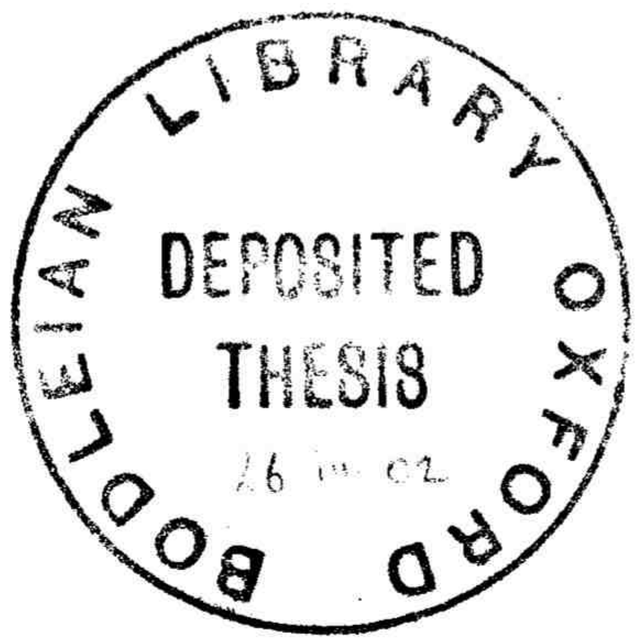
The University of Oxford

The Social Construction of Revolutionary change in Tigray, Ethiopia 1975-1997

by

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Terracing the hillside for tree planting

Abstract

This thesis seeks to investigate the hidden record of political, social and cultural reconstruction in Tigray under the Tigray People's Liberation Front. It is a field-work based contribution, relying on first-hand research into mostly oral sources in the region and does not attempt an exploration based on documentary sources. Discontents gathering force throughout the 20th century at violent expropriation by feudal landlords, bandits and armies of both nobility and emperor, not only toppled Haile Selassie and brought the Derg dictatorship to power, but also gave revolutionary impetus to the founders of TPLF in 1975. The TPLF objective was to set up a rural power base to mobilise for armed struggle against the Derg and at the same time to liberate the peasantry from the cultural effects of feudal subordination. It was not enough to improve the material conditions of their lives; the peasants needed to have more direct control over their lives through increased decision-making power. The TPLF sought to transform the consciousness of the peasants through a range of strategies. They enlisted their support through land reform, but turned them into participants by guiding them to do it for themselves. In 1978 they established departments (of education, agriculture, public affairs and so on) to support the farming communities. They instigated a programme of intensive political education, involving confidence-building, practical experience and cultural activities. As peasants became fighters in large numbers, schools and educational programmes for fighters and civilians multiplied. Village communities began to administer themselves through elected councils, mutually agreed codes of law and regular evaluation to check accountability to all sections of society, including previously discriminated groups, such as women, artisans and minorities. After victory in 1991, the Transitional Government introduced a federal structure, democratic elections and a new constitution to Ethiopia, aimed at encouraging regional equality through self-administration. In Tigray, villages and towns continued to run their affairs, but the TPLF sought to preserve revolutionary momentum by enabling an expanded struggle for development. The study finishes by providing a brief theoretical framework and comparative analysis of the Tigrayan revolution in the context of other, mostly African, insurgencies.

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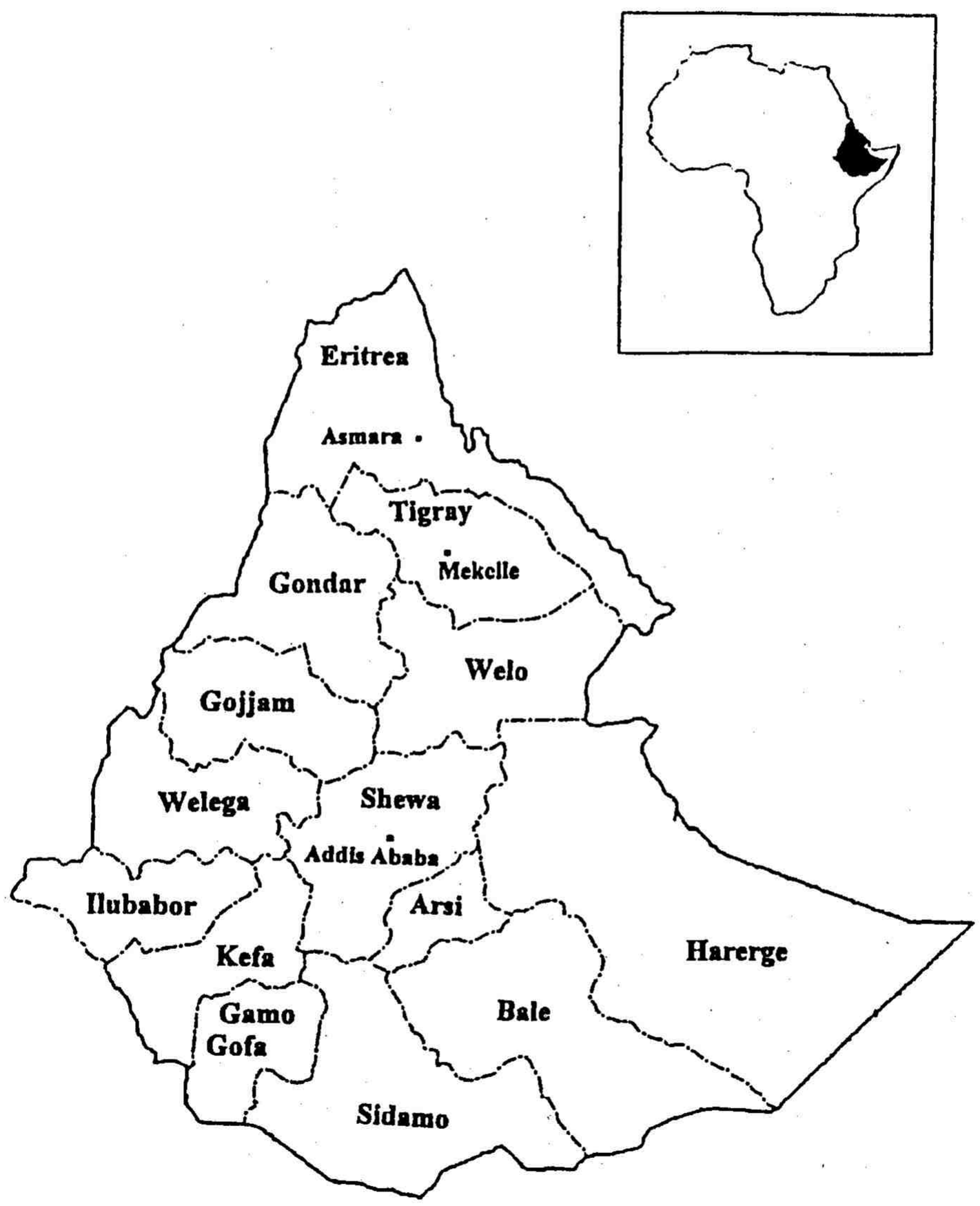
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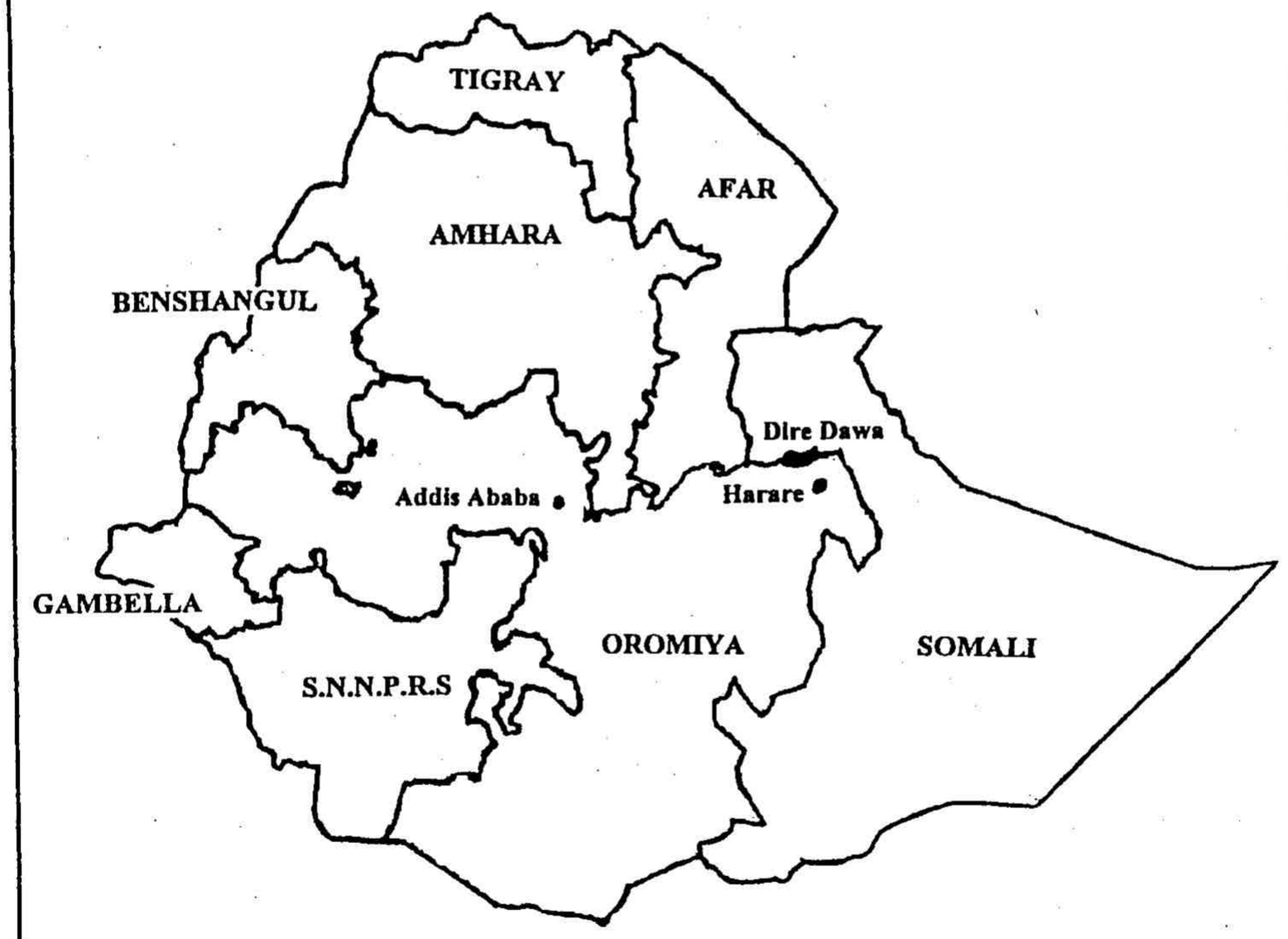
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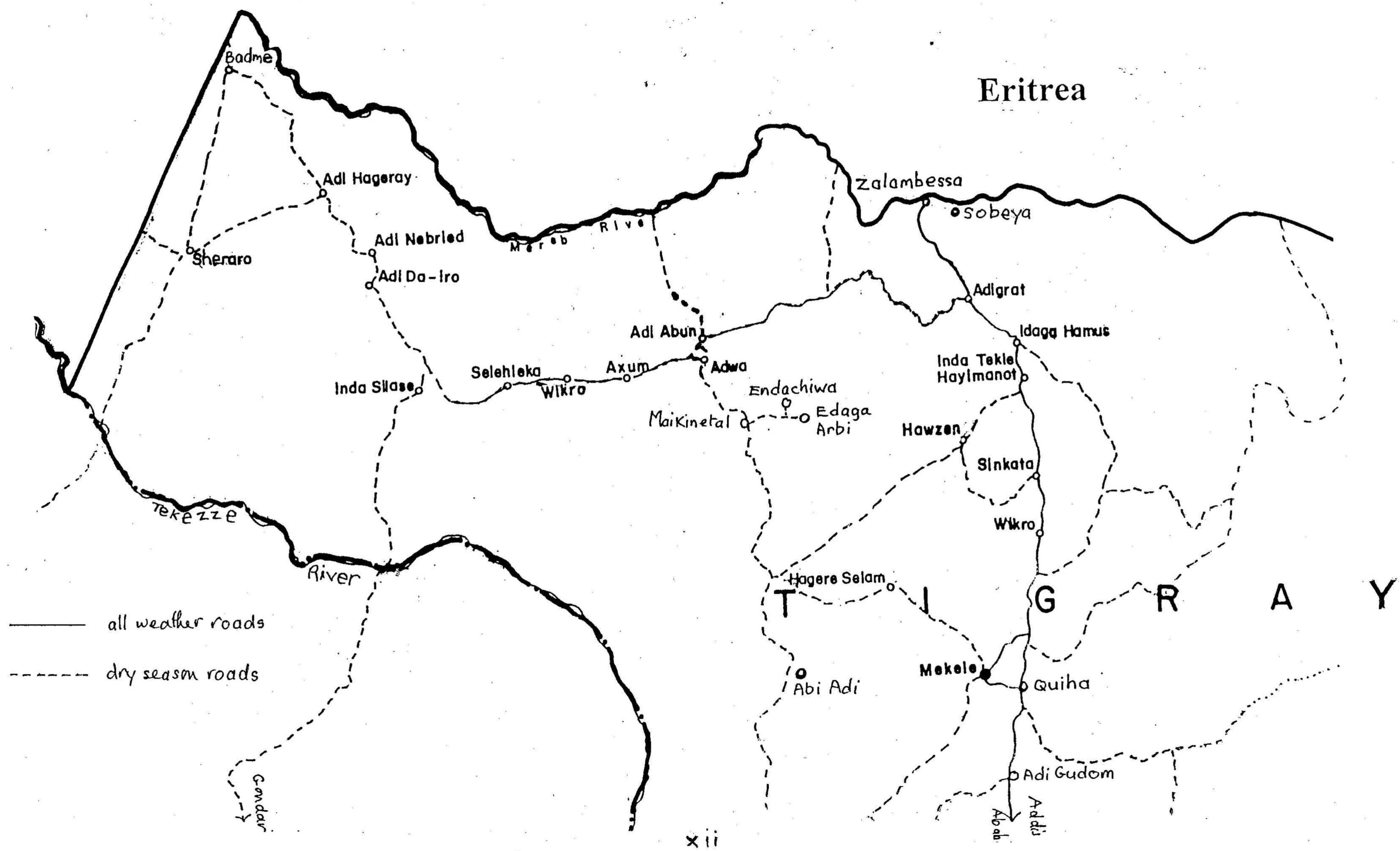
Ethiopia and its Administrative Regions
Before 1991



Ethiopia and its Administrative Regions
After the formation of the Federal Government in 1995



TIGRAY


Eritrea
Badme
Adi Hageray
Sheraro
Adi Nebried
Adi Da-Iro
Merab
River
Zalambessa
Sobeya
Adigrat
Adi Abun
Idaga Hamus
Axum
Adwa
Inda Tekle Haymanot
Selehleka
Wikro
Inda Silase
Endachiwa
Edaga Arbi
MaiKinetal
Hawzen
Sinkata
Wikro
Tekezze
River
Hagere Selam
T I G R A Y
Abi Adi
Mekele
Quiha
Adi Gudom
Addis Ababa
Gondar
all weather roads
dry seasm roads

Preface

It was almost by chance that I became involved with the revolution in Tigray and hence with Ethiopia. My first visit to Ethiopia in 1986 was in response to an invitation from the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) to 'see for yourself what we are doing in our liberated area'. I had come in contact with the Tigrayan Front when editing a publication on the politics of famine in the Sahel in 1985. At that time I knew little more than that they were engaged in an armed struggle against the military government (the Derg) that had overthrown Emperor Haile Selassie and that they were not fighting for the restoration of the monarchy, but for some sort of better deal for the peasant farmers who were the majority of the population. I was interested that their political and social programmes with village communities seemed to be at least as important as their military aims and that the equality of women was one of their declared objectives. I stayed about three months, spending most of my time in the small towns and villages of the western lowlands. The TPLF 'base area', comprising the command post, fighters' training camps, fighters' training schools and many of their projects were at that time also in the western lowlands in the big river basins of the Tekezze and the Kasa, camouflaged against MiG bombardments by extensive forest cover.

