into the ritual. Thus in the Virgin Mary *mehaber* I attended, a Saint Michael's day in January was added as a regular feature as one such *ch'immir*.

Mehaber are constructed around religious symbolism. Thus associated with each *mehaber* is an earthenware pot and often a picture. The pot, called *ts'iwwa*, is dressed in numerous layers of bright cloths, of a type associated with the Church, and made to fit round the pot's neck. Members from the *mehaber* take the *ts'iwwa* in turn, and at the end of each event, the next person to host the celebration takes the pot home, together with the centre chunk of the bread which the priest blessed at the beginning of the event and which is reserved for this purpose. The picture kept with the *ts'iwwa* is usually that of the Saint being celebrated, though a Saint George's *mehaber* might, for example, acquire a picture of Virgin Mary instead.

Many members fast on the day of the *mehaber*, their first morsel of the day being the bread that has been blessed for the occasion, consumed in the late afternoon, or early evening. The religion's taboo over menstruation results in a dilemma for women whose period coincides with the twenty-first of the month, i.e. Virgin Mary's day. Until menopause, some women abandon the *mehaber* if this occurs, others still continue to attend, though refraining from eating the blessed bread and drinking from the *ts'iwwa*.

Men and women tend to have separate *mehaber*; but it is quite common to have at least one man at any gathering of a women's *mehaber* and *vice-versa*. There are several reasons for this. One is that a widow or a widower might take over their spouse's *mehaber* membership. This is said to be done as a way to honouring the dead and as an activity that brings favour to the deceased in the next world. Another reason is that men, in particular sons or husbands, can substitute for women if, for some reason, the latter cannot attend; the substitution never takes place the other way round.

Substitution in the case of women's *mehaber* is not necessary, but attendance is a sign of commitment to the Saint and to the *mehaber*. If a woman cannot attend, it is therefore better for her to send someone in her place. There is the added factor that the financial outlay for each individual does not depend on the number of attendances. The costs of hosting the event can add up to about 125 *birr*, or 165 *birr* if a sheep is slaughtered. For about twenty members and fifteen guests/family, the costs can be broken down as follows:

30 *birr* of barley for making *injera*, 20 *birr* for brewing *t'ella*, 10 *birr* of wheat for making bread, 6 *birr* coffee, 5 *birr* *géshe* (*Rhamnus prinoides*) a plant used for fermenting *t'ella*, 4 *birr* butter, 3 *birr* lentils, 2 *birr* onions, spices 2 *birr*, salt 2 *birr*, sugar 1 *birr*.

Of the total sum, about 60 *birr* is the cost of grain that will be taken from the domestic granary. Increasingly, expenses have had to be considerably reduced, households economizing in particular on meat, butter, lentils and sugar. Having paid for these monthly feasts (through hosting one themselves), it would be a waste if someone in the family did not benefit from the occasion. With these exceptions, and those of the priest at women's *mehaber*, membership of the association is gender specific. Each gathering, nevertheless, usually include the host's guests and relatives of the opposite gender. In the case of men's *mehaber*, the wife's presence is particularly necessary in the preparation and dispensing of food and drink.

People of the same *mehaber* tend to live within walking distance from each other, sometimes in the same Peasants' Association. For women's *mehaber*, the locality from which members come together is usually wider than for men's. Female respondents commented that it was the spread-out nature of the 'sisters' that they thus acquired which they valued. Women often kept to the same *mehaber* even when they changed homes through different marriages and visits to their natal home between marriages. The contrast between men and women's *mehaber* groups can be explained above all as a reflection of the predominance of virilocality.

The whole event serves a combination of spiritual and lay purposes. The spiritual ones underlie much of the symbolism of the event as already described. When asked why they attend, the answer is often that it is '*lenefsé*' (for my soul), part of the deeds of a good Christian. It is also an action that might be taken as a vow to a particular Saint or as a way of giving thanks. Barren women join as a way of begging the Saint to make it possible for them to beget. In the case of a female member who dies childless, the members have a tradition of taking food and drink to the Church on the fortieth day

after the woman's death as a symbol of remembrance on earth, and a reminder to Heaven of the woman's good intentions.

The lay benefits derived are mainly expressed in terms of friendship and kinship. Fellow members of a *mehaber* are referred to as sisters or brothers. In the case of women, their reason for joining a particular *mehaber* is often associated with the attempt to retain ties of kinship or relationships which might otherwise break-up because of marriage and divorce-related mobility. Consanguineal kin can thus be met regularly, and in-laws or friends from a certain period and earlier locality need not be lost.¹

Alemïtu

I belong to a *Maryam mehaber* [Virgin Mary's *mehaber*], I grew up with this *ts'iwwa*, with *Maryam*. she makes me happy, when I ask her to make me well she does so; she gives me friends, my *mehaber* sisters. If I stop attending regularly she tells me in a dream that I must go. I started this one on my own, it was not my mother's. My goddaughter asked me to join.

Asnak'ech

I used to go to another one, some friends had said, 'let us drink', so we did. But I stopped when I became pregnant, and then I lost the boy. Seven month's ago I joined this *Maryam mehaber*; I did so because my only other child was ill. I made a vow and entered. I like the *mehaber*, to drink together is a good thing; also I know that she, *Maryam*, will lighten my troubles and also it is good for my soul. This one also [the new *mehaber* she has joined], it was friends who said, 'come with us that we may drink'.

Taferaw

I have been in a *Maryam*. There were ten of us, it started just over two years ago. I started because Alemu [her son] was ill, he had trouble with his eyes. I called Mary asking her to make him better. I did this on a Thursday, the same day he got better, so I joined. Before that I had joined the same group and paid once, then I stopped. I had joined that first time because of the mother of my old husband. He died and I joined, so that I would still see her when I left the country [area]. I think that the *mehaber* was started by her mother. I stopped that time because I had an argument with someone in it.

This socially constructed kinship is stressed by women rather than men, or rather, the women are more involved in a system of support through the *mehaber*. Thus, *mehaber* sisters are expected to visit each other when they give birth, at christenings, if there is a funeral or any other major event. Respondents, however, were quick to point out that the support system had limitations. Asnak'ech, a respondent quoted above, added:

¹For similarities in other countries see March & Taqqu, 1986.

I count other *mehabertegnna* as sisters. When a close relative dies, we give money, about fifty cents each; they come also for a birth, or a christening, or if I am ill. Sometimes if I have a problem, I might share it with them, but I am more likely to tell a close friend outside the *mehaber*, I do not have serious discussions there.

Another woman likewise commented:

Dessita

One of the values of the *mehaber* is to discuss problems, but I keep these to myself; there is no real idea of helping those of us in the grips of some difficulty, but they come and visit if a husband dies or a child is born; they come and help with the work. We have not done anything together, but there is a code of conduct, women in the same *mehaber* are not supposed to steal each other's husbands for example, though I have known it to happen!

Mehaber are seen as having shortcomings, yet they are occasions on which a group of women can meet and discuss events together, often not as one group but in smaller discussion circles within the larger *mehaber* gathering. In the *mehaber* I belonged to there was only one point on each occasion in which all the *mehaber* women, and only them, acted together. The following extract is from my diary:

Towards the end of the evening the *mehabertegnna* trooped out to perform the only really integrating act of the occasion: to crap in union in the starlight outside the compound, whilst talking to each other. This time there was a lot of joking when the female host shone a torch which she had acquired too near to us. After performing, the group got together in a closer circle, a pot of water being passed round for each woman, in turn, to wash her private parts with. More ribald and personal comments, the closest the evening got to creating a sense of togetherness. Tonight the cold broke it all up and not too soon, as we were all perishing.

Mehaber provide an event to which women can look forward, an occasion to think about, to dress up for, and one which is socially approved. It is often an opportunity for regular visits to a different community, an important consideration given the restricted mobility of women. It is also an opportunity to sit, without working, to eat, talk and relax, an opportunity which is rare for some women - in particular those with a large household to look after, or, at the other extreme, those without any children or domestic help in the household.

The reasons for not joining a *mehaber* include costs (by far the most important), age, disillusionment and pain at the loss of a loved one and, as already mentioned, the timing of the menstrual cycle.

Yirgu

I have never been in a *mehaber*, the cost of two *mehaber* in a household under present conditions is too much, so it is only him [her husband] who has one.

Yematawerk'

It is simple, I cannot go to mine any longer, my monthly flower is at that time.

Yeshewagét'

I had joined a *Maryam mehaber*, but my daughter died when I was hosting it three years ago. She was fifteen, I gave it up. How can I forget?

Asselefech

No, no *mehaber* for me, I am still a child [22 years old, yet many younger women do belong.]

There have been changes in the celebration of *mehaber* over the years. My *mehaber* used to be considerably larger and more lavish. More than twenty years ago it comprised some forty people, but it had come down to about eighteen active members. The cost of belonging, the feast that had to be prepared, was found to be too much of a burden, not just because of the larger membership, but also because expectations at that time were greater. In the past, more and better food per member was expected, for example hunks of bread and not strips of *annebaberro*, a cheaper form of bread sandwich, was served in the morning. As membership dropped, the priest of the *mehaber* talked also about making the affair a more humble and affordable one, in keeping with the difficult times. During the 1985 famine a number of such gatherings in the region disintegrated, but a few of these have since regrouped and started up again.

In Menz, a different form of *mehaber* has also come into existence. According to my informants the Government edicts passed on to Peasants' Associations and Church leaders, has encouraged the men to form *senbeté mehaber* which take place in the Church rather than in people's homes. The form of the *mehaber* remains the same to the extent that the groups meet monthly and rotate the costs of hosting it. However, the food and drink are taken to the Church, and the event no longer lasts overnight. The rationale for the change given to me by the Peasants' Association leadership lay in the more 'open' nature of the resulting event, one which any passer-by could be invited to share. It could, on the other hand, be interpreted as the State's appropriation of the religious sphere, consonant with greater State power. The change suggests that the State is having to incorporate, rather than destroy, the local foundations of the Christian religion. The priests, for their part, explained the change as transforming the organization into one which is more in keeping with the religion and faith, arguing

that the *mehaber* which took place in people's homes strayed towards developing into a social and political rather than a religious gathering.

Whatever the rationale, it was seen as applying only to the male organizations: no question of moving the locality of the women's *mehaber* was suggested. One could speculate about the reasons for this. Perhaps the distinction was a recognition that the Church was an unsuitable place for a gathering of women since it represents a male preserve; or perhaps it was a recognition that women would not accept the move for these very reasons. It could also be that the State acted because the male *mehaber* formed nuclei of social discussion, some of which might have been considered subversive. The male get-togethers might have been considered more of a threat than the female ones. Church authorities, not surprisingly, welcomed the change which brought the whole event more closely into their fold. Whatever the reason, the change seems to have occurred relatively smoothly. Some men abandoned their *mehaber* because of the edict, some continued domestic *mehaber* in defiance, but most now belong to a *senbeté mehaber*,¹ and seem content to do so. The women's groups remain unaltered.

2. SPIRIT-BELIEFS

Mention was made earlier of another 'religious' component to rules and traditions in Menz culture. This is one which was never legitimated by the State, has been discouraged as backward, and has unhesitatingly been subject to attack by both the previous and the present *régimes*. In the early nineteenth century, *zar* cults were forbidden² whilst in post-Revolutionary Ethiopia there have been campaigns to encourage people to throw away the 'trappings' of spirit-beliefs: *ch'ellé* beads and other spiritual paraphernalia.

Despite such actions, these spirits continue to play a central role in the society, not only on the ideological plane, which has not yet been shaken nor superseded by a Socialist perception of phenomena, but even in the material level. This is because the distinction between the material and the ideological is not rigidly upheld, or rather, the ideological impinges upon the material. Thus most events - the accumulation or loss of wealth; health and illness; birth and death and the State's presence in various guises - are all first and foremost given a supernatural interpretation. It would be impossible to

¹ The figures available for the questionnaire I administered are 27 *senbeté mehaber* members and 13 domestic ones.

² Natvig, 'Oromos, Slaves, and the *Zar* Spirits', 1987: 671.

consider the position of women in the society, or the relationship between the peasantry and the State without reference to this area of life.

The importance of these spirit-belief systems is sometimes shrouded from view because they are known to be frowned upon, almost forbidden by the priests of the 'legitimate' Christian religion, despite the fact that belief in these spirits is almost universal.¹ It is also in some ways made invisible by the very nature of the beliefs, dealing with uncertain relationships between humans and spirits. Finally spirit-belief systems are under attack by forces of modernization, and scientific explanations of phenomena. Though many of these changes also undermine the 'Christian' component in the culture, the spirit-belief systems are more vulnerable because their religious prescriptions operate to a greater extent in terms of secrecy and individual rather than group identity, and because they have never been constructed into a doctrine, let alone used as a force legitimating State authority. They also operate in a sphere of culture in which women predominate, and perhaps, therefore, function as an alternative, a culture 'in opposition' rather than 'in power'.

