'CENTRE' AND 'PERIPHERY' IN HISTORY: THE CASE OF WARRIORS AND WOMEN IN TRADITIONAL ETHIOPIA

A consideration of the informal and the mundane aspects of the military traditions of the Ethiopians shows the omnipresence of rebels, independent soldiery and women warriors. These categories have social significance which conventional interpretations have not usually taken into account. This paper tries to draw attention to the importance of understanding these native models and the conclusion explains their relevance for analytical purposes.

Official literature on Ethiopia emphasises the state structure of the traditional monarchy and the official myths and approved history of the 'dominant' peoples in the 'core' regions of the central and northern highlands.[1] Accordingly, the official

[1] In Ethiopia there is a tradition of court scribes keeping chronicles. These chroniclers, being the only literate class, and the priesthood at that, have for over a thousand years sustained the association of the land and people with the Christian, i.e. Biblical, 'Ethiopia', and the government with the myth of Solomon and Sheba of the fifth century B.C. Over the last century professional historians of the European world have taken this approach as basic truth (cf. E. Ullendorff, *The Ethiopians*, London 1960). There is a vast literature which has considered Ethiopia from the perspective of what constitutes the present-day territorial state (cf. R. Pankhurst, *Economic History of Ethiopia*, Addis Ababa 1968, for such an approach).

political accounts deal with the so-called 'Amhara' and sometimes Tigre, or often a combination of the two peoples, who continue to pass as the only 'Ethiopian', irrespective of the differences even between ordinary peasants and government personnel. Here I propose to outline some of the ideas basic to the military practices which sometimes even controlled those of the government, and determined the socio-economic relationships between these 'dominant' people and the various other communities in present-day territorial Ethiopia.

It is not entirely unjustified to emphasize the formal structure of the state. From the comparative perspective, the traditional style of political and military recruitment is recognizable as the feudal process of raising levies through the land-tenure system. In traditional Ethiopia those in control, from the local to the larger structure of the state, marked out certain areas as reserved for military service. Consequently, the peasants in such lands had the obligation to serve in the army whenever they were called upon to do so, or else forfeit their right to the land. A look at the social history of the country however shows that the peasants had evolved a method of asserting their independence from such authorities.[2]

Among the 'Amhara' and the Tigre it was a social obligation for men to maintain the communal right to land. When men were not available in a family to fulfil that obligation, women took their place in order to pass the inheritance to their male descendants.[3] Political and military authorities had to struggle against this social expectation in order to maintain the feudal process of raising levies from lands they marked out for military service.[4] I contend therefore that even the importance of land-tenure-based recruitment is much more than simply a feudal system of recruitment. It is true that the monarchy was based on a feudal hierarchy, and it claimed to be a 'dynasty' of long standing. But the very nature of succession including that to the throne was based on the ordinary man's idea of what constituted politics and authority. In other words the control of

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[2] I collected oral traditions from the countryside between 1959 and 1975, and this article is based mainly on that material. It is possible to reconstruct a social history of the country from oral information supplementing it by records made by travellers. At least in the nineteenth century, a substantial number of travellers and other observers passed through Ethiopia (e.g. G. Massa, *I Miei trentacinque anni di missione nell'alta Etiopia*, Roma 1921-30; M. Parkyns, *Life in Abyssinia*, New York 1854; N. Pearce, *The Life and Adventures of Nathaniel Pearce*, London 1831; etc.

[3] See my 'Women Guerrilla Fighters' in *North-East African Studies*, (Michigan), September 1980.

[4] Pankhurst, *op. cit.* pp. 135-181.

land redistribution was asserted by whoever had the propensity to assume military strength. Women fighters are mentioned by local literature and foreign writers echo stories about the presence of women on Ethiopian battlefields. Although the male/female roles and position are never clear, it is certain that women were the major factor in confirming the kinship relationship with regard to inheritance of communal land.

It should be mentioned that women were not excluded from participation in military activities.[5] Women appeared on battlefields as concubines, wives, sisters and pot-bearers (in the supply units) of the fighting men. Frequently they also appeared as fighters with guns or other weapons, in response to mobilisation decrees of the government. Such fighting women were rare, coming to the fore mainly in times of 'national' (i.e. government) crises. Close examination shows that they became involved only when lands they had inherited and lived in happened to be of the category 'reserved' for military purposes, and when there was a shortage of men to take the field as proxies. In the 1930s the government issued a series of proclamations prohibiting women from inheriting these reserved lands and enrolling in the army. However, partly because of the magnitude of the Italian invasion and partly because of the break-down of government order after the occupation, women continued to fight alongside the men during the period of resistance against Italian rule (1935-1941). For the 'Amhara'-Tigre peasant the participation of women was nothing beyond ensuring the inheritance of communal land by their infant or minor sons.