From that time on I continued to return to Tigray throughout the 1980s and 1990s. In February 1989 the military government was forced to evacuate the remaining towns and the whole of Tigray was then in the hands of the TPLF. Tigray became a place of peaceful reconstruction, albeit with limited resources, while the civil war passed south into Amhara and Oromo areas, where the Front had joined forces with other dissident groups in a new coalition called the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). I

returned to Tigray in 1989 to monitor conditions in the newly liberated towns and to gather information on what life had been like under the Derg. In the early months of 1991 I carried out a research programme in Tigray on the history of dissent and the early years of the TPLF and then travelled south to monitor EPRDF's administrative strategies and their reception in the newly liberated areas of Wollo, Gondar and Gojjam. After the EPRDF victory in May 1991 I continued to visit Tigray and also travelled widely throughout Ethiopia. In 1994 I monitored the preparations for the new constitution and the first nation-wide elections in 1995. Meanwhile I had written two books about different aspects of the revolution, (1989; 1999), but much remained to be explained and in any case the 'revolutionary process' was still evolving.

In Tigray I had become fascinated by the strength and resilience of popular support, not just for the Front, but also for the revolution itself, which the people identified as their own, referring to '*our* struggle' (*kalsina*) and to the TPLF as '*our* organisation' (*wedebna*). I began systematically to gather material, including the history of Tigrayan dissidence, which would explain this support. The close relationship between the rural population and the liberation Front was evidently the crucial element on which the success of the revolution depended. Other dissident groups had set out to form such a relationship and failed. Moreover, the peasants were notoriously suspicious of outsiders, even of other Tigrayans from the towns. I was becoming convinced that research into the social construction of revolutionary change, which even by the mid-1980s was everywhere apparent, rested on an investigation into the construction of the relationship between the farming communities and the founders and early fighters of the TPLF. Although my research until that point overlapped into the three disciplines of politics, history and anthropology, it seemed to me that this investigation could only be conducted

anthropologically and I therefore applied for admission to the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology in Oxford.

This study of political mobilisation and organization in a rural-based war of liberation is based primarily on field-work evidence gained over a period of more than ten years. This has enabled me to approach the Tigrayan revolution as a process which has been continuously developing and changing over time. The research is focused on rural communities, most of whose inhabitants are illiterate, and therefore the primary emphasis has been on oral sources. Although I have made use of some important documents, I have not attempted to explore documentary sources in any comprehensive way. As far as possible I have included people's own accounts of their history and experience for methodological reasons which I explain in Chapter 9. I have on the whole sought to avoid repeating material already adequately covered by existing studies. Thus I have provided the relevant information in Chapter 2 on the Ethiopian student movement and the main points of difference between the TPLF and other Ethiopian guerrilla fronts in northern Ethiopia, but I have left detailed analysis to the numerous readily available secondary studies. Similarly, I have not sought to conduct a top-down investigation into TPLF organisational and military policy, or non-TPLF or opposition perspectives, which have already been well-covered by John Young's excellent study (1998). I hope rather to provide information and insights into revolutionary change from the perspective of the village, which has not been done before.

Introduction

There were two revolutions in Ethiopia in the last quarter of the twentieth century. The first was a military coup in 1974, in which Emperor Haile Selassie was deposed and his government replaced by a committee of army officers, called the Derg, its power soon to be usurped by its self-styled leader, the dictator Mengistu Haile Mariam. The second had its inception a few months later, when early in 1975 a handful of young students and radical thinkers escaped from the purges of the Derg to the countryside of the northern province of Tigray to start the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). This movement was not only eventually to defeat and replace the Derg, but over the following seventeen years to transform the social and political life of Tigray, a process which still continues today. The people in Tigray I travelled with and lived among, whether fighters or civilians, were so inspired by the transformations in their daily lives and so certain of eventual victory, that it was difficult to maintain scepticism even in private. Moreover no one in Tigray described the Derg incumbency as a 'revolution', but as a dictatorship, referring to 'the fascist Derg' or, more intimately, to 'Mengistu'; the only revolution they recognised was the one in Tigray. The TPLF did indeed win the war in 1991 as part of the larger coalition, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). Only then did I travel to Addis Ababa for the first time to discover that few seemed to associate Tigray with a revolution, despite the taking of Addis Ababa by its proponents, and that the only revolution in Ethiopia was ascribed to Mengistu Haile Mariam.

The ironic and surprising evidence of the enduring power of Derg propaganda that first, the liberation struggle in Tigray did not exist and later, when its victories could no longer be

concealed, that its activists were merely ignorant bandits (with long hair and pendulous ears), is that it has never been superseded at the centre by more accurate information on the history and record of the TPLF. The combination of silence, ignorance and the misrepresentations of opposition factions since the end of the war recall the allegations in the colonial context by Edward Said of the erasure of the 'counternarratives of liberation' (1989: 205). Although Ethiopia, excepting Eritrea, is celebrated in Africa for its relative freedom from European colonial domination, yet the history from the end of the nineteenth century of internal domination of its many peoples by the Shewan Amhara elite has resembled in many ways the colonising process, especially in southern Ethiopia which had been annexed by force by the Ethiopian Emperor Menelik II at the end of the nineteenth century.[1] Twentieth century Ethiopia reflected the divisive nature of colonial experience, the parts 'communicating with each other by a logic of violence and counterviolence' (Fanon 1966; Said 1989:206-7). However, outside Tigray, the narrative of revolution in northern Ethiopia is in process of erasure, in part by the fact of EPRDF gaining legitimacy as government and in part by powerful sections of the urban intellectual elite in Addis Ababa, displaced from power and maintaining their own narrative of ethnic supremacy and hostility to their historical rival, Tigray.

The objective of this thesis is to make visible this hidden history, but to do so not only through a description of events, but also by interrogating the constructs which fill 'the silences and spaces between events', in the words of Jean and John Comaroff, and through

[1] The colonial interpretation is controversial. Some dissenting groups such as the Tigrayan Liberation Front (TLF) and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) have asserted a colonial analysis for their respective areas of struggle. The TPLF, however, interpreted the relationship as a 'national question', rather than as a colonial issue. They argued that Ethiopia was a multi-nationality state in which the different nationalities had a right to independence, but that this was not necessarily in the mutual interest. The Tigrayan struggle was not therefore for independence, but for a united Ethiopia in which the different nationalities had rights to self-determination (autonomy) and equality which were denied before 1991. In contrast, they reserved a colonial analysis for Eritrea, recognising that it had a distinct history of colonisation and a long struggle for independence.

which 'disjointed stories are cast into master narratives.' (1992: 17) I hope to explain the origin and emergence of this revolution; to investigate the ways in which the crucial relationship between the TPLF personnel and the rural peasants was constructed and maintained; and to explore the dynamic processes of political, social and cultural transformation as they evolved and were practised in the rural areas of Tigray. The civil war, despite bereavements and hardships, has gone down in Tigrayan oral history as a magnificent and heroic struggle. Yet 'the tools that build hegemonies, that work thoroughgoing transformations' (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992: 35) were the accumulation of small-scale exchanges and actions negotiated on a daily basis at the level of the village, where change had to take place if there was to be any real change at all. Grand designs had to be rigorously tested in the context of the daily activities, practical interests, cultural practice and understandable resistance of the peasant farming communities. This transformation and the means by which it was achieved are the subject of this thesis.

The model of social transformation in my own research area I found echoed in Jean and John Comaroff's studies of the Tshidi and Tswana peoples (1992; J.Comaroff 1985). Although these are directed towards exposing the structures of communication and influence, simultaneously subtle and mundane, through which the colonising process was achieved in South Africa, yet I found their investigative methods illuminating in my analysis of the contrary process of Tigrayan resistance to domination from the centre. Also their description of the subtle forms taken by the 'colonising of consciousness' in a colonial setting, has ironically shed light on the 'decolonising' processes by which the TPLF gained the confidence of their own people and raised their political consciousness in order to resist an internal oppressor. Like theirs, my work also depends on a definition of

culture that is historically situated, dynamic, permeable to external influences, its elements open to contestation.

Some studies since 1991 have shed light on the record of the liberation front during the war, but stopped short of examining the process of revolution itself. Hendrie (1999) includes a useful study of TPLF land reform, among other effects of revolution in a Tigray village; de Waal's investigation into the interrelation of war and famine in Ethiopia over thirty years (Africa Watch 1991) looks at the Derg construction of famine and at the plight of the Tigrayan people as victims of food deprivation and bombings, but also considers the role and nature of the TPLF. Young (1997) examines the political and military history of the TPLF rise to power in revolutionary Tigray, including their political rivals. In much of the anthropology of resistance, the emphasis has been, understandably, on the nature of domination and the powerlessness of the subordinated. Scott's useful work both records and celebrates the small-scale refusals of an exploited peasantry to acquiesce in their exploitation, but slips into dismissiveness, along with the 'fading, left-wing, academic romance with wars of national liberation' (1985:xv), of larger-scale revolutionary enterprises. In one way he is right. It is rare that resistance movements are able to overcome the odds stacked against them. There is a distinction between disaffection and the transformed consciousness necessary to win the struggle for liberation. Although the Tigrayan struggle was led by urban radicals, they did afford the peasantry 'open organised political activity', Scott's criterion, and indeed the peasants' understanding of and involvement in the political and revolutionary process not only won their support for the war but also stood them in good stead for continued self-administration afterwards. It seems likely that the real evidence for long-term change is precisely located and to be

sought in the small-scale evidence of new confidence in speaking out and demands for accountability.

Preparations for fieldwork

In 1996 and 1997 I returned to Tigray to do field work specifically directed to doctoral research. In my earlier visits I had been investigating the antecedents, causes, principles and conduct of the revolution in general terms, by travelling widely throughout Tigray in successive visits. I rarely stayed more than a few days in each place, occasionally up to two weeks, although I returned to some places several times over ten years to renew contacts and check on developments that could only be monitored over a period of time. Both the width and the developmental aspects of this research experience were to prove invaluable for the doctoral project. The strengths of this method were that it provided evidence for how the revolution was working as a whole, a sense of TPLF strategies and tactics over a wide area and the variations of response to them, which enabled me to draw some general conclusions about, for example, the widespread support for the armed struggle or the emergence of women from behind closed doors into the public arena. However there were also weaknesses in this methodology. Although TPLF claims were easily (and genuinely) verified by evidence drawn from every town and village of peasant support: of functioning elected councils, of well-attended meetings, of voluntary recruitment into the army, of participating women where none had participated before and so on, yet this very evidence tended to obscure the answers to other important questions or prevent those questions from even being raised. How had the peasants been brought from a state of subjugation and alienation to this level of participation in a social revolution, as well as an armed struggle? No support for any movement could be total, so were there dissenting or at least passive minorities (or even majorities) in the small towns and villages? Who had disagreed and

what had happened to them? If roughly a third on average of the army and of the elected councils were women during the civil war, what was the state of mind and activity of the remaining two thirds? I felt these weaknesses would be countered by a period of more conventionally anthropological fieldwork in one or two sites, where I would be able more effectively to assess the impact of the revolution on a community.

I returned to Tigray from March to June 1996 to make the necessary arrangements. I decided to spend several months in two villages, to give me a basis for comparison. My criteria were: they should not be exceptional, but 'typical'; at the same time they should be differentiated from each other by distinct or unique characteristics; and it should be possible to monitor their engagement in development activities, the government's primary campaign. A 'typical' village would have a good record of support for the revolution, but not a reputation for unusual adherence to TPLF. I wanted, for example, to avoid places, like Adi Nebried or Adi Hagerai, which were exceptional for their association with particularly-strong women or for electing women as chairpersons on the local council. I chose Sobeya, a village in the north-east in Agame on the Eritrean border, where I had already carried out some research on TPLF land reform during the war. After consultation, I chose Endachiwa in the central highlands as a second research base, a village unknown to me, but which had been one of the earliest communities to support the revolution.

When Tigray had been a war zone it had not been possible to travel freely in the countryside. Security considerations both for the traveller and for the TPLF meant there were tight controls on movement from place to place. Anyone travelling around, including even fighters in TPLF administrative departments, had to have official papers stamped with TPLF insignia to establish their credentials and distinguish them from groups of Derg

infiltrators (*banda*) bent on recruiting spies or on subverting through acts of terror the Front's relationship with villagers. Although freedom of movement, of a kind that had not been possible even under Haile Selassie, was introduced after the war, it would have been counter productive to arrive in a village without having first established my own credentials. I therefore approached the authorities in Mekele with my project proposal and then travelled to each district (*wereda*) to present my letter of authorisation to the *wereda* authorities and get their approval to explain the project to the village administrations and ask their permission to carry out my research at a specified later date. I found this gradual approach much more successful in getting support than expecting the arrangements to be expedited for my research to start within a few days. I was able to stay a while in each village, take it easy, drink the local beer, adapting to the slow pace of civilities and explaining my plans with no immediate pressure on the council representatives to take any action at all.

Endachiwa profile

The name Endachiwa, meaning 'place of the nobles', bespeaks a feudal past, but I found little evidence that the higher levels of the aristocracy had rights over land in the area now designated as Endachiwa. 'There is no *gulti* land here either,' I was told by a village priest. 'If you walk to the back of this mountain, from there to Adua it was all *gulti* land of Ras Mikael and even of other rases like Ras Mengesha in Ras Mikael's name. There was also a *Selassie* (Trinity) *gult* for the Church.'[2] However, another priest gave names of feudals lower down in the social hierarchy who were an influence in the local area: 'Fituraury Haile Kiros, Grasmach Asmelesh, Ato Abraha Bergi, Ato Wereda. All these are the feudals

[2] Keshi Tareke, village priest and historian, interviewed in Endachiwa, 6 December 1996. *Gulti* was a system of hereditary rights in land granted by the Emperor as a reward for service. Gifts were individual and therefore in theory non-hereditary; the rights were for usually for administration and taxation and did not

Lower Endachiwa

Reserved for forest

St. Mariam

Tchomairimi

fields

fields

Zerabera

GULLEY

Sagla tree (Kushet meetings)

GULLEY (Dry river bed)

fields

Reserved areas

Reserved areas

Park

GAZEBEN

Keshi Ettaillemariam

K. Desta's brother

Ngisti

Warus

Keshi Teklehaim.

GULLEY

GULLEY

Agents Office

My house

communal grazing

Zerabera

fields

St Mariam

fields

Teklehaimanot

Keshi Desta

Track

Continued below

fields

track

Track

GULLEY

← Mai Kinetal / Adua

Road

↓ Edaga Arbi (Road)

fields

fields

Adiwoizero

fields

fields

Adikameya

fields

fields

Gulley

Gulley

Atagemuz

Bherawi

mountain

Reserved

mountain

Village meetings

St. Giorgis

Community Court

Reserved for forest

Reserved for forest

Upper Endachiwa

Reserved areas

Kokowo

Terraced fields

Terraced fields

Terraced fields

Kokowo

Gebrekl. f.

Wedding house

Kidane Meheret

Aadamas

Terraced fields

A's uncle

Dar Gini (From K.M.)

dry stream bed

Zerabera

Adi Woyeb

tea place

dam buildings

fields

Adi Woyeb (from dam To K. Meheret)

Terraced fields

fields

plain

fields

fields

School

GULLEY

soil heap

Dam site (reservoir)

dam site (reservoir)

Dam wall

RIVER BED

fields

dam site (reservoir)

dam site

GULLEY

Continued from above

Mai Sesala

soil heap

football field and pasture

Adi Kameya

fields

Mai Sesala

football field/pasture

GULLEY

Beleho

Mai Sesala

fields

Terraced fields

Endagiorgis

st. Giorgis

Metga "Park"

Plateau

plateau

KEY

- dwelling
- church
- high ground

of this area. It's a long time ago. I may have forgotten them. Also Grasmach Bergi was famous in this area. He was a famous feudal.'[3] The 'feudals' were linked negatively in villagers' minds with land monopolies. The dominant land tenure system in northern Ethiopia and also in Endachiwa was called *risti*.[4] The injustices and discontent associated with disparities in land holdings was one of the major factors contributing to the people's positive reception of the Front's fighters when they first infiltrated the area. In response to the villagers' demands, land reform was the first TPLF programme to be carried out.

Commentators disagree about the appropriateness of the term 'feudalism' to Ethiopia, because of fundamental differences between the Ethiopian and medieval European models of political, social and economic organisation (Goody 1963; Donham 1986:4). Nevertheless, following Hoben (1973) and Gebru Tareke, I use the term here as appropriate to the kind and degree of economic exploitation of a subjugated peasantry in Ethiopia before 1974.

> [I]t appears that the relations of production and distribution closely resembled the feudal model. If what pre-eminently characterizes feudalism is not the existence of a warrior ruling class, hereditary fiefdoms and vassalage, but the exploitative and contradictory relationship between a dominant landed aristocracy and subordinated majority of producers possessing the means of their subsistence in which part or all of the agricultural surplus (whether in labour services or in rent, in kind, or in money) is directly appropriated by the former through political and legal means of compulsion, then such a relationship describes Ethiopian society since at least the fourteenth century (Gebru Tareke 1991:57)

It is also used by Ethiopians themselves, among whom English is widely used as a lingua franca by those who have had secondary schooling, to describe the political economy of

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supplant the allodial rights of the *ristegnas* who farmed the land (Bruce 1976: 62; see Land Tenure in Chapter 2 and Appendix 2).