Women are more involved than men in this spirit culture - not just as worshippers, for in this role they also predominate in the 'Christian' scene, but in the more interactive role as communicators with, and 'embodiments' of the spirits. This is in contrast with the menial role women are allotted in the Church.²

The spirits that visit women in Menz have in common their initial presentation as an illness, which can be relieved through participation. However, there is much more at stake than the placating of a mental or physical malaise, as Lewis in his seminal work, *Ecstatic Religion*, pointed out:³

For all their concern with disease and its treatment, such women's possession cults are also, I argue, thinly disguised protest movements directed against the dominant sex. They thus play a significant part in the sex-war in traditional societies and cultures, where women lack more obvious and direct means for forwarding their aims. To a considerable extent they protect women from the exactions of men, and offer an effective vehicle for manipulating husbands and male relatives.

¹ See Weissleder, 1965: 75.

² 'Women, otherwise limited in cultural participation among the Amhara, particularly in the Church institution where their expressive behaviour and opportunities for service are almost entirely rejected, constitute a considerable majority in the *zar* societies, even in the top leaderships' Messing, 1957: 598. Also Tsehail Berhane Sellassie, 1984: 14.

³ Lewis, 1975: 31. Very similar comments are made in his more recent book, 1986:39. See also March & Taqqu, 1986. For a similar interpretation in terms of stress in Eastern Transkei, see O'Connell, 1982; in Kenya see Gomm, 1975.



39 ← Church



40 ← Priests



41 ↑ Icon of St Mary and Child



42 ← Chellé spirit
beads

It will be shown that the spirit-belief systems represent a sphere of culture in which women can express themselves, but also one which they can use to receive material and socio-political benefits.¹ The political rewards involve the opportunity for expression and a sphere of power. The material rewards include coffee, butter, honey, meat, perfume, beads and clothes. My respondents in Gera estimated that up to four *birr* a week might be spent on such ceremonies. For most women it was usually much less, but it could include occasional large expenditures, such as the money for an *angel-libs*,² a special piece of cloth worn as a scarf, preferably edged with red and black, costing about seven *birr*.

The value to women of the spirit belief system should not be romanticized. The picture that emerges from Menz is also one in which believers and observers alike express negative attitudes to the religion which is not legitimate in the way that Christianity is, and the spirit-belief is perceived as one binding devotees to expenditures,³ to fear, and to a traditional behaviour pattern that some of them wish to alter.

Like many other examples of such religious systems, one of the characteristics of spirit-beliefs in Menz is that they are peripheral not only in having a membership of women and low-status men,⁴ and in the amoral position of the beliefs,⁵ but also because they seem to have their source outside the society in which they are located. In fact, both Christianity and spirit-belief systems have links with Oromo culture and Islam, for instance the role of coffee and incense; the holy nature of Fridays; Arabic linguistic borrowing for such things as the term for amulets, *kutab*, and we shall see that a number of other borrowings occur in the different spirit beliefs.

¹ I am not arguing a simplistic functionalist view of the spirit or, for that matter, Christian beliefs. Women's involvement in religion is more than a simple compensatory action, a protection against the world or against male supremacy. It is an expression of culture and a belief system in which some actions can be explained this way. See Holmberg, 1983, for a critique of this type of analysis, also Van Binsbergen, 1979, for an explanation in terms of social formation and political change.

² Though pronounced as such term is probably *anget libs*, literally neck-clothes, i.e., a scarf.

³ In a female-headed household, the expenses are personal. If there is a husband on the scene, this can be a way of asking for a reward, but in the context of increasing poverty, households must find ways of reducing their expenses.

⁴ With very few exceptions, e.g., Bushmen of the Kalahari, where trance is a monopoly of men in general, Lewis, 1975: 48.

⁵ Lewis suggested that whereas mainstream religions, in this case Orthodox Christianity, are moral religions praising and blaming humans for their actions and thoughts, the peripheral religions are often amoral in nature: they treat the victim of possession as blameless with respect to actions and thoughts within the society, in essence because the religion plays no direct part in the structuring of society.

The spirit-beliefs are seen as pre-dating Christianity, yet, to the extent that this is the case, the distinction being made is between two beliefs established in the country more than one and a half millennia ago. The concept of spirits as a marginal belief surviving the introduction of Christianity draws attention away from the common past. Thus, Natvig looking at the origin of *zar* possession attempts to focus on the common past, suggestion that the belief arose out of contact and social tensions at historical meeting points between different cultures and religions. The belief is then argued to have been maintained, even after conditions altered.¹

It is very difficult in practice to distinguish clearly between the different spirit-belief systems operating in the area. This is partly because talking openly about such matters can be courting the displeasure of the spirits, but it is also because not all women necessarily differentiate between the various spirits. The classification and separation adopted below is thus invalid for some respondents. To give an example, *ch'ellé*, *wik'abi* and *zar* could be classified into one, two, or three separate types of belief. I found that the explanation for these differences lay in the extent of involvement of the devotee. The more committed the person was in the belief-system, the more detailed their knowledge of the spirits and their distinctions. This generalization notwithstanding, some women had a considerable involvement in, and knowledge about, one particular spirit, and very little about any other.

Confusion is increased by considerable variation amongst individuals in the way that the spirits are described, and honoured. Problems also sometimes arise because there are no steadfast methods of operating even for one particular individual. Side by side with this flexibility, there is sometimes a rigidity and a sense that there is only one way of doing things. For example, ceremonial slaughtering of sheep or chicken is one of the ways in which many of the spirits are placated. Sometimes the colour and sex of the animals are specified, and any deviation from the rule is frowned upon. The same individual, for the same spirit, but at a different point in time, will comment that the specifications do not matter, adding: *yetegnew*, 'whatever is found'.

The supportive and yet marginalized nature of the spirit-belief systems in Meriz can be illustrated by abandoning the abstract terms in which they have been discussed so far, and by describing instead how they are manifested in the society. Some details on the main spirit systems are presented next. They include: *adbar*, *wik'abi*, *zar*, *ch'ellé*, *aganint*, and *buda*. It should be noted from the beginning that most of these belief-

¹ Natvig, 1987: 688.

systems are not always expressed dramatically by trance or possession. Most of the time, in the majority of cases, the beliefs are on-going conditions needing periodic placating. Possession itself is but a rare occasion, though it remains central to the belief in the *zar* and *buda* spirits in particular.

(i). *Adbar*

The *adbar* is a female spirit associated with a specific area, often a communal one referring to a place, *bota*, or country, *ager*, and is sometimes located by a tree or some other open space. Actions are regularly taken by some women in order to appease the spirit. These include daily spilling the coffee dregs at a certain spot outside the hut, and burning tobacco leaves (*timbuho*) outside the hut on Wednesdays and Fridays. Occasional celebrations involve burning *it'an* (incense), or *weyra* (wild olive tree) sprigs, laying freshly cut grass in the hut, making a dish of wheat or barley called *k'inch'é*, or a type of bread *t'iresho*, specially brewing some beer *t'ella* or drinking a *ch'at*-based tea. Annual events, usually in May, include the ritual slaughtering of livestock. Particular types of livestock are slaughtered inside the hut, white chicken and black sheep being preferred.

When the spirit is called up, it is sometimes addressed simply with a blessing for the day such as: *megen senyo, maksenyo...* Blessed Monday, Blessed Tuesday,... Otherwise it is addressed with the following prayer in which the *adbar* is given the name *Awgé* and addressed in the female:

አድባር፡አውጌ፡	Adbar Awgé
አንቺነሽ፡አድባራ፡	You are my adbar,
ዳሀና፡ዋይ፡	Keep well,
ካመት፡አመት፡አድርቢኝ፡	Let us get by from year to year,
ልጅ፡ለሌሎ፡ልጅ፡ለጢልኝ፡	Give a child to the childless,
ለታመመ፡አድጊልኝ፡	Heal the sick,
ከፋን፡አሸቢልኝ፡	Make the evil stay away,
ዳጉን፡አቆርቢልኝ፡	Bring the good near to me.

In neighbouring places, including the town of Mehal Meda, the *adbar* was addressed by the name of *Rahélo* and celebrated in other ways. Once a year, *rimit'o*, bread baked specially in the fire rather than in a pan, and some *nifro*, boiled grains, are cooked in preparation. The devotees then go outside with their fists clenched full of the grains. In unison, they clap their hands, and throw away the contents saying, '*Rahélo, hid tolo*

tolo', i.e., 'Rahélo go quickly quickly'. The individuals then return quickly to their separate huts. This ceremony can be carried out by a single household, or by a whole neighbourhood of women together. The symbolism behind the ritual in this case seems clearly to emphasize a desire to placate and then be rid of the spirit.

(ii). *Wik'abi* and *Zar*

Wik'abi and *zar* are different but similar spirits. Both are internalized - part of the individual rather than a separate external being - and they are always expressed in terms of an illness within the devotee. This is unlike the *adbar* which has a separate identity from the person.¹ The *zar* spirit is known in a number of other areas including Djibouti, Somalia, Sudan, Egypt, Iran, and Arabia. It is thought to have originated in Ethiopia where it might have been part of the dominant belief as the sky god of the Agaw before being marginalized by the coming of Christianity.² Records of *zar* cults have been found that date back at least to the sixteenth century.³

Wik'abi can be seen as a milder form of *zar* and affects a majority of women.⁴ The *wik'abi* spirit threatens ill-health and discomfort and needs to be pampered, usually with coffee, and a particular piece of clothing, the special neck-scarf or *angel-libs*. The spirit of some women can be more demanding, asking for such luxury items as a complete dress, honey, and the slaughtering of livestock.

The *zar* spirit takes possession of people in a more dramatic way. Possession is often vocalized by speaking 'in tongues'. Predictions can be made and the possession sometimes develops into a cult, with followers as well as 'servants' of the possessed who are there to provide offerings. The *argot* spoken by the possessed can only be completely understood by those involved in the belief-system, though linguistic gender-reversals are common and recognizable. In addition, cross-sexual imagery is common, whilst the possession itself is enacted primarily in terms borrowed from the *serg* marriage ritual.⁵

¹ In a translation of the term *wik'abi*, a friend suggested 'the wicked side to one's guardian angel, that sticks more closely to you than the good counter-part, this one is always at your side.'

² Tringham, 1952:27; Messing, 1958: 1120; Lewis, 1975: 96.

³ Natvig, 1987: 677.

⁴ In both cases, women afflicted with the possession sometimes display their condition outwardly by wearing a foot bracelet called *allo*.

⁵ This is referred to briefly in Messing, 1957: 636, see also Lewis, 1986.

The belief seems to be associated with older women and is seen as a hereditary one, with particular families being known to be prone to possession. Pacifying the *zar* involves a greater amount of ceremony than is required by the other spirits considered here. The woman who is possessed tends to call for her 'daughter' Awgered while grunting for ceremonial levies in a spirit *argot*. During the event, the *masink'o*, a single string guitar will be played, often by a male relative, whilst honey, *ch'at* and coffee are consumed and incense is burnt. If an animal is to be slaughtered, this is often a white sheep.

In Gera *wik'abi* is the most pervasive form of spirit. There seem to be a vast number of different kinds of *wik'abi*, though many people no longer develop the belief to a degree that requires naming and differentiation. Some older people talk about being possessed by up to twelve *wik'abi* at any one time. Some of these, such as Bir-Alenga and T'ek'wor, are seen to have Amhara Christian origins, whilst others, such as Sheh Abash and Abjulalé, are perceived to be Oromo Muslim.¹ I was told that if one of these Muslim spirits was particularly strong in a woman, there was the possibility that it could force her to change her religion and migrate. Usually, however, they do not conflict with the 'dominant' Christian belief, i.e. Menz Christians could have Oromo Muslim *wik'abi* spirits within them without this jeopardizing their Christianity - a view that would undoubtedly be challenged vigorously by the priests.

The same woman could have all the four *wik'abi* mentioned by name, though one of them is usually declared as the overall leader, the *t'ek'lay*. The T'ek'wor tends to be celebrated at Epiphany, with roasted grains, *k'ollo*, coffee and through the slaughtering of a black sheep with a white head. Bir-Alenga is celebrated at different times of the year. It is seen as a powerful spirit that does not let go easily. Sheh Abash is celebrated on Fridays with coffee and *aden* and *kerbé*, two types of incense. Abjulalé is celebrated on Wednesdays with coffee and often a simple unleavened bread, *t'iresho*.

(iii). *Ch'ellé*

Ch'ellé is similar to *wik'abi* and *zar* in that offerings are made to an internalized spirit. Once again, the offerings are consumed by the individuals themselves. The *ch'ellé* spirit, is paid homage to more rarely and at particular times, often in July or

¹ For similarities with beliefs among the Gurage see Shack, 1966, 1971; among the Oromo see Knutsson, 1975; among the Sidamo, Hamer and Hamer, 1966, Brøgger, 1975.

September, though minor additional celebrations, *gurcha*¹ can also be made at other times, especially during 'Christian' celebrations, such as Epiphany, Easter or Christmas.