Warriorhood was valued highly, and it was not the privilege of any particular group to control military activities. Generally speaking, Ethiopians think of themselves as warriors. Nevertheless there were very few communities with standing armies. Where they had them, as in Walamo and Kaffa (two former kingdoms in the south), either the whole population was regarded as a 'slave' class distinct from the ruling families, or they were raised by periodical levies, returning to other activities when they were not required to fight.[6] Among all the communities, including those outside the so-called dominant peoples, men were socially expected to train themselves in the art of war and prove that they were valorous soldiers.

In the formation of military groups, therefore, the state structure was not necessarily the only source of authority. Among the 'Amhara'-Tigre communities, the interests of local

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[5] For a discussion on the involvement of women on Ethiopian battle-fields see Selassie, *op. cit.*

[6] See studies by Ernesta Cerulli, *Peoples of South-West Ethiopia and Its Borderland* (London 1956); W. Shack, *The Central Ethiopians: Amhara, Tigrina and Related People* (London 1974); and Huntingford, *The Galla of Ethiopia, the Kingdoms of Kafa and Janjero* (London 1969).

peasants in maintaining their communal land and in exercising military power was not always dependent on, or contingent to, the formal military laws and rules of the state under the monarchy. The peasants had their own criteria of determining enemy and ally among their neighbours, and they valued the independent practice of warriorhood to the point of defying established authority. As a result there were constant wars that were initiated by peasants. Indeed, whenever there were wars which the peasants had not initiated they looted both the losers and the victors.[7] Such apparent rebellion against their own formal system was a reflection of their political and military ethos and its nature was basic to the widespread formation of bands of warriors from the 'core' areas, who lived and operated in communities which were not strictly under the state.

Men in these two communities start their training for the soldiery from childhood. They play para-military games as children, and as youths achieve the status of soldiers, euphemistically known as 'killers' by proving themselves as hunters of big game. Traditionally, they had to produce the tail of one such animal at least once in their life, as a trophy. Such a trophy had a symbolic significance in the transition rite of passage from childhood to adulthood. (The tail was considered equal to producing the penis of an enemy). It should be noted that in order to achieve the 'kill' men had to wander away from their own communities, explore the wilds, i.e. areas considered 'unfit' for human habitation, and pass through communities hostile, or that would naturally become hostile, at the appearance of large bands of armed men, as the hunters usually were. Men preferred to stay away in the wilds rather than return to their own communities without the trophy.

In the process of looking for the trophies, of which the more procured the better, they formed a series of bands of hunters and warriors, who appear in the literature as *shifta* or 'rebels against authority'. Strictly speaking they were known as *fanno* or 'leaderless bands of soldiery', although hunting *fanno* groups sometimes acted as *shifta*. *Fanno* lived and operated in the

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[7] Travellers such as Plowden, sometime British Consul in Ethiopia, were struck by such behaviour on the part of the Ethiopian peasants. See his *Travels in Ethiopia* (London 1868). Most of the rebellions between the period of 'the Era of Princes' and the establishment of a central monarchy (1769 to the 1880s) were such offensives by peasants, despite claims of 'factionalism' by modern historians, for example M. Abir (*The Era of Princes*, London 1968).

fringe lands of their own or other friendly communities.[8] Along frontiers which they regarded as foreign they engaged in raiding vulnerable communities for cattle, crops and slaves. It was mainly this which gave them the reputation that they were poachers by writers from the colonial boundaries around present-day Ethiopian territory.

Indeed such *fanno* groups sometimes became *shifta* and eventually assumed political power identifying with the feudal monarchy, and claiming the lands of those they raided as *fanno* and *shifta*. Whether this form of expansion was good or bad, the tradition of hunting and associated activities (as opposed to government military operations) was the main dynamic of the military activities of the so-called dominant people. It is also questionable whether these bands were held with equal admiration by communities other than their own. For example the daring adventures of the *fanno*, known as 'Tigre' in Boranna, southern Ethiopia, were sheer nuisance to the Borana themselves although the 'Tigre' were admired for them in their own communities in the north. The point is however that they formed a network of contacts between different ecological regions. It is these regions that are now officially held and perceived as the ideal 'homeland' and 'boundary' by the local official writers.

Despite this dynamic, peasants in these 'core' regions initiated military challenge when they considered their communities threatened. An outstanding example is their resistance to the authority of a new government trying to impose its rule in their region. For instance when all the nobles were deserting Emperor Towodros (1855-1868) for his attempted military reforms, one of them tried to establish his own authority in Gojam, an 'Amhara' province in the north-west. According to official chronicles peasants in the province refused to accept him, and in two local communities made joint efforts to drive away his appointee. Driving away the appointees meant coming out in force in the villages and telling the new-comer and his retinue that he could not take up residence, collect taxes or conduct judgment. In this particular case the appointees of the emperor had a base, and the rebel noble was 'related' to the communities; but they drove him away, without even waiting for the emperor's men to take action.