[3] Keshi Desta, head priest of St Mariam Church, Zerabera kushet, Endachiwa, 22 October 1996.

the imperial period. Tigrayans not only use the English terms 'feudalism''and 'feudal', but 'the feudals' in a substantival sense for individual feudal lords or for the class as a whole. At the apex of the hierarchy was the emperor who distributed *gulti* rights to land to a warrior nobility and to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, rights which legalised high rates of extraction from the peasantry. The controversy particularly focuses on the north where in theory the *risti* system of land tenure gave inalienable rights to land inherited from a village ancestor. The Tigrayan peasants, however, use *mesfininet* (translated as 'feudalism') to cover the extractions of a much larger class of lower 'feudals', landlords and bureaucrats, who manipulated *risti* through litigation to gain large landholdings at the peasants' expense. Thus my research contradicts those who assert that 'the Abyssinian system did not generate a category of landless people who then had to work for others as servants or wage labourers' (Donham 1986:16). Peasants in Tigray whose land was lost or too reduced for subsistence were forced to work as sharecroppers on others' land. In addition, Muslims, minority nationalities, and artisans either had limited access to land as tenants or were denied land altogether and had to find alternative ways of earning a living.

The Tigrigna word for 'village' (*tabia*) differs from the Western concept of a village as a cluster of dwellings surrounded by countryside. A cluster of dwellings and shops signifies a town, no matter how small, in northern Ethiopia. A *tabia* denotes all the scattered farms and the churches that serve them within a designated, often topographically delineated, area, like a valley or one side of a mountain. Endachiwa occupies both sides of a valley in Adua Zone in the central highlands. It is accessible by track from the rough road that connects the *wereda* (local district) town of Edaga Arbi to Mai Kinetal on the main road and to Adua, about two hours drive by bus, although across country it is only three to four hours walk. The regional capital, Mekele, is four hours drive away or longer by bus from

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[4] For *risti* land tenure see the Land Tenure section of Chapter 2 and Appendix 2.

Adua. More importantly, for its inhabitants, Endachiwa is a seventeen km round trip from Edaga Arbi, where the *wereda* authority offices, the district court, the clinic, the grinding mill and the weekly market are located. Ethiopians divide altitude into three categories, high, medium and lowland. Endachiwa, at about 2250 metres above sea level is medium altitude. In the past this would have placed it above the 'mosquito line' and in fact the inhabitants say there are no mosquitoes in the area. However, with the building of new micro dams all over Tigray, malaria has been appearing in areas hitherto considered safe. As a dam was under construction while I was living there, perhaps this is a future hazard for Endachiwa also.

The village is divided into twelve *kushets* or sub-areas, but these names serve only as indicators for addresses, for giving directions or finding the way. For all administrative purposes Endachiwa is divided into three, Upper (*lalai*) Endachiwa, Lower (*tatai*) Endachiwa and Bherawi.

Population of Endachiwa

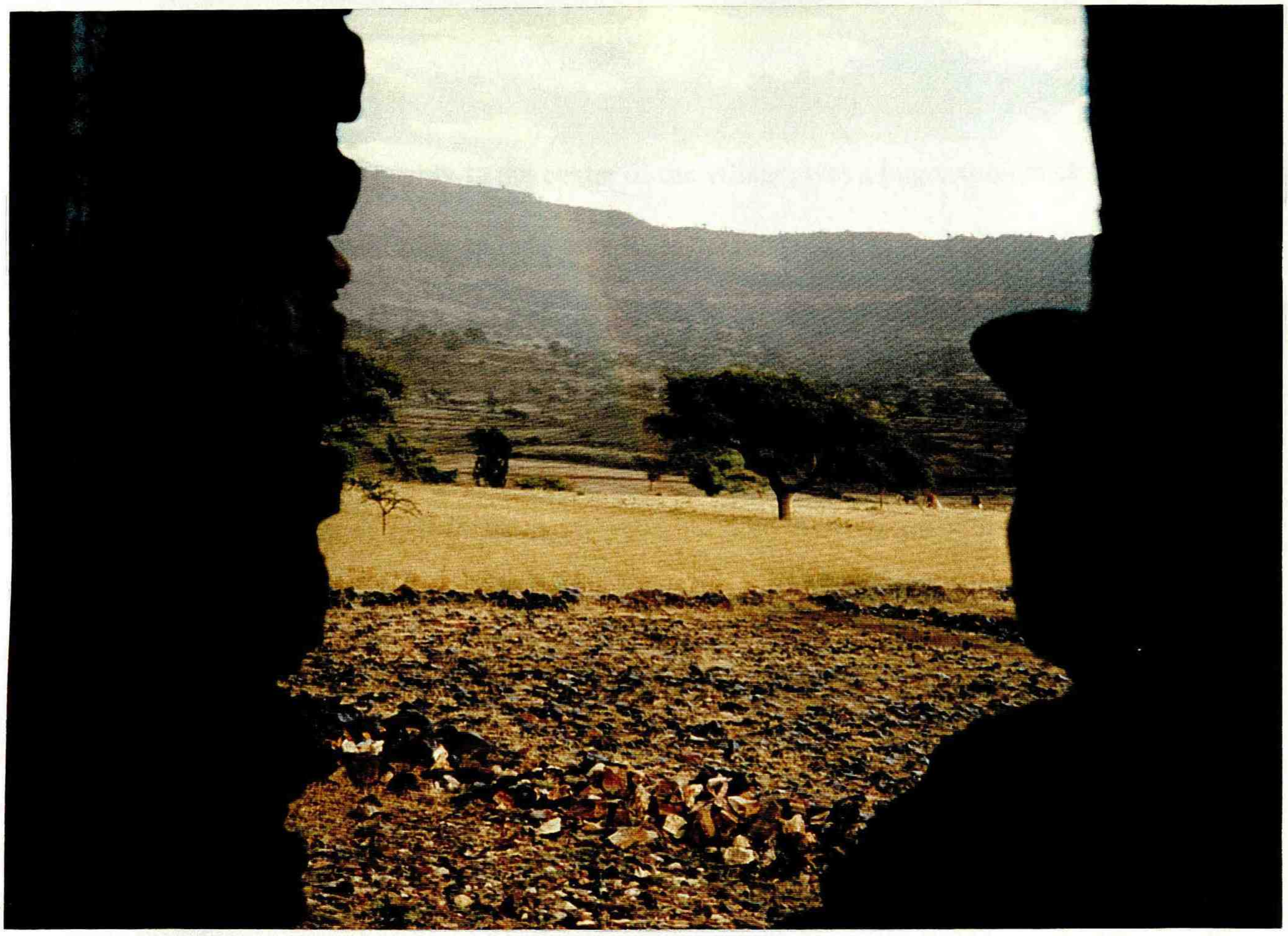
Lower Endachiwa	2307
Upper Endachiwa	2543
Bherawi	2037
TOTAL	6887

Table 1. Source: Endbatsahma *Wereda*

A majority of the population of Bherawi was Muslim, whereas Upper and Lower Endachiwa were Christian. There were four churches, two in Upper Endachiwa, and two in

Lower Endachiwa. I lived in Zerabera *kushet* opposite the church of St Mariam. The Muslims of Bherawi, like the Muslim community in Edaga Arbi, strongly supported the revolution, through whom they had acquired land for the first time. Muslim women were especially strong supporters, because they saw themselves as beneficiaries of TPLF's commitment to women's equality.

The economy of Endachiwa, as in the rest of the Tigrayan countryside, is based on subsistence agriculture. The main crop is *hanfetz* (a mixture of sorghum and wheat), followed by *teff*, but wheat, barley, finger millet, beans, lentils and chick peas are also grown. The fertility and average rainfall make Endachiwa a suitable candidate for the Ethiopia-wide agricultural project, Global 2000, for which an increasing number of farmers are signing up.[5] One agricultural consequence of the new dam, due to be finished the year after I left, was the introduction of irrigated crops for the first time. The new elementary school up to sixth grade was anticipating a future when the available land could no longer sustain the rising population, who therefore had to be educated for alternative employment. It had been built by the villagers in 1992 and staffed by the Education Bureau, although its 'green' classrooms of low stone walls roofed with tree branches were unusable for much of the rainy season. Two classroom blocks were financed by the government in 1995-6 and two more were planned for 1998, after my departure. Meanwhile pupils numbered more than eight hundred, so 'green' classrooms continued to be necessary. Students who wanted to continue up to eighth grade had to walk a round trip of seventeen kilometres to Edaga Arbi every day, where the educational facilities were about to improve. By the time I left, a new high school up to twelfth grade was almost completed.



Endachiwa harvest from the window of my house



Collecting building stone for the new school block in Sobeya

In Adi Kameya *kushet*, roughly in the centre of the village, was a huge, ancient sagla tree. This was the place of assembly and all the village meetings took place in its shade. It was on a slope and over the years tiers of stones had been brought for seating so that the place resembled an arena. My first experience of a meeting there was an important antidote to complacency. The chairman introduced us and invited me to say a few words to the assembly. I made it brief and simple and it was translated to avoid misunderstanding. Afterwards the chairman began urging the people to sign up for literacy classes. One old man stood up to support his point. 'If we had more education,' he said, 'we could have understood what it was this foreigner was talking about.'

Sobeya profile

Sobeya is a village in the *wereda* of Gulomakeda, situated on the Eritrean border in the area known as Agame in north-eastern Tigray. Three hours walk to the west is the *wereda* town of Zalambessa, the border town on the main arterial road from Addis Ababa and the south to Asmara in Eritrea. It therefore played a major role in controlling border relations with Eritrea, including customs and excise and immigration. This border relation has also affected villages like Sobeya, where militia have had to share the major responsibility for border patrols to control smuggling from Ethiopia, especially of coffee.[6] The precise

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[5] Sasakawa Global 2000 is an intensive campaign, originating in Japan, to increase agricultural production through the selective use of improved seeds and inputs, and training and supervision for farmers. It was introduced after 1995 as part of EPRDF's five-year development programme throughout Ethiopia.

[6] Eritrea, before the outbreak of the Ethio-Eritrean war in May 1998, was 13th in the hierarchy of world coffee producers, although its climate was unsuitable for coffee growing. This was entirely based on illegal procurement from Ethiopia through a variety of channels including cross-border smuggling. The refusal of the Eritrean government to respect economic agreements was one of the causes of the Ethiopian government's refusal to accede to Eritrea's request that the new Eritrean currency, the Nacfa (introduced in November 1997), be valued on a par with the Ethiopian *birr*. To prevent this the Ethiopian government changed the design of its currency in a surprise move which left stranded Eritrean speculators who had hoarded birr 'mountains'. Economic issues are thought to be the most important cause of the Eritrean invasion of Ethiopia in May 1998.

location of the border appeared to be unmarked, although, walking in the area, companions would remark that now we were in Eritrea. The local peasants intermingled and intermarried, but, despite assertions of their sharing a language and culture or being 'the same', the locals knew exactly who was Tigrayan and who was Eritrean. The character and history of Sobeya have been defined by its location and topography. As we shall see in later chapters, these were factors in attracting revolutionary groups to the area, out of which developed the close relationship between the TPLF and Sobeya villagers, which led to Sobeya becoming the first village to introduce land reform under the Front.

Sobeya is mainly situated on a flat plain, although its dwellings drift up the lower slopes of the surrounding mountains. Despite the fact that it is an inadequate rainfall area, the floods of the rainy season have gouged out deep gulleys in the plain, a continuing problem which the soil and water conservation campaign has been trying to address. The dryness of the region made it one of the first villages to benefit after the war from the well-building programme of the Relief Society of Tigray (REST). It is still called a village, although before the recent war broke out between Ethiopia and Eritrea it was fast becoming a town. Since the end of the civil war it has developed a small centre, as its residents have sought to augment their incomes by setting up small shops and restaurants and a weekly market. It became the site of the workers' camp in 1996 for the second stage of construction of a new road from Zalambessa to Alitena, in its neighbouring Irob *wereda* to the east, and at least some of the new *sewa* houses and teashops have been a response to the business opportunities provided by the road workers.

As in Endachiwa, the foundation of Sobeya's economy is subsistence agriculture, but its stony and infertile soils have forced a high proportion of their population to add to their

Sobeya (central)

KEY
well
dwellings
Church
belles / prickly pear
terraces
Ketema names of kushets

CLINIC
Ketema plain
fields
Zalambessa
path
small shops
School
block under construction
grinding mill
Ketema
rocky hill
RC MISSION
MISSION SCHOOL
Administration building
Min/Agr
Tea Bowls
Grinding Mill
New Agricultural Bureau
monument
New Road
RIVER BED
Terraced reserve forest
Eritrea
Terraced fields
rocks
Tree Nursery
Maize
Green Pasture/ water meadows
Veg. Gdn
fields
→ ALITENA
Veg. Gdns
Maize field
Veg. Garden
Veg garden
Road workers' camp
Path
Well
st Mariam
Adi Baira Christian
wide Path
Mebraty
Adi Ezana
Old School
Aragit
Veg Gdn
Terraced forest Reserves
Reserved forest heights
low Terraced fields
check dams in gulley
Terraced fields
Terraces
Hill
Flat fields
Terraced fields on hill
Terraced fields
GULLEY
Path
Rocks
Gullies

income by travelling seasonally in search of employment to other parts of Ethiopia, to Eritrea and further afield to Sudan and Saudi Arabia. Many of its young men are permanently working at a distance and sending money back to their families. The soils and unpredictable rainfall have also prevented Sobeya farmers from growing the main crops of Tigray, *teff* and wheat, and therefore disqualified them from agricultural participation in the current Global 2000 Campaign to increase productivity. The main crops are therefore maize and barley, and, unusually for Tigray, some farmers also grow small irrigated plots of vegetables, possibly the result of an Italian influence from Eritrea. Agame honey is reputed the best in Tigray and Sobeya bee-keepers do qualify for the Global programme of selected bees and advice from the *wereda* Global 2000 office. Anomalously for such a dry area, Sobeya has a marshy green area to the east of the village which never dries out. It is called the cattle pasture, but in fact the villagers reap their plots to hand feed their animals or to make it into hay, to avoid overgrazing and to prevent quarrels about straying animals. Another invaluable dry season fodder is *belles* or prickly pear, which is also used for live fencing to mark off fields and compounds and whose fruits have long been marketed in Eritrea to tide the farmers over the end of the dry season.

The majority of the population was Orthodox Christian and there were three churches in Sobeya, but following the activities of Italian missionaries in the nineteenth century, a sizeable minority were Catholic. The centre of missionary activity was the neighbouring *wereda* of Irob, especially Alitena, the *wereda* town, where Italian Lazarite priests had moved from Adua. Despite a smaller Catholic population, Sobeya also had a Catholic Mission, which included a church, a school, and the residence of its Tigrayan priest. As a result of its semi-urban status, Sobeya had more facilities than Endachiwa, although its

population of 5570 was slightly lower.[7] The Mission school had been built in 1960 and the state school in 1971, but rebuilt on a new site in 1995. In 1997, while I was living there, the foundations were laid for two new classroom blocks. The village also had a health clinic, which had been built under the Derg, although a special block for Mother and Child Health had been added. The clinic was staffed by two full-time health workers, one male and one female, and a pharmacist. There were two grinding mills, one set up by REST and the other a private facility. Several small shops sold basic provisions, especially items which could not be supplied locally, like oil, sugar, coffee and batteries, and there was also a weekly market.

Fieldwork experience and methodology[8]

I adopted the classic participant-observer approach. My methodology was influenced by a long-term awareness of the problems of representation, not only in an anthropological context, but from my experience of teaching literature before 1983. My analysis would have to be my own, but I was concerned to base it on and include in the text Tigrayan perspectives and voices. This necessitated very extensive interviewing to differentiate between individual and more generally-held views. Villagers seemed to think it perfectly understandable that I should want to write about their revolution and were not at all reluctant to be interviewed. In addition they invited us to their houses, to religious clubs, to weddings, to congregate outside the church on Sundays, to village celebrations and to all the formal and informal meetings. I tried to contribute to village events in any way I could. In Endachiwa I lent and eventually gave my powerful gas lamp to the church; I gave money in lieu of labour to the St Mariam anniversary, the *debr* or feast day of the local church; I set up (reluctantly) a mini health clinic; we shared in the reaping and so on. In

[7] Zalambessa *wereda* records for 1997.