There seem to be two types of *ch'ellé*, called the Gurage and the Galla.² The latter one is said to like white beads, barley and butter; the former prefers multi-coloured beads, wheat and honey. In both cases the *ch'ellé* do not like spices of any kind, including salt and *berberé*, and although beer is prepared this must not be fermented with *géscho* as is the norm.³ Usually the celebration is in July, at a time 'when the water becomes murky' *wiha sīdeferris*. On the occasion, those who can afford such an apparel, wear special decoratively embroidered cotton tops called '*yech'ellé libs*', *ch'ellé* clothes. Beads (hence the name, *ch'ellé*, the Amharic term for beads) are brought out from their baskets in which they have been kept together with perfume, *t'ejj sar* and *arrīti*, [*Cymbopogon citratus* and *Artemisia Afra*], two grasses which have a pleasant smell (see photograph 42 on page 232).

The following details are from the ceremony lasting three days as performed by an elderly woman currently living in Molale town, who said that she herself had followed the traditions of her mother. In many other cases the degree of ritual and festivities involved is much less extensive, especially given the economic decline in the rural areas.

First the hut is made beautiful with freshly cut grass strewn on the floor. Then I put a bowl on top of a large upside down sieve in front of myself. I sit on the skin of a sheep which had been slaughtered for the spirit on a previous occasion. To start the celebrations I hold a few strands of long pieces of special grass, *serdo*, in each hand, and dip the grass in melted butter saying '*Sifa, sifa, sifa,*' and ululating. At the same time I bring the strands of grass round my neck and down my chest while smearing the butter on my neck, and repeat the gesture three times. I then dip the white *ch'ellé* in the butter and round my neck. The barley dish, *gebs k'inch'é*, is then put in a container on a sieve, then I taste it three times, putting both hands in the bowl and ululating. It is said that the barley lord, the *gebs géta*, has tasted of the meal. Also *gebs k'eribo*, unfermented barley beer and *k'ollo*, roasted grains are consumed. It is then the turn of the wheat lord, the *sindé géta*. The same process is repeated with the multi-coloured beads, honey instead of butter and wheat instead of barley.

¹ The term means something like a taster. Honoured people are sometimes hand-fed a few times as a sign of friendship and a symbolic gift.

² The term Galla is a reference to the people now more commonly and less derogatorily known as Oromo.

³ This is likely to be another Islamic influence, since the Moslem religious leaders do not drink *t'ella* only *buk'ri*, a form of beer without alcohol.

After this food is prepared, guests and family partake of the meal from another dish to which seasoning may be added. Non-household members are sometimes invited, the reason for the feast being explained. If another person believes in the spirit, however, she will make sure she has feasted her spirit in her own home before she accepts such food in the house of another.

During the whole period, I sleep on the floor¹ rather than on my usual bed [probably because of a taboo against sexual activity, the woman being expected to be 'clean' and devoted to the spirit that she is honouring]. At some stage, *k'eshir*, full coffee pods [in their husk], will be roasted, dipped in melted butter and eaten whole. Also if *ch'at* is available, this will be boiled and drunk early in the morning, preferably with honey, in a tea-form called *awza*.

On the third day, the ritual ends. First the grass is brushed to one side. The bits of flour that did not pass through the sieve have earlier been collected and made into three to seven little balls of dough, *rimit'o*, which are baked in the fire, amid the ash dung and wood, rather than in a pan. At the same time coffee 'for the seeing off' is prepared and some food is cooked with butter and with honey separately and tasted while ululating. When everything is ready, samples of all the food, including the *rimit'o*, are put on the grass in the hut. It is said that this is done because these offerings take the illnesses with them when they are taken outside. When everything is ready, I take it all out, saying:

የገሰሰም፡ ካለ፡ ወዳሬት፡ አም ዋሳይ ሻላሁ፡
 ዘመ ድ፡ አዝማዴ ንም፡ ልጃቼ ንም፡ ጠብቂልኝ።

'If there is aught that is missing I will in future
 make it up to you,
 Keep guard over my relatives and children for me.

As I take all the grass and food out I hold a metal knife in one hand and throw away the rubbish, still holding the knife and come back quickly. Then that is it. The *ch'ellé* has been honoured, the beads are put back in their basket and I continue with my life.

In 1977-78, there was an attempt by the Government to stop the payment of tribute to *ch'ellé* spirits. As well as giving speeches on the issue, representatives of Party officials came to people's houses to confiscate the beads and the baskets. Some women managed to secret away their tokens, this action being rationalized by a suggestion made to them by the spirits themselves in the form of a dream. Those who did give up their beads have not necessarily abandoned the belief. Many have bought new beads, whilst other women have resorted to celebrating their *ch'ellé* with coins, preferably old silver ones, most frequently the Maria Thérésa thaler, but failing these, any coins in circulation.

¹ For parallels from other countries, see Lewis, 1975: 63.

(iv). *Buda*

Ayne t'ila and *buda* are both forms of the Evil Eye, often but not always merged with *aganint* and *jinn*. Outsiders and people involved in crafts, such as potters, blacksmiths and weavers, are most likely to be identified as the ones inflicting the evil. These crafts-people (men, except in the case of potters) are the exception to a female dominated scene, and come nearest to what might be described as witches. In the *buda* spirit-belief three people are involved: the person causing the possession or 'eating' as it is called in Amharic, the possessed or 'eaten', and the person called upon to cure the possessed. Appropriate given the food-image, is the belief that the *buda* offends dietary rules by eating carrion meat and other foods prohibited in the society, and that they transform themselves into hyenas by night.

The person inflicting the harm, the witch, is usually male, and almost exclusively defined as an outsider.¹ Traditionally these came from the community of people who had emigrated into the area and, not having rights to land use, earned a living in craft production. Potters, blacksmiths and weavers were the most likely candidates. In Menz, a community of potters resides in a few locations, mainly in Keya Gebriel *wereda*. Their religion is said to be different from the Christian Orthodox one of their neighbours, similar to that of *Felasha* Judaism practised in the north-west of the country, in Gonder. The population is known to have existed in the area for centuries. Thus the community of 'eaters' is, in all likelihood, as old as that of the 'eaten', yet they remain clearly distinct, their different beliefs, together with their skills, and the occasion for interactions through the market place, make them an identifiable pool of transgressors. Increasingly, emigrants into towns, such as Mehal Meda, who become blacksmiths, are another category.

The people who do the curing are likewise male, also usually outsiders. In the past these would have been men with a Church education who deviated from the mainstream belief and its preachings, or even priests in the fold of the Church who would be asked to exorcize the spirits with holy water. More recently they also include men without education or with a lay education, who manage to build up a reputation on the grounds of personal knowledge and interaction with the spirits. The *buda* doctors will also be referred to in the case of the other spirit-associated illnesses, in particular, that of *aganint*. Such practitioners are increasingly located in towns. Protection given by these doctors against such dangers include various amulets. Many people also

¹ For an account of the origin of the *buda* belief, see Reminick, 1974.

believe that individuals can take their own precautions: a stick of rue used as a tooth pick, whole lentil seeds, and, some say, a piece of fresh dung hidden in your clothes will do the trick. When possession takes place, the spirit is exorcized with spells, herbs and the smoke of particular types of incense.

The main actors, the possessed, are usually women who reside in the community. Anyone can be 'eaten', the cause usually being attributed to envy, to being 'seen'. Thus, beautiful, wealthy, powerful, lucky or even happy women are particularly prone, their basis of superiority being attacked by the envious spirit. The event can occur anywhere; although, crowds and events such as markets are particularly feared as times when someone is likely to 'see and eat you'. Unlike the *zar* possession, which tends to be inherited and manifests itself periodically, the *buda* possession tends to have a specific beginning, an occasion during which the spirit 'enters'. The actual possession fit can occur immediately or at any time thereafter. It can then be completely exorcized after one fit or, in some cases lies dormant, rather like the *zar* spirit, manifesting itself periodically.

To recapitulate, in general men seem to 'eat' and women be 'eaten', though this gender division is far from rigid. Those with the knowledge both to do harm and to cure are outsiders, whilst those who suffer are insiders. Once again the picture is one in which the belief system centres on women. In this case it even re-enacts the story of women's vulnerability to men, both their subordination to male power, the *buda*, and their dependence on male knowledge, the *buda* doctor. It would also seem that it is not the most marginalized of women that are 'eaten', but on the contrary, those with an advantage such as wealth or beauty. It could therefore be interpreted as an active response by women whose relative security is threatened, either a pre-emptive action or a *post hoc* manifestation of a change in fortune. Unlike the *zar*, the *wik'abi*, and the *ch'ellé* spirits, the *buda* illness is not inherited.

(v). *Aganint*

The final category of spirits to be discussed here are *aganint* or *ganil*. Like the *buda*, they tend to be seen as evil, though in this case they are not personified, but external, non-human agents of mishap. They are usually described as water spirits and are believed to be the cause of most deaths in the vicinity of rivers. They can also be blamed for other misfortunes, such as madness. Most of the spirits are said to inhabit different kinds of water, such as lakes and rivers, although some live in forests and the

very powerful *berak*¹ comes from the sky. These latter forces were described to me as being the size of a chicken, that come to burn houses and give people skin diseases. *Jinn*² are sometimes said to be the same as *aganint*, and at other times viewed as a different evil spirit, male or female, likely to be encountered on the road, which disconcerts people since it appears as if human and promptly disappears.³

There are ways of pacifying the *aganint* spirit and keeping it at bay, such as the lighting of tobacco, *timbuho*, a strategy also used for the *adbar*. In the past, but hardly ever in recent years, there were also ways of making use of these spirits as oracles, calling them up and asking for advice. *Aganint gottach*, *aganint* 'pullers', were usually male shamans who had the powers to communicate with the spirits at night, once various offerings (food, drink, cut grass, etc.) had been prepared for them. One famous *aganint gottach* is said to have lived in Keya Gebriel, one of the *wereda* in Menz. It is perhaps significant, given my focus on gender, that the one form of spirit mediation perceived as being a male terrain has ceased to operate.

(vi). Links with Christianity

The power of these spirit-belief systems and their hold on individuals and especially on women in Menz, does not rest only with the above-named spirits. As already mentioned, it spills over into the 'Christian' religious culture, despite the Church's attempts to avoid 'contamination'. For example, the ritual slaughtering of livestock which is then consumed is part of the 'Christian' culture and a way of celebrating such Christian festivities as Christmas.⁴ Even when the slaughtering is done in a Christian context, however, it is fitted into rituals which are in keeping with traditions more closely associated with the spirit-beliefs. Thus slaughtering is carried out inside the hut rather than outside, and there is a prohibition against entering the huts for three days after the event applicable to all those not present at the time of the slaughtering.

¹ These are also called *YeMedan Alem fanta*, 'the share of the Saviour of the World', i.e. Christ. The descriptions of the spirit suggest an association between the sighting of the spirit and lightning; the word *berak* also has this connotation in Amharic.

² *Jinn* or *Jini* are prevalent in Islamic cultures. Describing this in the case of Somalia, Lewis writes: 'Anthropomorphic *jinns* lurk in every dark and empty corner, poised ready to strike capriciously and without warning at the unsuspecting passer-by. These malevolent spirits are thought to be consumed by envy and greed, and to hunger especially after dainty foods, luxurious clothing, jewellery, perfume and other finery.' 1975: 75.

³ The presentation here stresses the belief as a serious one. However, there is a second level in which terms like *wik'abi*, *jinn*, *buda*, etc are used, namely as insults or in jokes. The angry muttering '*met'abet jinniw*', 'his *jinn* has come upon him' towards a husband who is misbehaving in some way, or '*buda new*' referring to someone who is disliked are common usages in Amharic.

⁴ For some to me totally enigmatic reason, Christmas is a greater occasion in Menz than Easter. This is a reversal of the general pattern in Christian Ethiopia.

Finally, the specificity of colour and sex of the animals is part of the spirit-belief system which is carried over into the Christian context and 'colours' traditions celebrating the Orthodox religion.¹

To give other examples, *t'enk'way*, sorcerers, who can be male or female, offer predictions, advice and amulets. Male *t'enk'way* often start life as priests, *debtera*, and even after moving away from the Church, continue to legitimate their knowledge by referral to and borrowings from the Bible and Orthodox Christianity. Even priests themselves are not averse to delving into the 'opposition spirits' for a greater influence on people's actions and beliefs. Finally, it is quite common for the wife of a priest to be particularly prone to involvement in the spirit-beliefs, a situation accepted by her husband.

(vii). Summary

All the different forms of spirit-belief systems currently vie for a hold on individuals - almost all women are 'captured' by at least one spirit, usually by combinations of them. People interpret births and deaths, health and illness, wealth and poverty, temperament, and many other things besides, in terms of spirit 'interference', often in the same breath as making reference to the will of the God and/or the Satan of the Christian belief system. In the eyes of many there is nothing contradictory about this cocktail of beliefs. Where suggestions of incompatibility arise in people's minds, these have been because of the Church and the State's propaganda against spirit-beliefs as being 'the devil's work' in the one case, and 'backward practices' in the other. Jointly, this propaganda seems to have had the effect both of creating an increasingly internalized, private belief, and of encouraging people to have a negative attitude towards the beliefs that they hold. As yet there are few signs of the beliefs themselves either being superseded by a straightforward Christian belief or by

¹ There are a number of other ways in which the distinctions between the spirit-belief and Christianity are hard to draw. A good deal of ceremonial is negotiated around food. The prayer below is one recited in honour of Saint John, it is not far removed from ones sometimes recited to the *adbar*.