Peasant resistance in this manner is different from an individual or an organised group taking military leadership. They are not *fanno* because they are in their own areas, but like the *fanno* they have very temporary leadership. Their reaction is spontaneous, and in the case just mentioned their attitude towards the noble rebel was formed on the basis of his reputation for poor warriorhood. Peasants in another 'Amhara'

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[8] Unless otherwise stated, information on the *fanno* and the *shifta* is derived from my field notes, collected in preparation of my D.Phil. thesis (Oxford 1980).

locality, Shewa, had the same reaction to the representatives of the monarchy in the northern 'core' region of Gondar. Indeed a breakaway provincial kingdom was established in the 1820s after a series of treaties between the warrior 'kings' and the peasants there.[9]

In general the active soldiery under the monarchy treated the peasants like an independent body of soldiers. Indeed during and after pitched battles between two factions, peasants always posed as third parties. Often, both loser and victor at a field of battle were killed and robbed by the peasantry unless one or the other had secured their 'military support', which simply meant their neutrality in the dispute which had led to the war.[10] Of course such behaviour on the part of the peasants was instigated also as self-defence. Normally battle-fields were selected on the basis of the availability of loot for the supplies unit, which meant that the local peasants were liable for looting unless they took the offensive themselves after a battle. This accounts for the series of raids by government soldiers against peasants, reflected in the nineteenth-century military history of the 'core' regions.

With the importance of warriorhood and the possibility of anybody forming military bodies, breakaway groups of *shifta* were rampant in the society. Not infrequently, politicians made their way to power by starting off as *shifta*, as there was hardly any other political procedure which did not involve warriorhood.

Unlike the *fanno*, *shifta* live in hiding from authorities, sometimes protected by their own communities, sometimes fending them off, depending on their 'cause' for rebellion. Ideally, river valleys, lowlands and thick forests or mountain fortresses are associated with *shifta* as their usual retreat until they are prepared to resist authority with full military operations.[11] Government troops never follow *shifta* into these regions, and often they satisfy themselves by issuing orders to peasants to give up the *shifta* that they protect. Only in extreme cases, for instance when the government troops consider it strategic to free *shifta*-infested areas, do they make the effort to pursue them into their hideouts.

Shifta are armed at all times, and in extreme cases they would try to cut off their own communities from government troops and other forms of control. They do not however offer

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[9] R. H. Kofi Darkwah, *Shewa, Menelik and the Ethiopian Empire* (London 1975) is a recent study of this particular province and the rise of a kingdom there during the earlier part of the nineteenth century.

[10] Plowden, *op. cit.* p. 53.

[11] Indeed a modern Ethiopian geographer confirms that to be the actual case rather than the ideal. Masfen Walde Maryam, *Introductory Geography of Ethiopia*, Addis Ababa 1972, p. 54.

or accept battle until they are well-established; they 'run into the lowlands'. Their success or failure to face confrontation depends on their relationship with their own community. Initially, they are feared as ones who disturb the local peace for the sake of attaining their own ends. They are also liable to be joined by cut-throats, petty criminals and juvenile offenders. Nevertheless, the leaders often manage to convince peasants of the justness of their 'cause', and they make a more or less tacit understanding on the issue of peace for the locales.

Establishing a relationship between the *shifta* and their own communities is central to their organisation as well as their success. At the initiation of their rebellion *shifta* leaders would prepare or attend a feast and make their intention known through the *fukara*, a harangue of prose and poetry, usually translated as 'war-cries'. Their openness depends on how strong they consider their causes and their prospective following to be. Peasants of course try to suppress quarrels between members of their local community by effecting reconciliation. Elders and the family circle of the men involved would assume responsibility, so that in murder and revenge, for example, blood-money would be shared between them. On the other hand if the case stands between a member of the local community and a government official, the elders would make the effort to gain amnesty from the local officer. The whole community would turn against him if they consider his response unfair in any way. They would then close their eyes to whatever the disgruntled man would do, or even assist him, in his rebellion. In other words if anybody decides to take up arms against authority and the peasants consider it justified, they would support the rebel.