Sobeya the most important event was the twenty second anniversary of the revolution in February, for which a monument had been built, covered in paintings which represented the main events of the relationship between the village and the TPLF. I made a photographic record for the village of the painting of the monument, the preparations for the celebrations and of the day itself.[9]

I approached the selection of a research assistant and interpreter as a vital part of my methodology. It turned out to be much more problematic than choosing a village. Although I had mastered the Tigrigna script, my grasp of the spoken language was inadequate to catch subtler nuances especially as there are dialectical differences over very short distances in Tigray. I needed a Tigrigna-speaker who was personable from the villagers' point of view, who would not feel exiled in the countryside from all good things, who was educated enough to understand and advance the project, and mature enough to be disciplined in a village setting. He needed to be a supporter of the TPLF to gain the confidence of villagers, but not an ex-fighter or so close that it would affect the neutrality of my research. My first choice disqualified himself by chain-smoking, a habit which would have alienated the villagers from both of us. I eventually found his successor in Addis Ababa. He had some of the ideal qualities I had begun to believe were unattainable; other lesser attributes I decided to let go. The son of an Axum priest, he was not only exceedingly pious, but he also knew and could sing many of the Ge'ez Church songs and dances, which was a great recommendation to village people, particularly the priests and elders, who genuinely loved him. He also had a deep and unaffected love for the

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[8] These categories so overlapped that I decided to treat them in one section.

[9] I have no doubt that the monument was destroyed by Eritrean forces during the recent conflict (1998-2000), because the Eritrean government was claiming to external mediators that Zalambessa, Sobeya and Alitena had been administered by Eritrea before the conflict broke out. I also had reports that the churches and houses in occupied border areas, including Alitena and Irob had been dismantled or destroyed. For these reasons the photographic archive will be an important historical record for the Sobeya community.

countryside from childhood experiences with country relatives, a rare quality among the more educated urban youth. He was excited by the research subject and also a civilian supporter of the revolution, although he had spent the civil war years in Addis Ababa. As far as village relations went, he became a positive asset.

I had two more basic advantages, which remained so at every stage of my fieldwork. The first was the nature of the research topic, allied to the fact that I had been in Tigray during the war, had been present at important events, and knew many of the first fighters, including some respected martyrs. The perception in the countryside that their revolution was a collective achievement of a particularly noble kind, a glorious period in their history to rival the Battle of Adua and great achievements of the past, gave them an interest in talking about it and explaining their own contribution. They pointed to the land, the school, the new roads, the *baito* (council) and particularly local development projects which they saw as specific benefits brought by their struggle. They were keenly appreciative of my interest, which they thought must be intense to cause me to live with them 'in the dirt' when I could be living a life of luxury elsewhere. People in both villages echoed the words of a veteran of the 1943 uprising, that the revolution was 'a victory and it is another victory that our friends from the outside are now coming to speak to us.'[10] The second advantage was my age. Although women have been severely discriminated against in the past and the struggle for equality still has a long way to go, older women are respected in Tigrayan culture and can be accepted as community elders, whose advice and wisdom are worthy of respect. My age and the fact that I had four adult children gave me status in the culture and made it easier for them to grant me the respect and confidence necessary to accept me in the village and give me the information I required.



Launching candles. Temket (Epiphany) celebrations in Endachiwa



The priests celebrate the new Sobeya monument to the revolution

The two pivotal institutions in both Endachiwa and Sobeya were the church and *wedebna* ('our organisation') or TPLF. The Church dictated the work/play pace of village life with its calendar of holy days when agricultural work was forbidden. These were the days associated with meetings, but also with relaxed social gatherings and *maheberat*, the religious clubs which were also opportunities for rotating hospitality. The influence of the TPLF seems not to have superseded that of the church so much as to complement it. The world of the revolution was the world of work, of increased agricultural production, of soil and water conservation, of serious meetings, but also of serious benefits to the village community. It is tempting to think of this as a division of labour in which the revolution looked after the body, the material world, and the Church looked after the spirit, relations with God. However the priests were in the forefront of both worlds. At the celebrations of the revolution on 18 February the bright parasols and glinting crosses of the priests led the procession. In Sobeya they performed the sacred dances which accompany the liturgy out in the open at the foot of the new monument to the revolution. In both villages, priests had been among the leaders of the local armed struggle.

Apart from some health setbacks, there were few problems and they were not too difficult to solve. In fact any anthropologist has to face the possibility that there may be problems beyond the field of vision and be on the look out for signs of sensitivity caused by one's own cultural blindness. This is a strong argument for taking a good research assistant. In both Endachiwa and Sobeya, the sympathy of the villagers for my project, which they understood as a history of the struggle, made acceptance more straightforward than it might have been otherwise. In Endachiwa we arrived on a Saturday, having attended on the

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[10] Balamberas Mulaw Wores, 77, interviewed in Qhiha, 10 February 1991. His words are quoted in full in

way the annual *wereda* evaluation in Edaga Arbi, to find that the accommodation offered on my preliminary visit was now occupied. As a result, all the council executives arrived to empty and clean out a tiny agricultural agents' office in Zerabera *kushet* for us to move into. The priest, Keshi Yibrah, who was to become a good friend, took our water container to fill at the spring. All these jobs were normally regarded as women's work. Although I never discussed this occasion with them, they were all politically conscious men who had perhaps been influenced by the fact that fighters during the civil war had continuously challenged the traditional division of labour. It was an interesting initiation into village life.

Soon after my arrival in Endachiwa in September 1996 I decide to challenge my prejudices in favour of the revolution by approaching first of all that sector of the community likely to be most opposed to the TPLF, the priests. I interviewed Keshi Desta, the elderly head priest and my neighbour, only to find he was a staunch supporter of the revolution and that two of his children had become fighters, with parental support, one of whom had been killed. I only managed to discover one individual in Endachiwa, also a priest, who was opposed to the TPLF. The priests were among the few older members of the community who had some education or were at least literate and therefore they were invaluable in the administration. Moreover their role in the community as spokespersons, mediators and advisors, prepared many of them to also assist in the task of 'agitating' the people to keep up their civic responsibilities. Some of them became key informants on Tigrayan history, including the early days of the revolution.

At first the villagers were cool, reserved and polite. I was to learn over the coming months that restrained, dignified behaviour was respected in the countryside and uncontrolled or

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Chapter 2, Note 5.

emotional displays disparaged. I had made a conscious decision to follow the example of the early fighters in the revolution, who had won the confidence of villagers by respecting their piety. The sacred grove of the Church of St Mariam was facing my door across a field. I had brought a dress and shawl suitable for church and the first Sunday morning I got up in the dark and joined the women in the place designated for women. Within an hour after the end of the Mass, the head priest had sent over to us from his nearby house a tray of *injera*. From that moment the villagers' response was warm, reserved and polite. I continued to attend church on all Sundays and holy days, but the priests' suspicions of a foreigner were not entirely allayed. A few weeks later they invited me into the church compound for *sewa* (home-made beer) and bread, but in fact to interrogate me on my Christian credentials. They wanted to know first of all what sort of a Christian I was. Fortunately, knowing the hostility of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in the north to 'protestants', whom they don't distinguish from fundamentalist Christians whose missionary tactics the EOC sees as unacceptable, I was able to cite my convent upbringing and say 'Catholic'. As the EOC scriptural base has remained close to its Hebrew roots, their questions were almost entirely based on the Old Testament. I seemed to pass the exam.

In Sobeya I was helped by having met and interviewed some of its leading revolutionary members during the civil war. Some of these were now elected executives on the council. My problems of a minor kind were associated with the Catholic Mission and these are of interest in that they exposed some political and religious tensions in the area. It was in this connection that the public relations policy that had proved successful in Endachiwa backfired. I could hardly make a strong bid for inclusion in the Orthodox Church on the grounds that I was a Catholic Christian, if there was also a Catholic Church on hand. In

addition, the *wereda* chairman who accompanied us from Zalambessa and the Sobeya Council executives, who had no idea of my religious background, if any, all thought I would be more comfortably accommodated in the Mission than in a village house. My research assistant then informed the Catholic priest that I was a Catholic, which was not in fact accurate. This was an invidious position because, although pious Tigrayans would tend to respect any believer rather than a non-believer, there seemed to be tension between the Orthodox and Catholic Churches in Sobeya. I wanted to minimise barriers and being a foreigner in rural Tigray is enough of an obstacle to start with. The *wereda* authorities in Zalambessa, some of whom were ex-TPLF fighters, also expressed some hostility towards the Catholic Church on the grounds that they were not interested in the plight of the poverty-stricken rural people in general, so much as intent on adding to their numbers through conversion. The problem was exacerbated by the character of the Catholic priest in Sobeya, who was not welcoming, but did not know how to refuse the *wereda.* Not wanting to accommodate us in any of his several guest rooms, he put us in a store-room, which, apart from being plagued by scorpions, was commodious enough to allow workspace, so we had no objection. However, although a youngish man, he tried to assert his authority over us in various unacceptable ways, for example by instructing us to be back in the compound by six-thirty every evening and by telling us not to invite villagers into the compound, 'except for Murutz [the *wereda* chairman] and people like that'. 'Why is that?' 'In case they are thieves.' From the first, although I paid rent, he sought to get the most out of me by setting me several kinds of writing tasks. I responded with Tigrayan tactics: friendly charm, no arguing or confrontation, ignoring all unreasonable demands. Finding that both village and *wereda* authorities were supporting my work, he soon became more cooperative.

I never felt any antagonism from the villagers or suggestion that they categorised me with the priest, but I may not have had the sensory equipment to make the judgement. I continued to observe all the customary indicators of respect towards Orthodox priests and the churches and occasionally attended the services. The *wereda* officials' suspicions seemed to be confined to the one priest and to include a deep-rooted suspicion of celibacy. A second Catholic priest in a neighbouring *tabia* was a convert from the Orthodox faith and, as he was married with a family before his conversion, remained so. Unlike the Sobeya Mission priest, who wore a Western style soutane and a berretta, the second priest retained the clothes of an Orthodox priest. Perhaps this contributed to his greater acceptance by local people.

Since I left Sobeya in 1997, war broke out between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Zalambessa was invaded and occupied by Eritrean forces and eventually destroyed. Sobeya, along with other border villages up to and beyond Alitena, was occupied and turned into a heavily-mined buffer zone in front of Eritrean trenches, its people displaced into refugee camps north of Adigrat.[11] Reports have indicated that the churches, buildings and infrastructure in Sobeya have been destroyed, so that many of the material and cultural structures to which I refer in this thesis and which I would otherwise have assumed would outlast my presence, may no longer be there or may be rebuilt in a different form in the future. The war came to an end in May 2000, but de-mining operations took several months. I hope that by the sowing season in 2001 the people of Sobeya will perhaps have returned to their land.

[11] According to reports from the front during the war, border villagers under Eritrean occupation, including those in Sobeya, were being allowed to stay and farm their land on condition they accepted Eritrean citizenship. Other communications suggested the villagers had chosen to move out.

Chapter 1

How Tigrayans perceive their history

Introduction

Tigrayan perception of history is the most important factor in investigating the causes of the Tigrayan revolution. The distinctive history of Tigray has been a secret history since the Shewan Amharas under Emperor Menelik II began to dominate Ethiopia politically at the end of the nineteenth century. It has been secret because it took place at the periphery, in the poor northern provinces, remote and inaccessible during this period; its people were illiterate and their story marginalized, because written history in Ethiopia, as elsewhere, is a concomitant of power; it has been hidden most obviously because the northern provinces were seen as either a potential or actual threat to the hegemony of the Amhara emperors and from the early sixties in Eritrea and the mid-seventies in Tigray were engaged in armed struggle against domination from Shewa under first Emperor Haile Selassie and then the military dictatorship. Central government used the propaganda resources at its disposal to keep it hidden. Finally, the areas liberated by the TPLF after 1975 were physically cut off from the rest of the country and there was little communication except via the propaganda radio stations of each side.

From the perspective of Addis Ababa and its elite, formed under dictatorial central power, all Ethiopia beyond the capital has assumed peripheral character. However an overview of the whole region not only suggests a `hierarchy of centres' (Donham 1986:24), but also a hierarchy of peripheries. The southern marches have been the most marginal, literally and metaphorically, of the lands incorporated by Menelik at the end of the nineteenth century

(Donham and James 1986). The perspective from here has tended to homogenize the old `Abyssinian core' of Tigray/Amhara into a unitary and predatory centre. Scholars too have taken their cue from political interrelationships, including intermarriage, between the Tigray/Amhara aristocracy and would seem, from the invisibility of Tigray in their works, to have denied Tigray separate identity and status (Bahru Zewde 1991; Donham 1986:3). Thus Christopher Clapham, trying to account for the TPLF before 1988, found it 'paradoxical that this opposition should be greatest in northern Ethiopia, including especially the Tigray region which has formed part of the Ethiopian state continuously since the earliest times, rather than in the recently incorporated regions of the south and west' (1988:205). In other words, for those who thought of the highlands of Ethiopia as a cultural and administrative unity it was difficult to see the rationale of the liberation struggle.

The view from Tigray is very different. Tigray over the last hundred years has been the site of opposing tensions, the centripetal thrust, inherited from feudalism, of sovereignty dispersed to the regions, opposed to centrifugal pressures to establish a centralised unitary state. Since the accession of Menelik, Tigrayans, perceiving themselves not only distinct in language and culture, but also the inheritors of a rare and ancient history, have resisted a deliberate discriminatory process which left them in the last years of Haile Selassie the poorest and least developed province in Ethiopia. As civil war intensified and Tigray became even less accessible, the military government's control of news and propaganda became even more difficult to challenge. As a result, when EPRDF defeated the Derg in 1991, ignorance of Tigrayan history and of the record of the member fronts of EPRDF

areas made it seem as if they had sprung from nowhere and government propaganda about rural bandits and their extremist politics led to their being sensationalised and feared.

The objective of this thesis is to make visible some part at least of the record of TPLF through an investigation of the impact made by the liberation struggle on the lives and culture of rural people in Tigray. This chapter will argue that the causes of the revolution lie much further back in Ethiopian history than the immediate grievances in the 1960s and 1970s which triggered diverse illegal opposition movements, lie in part in their perception of their history, especially of the last hundred years, reinforcing the view that interpretation of the past is an aspect of politics (Leach 1965; Appadurai 1981:202). I will go back no further than the last years of Emperor Yohannes IV, the only Tigrayan emperor, his successor, the Shewan-Amhara Menelik II, and the Battle of Adua in 1896, when the forces of Emperor Menelik II defeated the invading Italians and freed Ethiopia from the immediate threat of colonisation. According to Tigrayan oral history, attitudinal changes began to surface in the late nineteenth century in criticisms of local and central feudal authority. Critical attitudes hardened into resentment in following decades in response to what was perceived as multiple injustices and abuses of authority, breaking out into an open rebellion in 1943. This uprising or First *Weyane* in Tigray failed, but is seen as leading directly to the better organised and politically conscious 'Second *Weyane'* which succeeded in 1991.

Tigrayan oral history

Investigating the feudal period through oral history is not unproblematic. It is impossible to know the feudal period directly, because the past has been packaged and mediated by the

intervening discourse of the TPLF revolution, even for those who lived it. It was in TPLF's interest to catalogue society's ills under Menelik and Haile Selassie and attribute them to *mesfininet*, which they translated as 'feudalism'. Even interpreting the evidence of contemporary songs and poems cannot be entirely immune from intervening influences. However it would be an overstatement to suggest that TPLF's political education 'created' the past, but it did give coherence to experiences and inherited memories, recasting them as shared perception of 'oppression'.

In Tigrayan villages transmitting the community's history is a serious responsibility, bearing most heavily upon men, although some famous history-tellers have reputedly been women.[1] Social gatherings and holy days, when most agricultural work is forbidden, provide opportunities for exchanging stories and, among the animal fables, moral tales, biblical stories and lives of the saints, important events in local history are recounted from the point of view of participants, even if long dead.[2] In Adua district the appropriate gatherings are the *mahebarat,* monthly meetings in honour of a particular saint, hosted in rotation by a fixed group of twelve, one for each month. Membership, which excludes relatives, often transcends village boundaries, creating important ties with neighbouring communities.

> On these occasions the veterans tell the history of the people over many years. This is how we learned about this history. Those who were at the Battle of Adua only died very recently. A brother of my father's was a hero of this battle. He died ten years ago. He told me this story. All the problems they

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[1] Iyassu Berhe, head of TPLF/EPRDF Cultural Department during the civil war, interviewed in Addis Ababa, October 4 1991

[2] In both Endachiwa and in Sobeya, certain elders were especially respected as historians. I was directed to them when I asked about times and events before the coming of TPLF. These were always men and often but not exclusively priests.