አንተነህ፡ ቆጆስ፡ ገብርኤል፡	You are Saint John,
ተዎር፡ አዎርህ፡	From month to month,
ታመት፡ አመትህ፡	From year to year,
ጳና፡ አድርገኝ፡	Make me well,
እስከ፡ ዘመዴ፡	Together with my relative,
እስከ፡ አዘግዴ፡	Together with my kin,
እስከ፡ ዎጳድኩት፡	Including those I love,
እስከ፡ ዎእድኩት፡	Including those I conceived.

scientific materialistic explanations. The impact of impoverishment¹ and Villagization are undoubtedly the factor that have triggered the most change, as was mentioned in Chapter Five. I often heard people observe that Villagization had at least one good result - it has released people from subservience to the 'place' and its 'habits'; from the *timbuho*, tobacco, and the 'blood' from slaughtering sacrificial animals.

There are differences in the degree to which different categories of women are involved in these beliefs.² Undoubtedly a happy, married, young woman, with children, in a relatively prosperous household, is less likely to be possessed by a *zar* spirit than a less fortunate woman. On the other hand, the former woman's very luck is likely to attract the evil envious eye, and make her prone to being 'eaten' by the *buda*. A single woman who has lost several children, or is childless, is more likely to invest in *ch'ellé* and *zar* beliefs, especially if she has a sympathetic relative at hand able to foot the bill. Most women, regardless of their position and status, are likely to resort to *wik'abi* illnesses to vocalize some ailment and/or to justify expenditure on some luxury goods for themselves. Most women are also likely to cater to the *adbar* spirit, perhaps paying especial attention to the tribute, if they have a particular problem on their minds. Furthermore, the rewards from, and the reasons for, participation in the different beliefs vary from woman to woman.

Another distinction that could be made focuses on the expression of belief. There seems to be a difference between spontaneous, occasional celebrations of the spirit and regular expected ones, between possession manifested through trance, or through varying kinds and severity of illnesses. Once again the different scenarios allow for distinctions in the expression of belief. This discussion should serve as a reminder of the heterogeneity of experiences, and the danger of treating women as an un-differentiated category.

I have argued that the spirit-belief systems in which women predominate are viewed within the society as being of negligible importance as compared to the legitimized

¹ One woman commented *ak'im yansenal, gin sisay aysel'unim*, 'we cannot afford them, but they do not give peace (otherwise)'.

² Note also that I am not making a clear distinction between what the anthropological literature might label witchcraft (*buda*) and different forms of possession (*zar*, *ch'ellé*, and so on). This is because no distinction is made along these lines at the diagnosis stage, i.e., illness can be diagnosed in either of these terms and because once labelled in distinct terms, it is still common for a woman to be under the influence of both *buda* and *ch'ellé*, i.e., both witchcraft and possession. For an attempt to argue against the validity of the conventional distinctions see also Lewis, 1986.

Christianity. Yet they are a key component of women's lives, and throughout the thesis references have been made to the way these beliefs affect women's actions.¹ The spirit manifestations can be seen as a way of justifying the celebrations and consumption of the society's luxury goods. In some senses it is a female consumption not unlike the male consumption of the other type of spirit - alcohol. Belief in the spirits can also function as an excuse - a rationale - for certain actions and decisions² and they serve as an outlet for expressing frustration, fear and pain.

The spirits can be interpreted as sources of support to the extent that they present an explanation of women's world view, and represent practically the only public sphere in which women have power. However, this phenomenon could also be seen as detrimental to women, to the extent that it channels their expression into this peripheral sphere, one which is not politically threatening to the mainstream ideology and culture, and one which instead of challenging male hegemony, seems to perpetuate women's subordinate position. This point is made about marginalized belief systems in general by Lewis, who writes:³

It is possible for men to give in to them [women] without ostensibly deferring to their wives or jeopardizing their position of dominance.... neither sex loses face and the official ideology of male supremacy is preserved.

The way people adapt to changing conditions is not uniform. Some women hang on to long-held beliefs, others are quicker in deciding to consider them inappropriate and in taking up alternative modes of thought. Generally, however, these beliefs are increasingly perceived, from within the society, by both men and women, as a source of oppression and fatalism.

It would be interesting to pursue the question of the sexual construction of these beliefs. In one way the spirits stand as a representation of female opposition to male dominance in Christian beliefs. The male prerogative is made use of, rather than shunted through the creation of a separate system of female valuation. Thus, in the spirit-belief language reversals, in particular the addressing of a woman being possessed in the masculine, is common practice. Furthermore *zar* possession is enacted in terms of *serg* marriage, the spirit representing a male penetration of the woman who is possessed. Likewise the *wik'abi* spirits are also male, exerting their power over their 'subject'

¹ For a comparative discussion, see Lewis, 1975; Robertson, 1987: 105-6.

² For example, a woman can decide on a divorce, or ask for other major changes in her life, justifying her actions in terms of her *wik'abi*.

³ Lewis, 1975: 86.

women and the *buda* witch is usually male. This picture strongly suggests that women portray spirit possession in the same way as their relationships are daily constructed, i.e., as themselves in the subordinate position. However, not all the spirits have a male identity (*adbar*, *Atété*, *ch'ellé*) and even in the *zar* possession, in Menz at least, the central figure called for is that of the symbolic daughter 'Awgered'. Furthermore, over the course of my fieldwork, it became apparent that enacting of possession was the exception. For the most common belief, *wik'abi*, there was no need to enter a trance or even to name the spirit.¹ Indeed when referred to, it was usually not personified, presents were needed for an ungendered *lewik'abiyé*, *lebeshitayé*, 'for my *wik'abi*, for my illness'. I would therefore suggest that there are a number of different constructions, the cross-sexual imagery used to re-enact women's subordination being but one approach, others being set within an all female framework.

It is difficult to estimate both the rationale and the extent of the changes now in progress. My interpretation would lean towards explaining developments in terms of a reduction in the structural, i.e. regular expenditure involved in the belief-system without a loss in the beliefs themselves. Thus, incidental expenses can and still do occur. As already hinted, I would also suggest that the reason for the reduction in material manifestations of the beliefs result primarily from impoverishment rather than from a loss of belief. The parallel is with traditions such as the *mehaber* within mainstream Christian religion which were abandoned because of economic conditions. Perhaps derision of the spirit-beliefs, in particular the label of 'backward superstition', the availability of scientific explanations of disease and the antagonism of the State will, in future, function as more than the outward justification for abandoning the beliefs. However, unless structural conditions change enough to allow women other outlets of frustration, or more fundamentally still, unless conditions improve and women's material grievances are resolved, it is more than likely that the spirit belief-system will survive.

¹ I have a hunch that the enacting of possession is more common in urban settings, whilst the expression of possession in terms of malaise and specific ailments characterizes rural methods of drawing attention to possession. Alternatively, the distinction might be more closely correlated with wealth.

II. LANGUAGE

In Menz, men and women, children and adults all speak Amharic. It is the only language used in the area, an unusual situation in Ethiopia, where a mix of populations within a particular locality often results in the coexistence of several languages.

Writing and reading was traditionally almost completely restricted to the domain of those who progressed through the Church schools - a small minority of the male population, and literacy tended to be looked upon negatively by much of the population, including the nobility. Modernization in Imperial Ethiopia introduced schools to a wider group of boys and girls, and, as was discussed more fully in Chapter Four, the literacy and educational drive of the current Government has attempted to achieve mass literacy. Here, however, it is the way Amharic is used in the society that I would like to consider.

Levine, among others,¹ showed that the finer uses of Amharic are reserved for learned elders in the society, those trained in *k'iné*, a form of poetry often making use of *double entendre*, and this remains the case today. Most of the verses quoted in this thesis, for example, are in the masculine voice and are likely to have been composed by men, though most of the verses were recited to me by women. The clear exceptions were the mourning dirges the composers of which are often women.

In more mundane pervasive use of language, the rule is that men speak and women remain silent. This rule applies in most social and official settings, such as in Peasants' Association meetings. In legal terms, the Constitution of 1953 declared that women had to be represented by men for any public transaction such as to borrow money.² Even in law courts today, it is usually a man who speaks for a woman. If there are guests in a home, women are expected to provide food and drink, whilst men take charge of the talk and entertaining. If women want to communicate among themselves when there are men around, they 'whisper' or 'gossip'.

The rule that men have the greater right to speak is unquestioned and is one that is also common in other societies.³ Yet it is often broken by women who have enough security to do so. In particular, the more equal the marriage, the greater the voice of women. Furthermore, though whispering and gossiping are conditions that imply constraint,

¹ Levine, 1965.

² Tsehai Berhane Selassie, 1984: 9.

³ Gilmore, 1978; Jabbra, 1980.

this is not to say that women do not actively use the channels available to them to their own advantage.¹

Cultural meanings and information are transmitted by language,² yet language itself is not a gender-neutral construct. Spender's *Man Made Language*³ is a systematic study of the sexist nature of the English language which is probably paralleled in most other languages, as in Amharic. However, it is not so much this dominant sexism that I wish to draw attention to here, but rather to the exceptions to this bias.⁴

The following are extracts from my diary:

A group of men were sitting on some stones, not far from my hut. Work'u, the literacy teacher, addressed Mekonen, the Secretary of the Peasants' Association, in the feminine. They had just come back from the market in town and were talking about their day. Soon after, Mekonen used the feminine to address Tizazu, a middle-aged man. Could there be a direction, a logic, to its use? In the first case, the person addressed was the younger, yet the one with the greater social status. In the second case, the person addressed was older and of lower social status.

I witnessed the following exchange between Tesfayé, a boy of about four, and a neighbour, Sindé, a middle-aged woman.

Tesfayé: *Na, tolo, na!* 'Come quickly, come!'
Sindé: *Teyi, irefi, met't'ahu.* 'Leave it, be still, I am coming.'
The boy addressed the woman in the masculine whilst she addressed him in the feminine. A double inversion.

I heard Tizazu speaking to an elderly male relative in the feminine, and being answered in the same form. Here the person addressed was an elder, deserving honour from a younger relative, yet the reversal worked both ways. It is confusing. The only conclusion I can come up with is that these uses cut across age and status and express a sense of closeness and friendship.

The above examples point to the existence of gender reversals in Amharic. The phenomenon is curious; given that there is a sexual order to the language, why is this order sometimes broken? Can anything be said about these reversals, bearing in mind the debates about the relationship between language and culture? Are gender distinctions being used for other goals? The purpose of this discussion is to set the scene,

¹ Harding, 1975, argues that in view of women's lack of a formal access to information, gossiping provides an implicit way of finding out about decision-making processes. It is a political act which is made fun of because politics should not be a woman's prerogative. See also Wolf, 1974, for women's manipulation of gossip in the Chinese context.

² For an account of this in the context of sociological research, see Cicourel: 1964.

³ Spender, 1980.

⁴ A study by Teshome Demisse and Bender, 1983, on the argot of 'unattached girls' in Addis Ababa would also fit in this category. The authors argue that the argot is a personal language used by prostitutes, as a tool for self-defence and as a means of creating group cohesion.

to provide some information on this linguistic phenomenon, and to hazard some answers.

Amharic marks gender differences in pronouns, personal names and verbs. Articles are required only to qualify or emphasize the noun, in which case they too can be assigned a gender. Inanimate objects need not be gender specific. The general framework is one of a language in which gender specifications are not always used to express a sexual distinction. It is some of the other uses which will be discussed here.

In the realm of inanimate nouns, words such as *ts'ehay*, sun, do not have to be prefaced by a gendered article, nor do they carry an automatic gender specification. However, in any but the most mundane conversation, there is a high likelihood of the inanimate noun either being prefaced by a gendered article, or having a qualifying article attached to the end of the word. For example,

Echi' ts'ehay, ('this sun', f.), *yihé ts'ehay* ('this sun', m.) or
ts'ehayu ('the sun', m.), *ts'ehaywa* ('the sun', f.).

Thus, the masculine or the feminine can be used for inanimate objects. There are 'more likely' articles attached to many objects, but, preferences are often left open to the individual speaker and the context.

Sometimes, however, a sexual distinction is used to create a difference in the characteristic of the inanimate object which clearly reveals the gender construction in society. Thus male soils, *yewend merét*, are rich and fertile whilst female soils, *yesét merét* are light and relatively infertile.¹ Size will determine the gender, the feminine being used to suggest a smaller and the masculine to suggest a larger object. Even in this case the feminine for the diminutive is far from obligatory.

For animate nouns, e.g., humans, it is not uncommon for people to reverse the biological gender. Thus the Amharic for the pronoun and verb pertaining to a male. For example, *ante hid* ('you go', m. sing.) or *ante na* ('you come', m. sing.) might be substituted by the female, *anchi' hiji* ('you go', f. sing.) or *anchi' ney* ('you come', f. sing.).² The substitution

¹ Messing, 1957: 93 /112. Also male timber for strong wood, female timber for pliable wood.