Local support for the *shifta* was expressed in various ways: *shifta*, instead of government officials, would be allowed to collect revenues; they would be allowed to buy cheaply from the local markets; they would be supplied with food; and arms and ammunitions would be smuggled for them by the peasants. In the Christian areas of the north, they would be allowed to worship in the churches. They would thus be given access to facilities as if they were normal members of society, or they would be treated even better in some cases for the admiration they commanded as fighters. Especially *shifta* with a political 'cause', like protecting the community from over-taxation, were considered as potential military and political leaders and were therefore treated with due respect. Indeed rebels who are already important locally, for example for being rich, or with a large retinue and social connections, do not even bother to go into hiding, as the peasants themselves would act as sentries in case of the appearance of government authorities. If their local support were limited to their own family circle, they would stay in the communal fringe-lands which in local terms are no-man's-lands. They would however be kept informed by the local community as a whole in case of imminent danger.

Whatever support is given to the *shifta*, peasants expect them to come out of their hiding either as winners or losers. If they lose a battle, peasants would not give them up to the authorities, but they would withdraw support from them. Peasants would try to avoid punitive raids by government troops. Nevertheless the spirit of the *shifta* would attract youths to their camp, even if they had to be on the move for some time after a confrontation.

Often *shifta* with political 'causes' are on the move, and the attempts of government troops to corner them result in various *shifta* communities formulating a common cause. Their contact however never went beyond that as they hardly ever succeed in uniting in their efforts to attack or repel attacks. If anything, the concentration of rebels in a particular area is a reflection of the weakness of the government authority there rather than the strength of the *shifta*. After a series of confrontations, the *shifta* with the largest following tend to initiate offensives and eventually build themselves into political 'masters' who even become solicited by government officers or sometimes even assume the throne themselves. Being a *shifta* is thus one step towards assuming control of the redistribution of land, even if only an accidental one.

Like the *fanno*, *shifta* on the move inadvertently create inter-communal relationships. They would be joined by men from various localities who aim to be rewarded with land. Often they would also control, or try to control, whole communities and their land, if they found them vulnerable. The possibility of assuming power through the admired practice of the soldier generated the constant warfare fanned by the *fanno* and the *shifta*, who nonetheless affected communities outside the 'core' regions of the 'dominant' people. If the *shifta* collaborated with the local community, the *fanno* allied with the government. The difficulties of the British Consul in southern Ethiopia, who tried to control the activities of the *fanno* in northern Kenya is a good example.[12] The government authorities allowed the *fanno* to operate although he had apprehended them poaching in British territory. Indeed, official history claims control over certain regions on the basis of the activity of *fanno*.

There is not enough evidence to support the theory of the 'entrepreneur' politician for the traditional Ethiopian peasant warrior. Indeed those who assumed great political authority did so only by force of circumstances. The value of warriorhood however was deeply rooted. I think it even accounts for certain communities in northern Ethiopia forcing the government of Haile Selassie (1930-1974) to waive tax arrears,[13] while those in

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[12] See Hodson's *Seven Years in Southern Ethiopia*, London 1927, p. 26.

[13] J. Markakis, *Ethiopia: Anatomy of a Traditional Polity*, Oxford 1974, pp. 376-387.

the south, although under the same government, did not manage to do so.

Recent historical writings on Ethiopia treat the presence of the *fanno* and the *shifta*, or the spontaneous uprisings by peasants, as a direct consequence of temporary government weakness. The emphasis on the 'government', and especially on the 'discontent' against it, is so great that even the existence of women guerrilla fighters is assumed to be a new phenomenon. This is perhaps understandable as the 'change' in social structure has been so substantial over the last fifty years that the underlying cultural values are not easily recognisable. In other words, hunting has been forbidden since the 1930s - so that not much has been heard of the *fanno*. Similarly a standing army was established at about the same time, leaving no scope for the rise of the *shifta* to military and eventual political prominence. Nevertheless, the deep cultural values have been persistent: during the revolutionary movements over the last two decades, calls were made for the dispersal of the *fanno* and *shifta*, but their numbers are increasing every day. The government decrees of the 1930s, which prohibited the participation of women on battlefields, has not affected the culture; women guerrilla fighters are now in abundance. It is a retrospective view to say the least that the 'cause' for the existence of these categories is the weakness of the governments.

An important factor in this retrospective interpretation is the model of the 'dominant' people. Ethnicity is now a major political issue in Ethiopia (as elsewhere in Africa). The identification of the 'Amhara'-Tigre peoples with the government and reference to them as the 'dominant' peoples confuses the formal structure of government and society with that of the popular, grass-roots level. It disregards the persistent custom of peasants rebelling against authority until they are forced to submit to it. In the main it is the peasants who form the ethnic groupings, and identifying them with the central institution of state leaves out their social and economic as well as political identity. The state distinguishes between its seat of power (i.e. centre) and its outlying frontiers: that is pertinent to the very nature of government - but peasants do not distinguish between their communal land and that of the boundary of state. They know only of their own land. For purposes of analysis therefore government and ethnic groupings should be kept separate.

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