> encountered they passed on to their children. On any occasion, whether of mourning or whatever, they would pass the history to the next generation.[3]

Tigrayan oral history, rarely consensual, tends to be a collection of perspectives and experiences, supported by witnesses and communally shared. Sometimes an event is celebrated in a `chain' of poems.[4] This collective history differs from the common Western idea of `life histories'. Institutionalising history-telling within a community has provided a regulatory context which subjects individual memories to critical scrutiny and correction. Inset stories are typical, like the following tale of the spy Awa'alem who helped defeat the Italians at the battle of Adua:

> Before this the Italians had sent Awa'alem Haroget by force and against his will to spy Menelik's position. They sent him with two companions who were loyal to the Italians. He admitted directly to Menelik that he had been sent as a spy, so Menelik decided to send him back plus deliberate disinformation. His two companions knew nothing. Menelik told him to say that the Ethiopian soldiers were in a very bad condition with epidemics of dysentery, that they were starving, there was desertion, and so a very small force was left in Adua. As a display before the two pro-Italians, the bells were rung summoning soldiers who were told to disperse and search for food in the countryside, apparently leaving Menelik relatively unprotected. Awa'alem told all this to the Italians and also that Menelik and his wife, Tsahaitu, were very religious and often in church. If they attacked at a certain time when they were in church they would be virtually defenceless and easily captured. Awa'alem went back and forth several times. It was finally agreed with Menelik that they would arrange an ambush. A key role was played by Awa'alem in encouraging the Italians to come out and advance on Adua.[5]

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3 K. Gebre Egziaber Abraha, aged 73, the Administrator of Adua hospital, interviewed 22 April 1991

4 Iyassu Berhe, who conducted extensive investigations into rural culture and oral literature during the civil war, shared his findings with me at different stages of the war and afterwards; interviewed in Addis Ababa, 10 October 1991.

5 Keshi Kiros Nega, 69, interviewed in Adua, April 22 1991.

The elders and veterans I interviewed usually came to talk in groups of three to five, glad to recount the past.[6] They were careful to establish their credentials, for example the Adua elders were all close relatives of Battle of Adua veterans and the father of the oldest (75) had been a soldier of Tigrayan Emperor Yohannes IV:

> My father was the one who fought in Metemma with Yohannes IV. [He told us] even their problems on the way, of thirst, having to drink urine and so on. If kids are shouting in a meeting, they are absolutely forbidden to make a sound when a story is being told. Because we have no books, often we are illiterate, it is vital to listen carefully, especially for the sons and daughters of the participants.[7]

In some areas describing events had a particularly local character. In Wajirat there were traditional community rituals called *seber gumare* for recording warrior exploits. The villagers lined up facing the warriors, who, calling on each other as witnesses, one by one chanted their exploits, which were repeated in chorus by the assembly. Each, placing his booty, perhaps one or more captured Italian guns, on the ground on a sash (*nasel*), came in strict order of achievement, the greatest last, and there were severe penalties for infringing the order or for lying or exaggerating.

> They knew who they were so they respected each other. Then, the one who was the bravest of all of them would come last. After that no one would say anything. If a man who killed one Italian came after the man who killed fourteen or fifteen or twenty he was immediately shot in front of everyone.[8]

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6 Balamberas Mulaw Wores, veteran of First *Weyane*, aged 77, interviewed in Quiha, February 10, 1991. His sister was the wife and his uncle the relative of Blatta Hailemariam, leader of the uprising. He made a stately reply when I thanked them for agreeing to talk to me: 'She is our guest. She has come to our country from a long way. It is she who should be thanked, not us. We have survived the First *Weyane.* We had a few victories, many defeats; we lost many lives and saw many atrocities, but we have seen not only the First *Weyane,* but also the second revolution and the first led to the second. That is a victory and it is another victory that our friends from the outside are now coming to speak to us.'

7 Grazmach Welde Giorgis Abraha, 75, interviewed in Adua, 22 April, 1991.

8 Iyassu Berhe, 4 October 1991. Iyassu said these rituals were still practised in a modified form.

Their history-telling provides a far from seamless narrative of the Tigrayan past. It assumes a Tigrayan perspective, but this can be regional or local. Although the Battle of Adua is known throughout Tigray, only accounts of those whose relatives participated would be respected. Feudal divisions and allegiances also create different perspectives. Story-tellers emphasise the part played by their own locality. `You must ask them' was a common response to an enquiry in Adi Gudom about an incident in the 1943 uprising in Mekele or about Adi Gudom in Quiha, places which are only a few kilometres from each other.

Nevertheless, village historians see their role in passing on a particular analysis to future generations as politically important and this is perhaps why there is a coincidence of views in the narratives. Those of more than local significance like the Battle of Adua, the Italian invasions and the 1943 *weyane,* offer similar justifications for increasing resentment of the central government. Blatta Hailemariam, best known leader of the *Weyane,* in exile after its final collapse, evidently felt keenly his responsibility to pass on, not just the details, but also the rebellion's context in Tigrayan history:[9]

> When we were younger he told us what Tigrayans are - why they are fighting, what are their aims, why we were in a remote area, why we were not in our natural land. He pushed us to think about these things. Then when we were older he told us the history from Yohannes onwards. His father was a *hakim* [traditional doctor] for Ras Yohannes... and imparted all this history in every detail and he passed this history on to us - what the people of Tigray have suffered, why he was imprisoned and so on. [10]

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[9] Hailemariam Redda's name is usually prefixed by *Blatta*, a minor feudal title

10 Kassa Hailemariam, son of Hailemariam Redda, interviewed in Khartoum, May 9 1991. When Hailemariam was finally arrested after the end of the *Weyane,* he was exiled in 1949 to Gamu Goffa in the south of Ethiopia. He was released by the Derg in 1975 and returned to Tigray to constant harassment by Derg officials and soldiers for suspected contacts with TPLF, until returning to his village in the south in 1981.

After release in 1975, he returned to Tigray and tried to research the written records, but found 'the only written documents were the distinguished history of Haile Selassie, blackening the *weyenti* as bandits'.[11] Angry that Tigrayan achievements and contribution to the security of Ethiopia against invaders have not been recognised, that their history has been subsumed into the Amharanised Addis Ababa versions, Tigrayans regard their oral history as the only accurate record of their past.[12]

A hidden culture of resistance

Poems and songs are important oral evidence of popular feeling in the past, often a secret record known only in a particular locality and unknown in the towns. As contemporary records, they corroborate critical interpretations of events and behaviour earlier in the century in the oral histories I collected in the 1980s and 1990s and are not the result of hindsight influenced by an anti-feudal revolution. They carry a proto-revolutionary punch by recording dissatisfaction or despair about the hardness of life, injustice of landlessness, social inequalities and the bitterness of poverty (Hammond 1989:30,113).

> Oh you poor people, how borne down by exploitation.
> They drink the filtered *sewa,* and if they like you
> they give you the dregs.
> Would I tell this story if I could get a better life?
> In the sun in the daytime, in the night
> huddled round a fire made of dung,
> I wonder is it my foolishness or my poverty
> That I flatter those not of my kind?[13]

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11 Ibid.

12 Mulugeta Berhe, Tigrayan collector of oral history, interviewed in Mekele in January 1991: 'Most information on the history of Ethiopia is distorted. The Amhara [elite] identify their history with that of Ethiopia and claim it goes back some 3000 years. In fact `Ethiopia' was created during the `scramble for Africa' and is not a continuous national history.'

13 From Iyassu Berhe, who generously shared his collection with me.

Other songs were composed for weddings, funerals or festivals. One of the most important sources here has been the *melkes* or funeral ode. Praise poetry, as in so many African countries, was an important way that poets and musicians could at worst survive and at best attain a privileged position in the feudal hierarchy in the courts and retinues of the aristocracy (Vail and White 1991). The most famous professional poet-singers were the *melkesti*, men or women who composed and sang funeral odes. Traditionally protected from reprisals, they were often social critics, particularly of abuses of authority. Their short concise poems exploit the linguistic characteristics of Tigrigna which facilitate elliptical modes of expression, suited to double meanings and subtly encoded messages (Hammond 1989: 32,35). In Agame, male poets called *mase* sang songs after the *wafera* or `working together' for the feudal lord. The following example from earlier in the century, pointing out the transitory nature of wealth and power, is clearly critical of feudal pretensions.

Fortune, let me sing to you about it.
It passes like the clouds.
Good fortune was there
in the house of the King, Yohannes IV,
wearing his golden robes.
But it passes.
We see it passing like the clouds.
It not only passed away for him,
But destroyed his guns, his artillery,
and all his garrisons.
Then good fortune was there
In the house of King Menelik,
But it all passed away.
Fortune is also here, near us,
In the house of the feudals.
It will pass like that of the Kings.
And we will see a time
when the house of the python
will belong only to rats.[14]

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[14] Translated by Iyassu Berhe, sung by Gedamo Berhane, son of Berhane Gezai, a famous *mase* singer. Gedamo was himself one of the best known poets and singers in the TPLF cultural troupe. 19 June 1989.

However, *mase* were well-known for operating on more than one level. The following appears to be a straightforward complimentary poem, but would have had a satirical resonance for a peasant audience, who would not have been paid for working the land of the *Balambarass* (a minor feudal), just given a gourd of *sewa*.

> How are you, my Balambarass, my leader, my feudal?
> You just give us, your poor people, all the good things of life.
> Everybody is afraid of your gun,
> Because you are a brave man.
> Your house is full of cattle and oxen.
> My Balambarass, you who become a leader early in the morning,
> You become King because of your fine weapons.
> Saturday and Sunday early in the morning we see you in the church;
> Monday and Tuesday you send us to your fields to work,
> So you are a true leader.

The poet suggests he is 'brave', 'a leader' and 'king' only by virtue of the weapons he possesses; the satiric intent turns on the penultimate line, where his command to the peasants to work his fields is sandwiched between a comment on his visible piety and his leadership. Tigrayan poetry uses words and images with different meanings for different listeners. The pen was an image of bureaucracy; the ploughshare signified the peasants, the one oppressing the other. The reference to peasants working in the landowner's fields has to be understood alongside other 'secret' poems spoken and shared behind closed doors, bewailing the difficulties of working the stony soil and the bleakness of future prospects. Resentment at a system which enforced hard labour only to see the wealthy extract most of the crop was most overt in harvesting songs which, while still conventional, tended to be more subversive (Hammond 1990:112). Other pre-revolutionary songs celebrate patriotic resistance to the Italian occupation and the 1943 *Weyane*. In the 1960s and early 1970s a

great outburst of song characterised the student movement against Haile Selassie's rule.

Emergence from feudalism

The wider context of these poetic and oral history traditions was of course feudalism. Feudalism (*mesfininet*) in Ethiopia was a system of institutionalised inequalities, maintained and protected by absolute authority backed by armed force.[15] It constructed a total world of political, economic and social relations, characterised by systematic expropriation from the peasants by an elite. More important than armed force to its preservation, however, was the construction of consciousness, through which both winners and losers internalised its ideology. In Tigray, however, aristocratic rivalries, manipulation of land rights and economic instability introduced inherent contradictions and some volatility into the system, especially but not exclusively at the lower end of the hierarchy, when members of the nobility could be outlawed or minor feudals be indistinguishable from peasants.

Emergence from feudal consciousness in the north has been a long and difficult process, still incomplete. Oral history accounts show the hegemony of feudalism beginning to crumble from the time of Menelik and its authority increasingly open to contestation. Menelik and Haile Selassie deliberately weakened regional authority in the interests of autocratic centralism, but their authority was itself questioned, then challenged from

[15] According to Dr Gebre Ab Barnabas, commissioned by TPLF to research the oral history of the revolution and its background, the nobility 'said (and taught the peasants) that Tigray had three types of people. First were the Humans (*seb*). The Prince, Mengesha Seyoum, is human. Next were the Semihumans (*sebaseb*), the gentry. Last were the Subhumans (*ankakines*), the rest of ordinary Tigrayans'. A conversation in London, 24 September 1996.

below. However this was no simple process, but a complex fusion of factors, whose visible forms were often contradictory and ambiguous.

Feudal hegemony was no bar to discontent in Tigray, but discontent was a long way from revolution. The peasants complained, but also accepted. The Tigrayan saying, `Our king comes, our sun rises' catches the peasants' fatalistic attitude to their old feudal leaders whose succession is as inevitable as the sun rising: a new day, but the same old sun; a new face, but the same power, the same rivalries, the same wars and taxes. Except for sporadic unrest, the population seemed largely quiescent, its social and political relations tied into an inequitable economic system by patron-client relationships. This is the view reflected, for example, in the work of Dan Bauer (1973) who presents an internally coherent and credible description of a community organised hierarchically with leaders and followers, competing not only for power, but also status-honour. There are no poor, no landless and no women, certainly no indicators of the rural misery that spurred the student movement, at that time gaining momentum and soon to topple the Emperor, nor any signs of the unrest which helped TPLF gain acceptance as *wedebna* or `our organisation' and then to challenge and finally defeat the Mengistu dictatorship. Neither does John Bruce's work on land tenure (1974) suggest a proto-revolutionary condition, although it exposes the manipulations of the powerful in monopolising land and demonstrates the inequities of the *risti* system. The evidence for an alternative view, challenging that of the quiescent peasant, is in the oral histories. Their secret stories and subversive songs constitute a parallel commentary in which the outbreak of revolutionary struggle suddenly becomes a coherent outcome, rather than an inexplicable phenomenon.

Case study: The Battle of Adua

For Tigrayans, the past interpenetrates the present, and nowhere more significantly than in the case of the Battle of Adua. This battle reverberates in the Ethiopian imagination, not just because the Italians were defeated or because, through the subsequent treaty, Emperor Menelik II secured freedom for forty years from further attempts at European domination. It also mythologizes a defeat for European colonialism in Africa. Tigrayan oral historians do not contradict this view but provide a more complex interpretation. Their testimonies demonstrate the significance attached to the Battle of Adua not as an isolated event so much as a visible and catalytic point in a complex interweaving of political relationships, in which Tigray's decline is associated with Menelik's machiavellian determination to transfer imperial power from a Tigrayan to a Shewan dynasty, astutely playing off against each other not only different feudal factions, but also different European powers.

For the Adua historians, the Battle is entangled in external military and internal political relations during Tigrayan Emperor Yohannes IV's rule. The priorities of Menelik, King of Shewa, (to undermine Yohannes' authority and succeed him as emperor) were in direct conflict with those of Yohannes (to secure Abyssinia against external enemies). The narratives of Yohannes' problems dwell on Menelik's recalcitrance. 'But Menelik was unwilling' to assist Yohannes against the Mahdis; 'Menelik stayed at home and refused to obey Yohannes IV'. As evidence of Menelik's notorious cunning, they recount the story of Awa'alem, quoted above, or the widely disseminated story of his emissary monk whose

cryptic message sent Yohannes to Metemma against the advice of his vassals and hence to his death.[16]

> Yohannes IV was a fanatical Christian and Menelik, knowing this, sent a monk to Axum to meet a priest close to Emperor Yohannes, saying he was sent from God... The Dervishes raided Gondar a second time, looting and burning, so the people of Gondar sent a letter to Yohannes telling him the situation, how the Muslims had burned and destroyed the whole area. 'You must, as King of Kings and Son of Mary, do something to help us.' At that moment the monk, pretending to be sent from God, approached Johannes and said, 'If you go to fight Menelik, you will stay in power for forty years, but you will never go to heaven because you have ignored the threat from the Muslims. If you attack the Muslims, you will be defeated, but you will go to heaven as the Defender of Christianity.' So Yohannes 1V decided to go to Metemma, rather than fight Menelik in the south or the Italians in the east, who were all Christians. First he had hot discussions with his lords, many of whom thought the crushing of Menelik a much greater priority. It was because Yohannes 1V was so religious that he was manipulated by Menelik and so went to Metemma and was killed there.[17]

In this way the elders take issue with what they see as misrepresentations typical of Ethiopian written history. Although some Tigrayan historians do support, or have been influenced by, oral history perspectives (Solomon Inquai 1983:10-11; Kinfe Abraham 1994:159), my informants viewed written history typically as an emanation of Shewan-Amhara-dominated central power, which therefore 'doesn't reflect the role of the Tigrayans at all; they are all represented as Amhara or Menelik. Those in the front line were all Tigrayan, [although] there were Amhara Rases there, Ras Makonnen, King Michael of

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16 I collected another version of this story from Mulugeta Berhe, 6 February 1991. During the 1984-5 famine, Mulugeta met and interviewed a clerk of Johannes, then 128 years old, who said a spy of Menelik had been responsible for the death of Emperor Yohannes, that no enemies were anywhere near him, that the Mahdists had already been driven out. The shot that killed him was too short range, so his murderer must have been very nearby and therefore a spy. I heard another version of this story from Keshi Teklehaimanot, a priest-historian in Endachiwa, interviewed there November 3 1996, asserting the wide proliferation of the allegation that Yohannes had been killed by one of Menelik's soldiers.