² The differences referred to above operate only in the singular. There are no sexual specifications in the plural, e.g., in the example of coming and going given above, a mixed-sex group, a group of men or a group of women, will all be addressed with *innante nu* ('you come', pl) or *innante hidu* ('you go', pl). Likewise, there are no sexual specifications to the polite form, e.g., *irso nu*, ('you come', polite) or *irso hidu*, ('you go', polite).

could also take place the other way round, the biologically feminine being referred to in the masculine. The uses to which these reversals are put will be discussed in turn.

Gender reversal is most commonly applied to children and operates in the case of both females and males. From my diary:

Zegene and Mammit have a daughter, Sintayehu, aged about five. She was sometimes addressed by both parents in the masculine, sometimes in the feminine. Sintayehu often goes to play with Tesfayé or Addisé, two boys in the neighbourhood. She is related to neither. The three children can be heard to mix the genders indiscriminately.

When applied to children, this blurring of gender differences is used as a strategy to defeat the Evil Eye, and other malignant forces conspiring against the life of the child. By referring to the boy as 'she' or the girl as 'he', people believe they can trick the 'death-wishers' and increase the likelihood of survival. In addition, the child is not usually named before it reaches the age of two. Until then, and often well after, non-gender specific endearment terms such as Tinisé ('my little one') tend to be used for all infants. Even when the child is named, boys are sometimes given female names and *vice-versa*, whilst a large proportion of names are not gender specific. Note that in the example given above, there is no consistent use of a particular gender, and that the children themselves have appropriated the gender reversals in their own communications.

Among adults gender reversal is also usual, though more context-specific. It is most frequently observed when men are referred to in the feminine. There are, in particular, three almost contradictory reasons for these reversals.¹

- 1. As a term of *rapprochement*, a term of endearment and closeness, for example, between friends. It is in this sense that the reversals are most common. And this explanation seems satisfactory in the examples introduced at the beginning.
- 2. As a term of insult, to belittle or express a distancing and superiority over someone, for example, an elderly person to a youngster, or as a way of referring to an enemy. It is very often used to refer to the rebel groups as a 'put down'. Here language is used to express a feeling of social difference between people. This is also common usage in the context of an older man using the feminine to address a younger boy.

¹ Walker, 1933: 133 and Reminick, 1973:146.

- 3. As a way of honouring someone, a symbol of status differential in which the person addressed in the female is shown to be the higher, e.g. a young person addressing an elder, perhaps the idea being one of 'putting the person on a pedestal'. This last use is referred to in the literature, with examples of men using the feminine, though I have not heard it. What is commonly heard, however, is the use of the masculine applied to women as praise, the implication being that they are acting 'like a man'. Messing,¹ for example, noted that noble women were sometimes addressed in the masculine.

What is not referred to in the literature is the way that women themselves use gender-reversals, amongst each other. From my diary:

Abeba, a young woman lives alone with her mother. They often address each other in the masculine. Today Almaz, a friend of Abeba, came visiting. Almaz has recently given birth, and lives with her daughter and husband. Throughout the visit Abeba and Almaz referred to each other in the masculine. The two are distantly related.

Dessita, is a widow who lives with her three children. She uses the masculine form to refer to Asselefech, one of her neighbours, a young wife, and I have also heard her refer to Asselefech's husband, Bek'ele, in the feminine.

The use of the masculine for, or between, women can be explained predominantly in terms of the first of the categories earlier, as a form of attachment and closeness. In addition, as already mentioned, the reversals are applied to women, both by themselves and by men, in terms of explanation number three, i.e. as a form of honour, a way of looking up to some women who are acting 'like a man' or like an 'honorary man'.

It would seem as if although gender differences exist Amharic, these can be used for other reasons than to specify sex. In the case of children, to keep death at bay, in the case of men as a form of rapprochement, distancing or aggrandizing, whilst for women the differences are used predominantly for the first of these reasons, as a sign of closeness, but also to look up to women acting like men. The flexible use of gender demarcations and the 'liberty' people take with the language suggest that in the culture itself gender distinctions can be tampered with. The picture that emerges from this discussion on language is in keeping with the rest of the thesis: despite gender division of work and entitlements, an androcentric and patriarchal society, there is considerable negotiation and action that works against the dominant scenario.² The

¹ Messing, 1957: 419.

² These types of ritual exceptions occur in other societies in different forms. For example, Mead in her study of seven Pacific communities points to times when dress conventions are reversed. 'In adult life elaborate rituals in which men dress as women, caricaturing their lessness, and

message from the linguistic side seems to be that gender distinction can serve different uses, that sexual differences in language are 'hijacked' for other purposes than to describe a gendered world. When used towards children, the reversals are a trick against evil forces. Ironically, sexual reversals amongst adults are used to give contradictory meaning, they distance and bring together, they aggrandize and belittle.

There remains, however, a dominant use of the reversals, namely as a form of endearment, between individuals of the same or different genders.¹ The reasons are perhaps located in a connection with heterosexual love rather than a comment on relative power and status. In a society where homosexuality is taboo, terms of affection come more easily to people of opposite sexes. Thus by defining a woman as male, another woman can address her endearingly, and the same scenario applies for a man addressing another man in the feminine. In fact these gender reversals are one of the few linguistic forms of endearment. Whatever the use to which it is applied and irrespective of the speaker, the reversals subvert the accepted gender distinctions in language both to reinforce the notion of male supremacy and, in contradistinction, to cut across the gender hierarchy.

CONCLUSION

In both the sections on religion and language, the discussion in this chapter stressed the puzzling contesting of terms that surrounds the 'gender problem'. The approach taken was to concentrate, not on the dominant scene, but on where the rules are broken. It was argued that there are times when the androcentric frame is not applied, or when it allows, or fails to disallow, space in which women can operate.

The rationale for the lengthy discussion on belief lies in its continuing importance to the society. The new State has failed to suppress religion, and, in the case of Christianity, has not even been able to distance itself from it. I am not suggesting that the State has been completely outmanoeuvred by the Church. The argument is that, although the coercive power of the State ensures its outward supremacy, the ideological influence of religion is more central to the community and, in the case of Christianity, is even outwardly wooed by the local State.

women dress as men, caricaturing their glorious bombast, are a frequent feature of ceremonial life.' Mead, 1962: 88. On the separation of biology from gender in the case of cross-gender females, *berdache*, see Blackwood, 1984.

¹ For a study of endearments in Amharic, see Taddese Beyene, 1989.

I have argued that there are two forms of religious belief in operation. The first, Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, is overtly visible. It imposes work taboos, purification ceremonies and rules about fasting. In opposition to this and in a more marginal social position, is a non-legitimated spirit belief. Symbolically, men rule on earth just as they do in the heaven of Christianity, nevertheless, we saw that as well as finding support systems within the main Christian belief, in particular through the figure of the Virgin Mary and the organization of *mehaber*, women predominate in the alternative religion which caters more specifically to them.

In Part Two of this chapter, we turned to language since the terms people use determine the kind of communication they achieve and the perceptions they hold. In many cultures analysts of language have found that the spoken culture belongs to men more than to women. This is also the case in Amharic, the only language spoken in Menz. Nevertheless, we saw that gender differences in language were used for other purposes than sex differentiation and that reversals even obscured the standard distinction between the way men and women are addressed. As well as pointing to an element of flexibility, within the framework of gender hierarchy, the contradictory ways in which reversals are used, should act as reminder of the untidiness of a reality which belies neat and simplistic generalizations.

The choice of a focus on religion and language is not coincidental. Both are central in the ideological forces involved in the way men and women perceive each other, and the differences of their respective identity in society. They both help to describe the co-existence of a dominant world-view and a subordinate one. The male-controlled Church retains power over the Christian population through its exclusive rights and access to the religious language of Geez, whilst most of the spirit-belief systems invent their own argot, and, when speaking in Amharic often turn to gender reversals. Moreover, the spirit-belief system give women a voice, a time when they can clamour in a society which tends to require them to be silent.

10

GENERALIZATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Two sets of issues were addressed in this thesis. They were introduced in Chapter One with the following questions:

- The first concerned the peasant-State relationship:
 - In what areas has the State attempted to effect transformations? What are the attitudes towards, and the effects of, State policies on the peasantry?
 - Where the State has had little impact, what non-Governmental structures and services are operative?
- The second concerned the lives of women:
 - What is the position of rural women in Menz? What do they do? How does what they do reflect how they see themselves and how they are perceived by men? What are their sources of oppression or subordination and their sources of power and self-expression?

The empirical work has addressed these questions in detail. In this chapter, brief answers are highlighted through the summary of the consecutive chapters. Though many of the arguments can be taken out of Gera, Menz, or even Ethiopia, to a more general commentary about the position of women and the peasantry, the attempt in this thesis has been to ground the arguments securely in the context of the ethnographic research.

The structure of this thesis reflects how my understanding of the relationship between men and women, the State and peasantry developed in the course of the research. I went to Menz to learn about the impact of State institutions and found that this was taking the State too much for granted, assuming radical transformation where in fact there was none. In the empirical chapters we therefore move from a primary interest in the State to one in which it becomes incidental, one of a number of factors to be taken into account. My search for women progressed according to a similar trajectory. In the discussion of State institutions, women were incidental, their position unilluminated. In order to see women come to life and to understand how their relations with men were constructed I had to move away from Government policies.

I have argued that the State's economic contribution to society is marginal, and the ideological penetration of Socialism even less significant. We saw in Chapter Four that most fundamental of the policies that have been undertaken is the Land Reform which made land the property of the people, redistributed it within communities and abolished tenancy. Beyond this, what the State has succeeded in creating is a number of administrative institutions. The Peasants' Associations provide an on-going communication between State and society and are the executive basis to the organization of local Government. They have their own local law courts and police, and the capabilities of commanding a regular work force. Service Cooperatives provide Peasants' Associations with services and are at the same time, a channel of extraction. There are no State Farms, and Producer Cooperatives are almost non-existent in Menz.

In decreasing visibility, literacy, education, agricultural and health extension services are to be found, though, despite claims to the contrary, these provide few inputs to a minority of the population. One of the more important, if not the most significant, inputs acknowledged by the population, has been the provision of aid, mostly channelled through a foreign aid agency. The extractive arm of the State, has been most thorough in the demand for men as military service recruits, in tax dues and regular levies. Organizations, such as the Women's Association and the Youth Association are considered as little more than additional Government 'taxes'.

If we look at the position of women within the administrative organizations created, we find that they are relegated to the Women's Association, participation in literacy and, to a comparatively lesser degree, in education. Peasants' Associations, Service Cooperatives and Producer Cooperatives are androcentric institutions, officials being ubiquitously male. In this area, the Ministry of Agriculture fails to communicate with women and the Ministry of Health, though recognized in the community as being of potential value, has only a nominal presence. The result is that the relationship between women and the State is particularly tenuous and indirect. I argued that even judging the State by its own merits, in the case where it has created an institution with women in mind, the result is unimpressive. The Women's Association is but a token and ineffective gesture. In practice it would take too much administrative knowledge, money and time to carry through potentially emancipating developments.

The same criticism underlies the failure of most of administrative structures in Menz. The costs to the society are increased by the *tabula rasa* method of operation, which

results in the dismissal of existing structures in the attempt to build something 'modern' and Socialist, and the campaign fixation suddenly marshalling efforts for a limited period on a single policy. Finally, corruption and nepotism are on the increase, in particular at the level of local Peasants' Association and Service Cooperative officials.

Chapter Five, on Villagization, warned against too rigid and unified a perception of State policies and too simplistic a view of the implications of each policy. The overall negative reception of the policy springs from a host of reasons including the impracticability of having livestock and humans at close quarters, and the reluctance to move from a well established, 'warm' home to a bare hut, often smaller and less well-made. Nevertheless, I showed that despite the overall unfavourable reaction of the population to Villagization, the move away from the more isolated homesteads of the past was appreciated by many of the young and some vulnerable households, such as those without adult men. Some services are easily available for a greater population than would have benefited previously, and less time is wasted waiting for work campaigns to begin, and travelling to and from meetings.

The complex decisions underlying how a heterogeneous population reacts to Villagization were presented. For example, officials felt obliged to express nominal support for the campaign and have a hut allocated to them. However, as they belonged, for the most part, to the richer section of the population, they were more likely to remain in their old homes. The difficulties of controlling livestock in such close confines, and the greater distance from grazing land proved to be particularly unpopular with the comparatively wealthy who had significant livestock herds. More generally, people made different judgements about the costs and benefits of making the move, with such factors as distance from the existing homestead and the State of the hut being taken into account.

Beyond the predominant antagonism between State and population, lies a more complicated reality. Some State policies and military service in particular are feared and hated, some intervention has brought both welcome and un-welcome situations (Service Cooperatives bringing goods and a means of extraction) some are disliked but beneficial to a section of the population, be it only a minority, (Villagization - the young; single women) and finally some correspond with the desires of the population and have been highly valued (provision of aid).

A distinction can also be drawn between the planned outcome of a policy and the actual outcome, between different policies impacting negatively or positively on each other. Thus, though deforestation was an acknowledged problem in the region and tree planting campaigns were organized in the area, the policy of Villagization with the massive use of wood that it entailed has resulted in a significant setback to reforestation campaigns. The opposite situation also arises, for example we saw that, although direct attempts to reduce the influence of spirit-beliefs had little effect, the Villagization campaign in part explains the current reductions in spirit-related consumption, people dropping customs with the move, in order that the new place 'does not become addicted'.

Overall, the peasantry is suspicious of the State. The latter has the force to command the peasantry because of its coercive apparatus, but also because the power held by the rulers - in this case Mengistu Haile Mariam's Government - is perceived as legitimate. Furthermore, fear of the costs of the relationship is tempered by fear of exclusion, given the expectation of present and future beneficial inputs by the State.¹ Because of the distribution of aid in particular, an element of reciprocity enters into the relationship: 'since it is the Government that helps us stand [in these days of famine] if it tells you to jump into a gully, you do so'.

In the population's attitude here is an element of taking what they can from the State, doing as much as is necessary to reciprocate and then going their own way, as evidenced again by those who built a hut in the new village, but, preferring not to live there, have either kept it shut or put someone else in it. Summarized simply, a strategy of a negotiation between resistance and compliance characterizes the unequal relationship between Ethiopia's State and peasantry.²

Moving beyond the analysis of what the State has tried to do, in order to look at what it has not attempted, it becomes clear how much people's existence lies outside Government influence. The issues of primary importance to the community remain, by and large, outside State involvement.

¹ For parallels in the comparative and theoretical literature, see Rothchild & Chazan, 1988. Chazan, for example, notes: 'To many people in the countryside, ... the state ... constitutes an intrusive device from which they can possibly reap benefits, but over which they have little influence' and 'Viewed from below, the state is seen as both a distributor of benefits and an intruder. It is simultaneously an oppressor and an ally...': 1988: 137 and 333.

² This idea is developed by Scott, 1985; the title of his book *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, summarizes his arguments.

In Chapter Six on the household economy, the visibility of the State in the discussion begins to dwindle. The State's direct involvement is almost exclusively limited to crop cultivation. I argued that the household is involved in a much wider set of concerns, with activities outside crop cultivation including livestock production and processing, fuel production, the wool economy and trade. These have become increasingly pivotal as a consequence of the recent succession of droughts. Moreover, women's economic importance to the household lies in part in these other activities, as well as in their nurturing role. The State's partial vision is focused on men's principal work-domain. The visibility of cultivation lies in contrast to the more diverse tasks that women are involved in which tend to be socially invisibilized.

The reduction of all production to crop cultivation reflects women's subordinate social status, and fails to recognize women's economic significance. The reduction is a bias which is also adopted in the Boserup-Goody vision.¹ It will be remembered that the literature separates the male-plough cultivation systems of Asia, in which women are often veiled and have few rights and a relatively low status, from the female-hoe cultivation systems in Africa, in which women are the main cultivators, have more control over economic aspects of the household and are in a comparatively better position. When applied to Menz, not only is there the hitch that we have a plough economy in Africa, but the position of women in Menz does not fully accord to that which the theory expects in plough-economies. If a link is to be drawn between social position and economic contribution I would argue that symbolically important though it is, men's control over cultivation is not the only factor to consider. Women's contribution outside this sphere of production must be taken into account before a correlation between social position and economic contribution can be attempted.

In the mixed economy of Menz, the spinning of wool, the production of fuel, the processing of butter, and the revenue from small scale trade, e.g., of eggs, contribute to the domestic economy which provides an alternative to the importance in West Africa of women's role in the household plot. It is ironic that in West Africa, in an area in which women were renowned for their role in marketing, women often maintain the household through subsistence activity, whilst men, increasingly involved in cash production, spend their earnings on imported luxuries. Meanwhile, in the poorer, more subsistence-oriented society of Ethiopia, it is increasingly the women's small-scale

¹ See Chapter Two: 10-12.

involvement in the cash economy that provides the weekly contributions to subsistence, a reversal of the West African sexual division of labour and the subsistence/exchange spheres of the household economy.

Before moving on, a comment about perception. When the role of livestock in the economy is examined, it is usually the largest, most visible, most expensive, and male animal - the ox - that is highlighted. This also happens to be the animal most closely associated with ploughing (the male task). This is also the case at the symbolic level, since in Menz, as elsewhere, the acts of ploughing and sowing are used as sexual imagery for penetration. Yet, as we have seen, the livestock economy is also reliant on sheep, pack animals, and chickens. Cows reproduce, provide milk and can be used to plough. Sheep are vital as a form of capital, a risk-spreading, faster reproducing, bank which can yield additional profit: the skin and wool can be processed, the meat can be eaten. But, to insiders and outsiders alike, sheep are smaller, more mundane forms of livestock than oxen. As for chickens, their importance to the day-to-day running of a household is trivialized, forgotten in accounts of production. Chickens, however, are the only form of livestock to which women have almost exclusive rights.¹

Women's lives have been described to me by women as '*yedoro nuro*', 'chickens' life'. The analogy operates at a number of different levels. Like chickens' the life of most women unfolds in the homestead, in contrast with men's involvement in the wider outside. Unlike all the other forms of livestock that are taken to pasture lands or given fodder, chickens have to scrounge around for food and look after themselves. Similarly, women fetch their own water, make their own meals, whilst the menfolk are fed and given drink. At the symbolic level, chickens are ritually slaughtered to celebrate childbirth, women's blood discharged during delivery and the chickens' blood jointly resulting in the taboo against most people entering the hut for the first three days after delivery. Chickens, like women, are considered as small and of little value, again unlike the larger forms of livestock, and their contribution to the household economy is not acknowledged by men and external agents who laugh at the suggestion that they should be.²

¹ With the exception of young boys, who also sometimes own chicken.

² The equivalence has also been noted in other societies, thus O'Laughlin's study, 1974, suggests that the food taboos prohibiting Mbum women from eating chicken arise from a similar equivalence of women and chicken which functions to ensure male privilege. More generally, the connection between allusions of women and metaphorical equivalence with livestock exist at the level of associations with blood.

The picture drawn in Chapter Seven dealing with marriage and divorce, or rather, divorce and remarriage, showed a complex pattern of different types of marriages, extra-marital relations, polygyny, and the existence of both single women and independent women heads of household. At an average 3.3 marriages per adult, divorce, often instigated by women, is the rule rather than the exception. The unequal nature of gender relations emerged in the chapter; but it was also clear that women have acquired the power to express dissatisfaction and the search for improvements. These themes are also developed in Chapter Nine in the realm of religion and language.

Chapter Eight was devoted to the life-cycle. Conditions surrounding, and attitudes to, motherhood and the first few years of a child's life were first considered. It was shown that women are socially constructed as mothers, their reproductive role central to their status. There coexist in the society both a positive valuation of fertility which is life-giving, and a negative attitude to women's blood which is 'polluting' and contact with which needs to be mitigated through 'purification' by a priest. At least part of the negative associations, however, derive from a fear for mother and child. To increase the likelihood of survival, pregnant women have to be camouflaged and carry protective charms, while infants must be kept out of the sight of evil-wishers.

On a material level, the discomfort and pain of menstruation and the less frequent but more dramatic instance of pregnancy, childbirth and nurturing occupy women's thoughts and influence their actions. Conditions of impoverishment and the cold suggest that conditions are particularly hard for them. Contraception is not openly practised, the concept of controlled fertility not considered an area of discussion between spouses, let alone an issue of women's rights. Nonetheless, arguments over sex and the possibility of repeated pregnancies are central elements in tensions and breakups between spouses. Furthermore, late menarche, extended weaning, high infant mortality and arrangements such as spouses sleeping separately, usually with a child, keep household sizes low.

In parallel with the picture elsewhere, as perceived within the society and by the State in Menz, the activities of women in social and biological reproduction do not usually count as 'work', nor more ironically, as 'labour'. Though the reproductive role of women is often undervalued by them and by others, it is this self-same role which also defines them as the 'other' in a category complementary to men. The paradox is that, though undervalued, the reproductive role of women is, at the social level, that for

which women are prized. The virgin girl is given a symbolic endowment of luxury items at her first marriage to symbolize her worth to her future husband and her reputation is expressed primarily in terms of childbearing. Unlike the more common theme of women initiating divorce seen in Chapter Seven, a barren wife can expect her husband to tell her to leave. Recognizing her vulnerability, however, she might try to pre-empt divorce by suggesting that they bring in another 'fertile' wife.

Reproduction is considered a sphere of all women's expertise. In addition, some women become known as 'women of knowledge', in the role of midwives, whilst, some become circumcisers of both boys and girls. Furthermore, we saw that associated with the reproductive role of women is an arena in which kinship networks can be re-activated or created. Thus, for example, an expecting or newly delivered mother turns to her own mother during the *aras* recuperation period, whilst godparents are chosen at the time of the child's baptism.

Returning to the theory about the correlation between women's social status and economic contributions, simply to look at the 'economic' roles of men, observe that women contribute only to a lesser extent, plot these differences, and then come up with a theory about the position of women in different societies ignores the paradox of women's role in reproduction.¹ The theory does serious injustice to the complex way people think about their gendered world. Among researchers and policy makers, it reflects male bias, in priorities which downgrade reproduction. The importance of the life-cycle to the society, and the participation of the Church therein, was contrasted with the non-involvement of the State. Neither health improvement provisions nor family planning have been one of the main interests or State campaigns. Socialism notwithstanding, birth and death are constructed in Christian terms and ceremonies while the social relevance of life-cycle associated expenditures has not been addressed, let alone substituted or amended through policy measures. In the case of burial, the costs were borne, in the past, with the help of informal support systems. In Gera, formalization of *iddir* is a new phenomenon, an internal adaptation to change rather than one involving the State.

I argued earlier that the findings in Chapter Seven and Nine were similar. What characterized the conclusions about the marital and religious issues, is that within the overall framework of male dominance, women have found means of expression and

¹ It also fails to take into account the ownership of resources and how this affects work done and power held.

rebellion. Thus divorce was explained as action usually undertaken by women dissatisfied with their husbands. Yet, the fact that women initiated action is itself also a reflection of the virilocal norm giving men a greater control on the home. Furthermore, although women were the prime 'movers', the ones abandoning the joint home, this was, more often than not, a response to their husbands' unacceptable behaviour.

In the realm of the dominant form of religion, Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, women are considered inferior to lay men, themselves subordinate to the clergy. There is, nevertheless, support for women in the figure of Virgin Mary, the protector of women, particularly during childbirth. Women's rotating socio-religious gatherings, the *mehaber*, are also usually in her name. These provide a legitimate female-dominated occasion, celebrated with food and drink and the chance to socialize. They also result in a socially-created kinship network of 'sisters'. This is one of the rare occasions when women have some time to sit down and talk, when they will be seen without a bundle of wool to be cleaned at their feet, or a spindle in one hand.

Thus we saw that even within the male dominant religion, there are ways in which women find a legitimate, valued support system. The alternative spirit religion that exists in the society provides another area of expression for women and, to a lesser extent, for marginalized men. I showed that there were a number of different spirits with specific characteristics, that they involve women in a variety of regular and occasional outlays, that some beliefs include trance enactment, others were displayed through complaints of illness. The beliefs provide a channel through which women can express dissatisfaction, seek attention, be 'made a fuss of', receive material benefits and luxuries such as clothes, honey and coffee.

In Menz, as elsewhere, language is usually a male preserve. It was suggested in the same chapter that the gender reversals in daily language, in the *argot* of spirit-belief and the cross-sexual imagery in spirit possession point to ways in which the social divisions according to which men are superior and women inferior, are challenged or at least transposed out of their usual meaning.

An overall theme of the thesis has been the argument that to look at gender relations in Menz and conclude with examples of women's subordination and the hardship of their daily existence would do serious injustice to the active negotiation of their position enacted in all spheres of life.

In terms of the changes in progress, I argued that both impoverishment and, usually unplanned, State intervention have resulted in a number of developments. These include the decreased importance of land cultivation and the increased importance of other resources, livestock, labour and access to State inputs. However, in the case of male labour, these other activities are in turn constrained by such policies as communal work campaigns, timed not to interfere with cultivation yet conflicting with other activities. This has also had the unexpected result of increasing the comparative importance of women's income-earning activities since the communal labour is predominantly male labour and thus women's time is less interfered with.

Worsening economic and environmental conditions and the effects of some forms of State intervention, have contributed to an erosion of the material base of the culture. Many *mehaber* were discontinued because of the drought and in the case of some male *mehaber*, because of hostility to the Government's policy of hosting them in the Church. *Serg* ceremonial marriages have almost disappeared, primarily because of the cost of feasting the events; the consumption associated with other life-cycle events, has also been cut down. Even the convalescence time given to newly delivered mothers has been significantly reduced for similar reasons. The advent of Villagization together with present conditions has also resulted in a marked decrease in the offerings to spirits and the abandoning of some regular expenses associated with it.

The discussion of poverty should not be taken to mean that all people in the community are equally poor. Women are in a more precarious position than men. We have also seen that patronage networks emerge on different occasions: they were discussed in the context of local level State representatives replacing feudal lords, in the sphere of livestock herding *ribbi*, and in the selection of godparents for a child. Even within the category of women, there were significant variations: those with secure and direct access to land, and those without, those who have entered in different forms of marriage and households, those at different stages in the life-cycle. Finally, amongst women, as amongst men, there is the distinction in Gera between the poor, and the very poor or destitute.