17 K. Gebre-Ezgiaber Abraha, 22 April 1991

Wollo, King Teklehaimanot of Gojjam'.[18] Also, 'Historians have distorted the Battle of Adua as if Menelik was present ... Menelik was two days away and not in the front line at all'. The great Tigrayan warlord, Ras Alula, 'was in the front line of defence'.[19]

Menelik is characterised as consistently cunning, plotting to replace Yohannes as King of Kings, establish Shewa as the seat of power and force the decline of Tigray. The elders draw attention to Menelik's equation of his interests with Shewa, rather than the larger concept of `modern Ethiopia', with which ironically twentieth century written historians have associated him (Clapham 1988:27; Bahru Zewde 1991:111). He is less concerned with risking the security of the Sudan-Ethiopia border than achieving power by plotting to circumvent Yohannes' designated heir and be 'declared . . . King of Kings in Shewa, a terrible break with Axumite tradition'.[20] The Treaty of Wichale in 1889, by which Menelik acknowledged Eritrea as an Italian colony, shows him prepared to sacrifice the integrity of Ethiopia in pursuit of Shewan power, and more motivated by older feudal concepts of competitive kingdoms, where the Emperor as *primus inter pares* challenges his feudal barons for ethnic and regional pre-eminence. They see this opportunistic dealing with the Italians leading directly to the second Italian invasion in 1936.

The nobility also come in for criticism in this warrior interpretation of history. Warrior skills (represented by the hero warlord, Ras Alula), strategic cunning (cutting the water supply of the Italians entrenched in Enda Jesus above Mekele) and bravery in the face of impossible odds (the superior arms and equipment of the Italians) are explicitly admired in

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18 K. Kiros Nega, 22 April 1991
19 K. Gebre-Ezgiaber Abraha, 22 April 1991

this tradition of feudal warlordism in which status is based on responsibilities in battle and there are high expectations of leadership. They are censorious of Tigrayan weakness and willing to give credit to deserving Amhara.[21] Cowardice and weak leadership earn contempt and satirical comment and they attribute the failure of leadership which enabled the Italians even before the Battle of Adua to penetrate as far as Alaje, to the disunited feudal lords, manipulated and divided by Menelik. 'We want to stress that the people did not cause this defeat, but the feudals,' asserts Keshi Gebre-Egziabher.

Contradictions in the feudal system

In this way the narratives offer ample evidence of the contradictions inherent in the feudal system. On the one hand the criticisms of the nobility's actions before and after the battle were of individuals falling short of the responsibilities and expectations of office, suggesting the persistence of feudal ideals; on the other, they indicated perceived weaknesses in feudalism as a political system, particularly the way self interest subverted any concerted action. The prevailing culture was less and less able to hide these contradictions and they found expression in oral records among those who in a literate culture would be accounted voiceless. These history-tellers are not interested in being factual or 'objective' or even neutral. They are charting the history of consciousness; hence their interpretations although anchored in facts tend to be thematic, rather than sequential. Their criticisms of Tigrayan feudals at the battle take place within the social and political context of feudalism and at the same time are illustrated with criticisms of Ras Seyoum's cowardice during the Italian invasion, forty years later. Thus they provide evidence both of

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20 K. Kiros Nega, 22 April 1991

the persistence of feudal attitudes and the presence of unresolved grievances and discontent from which revolutionary feeling could spring.

The cowardice, self-interest, political mistakes and repressiveness of the authorities figure prominently in oral narratives of the past from the Battle of Adua onwards. However they are not depicted as remote undifferentiated 'oppressors', but distinguished by whether they were Tigrayan or Amhara, and, if Tigrayan, according to their allegiances. They suggest that Haile Selassie's policy, like Menelik's earlier, of shoring up his own power through fomenting feudal enmities, contributed to the vulnerability of Ethiopia and played into the hands of the Italians.[22] By giving parts of Dj. Haile Selassie's lands to Ras Seyoum on the death of his father, Ras Gugsa, he provoked Dj. Haile Selassie to conspire with the Italians against them both in a bid for overall power in Tigray.

One particular narrative (that of Kiros Aberra) provides an insight into the ambiguous cross-currents of the time.

> I, Kiros, was registered to be a soldier, but my parents came and begged me not to be a soldier. They were rich and other relatives also came. My parents said they would curse me if I joined the Italians, so I left them and returned home and became a farmer. In the first place Dj. Haile Selassie was our leader. Traditionally, the family of Dj. Haile Selassie was ours, so he told us, 'My lands were taken by [Emperor] Haile Selassie. You know I am humiliated by this person, so that those of you who know me and love me help me to regain my lands and govern Tigray.' The Italians promised to help him regain his lands and at last make him King of Tigray. Then we thought it was true and we sided with him. This was the reason why we supported him, but afterwards, concerning me, just one year after the

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21 Ibid. 'Ras Seyoum [prince of Tigray] ran away to Tembien ...A very famous Amhara, Ligabe Beyene, fought with great courage and was killed there.'
22 Kiros Aberra, 78, interviewed in Mekele, 11-12 February, 1991.

> occupation of the Italians I was against them and I was in the bush. Most of the army of Dj.Haile Selassie left him and became part of the resistance.[23]

This cryptic passage raises a number of points. Fighting for Dj. Haile Selassie is expressed as 'joining the Italians'; this, although controversial (because Kiros's family pressurise him to give up the idea), is not out of the question (or so many of his soldiers would not have followed him). Also, although different concepts of loyalty are at issue, loyalty to the central power in Addis does not seem to be among them; feudal loyalty takes precedence. Furthermore, assumptions of feudal ties of a traditional and absolute kind are in evidence, not only in words such as 'our leader' and 'the family of Dj. Haile Selassie was ours', but in the words of the leader himself. Yet Dj. Haile Selassie's assumptions of feudal loyalty in his followers, particularly 'you who know me and love me', are contradicted by counter-suggestions of the volatility of feudal relations, first, by the implication of his soldiers' self-interest in siding with him in the first place, and, second, by their abandoning him (when they discovered the Italians' treachery). This reading gives some idea of how these oral texts are permeated by ambiguities which I believe are significant in the context of a revolutionary movement, albeit forty years later, which depended for its success on popular support.

Ras Seyoum also provoked contradictory responses in the Tigrayan people. His 'cowardice' appears to have passed into legend.[24] The elders at Adua quoted three poems, particularly compressed and elliptical in form, which they called 'songs of the people'

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23 Ibid.

24 K. Kiros Nega, 22 April 1991. (Of the Italian invasion in 1936) 'it was a matter of leadership. In one day the planes bombed Adua six times. Therefore people like Ras Seyoum fled to Tembien, allowing the Italians to capture Adua with minimum loss. Therefore when we say the state of Haile Selassie was not bothered to defend Tigray and northern Ethiopia, in practice there were no leaders.'

criticising the feudal lords, two against Ras Seyoum and one against his associate, Dj. Maru.

1) Ras Seyoum, the whip of the oppressed,
Why do you run when you see the tanks?

2) Is it good to cry today with head bowed?
It would have been better to reduce taxes before.

3) Maru, with his huge bulk, at the River Mareb
I left him, yawning.

The nobility being overweight is a convention also found in other oral poems of social or political criticism, a portmanteau image suggesting overeating, greed and hence exploitation of the peasant food producers. Here, it also suggests inaptitude for warfare because Maru is too fat to march. Four years before these Adua interviews I collected another song from Iyassu Berhe on the same theme, which he roughly translated as follows:

4) Ras Seyoum has very big shoulders.
Because he was afraid, he left us in the middle of the river,
In the middle of the fight.[25]

The first two poems combine contempt for Ras Seyoum's cowardice with hatred for the heavy taxes he imposed. The second was repeated to me in Mekele by local elders, so it

25 Iyassu Berhe, 15 February, 1987, at the Music Department, Kasa River area, W.Tigray. The relevant text is as follows: 'Then in the valleys in between Ethiopia and Eritrea there is a very big river called Mareb. The leader, when he was in the offensive against the Italians, he reached up to the Mareb, and the warrior Tigrayans wanted to continue to Eritrea and defeat the Italians. But, not telling them, he returned back from the Mareb river to his castle and the Tigrayans, assuming that their leader was with them, fought hard and there were a lot of casualties. When they got the information that Ras Seyoum had retreated long ago, then they were having their own songs.'

had more than local currency.[26] Yet, other informants insist that 'Ras Seyoum was popular among the Tigrayan people'.[27] The ambiguity of feudal attitudes is particularly evident when Tigrayan feudals are themselves threatened from the imperial centre. 'They loved their feudals' and 'Menelik took our man, our lord, and killed him there' were quoted to me in the context of Menelik's imprisonment and probable murder of rival Ras Mengesha Yohannes (Seyoum's father) in Addis[28] and informants have expressed resentment at Haile Selassie's virtual 'arrest' of Ras Seyoum after his return from exile and appointment in his stead of Amhara governors[29] Faced by outsiders, whether Italians or Shewans, these peasants closed ranks with their feudal lords.

Women under feudalism

We gain further insight into the nature of Tigrayan feudalism by examining the position of women; although it is equally true that 'to understand the position of women in Tigrayan society, you have to understand feudalism'[30]. Women in Tigray, as throughout Ethiopia, suffered severe inequalities and lack of rights, in law, the community, the workplace and the home. In TPLF's analysis they were 'second-class citizens' who were not allowed to own land and, although they could inherit and bequeath it, male relatives always controlled it. They suffered an unacceptable burden of work, in agriculture relegated to low status tasks like weeding and forbidden to touch the plough or take responsibility for oxen, which were male prerogatives. Child marriage even at five or six was the norm, and proof of virginity was required of brides of twelve or thirteen. Women were allowed no part in

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26 Kiros Aberra, Assefa GebreMariam and Kindaya Natu, interviewed in Mekele, 11-12 February, 1991
27 Kindaya Natu, 11-12 1991
28 Mulugeta Berhe, 6 February 1991.
29 Balambarass Mulaw Wores, 10 February, 1991; Assefa Gebremariam, Mekele, February 11-12, 1991

public affairs or to speak in public. Rape was commonplace and rendered girls unmarriageable and women liable to divorce, whereas culpability in the man was minimised. Wife-beating was standard practice. Women's health suffered from restricted access to food (after productive men and boys), childbirth problems and injuries and high maternal mortality. As a result women internalised their inferiority and became passive, fearful and lacking in confidence.[31]

While this stereotype was important to TPLF propaganda, its factual basis is supported by personal narratives of women from all over Tigray, by various pre-revolutionary texts, and by conditions and practices still prevailing, despite the long struggle to reverse them (Hammond 1990). Although the attribution of responsibility to 'feudalism' disregards women's low status in many non-feudal societies, it is nonetheless true that women's lives in feudal Tigray, particularly in the rural areas where most lived, were constructed by extreme poverty in an agricultural economy monopolised by powerful landlords, the Church and the feudal hierarchy.

Women's subjection was epitomised by their burden of work (the laborious trio of fetching water and fuel and grinding on a primitive grindstone) and conditions of marriage, including the custom of dowry. Contemporary texts, especially proverbs and poems, make clear that in the discourse of feudalism femaleness was inherently inferior and 'dictated that women were lower than men and must be treated a little better than animals'

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[30] Netsanet Asfaw (fieldname Besserat), TPLF Foreign Relations Bureau, interviewed in London, 4 April 1985.

[31] Aragesh Adane, Roman Gebreselassie and Netsanet Asfaw, as above. Also Mahta Embaye and Zafu Abraha, TPLF Foreign Relations, interviewed in London, 1988, and others.

(Hammond 1990:33).[32] Consequently women's gendered tasks were considered degrading to men and the characteristics and appurtenances of women were attributed to men as insults. Among the resolutions of the 1943 *Weyane* was one dictating all men's participation; anyone refusing would be dressed in women's clothes and displayed in the marketplace.[33] One story illustrates the resilience of these perceptions:

> The skins of lions and tigers (cheetahs) were the hunting trophies which, more than any other, could enhance a hunter's reputation and establish him as a hero.[34] One day a hunter returned home from a tiger hunt empty-handed. He mocked his wife when she tied her sash around her waist, took up the spear and said she would try her luck. After a time she returned home bearing a tiger skin. Her husband was astonished, but the villagers declared, 'If a woman has killed a tiger, from this time forth men will only respect the hunters of lions.[35]

However, in such a hierarchical society not only women suffered discrimination; many categories were designated 'other' and even less worthy of human status, especially Muslims, artisans and minority nationalities like the Kunama. In a society favouring 'red' (fair) complexions those with darker complexions were called *bharia* (slave) and thought to be descended from slaves.[36]

Causes of resentment: taxation

Peasant informants describe a life of exploitation and misery. Their grievances eventually led to open rebellion in the 1943 *Weyane* in eastern Tigray, in the context of feudal culture a last and extreme resort. They held the central authority of Menelik and Haile Selassie chiefly responsible and then the provincial authority of Tigrayan feudals whose many local

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[32] Netsanet Asfaw, 4 April 1985
[33] Mulaw Wores, Desta Abuy, First Weyane veterans, interviewed in Quiha, 10 February 1991.
[34] This is always translated into English as 'tiger'. As there are no tigers in Ethiopia, it probably refers to a cheetah.
[35] Told me in Hausien in September 1991

abuses they blamed on the Emperor's divide-and-rule manipulations. 'Maladministration' was the cause of unrest most often adduced although it covered a range of meanings, such as Amhara appointees to Tigray administrative posts or the exploitative rates of taxation, which were also blamed on the central government.[37] 'The long list of oppressive acts of the central government against Tigray started with Menelik,' declares Kassa, son of Blatta Hailemariam, in an interview on the 1943 uprising.[38] 'Every Tigrayan knows this', says another informant in a similar context.[39] The 'oppressive acts' most frequently cited were heavy taxes and the depredations of the *akeytot* or feudal armies. Elders from the Mekele district, whom I asked about the economic situation before the Italian occupation, were careful to distinguish between natural conditions ('There was no famine, no drought, and the rains were good and the crops were sufficient') and a system which deprived them of their production through multiple taxes ('The problems were exploitation').[40] The same elders described seven types of tax.[41]

Peasant historians from different parts of Tigray share an analysis which makes the burden of taxation before the Italian occupation part of a pattern of oppression which led directly to armed rebellion. Gebrehiwot Kiros from Adi Gudom expresses it neatly:

> Before the Italians came the feudals exploited the Tigrayan people and administration and taxes were a very heavy burden to the people. Then the Italians came and then the people didn't pay all these taxes. They cancelled them, so the people were free during the time of the Italians. When they left,

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[36] In the iconography of Christian Church painting in Tigray, the virtuous were depicted with fair skins and the wicked with dark skins. Devils had black skins.
37 Mulaw Wores, Desta Abuy, 10 February 1991
38 Kassa Hailemariam, 9 May 1991
39. Kiros Aberra, 11-12 February 1991
40 Ibid.
[41] See Appendix 1.