EPILOGUE

WAR, PEACE AND GOODBYE TO SOCIALISM?

Since the end of the fieldwork period, Most of Menz, including Gera, has been briefly out of Government control, once in December 1989 and then again in April, 1990. On both occasions, the Tigrean Peoples' Liberation Front combined with the Amhara-based Ethiopian Peoples' Democratic Movement and calling itself the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, came into the region. The Front meet little official resistance the first time, though some fighting resulted in at least one man being killed in Gera. There was more resistance, in Mehal Meda at least, on the second occasion, weapons having been prepared in readiness for a second offensive. At present the area is reported to be back in Government hands.

At the time of writing this Epilogue, in Ethiopia as a whole, Mengistu Haile Mariam's Government is steadily losing ground to the 'rebel' groups. The negotiations with the Eritrean People's Liberation Front and the Tigrean Peoples' Liberation Front respectively, have floundered and the war continues. In July 1990, the Ethiopian Government looks more vulnerable militarily than at any time in the past.

Meanwhile, in March 1990, the Central Committee of the Workers' Party endorsed proposals tabled by the President which introduced fundamental policy changes and a move away from the Marxist-Leninist line towards a mixed economy. The changes include the encouragement of private enterprise, foreign and local, and free competition. State organizations such as the Agricultural Marketing Corporation are being officially reformed to trade with the open market; State farms, 'if they fail to be viable' are to be auctioned to the private sector or closed down; Producer Cooperatives are to be allowed to dissolve, and *de facto* private land rights to be reintroduced. The rationale given for this about-face has been internal failures and a change in keeping with developments elsewhere in the Socialist world. The aim has been stated as one

of 'safeguarding the country's unity and territorial integrity, while ameliorating the economic and social malaise facing the people.'¹

Reports coming out of Ethiopia suggest that the changes have been received with a mixture of scepticism and rejoicing. Producer Cooperatives which, over a period of fifteen years, three percent of the population had been persuaded to join, were abandoned in parts of the country, almost overnight. In contrast with the pace with which they were set up, people in some areas disbanded before any guidelines for de-Cooperativization were written up. Service Cooperatives have also started to flounder, and some de-Villagization has been observed, though the pattern is reportedly uneven.

It is too early to know where and which elements, if any, of the 'Socialist transformation' will be retained. Prophecy is always risky, but at the time of writing it would seem that, though there is the possibility of the Government now surviving with a less repressive administrative structure, should the Liberation Fronts' success continue, it is more likely that Mengistu Haile Mariam's Government will either be forced to accept secession and/or that it will fall. But what of the areas under 'liberation'? The Tigrean Peoples' Liberation Front and the Amhara-based Ethiopian Peoples' Democratic Movement have, until now, worn a Marxist-Leninist cloak, and it is not inconceivable for there to be a return to Socialist, centrally planned policies in the areas they control.

Whatever the changes at the national scale, my argument in the thesis, that there has been no radical transformation in Gera, implies that there will be no dramatic change unless, for example, impoverishment is exacerbated by military activities in the area. The limited activities of the present Government in Menz will have decreased as its control over the area has weakened and as a result of the new policy shift. Meanwhile, with the lack of any welfare system, economic support or development provisions, people continue their own battle against an increasingly eroded, harsh and bleak environment.

Throughout Ethiopia, the dream of peace and prosperity is currently expressed in the following rumour circulating up and down the country.

¹ Memorandum from the Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 6.3.90.

A young girl went to Church and had a vision. The Holy Spirit told her to proclaim that peace will return to Ethiopia, that God will stretch out His hand to help. Frightened and awed by the revelation, the girl returned home and failed to speak of her vision. The next time she went to Church, the Holy Spirit appeared again, remonstrated with her, and asked why she had not broadcast His message. The child answered that she had no authority, she was but young and a girl, that nobody would take her seriously. The Holy Spirit then gave her a sign which would make people believe. He told her that across the land, people will find eye-lashes in every Bible. The truth of this should convince the country that peace was at hand. The girl has dutifully passed on the message.

For many Ethiopians hope and belief are voiced through discussion of this vision. People are searching for eye-lashes, comparing their locations in Book and Verse, and interpreting their findings. There are two versions of the story, one is that peace is imminent, the other less common and cynical one is that, first, there will be four years of bloody war.

APPENDIX A

RESEARCH AND RESEARCHER: WHO, WHY AND WHERE?

INTRODUCTION

How did I come to be doing research on gender and the State in a community in Menz? This appendix documents my background and the way I chose the topic. This is done in the belief that personal motivation is central to the conception of the work. It informs the directions taken and the choices made in the course of the undertaking, and provides information on the likely strengths, limitations and biases of the researcher.

A coincidence of interests lie behind this research. The factors that at present appear to be the most pertinent are detailed below, in a narrative format that seemed in keeping with the nature of the subject.

My background is in development economics; this academic interest is itself the result of being born and brought up in Ethiopia. My parents are academics; my mother a librarian; my father a historian specializing in Ethiopia. As I grew up, other formative influences include the two 'isms' of Socialism and Feminism.

When it came to the question of whether to look for a job connected with development issues or continue with my education, the most appealing option seemed to continue studying by undertaking empirical research. I found the possibility of fieldwork particularly attractive in that the conclusion of much of the development literature stressed the need for a micro understanding of conditions, rather than the ungrounded construction of macro theories.

The interest in gender issues arose from my family background and its involvement in the Suffragette movement, and from my own Feminism. It was easy to recognize women

as a vulnerable group in society. Compared with the position of the proletariat in class analysis, the oppression of women seemed relatively untheorized. In a course at Sussex University, I was introduced to, and intrigued by, the little theory there was on the role of women in rural production systems. Finally, I remember feeling that the Feminist literature and that on women in development seemed to espouse a Socialist alternative as a foil for criticism of existing oppression; this suggested the need to consider the condition of women in Socialist countries and to evaluate what Socialist-Feminism could contribute.

Having put together the interest in the position of women and in Socialist developing countries, locating the study in Ethiopia seemed an obvious step. It was one, however, that I was reluctant to make, preferring to learn about - and visit - a country I did not know. However, given the interest in development, Ethiopia's condition and in particular the outbreak of the famine, the facts that I had an entry into the society and spoke Amharic, the official language, were impossible to ignore. It made sense to study Ethiopia.

When I started composing the proposal for Edinburgh University and the funding body, the Economic and Social Research Council, ESRC, I considered doing a comparison with socialization policies in Cuba, a country with a longer history of Socialist development and which seemed to have influenced the direction Ethiopia was taking. The knowledge that ESRC would most certainly be unwilling to fund such an ambitious project, especially given the increasing importance of completion rates, put an end to the idea. A combination of funding constraints and a feeling that an in-depth analysis was an approach that I valued, then prompted the focus on a single community.

The importance of agriculture for an almost exclusively rural population led me to consider tackling an agrarian issue. Villagization was at the time, and remains today the most widespread recent policy undertaken in Ethiopia, one on which there was very little information available. I assumed it would bring about a rapid and fundamental change in society. The components of my research proposal were thus brought together under the title Gender Relations in a Recently Villagized Peasant Community in Northern Ethiopia. As mentioned in Chapter One, in the course of fieldwork, the Villagization component ceased to play such a large role, the work expanding to take in the spheres of State action and inaction.

The selection of Menz as my region of analysis was based on a number of factors. The selection of an Amhara population was already a given, since I was brought up speaking Amharic and this had been an important factor in choosing to work in Ethiopia. Given of the political situation in Ethiopia, some regions were out of bounds, but at the beginning of the fieldwork period, Northern Shewa seemed a safe choice. It was also a region on the edges, rather than in the heart of the area affected by recent and on-going conditions of drought and famine. I felt that I would be unable to justify my research, however well-intentioned, with a population that was still traumatized by famine. However, there is no escaping the fact that, even in Menz, the region I finally chose, the land is increasingly incapable of supporting the population. There, at least in part, lies the rationale for Villagization and increasing Government involvement in peasant production.

Having arrived in Addis Ababa, and obtained all my letters of introduction, research papers, visas, etc, the next step was to locate the exact area of research, to choose 'my' village. As I was beginning to ponder over how to go about doing a 'reconnaissance' of the area, I heard that Save the Children Fund UK were about to start a cluster survey of randomly chosen Peasants' Associations in the area, for a nutrition study. I asked if I could accompany the team of four Ethiopians, and was accepted. The two weeks I spent with them turned out to be a good introduction. We visited the most isolated communities, travelling by Land-rover, by foot and by mule, across spectacular scenery which brought to mind the comment by a British soldier on the Napier Expedition of 1867/8:

They tell us this is a table land. If it is, they have turned the table upside down and we are scrambling up and down the legs.

We toiled in the day, measuring and weighing under-five-year-olds, and sometimes sleeping in the isolated homesteads between Peasants' Associations.

Unfortunately for me, though we passed some Villagized sites, none of the Peasants' Associations we visited were Villagized, and I soon realized that my choice was quite limited. However, I stayed with the team, knowing that I was learning much that would be useful, including a rural vocabulary, local expressions and, more generally, hearing about conditions in Menz. By the time we returned to Mehal Meda, the regional capital, the rains seemed imminent and it became important to concentrate on the immediate objective of locating the village for study and settling down before the rains inhibited communication and travel.

In Mehal Meda I asked about Villagized communities within access of the town. The first one I visited, Tsehay Sina, had been the location of an American Baptist mission. They had set up a school, clinic, a carpet factory and a generator providing electricity to some of the buildings. The Baptists had since been forcibly moved out, but the infrastructure remained. Meanwhile a Villagized community had been built nearby. The whole sight looked impressive - too impressive to be representative, and its background set it apart from the Villagization phenomenon I was hoping to study.

Next, I considered some other places, but most were ghost villages of a few huts, people still residing in their old settlements. Two villages were well inhabited, but seemed to me to be too near the town, and I had been taught to be wary of urban bias. As I continued with my selection procedure, I was soon left with two villages, in two different Peasants' Associations, and determined to choose from these rather than waste any more time.

Having reached this decision, I begged a lift from a Ministry of Agriculture driver who was depositing some seedlings in the direction of the villages. He dropped me just above Gera, the nearer of the two Peasants' Associations, and I walked towards the village. This was on a Saturday, mid-morning, and many people had gone to market. After some enquiries, I was told that the only official around was the Women's Association's Secretary. She often told the story in the following way.

Remember?, I was called to talk to you and as I approached with fear in my heart, I said to Teshome, 'How am I going to talk to her?' You laughed, and said, 'Do not worry, I speak Amharic.' You asked lots of questions about the Peasants' Association and those that were here answered as well as they could. I had invited you and everybody came with you to my hut; my mother was in bed with her monthly trouble. Remember, you asked what was hurting her and we said she had a headache. You showed your letters of permission, and there was even one there with your photograph. I asked you if you would have some *injera* with us and you said yes, and from then on we were sisters.

The sense of good will was general that day, so much so that when I explained what I wanted to do, I was greeted all around with enthusiasm. 'Of course it would be all right, if you want to live with us and study our lives.' I then explained that I would be back after visiting the next village, and repeated that my plans were to choose between the two peasants' associations. The people in the hut would have nothing of it. 'Why

do you want to walk to that village, it is far, why don't you just choose this one. It is a good place, it is an Association that you will like.'

I was disconcerted by these arguments. In my mind, the need to visit another village before deciding had been important. Furthermore, this Peasants' Association did not have a school, whilst the next one did. I put forward these objections. Again they were not impressed. 'But we have a Literacy Programme that you could study, and why go to another place when you can come and stay with us?' Against such logic and persuasiveness I was powerless. 'All right then, this will be it.' I had chosen, correction: - the Peasants' Association had chosen me!

In retrospect I think there are numerous reasons why people wanted me there. Behind their enthusiasm was probably a calculation that some benefits would ensue, for after all, 'all foreigners are associated with aid of one kind or another'; and there was probably also a rivalry with the neighbouring Peasants' Association. At the same time, they obviously had my interest in mind, they wanted to save me a long walk, and indeed it was an impractical expedition, given that I wanted to return to the town by the evening. For my part, however, what swayed me was that it felt good talking to them, we 'hit it off'. This was visible in terms of the humour and interest on both sides, and was in marked contrast to the village I had visited the previous day in which I had felt distrust and lack of communication, my impressions not diminished by an early encounter with a none-too-friendly pack of dogs.

Returning to the story, we had decided that this was to be the place in which I was to conduct my research, all this without the knowledge of the Peasants' Association leadership; they now had to be found and convinced. An advance party was sent with the appropriate letters, while I walked back at a more leisurely speed. When I reached the town, and after a few false starts, I located the Chairman and Secretary in a drinking house. There followed an extended bowing and introduction session, after which we sat down, to be joined by a growing audience.

I explained that I had been given permission to do research whilst living in a village, that I was interested especially in the position of women, in the current conditions of the population and in the impact of Villagization. I then told the story of how I had visited Gera and that this seemed like a good site for my research. The Chairman then took over and said that he had received the advance party with my letters, that all

the permissions were in order, that I would be welcome. In turn I expressed happiness at his approval and then moved on to three requests.

The first of these was a hut, 'Could one be built for me?' The Chairman consulted with the Secretary for a while and then, turning to me, asked whether it had to be a new one, built especially for me. No, I answered, any hut in the Villagized location would do. In that case, that was not a problem: I would be given a hut on arrival. 'What is your second need?' I answered that my own things would be coming, but it would be useful if I could get a bed from the area, rather than try and bring one from town. More deliberations as the Chairman and Secretary consulted with each other and sipped at their drinks.

'Do you need one of these modern ones with springs, as you see in towns, or would a local leather and wood one do?' I gravely answered that I would be more than happy with a local one. The Chairman relaxed, 'In that case, one will be ready for you, not to worry. What was your third request?' This I explained, was somebody, a young girl or an elderly woman, to help fetch water, and help me with other domestic chores. I mentioned this from a totally unfounded fear that employing someone might be unacceptable. No objections to such an arrangement were stated and it was left that I would return the following week. We shook hands and separated, and the following morning I took the bus back to Addis Ababa.

Thanks to the kind help of a couple of friends there and their Toyota four-wheel drive, I returned as planned with some belongings and more weighty fears and forebodings. The morning was spent in the market buying a few pieces of household equipment. We then drove to the village, the last car to make the journey until after the end of the rains. When we arrived, the Chairman turned out to be staying in his old house, some distance from the village. The Secretary of the Women's Association suggested I stay the night in her house, since the Chairman would not come until the following day. I accepted the sensible suggestion, my friends made their way back to Addis Ababa, and I prepared myself for a night on the floor. However, Ethiopian hospitality is such that the only bed was vacated for me, while mother and daughter slept on the floor.

The following morning the Chairman and his *entourage* arrived. They proceeded to take me round the village, the Chairman asking me which hut I wanted, and pointing out, among others, his own, and that of the Secretary's. 'But', I said naively, 'I do not understand, don't you live here? I don't want to cause anybody problems!' I felt

desperate, ideals of fitting in quietly, of fading into the background, being a fly on the wall, etc, the whole methodology in ruins from the beginning. The Chairman scratched his head and answered patiently, 'Do not worry about that, you choose where you want to be'.

While he was talking, I noticed nearby a hut that was locked. Making the calculation that this person perhaps did not live in the village, and that any disruption caused would thus be minimized, I asked 'What about that one?', 'So be it', came the answer. Much to my dismay the owner was found soon after and he unlocked the door. However, he was all smiles and would hear none of my apologies at having chosen his hut. It was only gradually that I came to understand what was going on. In general, Villagization is unpopular, and, as I have shown in Chapter Five, people were delaying occupation. Many households had not destroyed their previous huts and still resided at least in part in their old homes. By occupying a hut I was releasing its owner from an obligation to some kind of presence in the Villagized location. I would probably have been greeted with even more enthusiasm had I required ten or twenty huts! As it was I had made one faithful friend.

To complete the story, on the question of having someone to help, the Secretary of the Women's Association had already befriended me. We came to an informal arrangement whereby I would have supper with her and her mother and spend the evenings with them, and that they would also provide me with the water I needed. In exchange, I would buy them things on my trips to Addis Ababa, and give them some money for the market. On the question of the bed, soon after the hut selection, the Chairman brought out one of his and donated it to me. Rumour has it that he has since bought himself one with springs, 'the kind you get in town!'

APPENDIX B

SUMMARY OF DATA FROM QUESTIONNAIRES

I. THE HOUSEHOLD

• Household size and composition (sample 97)

	Total numbers	Range		Mean
		min	max	
Household size	430	1	10	4.4
Adults	226	0	5	2.3
Ad. Male	108	0	3	1.1
Ad. Female	118	0	3	1.2
Under 18	204	0	7	2.1
>18 Male	116	0	3	1.2
>18 Female	88	0	5	0.9
Under 5	61	0	3	0.6
>5 Male	35	0	2	0.4
>5 Female	26	0	2	0.3

• Generations within the household

Generations	1	2	3	Total
Numbers	7	21	69	97
%	7	22	71	100

• Adoption

Households included a child of a relative in at least 16 cases, (16%) and an adopted child in at least 4 cases, (4%).

II. WEALTH

There are two sub-sections to the wealth data. The first provides data from the village, (both those who have moved and those who have built but not yet moved in) the second from the questionnaire administered more widely in Gera.

I. Village Wealth

The sample 88, (except for the question on horses where the sample was 43). The data considers household wealth jointly in most cases. Where a man or a woman have separate wealth from that of the household s/he is living in, these have been counted as separate households. The units for the range measures are the same as the mean.

	MEAN	RANGE	
		min	max
Agricultural land	1.3 hectares	0	4
Fragmentation	4.7 plots	2	7
Grass land	106 m ²	1	450
Fragmentation	3.6 plots	1	12
Oxen	1.3	0	4
Cows	0.7	0	2
Steer/heifer	0.8	0	8
Sheep with lambs	13	0	72
Goats with kids	0.5	0	4
Horses	0.05	0	1
Mules	0.1	0	1
Donkeys	0.8	0	2
Chickens	4	0	7

II. Peasants' Association wealth

The data from questionnaires for the wider Gera population.

	SAMPLE	MEAN	RANGE	
			min	max
Agricultural land	94	1.4 hectares	0.75	3.25
Fragmentation	88	5.6 plots	2	13
Oxen	96	1	0	2
Cows	96	0.5	0	2
Steer/heifer	96	0.7	0	2
Sheep with lambs	96	7.4	0	50
Goat with kids	96	0.8	0	6
Horses	96	0.2	0	1
Mules	96	0.1	0	1
Donkeys	96	1	0	2
Chickens	96	5	0	29
Bees	97		1 household only	
Dogs	97	0.7	0	3
Cats	97	0.3	0	2

• Yields from the land in sacks (approximately 1/2 quintal)

Sample 40

Good year	Range 5-30	Mean 20
1988	Range 1-18	Mean 6.38

• Yield from the land in months of food

Sample 36

Good year	Range 3-24	Mean 12.47
1988	Range 0-12	Mean 7.35

III. GENERAL QUESTIONS

• Do you keep some land fallow ?

Sample 91	76 No	15 Yes
	83.52%	16.48%

• How much of your land is flat/at a gradient?

<u>Flat</u>	Σ Flat 197	%Flat=75
<u>Sloping</u>	Σ Sloping 64	%Sloping=25

Where Σ is the notation for the sum.

Of a sample of 44, there were, 28 people, i.e., 64% with at least one plot on sloping land

• Have you planted any trees?

Sample 95	37 No	58 Yes
	36.96%	63.04%

For a sample of 65 households, the number of trees they had planted ranged from 0 to 600. The sum was 1,261 and the average 19.4

• Are these trees located next to your residence ?

Sample 27	2 No	25 Yes
	7.41%	92.59%

• Do you regularly grow some vegetables during the rainy season?

Sample 92	24 No	26 Very little	42 Yes
	26.09%	28.26%	45.65%

• Do you accumulate ash for use as fertiliser?

Sample 94	15 No	9 Yes
	15.96%	84.04%

• Have you ever used chemical fertilisers?

Sample 94	47 No	47 Yes
	50%	50%

• If you have used chemical fertilizer, when did you start doing so?

Sample 47	1988/89 = 45	Before 1988 = 2
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• How many of your plots can you see from your homestead?

Sample 41. The number of plots that could be seen ranged from 0 to 7 out of a range of 3 to 10 plots owned. The ratio of plots visible from the homestead over total number of plots owned gives a figure of 164/232, i.e., 70%

• Do you or any member of your household do any weeding on your land?

Sample 40	38 No	2 Yes
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• Do you or any member of your household spend time guarding the land, protecting it against wild animals, etc ?

Sample 38	37 No	1 yes
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• Is your household involved in *ribbi* systems of looking after livestock?

Sample 94		
66 No		70 %
11 Own livestock looked after		12 %
17 Look after the livestock of others		18 %

• **Is your household involved in *Gwasssa Tera*, communal herding schemes?**

Sample 85

Only cattle	52	61.18%
Only sheep	0	0%
Both cattle and sheep	11	12.94%
No	22	25.88%

• **Have you ever been a migrant labourer?**

Sample 48

No	31	64.58%
Yes	17	35.42%

All those who had been labourers, had gone to the Debre Berhan area, to help in harvesting and/or to shear sheep. The duration of their stay was between one and six months. Most went for two months, usually once or twice rather than on a regular basis. None of them had gone since 1986/87, many of them just around the time of the 1985/86 famine.

• **How much tax plus membership fees did your household pay last year?**

Sample 36	24 birr	2
	33 birr	48
	96 birr	1

• **Has your household received aid donations in the past?**

Sample 93	No 24	Yes 69
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• **During the years when donations were in dollars, how much did your household receive in one year?**

Sample 67	Range 20-70 birr	Mean 43.21 birr
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• **Do you currently owe money to anybody, if so, by how much are you indebted to them?**

Sample 90	No 66	Yes 24
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Of those who are indebted, sample 23

Range 8-100 birr	Mean 39.56 birr
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• **What does your household use as source of fuel?**

Sample 63

Dung	Mainly Dung	Wood	Mainly Wood	Wood&Dung
3	56	1	2	1
4.76%	88.89%	1.59%	3.17%	1.59%

• **Has your household ever bought fuel?**

Sample 63

No	44	69.84%
Yes	19	30.16%

The fuel in all these cases was dung rather than wood.

The amount spent in one year by those who did buy, sample size 17, ranged from 5 to 40 birr, with a mean of 17.76 birr

• **Do you have close relatives who have been Resettled?**

Sample 92	No 58	Yes 34
	63.04%	36.96%

• **Numbers of close relatives Resettled per household**

Sample 34	Range 1-14	Mean 3.06	Total 104
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• **Do you have any close relatives who have migrated away from Gera?**

Sample 50	No 21	Yes 29
	42%	58%

• **Numbers of close relatives who have migrated away from here**

Sample 29	Range 1-3	Mean 1.62	Total 47
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• **Do you have any close relative who has or is undertaking military service?**

Sample 93	No 38	Yes 55
	40.86%	59.14%

• **Numbers of close relatives who have, or are undertaking military service**

Sample 55	Range 1-6	Mean 1.56	Total 86
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IV. EDUCATION AND LITERACY

The data in this section is divided into three, for different sources. The first gives the overall picture based on the answers from the general questionnaires. The second gives data on the nearest school, and the third on the village literacy site.

(a) Overview

Of the total population (370) the number of those who have at some stage attended at least one year of school was 51, or 14% of the sample. A significant proportion, approximately a quarter of these had the experience many years ago and have become illiterate since then.

The population which has never attended school, and is currently above five years of age was 319, or 86% of the sample.

Of those attending school, boys= 36, or 71%
girls= 15, or 29%

Of children that are of school age, i.e., 5 to 20, the population was 160.
Of that age group, 81 boys (86%) of the boys are not attending, and 13, (14%) are
Of that age group, 62 girls (94%) of the girls are not attending, and 4, (6%) are.

Of the total sample (370) ,
13 people have been educated to sixth grade or above, i.e., 3.5% of the population.
Of the 13, 3 i.e, 23% were girls and 10 (77%) were boys.

CHURCH EDUCATION

In the sample (370), 19 boys had an Ethiopian Orthodox church education

LITERACY

Of the sample, which considered only those who have not attended school and are above 4 years of age, 231 have attended at least one round of literacy, and 86 have never attended. This gives a 73% attendance rate.

However, the figures below show the results. The first column, entitled Nothing gives the number and the percentage of people who cannot even write their name. Column I, refers to those who can write their name but little else, and column II, to those who can also read and write a little. The percentage figures refer to the total population over 4 years old.

	Nothing		I		II	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Men	84	27	35	11	36	11
Women	101	32	45	14	16	5
Total	185	59	80	25	52	16

(b) Data from the nearest school to Gera

Grade	Male	Female	Total	Female as %
1	11	6	17	35
2	4	3	7	42
3	20	4	24	17
4	5	4	9	44
5	3	4	7	57
6	12	1	13	8
Total	55	22	77	35

(c) Data from the village literacy site

Adults defined here as those over 20 years old.

BEGINNERS

<u>Adults</u>			<u>Children</u>			<u>Male</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Total</u>
M	F	T	M	F	T			
0	34	34	32	33	65	32	67	99

MIDDLE LEVEL

<u>Adults</u>			<u>Children</u>			<u>Male</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Total</u>
M	F	T	M	F	T			
24	0	24	0	0	0	24	0	24

ADVANCED LEVEL

<u>Adults</u>			<u>Children</u>			<u>Male</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Total</u>
M	F	T	M	F	T			
6	12	18	0	1	1	6	13	19

GRAND TOTAL

<u>Adults</u>			<u>Children</u>			<u>Male</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Total</u>
M	F	T	M	F	T			
30	46	76	32	34	66	62	80	142

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