> then the old order came back. People were heavily taxed and the Tigrayan people were against this.[42]

The Italian occupation disturbed the traditional fatalism of the Tigrayan peasants and gave them a short but significant experience of a different life. Although their analysis excludes any suspicion of Italian policies as pacification strategies, appreciation of relief from expropriation co-exists with support for or participation in patriot resistance. Elders from the Mekele district combine these apparently contradictory responses. Kiros, a former soldier for Dj. Haile Selassie, says he became a patriot as a response to personal harassment and out of feudal loyalty: 'because the Italians didn't carry out their promise to [him]. He became like a common man. We felt we were being cheated and in other times when I was peacefully working on my land I was accused of small things and they imprisoned me.' In Mekele, the Italian occupation evoked wide-eyed wonder at the communications systems they introduced and such novelties as the market place, the water system, the football stadium, two-storey buildings, roads and access to building land. Most important of all 'they abolished the *asrat* system of feudal taxation for the first time. There was no *dembegna*.[43] Small wealth taxes replaced the old feudal taxes. Trade flourished, so that some informants in the towns refer to the occupation as a golden age.[44]

Mussolini's propaganda offensive in Italy preferred the rhetoric of a civilising mission to that of colonial conquest in Ethiopia: `to show Europe that Italy was not *occupying* Ethiopia, but *liberating* it from feudalism and eliminating slavery' (Sbacchi 1985:14; original emphasis). The Mekele elders record speeches by the Italians on the eve of

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42 Gebrehiwot Kiros, Adi Gudom, 24 February 1991

evacuation which reflect this rhetoric: 'Oh you people of Tigray, you love your fiancé better than the bride. It was the Italians who washed the dust of the feudals from the eyes of Tigray.' Opinions diverge about the Italian occupation. Ironically, the Italians remained popular and Emperor Haile Selassie on his return from exile encouraged them to stay to contribute to development, whereas the British were distrusted and criticised (Sbacchi 1985:224).[45] On his return, Haile Selassie's tax reforms discriminated against the northern provinces and pleased neither nobility nor peasantry (Gebru Tareke 1991:91), provoking members of the urban elite to appreciate colonial rule more with hindsight than they had under occupation: 'It was before the *Weyane* and after the Italian occupation that we realised that the Italian administration had been very good and we had lost it because we entered under the yoke of feudalism once more.'[46] However, most Tigrayan peasants considered the Italians ruthless and untrustworthy.[47] Although the peasants could not be said to have a class analysis before the advent of TPLF, yet from this point in the narratives criticisms of feudal*ism* as an oppressive system, rather than of the abuses of feudal individuals, seem to increase.

The tax burden was passed onto the producers, contributing to unrest and the conviction of the corruption of administrative officials. In fact it is difficult to single out taxation from the complex of 'repressive acts' attributed to the central government or to its representatives, the Amhara appointees who were now governors over the heads of Tigrayan feudals, and Tigrayan district governors who 'were serving the Ethiopian regime

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43 Assefa Gebremariam, Mekele, February 11-12, 1991. The *dembegna* was one of the tax officials responsible for calculating and withholding the *asrat*, or tithe on the crops grown.
44 Ato Asrat, Mekele, 19 February, 1991; Mulaw Wores, 10 February 1991
45 Ato Asrat, 19 February 1991
46 Assefa Gebremariam, 11-12 February 1991

of Haile Selassie ... [and] were also very bad because they were hand-in-glove'.[48] Some informants give priority to the *asrat* others to the Amhara administrators in diagnosing the causes of rebellion. Some link the two. 'The cause of the *Weyane* was Dj. Abai from Adua. He was the government official of Haile Selassie. He sent representatives to Enderta and Wajirat, saying, "I am your officer, your administrator. Hand over your taxes" '.[49]

Causes of resentment: feudal armies

However, the most frequently cited provocations from the time of Menelik could be categorised together under the general heading of unpredictable and violent expropriation, rather than regular taxation, however unacceptable. The elders use their own terms for these experiences, like 'lawlessness' or 'injustice', but the terms refer to the activities of either bandits or *akeytot*. Devastation by feudal armies was the primary cause of disaffection from traditional social and political systems, beating banditry and official taxation into second and third places respectively. These *akeytot* were not paid and depended for food and fodder on the peasants whose lands they were billeted on or passed through. Augustus Wylde (1888) provides independent corroboration of atrocities committed by Menelik's soldiers before the Battle of Adua, memories of which were still green until somewhat displaced by the devastation by Derg troops in the civil war.

> For six or seven months, Menelik's army in Adua ate everything, looted everything, burned houses for firewood. Before he had come to Adua, Menelik had declared to his soldiers, `Don't bring food! Tigray is a very strong enemy. We will eat their food and take their resources.' ... Through all the feudal battles, the soldiers always depended on the people for food and fodder. All this came from the people in the villages, but in Tigray at

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[47] Dr Gebre Ab Barnabas, Sheffield, 28 July 2000
48 Mulaw Wores, 10 February 1991
49 Haddish Roma, Maichew, 23 March, 1991

> this time they also had the express and explicit motive to weaken the Tigrayan economy and reduce the political threat. 'Even if he doesn't have anything to eat, he can still pay in money. Press him, press him!' The army also burned huts for firewood. The force was approximately 70,000, although it included a significant number of Tigrayans.[50]

The elders insist that this was a new emphasis in the behaviour of feudal troops, a deliberate strategy for destroying Tigray, although as long ago as the 17th century a Portuguese Jesuit priest was attributing famine to armies' requisitions, 'a plague worse than locusts' (Africa Watch 1991:27). Nevertheless, from Menelik's time a conviction of the systematic underdevelopment of Tigray by the government in Shewa forms an important part of Tigrayan oral history.

The peasants were obliged to maintain the Emperor's troops when he came north to Tigray, the armies of Tigrayan feudals and, after the Italian evacuation, even the retinues of *awraja* and sub-district governors, as well as soldiers accompanying tax collectors and other officials. Soldiers visiting a village for any reason 'would loot the whole village, cattle, goats and grain'.[51] One of the taxes listed after the return of Haile Selassie was *drar meslene* ('dinner for the governor').

> The Governor of the sub-district, when he goes with twenty five or so *akeytot* (troops), he will see a village. He goes to the house of a peasant. The whole village has to pay for the dinner of the whole twenty five. If they want the *meslene* to leave, the villagers have to pay to get him to go. For example, if the *meslene* arrives in a village *(tabia),* before his arrival he sends a messenger ahead, so they can prepare for him. Everything must be ready for one or two days, for a week, however long he is going to stay. Traditionally, you ask the *meslene* to leave, but before you can do this, you have to pay. Otherwise he won't go and he'll send a soldier to a house for a

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50 K.Kiros Nega, 22 April 1991
51 Desta Abuy and Mulaw Wores, 10 February 1991

> goat, for all the chickens to another. So after one or two days he must leave and therefore the village must give some money to him.[52]

Some informants associate the increasing lawlessness of these *akeytot* with the beginnings of organising for the First *Weyane*:

> As we said earlier, there was injustice. There were also girls and women raped by the troops. People were being beaten like donkeys. They didn't treat people like human beings. When they come to your house, they don't ask for a goat but just grabbed it. There were such heavy taxes also. The people couldn't stand it and began to rebel against the government.[53]

The *akeytot* 'lived on the shoulders of the peasants',[54] but when the peasants complained to a judge 'he was himself a *meslene* and he would act as if you were insulting him by accusing his soldiers of doing these things, these robberies. This was the injustice'.[55] Because the soldiers were sent by the feudals, '[w]e were robbed therefore indirectly by the feudals.[56]

The First *Weyane*

The *Weyane* was a rebellion against the repressive policies of Haile Selassie and the state by people 'provoked to an extreme' (Crummey 1986:22). There is some disagreement among historians of the period about the weight to give to the different dissenting elements in the revolt, the profoundly rebellious peasants or the self-interested feudal participants. Those interested in a more thorough discussion than is appropriate here should consult Gebru Tareke (1991). However, there was no evidence in the oral histories I collected to

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[52] Mulaw Wores, 10 February 1991
[53] Ibid.
[54] Kiros Aberra, 11-12 February 1991.
[55] Desta Abuy, 10 February 1991.
[56] Tadesse Ayele, from Fukra Alem, near Adi Gudom, 24 February 1991

support his contention that 'peasant interests were not the principal reasons for the rebellion' (1984:77) although he does acknowledge that it 'was a typical agrarian protest' (1991:116).

The priorities of the peasant participants included the nature and role of government in Tigray.[57] They believed the repression came from the centre and that it was a continuation of deliberate policies first introduced by Menelik to weaken Tigray. The first and most important of the *Weyane* resolutions was the refusal to be governed by Amhara governors; the second expressed the determination 'to govern ourselves. We choose our leaders, we choose our judges and we choose our administrators for ourselves'.[58] Frustrated and angry at the loss of power and autonomy to the centralising policies of Haile Selassie, certain feudals also supported the uprising hoping to benefit from it. Ras Mengesha (as Dj. Mengesha) was suspected of complicity in the rebellion, but my Mekele informants dismissed this as 'rumour': '[W]e never saw him or any evidence of this. He was always in the palace, guarded. But he was accused of this by Haile Selassie and sentenced to death.' He was persuaded to negotiate with the *weyenti* from Wajirat for the release of three feudal prisoners of war who were district governors. 'Such roles, such small roles, Mengesha played, but in the question of helping the *weyane,* he did not, despite the rumours to the contrary'.[59]

The presence of feudal lords in the *weyane* was less an issue than the presence of feudal ways of thinking. That the uprising was initiated by the peasants and was a military success

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57 Mulugeta Berhe, 6 February 1991

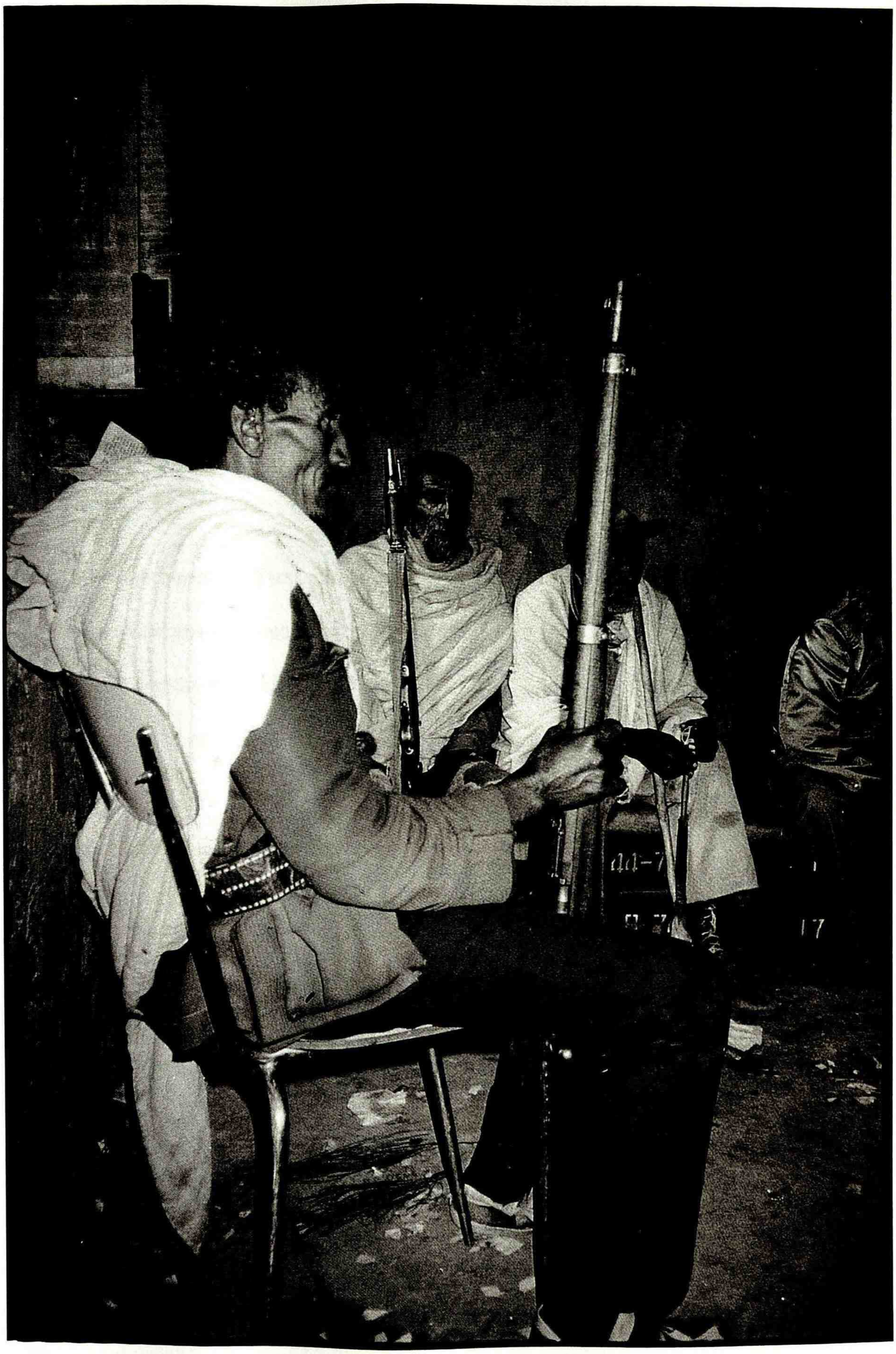
58 Desta Abuy and Mulaw Wores, 10 February 1991.

was of immense importance to the later 'second' *Weyane*. TPLF claim it as a precursor (TPLF 1983) while acknowledging that it 'lacked organisation and political consciousness'. Although some informants insist that, but for the bombardment by the British air force, it would have been successful, the narratives themselves contain the evidence that it was bound to fail eventually. The rivalries between feudal barons, which played a significant part in the political context to the Italian invasions, also percolated to their peasants. The fact that the *Weyane* was a regional uprising in the eastern and southern *awarajas* of Tigray, the traditional territory of Ras Gugsa and his son, Dj. Haile Selassie, perhaps accounts for the non-participation of Dj. Mengesha, the son of Ras Seyoum, whose traditional lands were in central Tigray. Sectional interests were an aspect of feudal politics and Emperor Haile Selassie reportedly manipulated these, particularly the desire of the anti-feudal peoples of Wajirat and Raya and Azebo, to choose their own rulers.[60]

After the bombings from Mekele to Amba Alaje, the structural weaknesses of *Weyane* organisation became apparent. The lack of cohesive organisation was paralleled by lack of political analysis or a unified vision of a system to replace the existing one or remedy the grievances provoking unrest in eastern Tigray (Gebru Tareke 1991:113). Ironically, the political perceptiveness which ensured relatively democratic ways of organising the preparation and decision-making did not extend as far as questioning the political system. The political weaknesses of Tigray, the internal divisions and divergent agenda of the powerful, were reflected in the *Weyane* itself. The main leader of the uprising, Blatta Hailemariam, a resourceful military leader, was distracted by personal ambitions. He did

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59 Ibid.
[60] Mulugeta Berhe, 6 February 1991.



Veterans talk about the First Weyane

not take part in the Battle of Alaje, allegedly because of sectarian disagreements. According to my informants, who were all followers of Blatta Hailemariam themselves, these disagreements were of a feudal kind:

> On 30th September (EC) until 3 October they fought at Amba Alaje. But not everyone. This was the force led by Bashai Gugsa, who fought the forces of Emperor Haile Selassie. The forces of Blatta Hailemariam were there, but he didn't participate. Some of the *weyenti* who were there accepted that a Tigrayan king be enthroned and that was Kefelatsion [son of Ras Gugsa], but Blatta Hailemariam wanted to be governor of Tigray and didn't accept it. So he led his forces out of Amba Alaje and came back to Mekele.[61]

The relation between the First and Second *Weyane* (TPLF revolution)

The *Weyane* veterans and leading members of the TPLF (TPLF:1983) explicitly link the 1943 uprising and the formation of TPLF. Desta Abuy, one of the *Weyane* leaders, made this point at the end of an interview. His impassioned rhetoric (within an unimpassioned general demeanour) perhaps gives us a taste of the effectiveness of oral historians in keeping the past alive for younger generations:

> We never regret what we did because we did it for the noble cause of the Tigrayan people... You know we were dispersed because we didn't have good organisation at that time. During the Italian invasions we saw how the Italian soldiers behaved during their advance, burning and killing and when the British bombed us we didn't know how to defend ourselves. We knew only our experience of the Italians, who had destroyed us with napalm bombs. We didn't have education; we had no shelters, so we dispersed. But we didn't submit in our hearts. Never, never! We never lost the thought that one day we would retaliate. We told our children every day of the atrocities done to the Tigrayan people. We told them the Amharas were victorious, how children were killed, cattle were destroyed. We never gave up. Now our children have started again in 1975 what we started before. The flames

61 Kiros Aberra, 11-12 February 1991

> of the *Weyane* were quenched, but the embers were still burning and our children in 1975 took fire from the ashes.[62]

This speaker and many other veterans claim oral history to have been an important connecting factor. Hadish Roma is eloquent on the effects of the reprisals by 'the Amhara government' after the rebellion had been put down in fanning Tigrayan nationalism and the veterans' determination to keep the memory alive.

> But many didn't accept the government, even though they imprisoned and killed us. The people were saying, 'We will not accept.' We had a will to vengeance. The result was that whoever knew about the *Weyane* told the youngsters about their strength and the evil deeds of the Amhara government... Yes, the first *Weyane* connects with the second *Weyane*. The aim is similar, in saying that we don't want oppression or exploitation.[63]

The *weyenti* themselves learned important lessons from the *Weyane* and passed these on to the young. Among those young listeners would have been the generation from which were drawn the founder fighters of the TPLF, who also see it as an important precursor of the later revolution. They assert the importance particularly of the democratic and peasant nature of the uprising (TPLF 1983:3), but criticise it for lack of organisation and political consciousness. Both these criticisms can be sustained on the evidence of peasant narratives. Although the rebels had formed no coherent alternative analysis capable of displacing feudal consciousness, the armed struggle itself, however brief and unsuccessful, was a consciousness-raising process and the comments of the peasant historians suggest that retrospective analysis, aided no doubt by the later analysis of TPLF, was much more aware of organisational shortcomings. However TPLF's praise of the *Weyane* as a 'democratic movement' clarifies the TPLF perception of democracy as being 'not the

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[62] Desta Abuy, 10 February 1991

presence or absence of organisation, no matter how democratic, but resistance to oppression insofar as it is done by the downtrodden against the oppressors.'[64] On the one hand it is clear that they lacked the kind of organisation which could withstand the structural tendencies to fractures and division inherent in feudal ways of organising and understandably enough they had no strategies worked out for dealing with the bombardments by the British; yet on the other hand they showed a degree of organisation which contradicts the implications of the description 'spontaneous' (TPLF 1983:3) or the suggestion that they had no organisation at all.

The organisation of the *Weyane* was a democratic mode of organising, in that responsibility was widely diffused and leaders were elected, but also modified by cultural constraints of the time, for example, the exclusion of women. When 'the people couldn't bear it any longer ... [t]hese people were contacting each other because everywhere was against the government'.[65] The people in every village, starting in Enderta and Kilte Awalalo, elected an *abo weyane* ('father of the revolution') and organised meetings 'beside a river beneath a big tree, so that people on both sides of the river were able to come together under the big trees'.[66] This traditional meeting-place was called *gareb*, but the name became applied to the meeting itself. The *abo weyane,* sometimes called *abo gareb*, discussed problems in the villages and then met representatives from other villages at the *gareb,* where they 'discussed what to do about the regime and passed resolutions concerning their *tabias* and how many people to recruit.' *Gareb* resolutions could differ

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63 Hadish Roma, 23 March 1991
[64] Dr Gebre Ab Barnabas, head of TPLF health training programme, TPLF Central Training Hospital, 1983-1991, conversation in Sheffield, 28 July 2000
[65] Desta Abuy, 10 February 1991
[66] Mulaw Wores, 10 February 1991

from one another in each area, so in Mai Derhu in Hintalo a meeting of representatives from all the *garebs* drew up a final list of resolutions. The most important were, first, the refusal to be governed any longer by Amhara governors and, secondly, a determination to choose their judges and administrators for themselves.[67] There had been one battle already in early May in Wajirat supported by one feudal, which the Wajirat people had won. So at the final *gareb* they also discussed the military situation and military strategies, the choice of military leaders, the roles of recruits from different areas and the strategic places to be defended. They also planned *beleya*, a system of bonfires on mountain tops, to alert the people from *wereda* to *wereda* of the approach of enemy troops. There were four main battles in addition to Wajirat: Wukro, Quiha, Mekele and Alaje, and the *weyenti* were victorious in all of them. They were defeated, they insist, by British planes.

The elders I interviewed pointed to the democratic nature of the uprising as an example of links between the first *Weyane* and the second:

> We did not regret anything we did in the *Weyane* because we were the oppressed people. We struggled for justice; we struggled for democracy so the struggle was a noble cause. We are happy today. The expression of our happiness is that today you can see that we are sending our children to the Front to fight against the Derg. No one compels us but because we need peace and democracy, to get these we have to struggle and to send our children.[68]

One informant defined *gareb* as 'a meeting *like a baito*' (my italics).[69] After the capture of Mekele by the *weyenti,* Blatta Hailemariam called the people together and told them, 'Our

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[67] Desta Abuy, 10 February 1991
[68] Seyoum Gezai, 24 February 1991
69 Mulaw Wores, 10 February 1991. The *baito* is the basic structure of democracy instituted by TPLF in their liberated areas between 1975 and 1991 and still the basis of local government since then. It is the executive committee for local administration elected by and accountable to an assembly of the people it

system is the system of *weyane,* the system of *gareb,* so from now on we have to administer ourselves and not be administered by the Amhara'.[70] The 'system of *gareb*' meant elected representation and consultative decision-making. Another informant compared the short-lived Mekele administration, 'elected by the people themselves', to the later *baito* under the TPLF. That they elected an administration of three Christians and three Muslims was remarkable enough in a culture which traditionally discriminated in favour of the Christian majority and which forbade Muslims to take part in public affairs or own land.[71] In the event it was a doubtful favour. The administrators were killed by the Ethiopian army and Muslims were not to be allowed to participate again until *baitos* in TPLF areas outlawed discrimination on the grounds of religion.

There is some justification for thinking that the weaknesses of a democratic approach combined with feudal ways of thinking contributed to the failure of the uprising. Ironically, both feudalism and their 'democracy', although apparent opposites, were characterised by loose structural organisation, lack of centralised leadership and susceptibility to factionalising, although some factions in the uprising were more democratic than others. The people of Raya and Azebo were fiercely protective of their independence and the Wajirat people had a relatively egalitarian culture which distrusted hierarchy, disliked status titles and rejected kings. These two groups were alienated at the end of the uprising by the Enderta *weyenti* who were distracted by discussions of king-making. However, my informants were not blind to these weaknesses. They compared the *Weyane* with the second revolution in some respects, but contrasted it in others.

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serves. It exists on several levels, the *wereda* (county), the *tabia* (local district or village) and *kushet* (hamlet).

Yes, the first *Weyane* connects with the second *Weyane*. The aim is similar, in saying that we don't want oppression or exploitation. In this way it was the same, but the second *Weyane* was a progression from the first. The leaders are more educated. They have strategies and methods. The first *Weyane* was about being a hero, being strong. The second *Weyane* has political consciousness. It has tactics. It is more progressive. The first influenced the second, because the oppression and exploitation got worse. After it failed, the bombardment and oppression by the government influenced the second *Weyane*.[72]

The harsh reprisals by Haile Selassie after the uprising intensified both anti-government feeling and the conviction that it was a part of a long-term Shewan policy to ensure Tigray would never be able to compete for power again: 'From Menelik onwards we were humiliated and second citizens. Everything bad was done against the Tigrayans'.[73] Oral narratives allege deliberate encouragement of brutality, looting and rape by government troops as reprisals after the defeat of the *weyane* at Amba Alaje:

> On October 29 the soldiers of the Ethiopian government went to Mekele and Quiha and even into rural areas. They began burning houses, killing people and cattle, for nothing, setting fire to crops - they were ready for harvesting at the time - either in the field or in the stack. They even raped the wives of the priests. This was the worst thing of all, to humiliate a priest - the worst because the people of Tigray are very religious. They tied people's hands and legs and whipped them. Many people fled from the highlands to the Afar lowlands and the Agew lands. We don't know how many people were killed or how many villages were burned. Whole villages were destroyed.[74]

Therefore those who might be expected to protect the law, flagrantly abused it. After the departure of the Italians, Haile Selassie had replaced the old system of unpaid feudal troops with a centralised army, but he paid them so little, only eight Maria Teresas a month, that

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[70] Kiros Aberra, Mekele, 11-12 February 1991
[71] Kassa Hailemariam, 9 May 1991
[72] Hadish Roma, 23 March 1991
[73] Mulaw Wores, 10 February 1991
[74] Desta Abuy, 10 February 1991

they continued to brutalise the people as had the old *akeytot*. The peasants saw this as a deliberate policy: 'The main aim was totally to destabilise the people'.[75]

The hostility to the government of Haile Selassie is often expressed in oral narratives as hostility to 'the Amharas'.

> They burned our churches, killed our parents. Everyone was telling - if anyone served Haile Selassie and you knew him, you went to the forest and killed him. Followers of Haile Selassie had very little sleep and we had no rest because of the bad work of the Amhara government.[76]

I asked the *weyane* veterans in Adi Gudom what they thought of fighting now alongside Amhara people 'as comrades'.[77] It is difficult to tell how much their rejection of implied prejudice would have been true in 1943 and how much is owed to the intervening political education of the TPLF.

> When we say Amhara we don't mean ordinary Amhara. They are like us. They are oppressed. We mean the Amhara administrators, the feudal system, the ruling class. So when our children are fighting against the Derg shoulder to shoulder with us we feel happy. (Seyoum Gezai)

> When we send our children to Shewa it doesn't mean we are sending them to fight against the poor Amhara. We have a common enemy, Mengistu Hailemariam, who is the oppressor of the people. (Gebrehiwot Kiros)

> We are not against anybody. We are against oppression, that's all. We want to bury oppression. We are not against any nationality. Who he is, whoever

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[75] Kassa Hailemariam, 9 May 1991
[76] Ibid.
77 Five elders from Adi Gudom interviewed February 24, 1991. The united front between TPLF and the Ethiopian Peoples' Democratic Movement (EPDM), which was mostly Amhara and operated in Wollo, Gojjam and Gondar, was formed in 1989. Within Tigray, only Tigrayan fighters operated as TPLF; in the EPDM liberated area Amharic-speaking fighters worked with the people, but at the front line they operated as a multi-national coalition, the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF).

> is our enemy, we do not care. We fight for our liberation and that's why we send our people to central Ethiopia . (Tadesse Ayele)

However it is important to remember that 'Amhara and Shewa were never identical' (Solomon Inquai 1983-4:7). The Adua oral narratives point out the connection between Menelik, Haile Selassie and Shewa, as opposed to the Amhara people in general. The people of Amhara see themselves as distinctive from the Shewa and record brutal experiences at the hands of both Haile Selassie and the Derg. In fact the Mekele interviews on the Italian occupation record an eye-witness account of a hostile encounter between the forces of Haile Selassie and the Amhara people south of Tigray:

> I was with Emperor Haile Selassie when he retreated. On the way to Addis, even the Amhara people fought against Haile Selassie. The people even with daggers and spears caught the soldiers and robbed them of their money, materials, guns and ammunition. Because they had heard that the Emperor had been defeated everyone went towards the soldiers and grabbed their mules, asses, their things. Everywhere there were shoot-outs[78].

TPLF propaganda literature for a range of internal and external audiences throughout the revolutionary period makes clear their sense of the importance of Tigrayan history. Their policy programme published after the Second Organizational Congress of the TPLF in 1983 (English version) is preceded by a Historical Introduction which surveys developments from the Axumite Empire to the military government and the foundation of TPLF. Its account of the systematic decline of Tigray under Menelik and Haile Selassie is similar in all its main points to the one given in oral narratives.

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[78] Assefa Gebremariam, 11-12 February 1991

Conclusion

The process of 'Amharisation', which accelerated after the *Weyane,* helped to obscure the distinctive history of Tigray. Amharic was declared the national language and Tigrigna was forbidden in official administration, in public affairs, in education or in any written form. This loss of language was felt keenly as loss of identity and loss of self-respect, as were the multitude of severe and petty repressions recorded in oral testimonies about that time.[79] There were very few schools, especially after 1949 when 49 were closed 'under the pretext that there was not enough revenue generated in Tigray' (Solomon Inquai 1984:12). By 1974 Tigray had still not received any industrial or agricultural development. The landless and the victims of the severe famine in the early seventies were forced to migrate in large numbers. The ferment of unrest and the reasons for it had become a hidden history.

As a result, the reasons for the outbreak of rebellion in Tigray in 1975 were ill understood and for its duration it continued to be underestimated. Academic commentators, susceptible to the suppression and manipulation of information under successive regimes, tended to subsume Tigray into the Abyssinian 'centre' and to generalise from research carried out in Amharic-speaking areas to Tigray. Although the Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (EPDM) was mostly Amhara, had been founded in 1981 and had its own liberated area south of Tigray, it had not been in the government's interests to recognise the non-Tigrayan fronts in the EPRDF coalition.[80] After all, the existence of the TPLF was only acknowledged in the final stages of the civil war. It accorded with the traditional interests of the central government to dismiss EPRDF as a front organisation for

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[79] Lisane Yohannes, teacher, and Joseph Belai ('Fanos'), interviewed in Khartoum, 9 May 1991.

TPLF and to trivialise the movement's aims as factional and divisive. Exaggerated and unsubstantiated emphasis on the extremism of EPRDF's alleged Marxist-Leninist aims and programme enabled opposition groups to reject it as the same as or worse than the infamous dictatorship it sought to replace.

In any academic study the elegance of hypotheses depends on the degree to which the explanations account for the data, without omission or suppression. Clapham's use of the word 'paradoxical', quoted earlier, is an implicit acknowledgement that something did not add up, of a gap between what seemed to be happening and available data on which to base an analysis. TPLF did not of course come from nowhere. The immediate and visible triggers of the unrest which toppled the imperial government, anger at the mishandling of famine, student unrest, the 'land to the tiller' campaign, army dissatisfaction over pay, Marxist analyses, all played their part, but they themselves were symptoms of longer term causes of disaffection, catalysts rather than causes.

The conventional view of revolutionaries as initiators and transformers can obscure the degree to which they are themselves products of social forces. The attribution of the TPLF dynamic solely to a set of Marxist or Marxist Leninist formulae (at different times credited by Western commentators to Maoist China or to Albania under Hoxha) suggests on the one hand that the revolution was the effect of a top-down imposition of a set of ideas and practices and on the other that it was the result of external influences. I hope to show that the nature of revolution in Tigray depended on a set of relations more complex than that of

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[80] After the end of the war, the EPDM changed its name to the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM) as more appropriate to a Party contending for power in the new federal region of Amhara. The title

the simple duality of a dynamic giver and a (more or less) passive receiver. Support for TPLF took some time to establish, but it depended on the relationship between the revolutionary founders of the movement and its peasant supporters. Both sides were products of the same history; both spoke the same language, literally and metaphorically. The recording and communicating of common experiences, of grievances embedded in events which focused on relations with the forces of authority locally and centrally, demonstrated the Tigrayan internal capacity for social transformation. This endogonous foundation of the revolution enabled TPLF to absorb huge numbers of peasants into its ranks and convert them from supporters into fighters and civilian participants.

'Ethiopian' was a relic from its origin in the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP).

Chapter 2

The countryside and the contest for revolutionary space 1975 - 1980

Introduction

The official beginning of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) was February 18, 1975, when a small group of revolutionaries left the town of Endaselassie in north-western Tigray and made their way to an unpopulated wilderness called Dedebit 'to start the revolution'.[1] TPLF was not the only dissenting group in Tigray to take to arms. *Teranafit*, the feudal precursor of the Ethiopian Democratic Union (EDU) led by the hereditary prince of Tigray, Ras Mengesha Seyoum, was organising in the west. The Tigray Liberation Front (TLF) and the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) were already operational in the northeast. Across the border, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) was making regular incursions into Tigray, and its rival, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), was sizing up the other Ethiopian revolutionary organisations for strategic support and training. Tigray was the contested space in which these illegal organisations had also to work out their relations with each other.

Meanwhile the new military government called 'the Derg' (Amharic for 'committee') was building its strength. As Ethiopian towns became too hot for them, dissenting groups retreated to the countryside to organise rural and urban support. More important than physical terrain was control of psychological space. This chapter's primary concern is the means taken by each organisation to win control of rural communities. Attitudes to the

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[1] Netsanet Asfaw, fieldname 'Besserat', woman fighter, London, 4 April 1985

people exposed political and ideological differences which help to explain their relative success and failure as revolutionary organisations. The TPLF was the only organisation to make winning rural hearts and minds a priority and a case study of Sobeya in Agame will examine the methods they used to forge durable relationships with the rural population in 1976.

The immediate context of revolution

What led a group of mostly students to go to Dedebit at this particular time? There were of course more immediate causes for a liberation struggle than long-term unrest gathering steam since Menelik's reign. Unrest was widespread in Ethiopia (Bahru Zewde 1991:215; Donham 1999: Chapter 1). Active disaffection embraced groups as disparate as badly paid factions of the army, taxi-drivers made desperate by soaring fuel prices and student groups. The paralysis of government in 1973 gave opportunity for this opposition, united only in disaffection, to coalesce into one movement, first in Addis Ababa and the larger towns, and then to spread into the countryside. Following a disastrous famine in northern Ethiopia from 1973-4, the revelation of a massive Government cover-up inflamed student opposition.[2] Radical students, already opposed to educational reforms, took up the peasant cause first in Addis Ababa and then in other larger towns throughout Ethiopia, with *Land to the Tiller* as their main slogan (Marcus 1994:167).[3]

The founder members of TPLF have acknowledged that the student movement, influenced by the international context of radical revolutionary ideas, was the most important factor in their intellectual and ideological development.[4] In Eritrea an armed struggle had been

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[2] The government banned all news of the catastrophic famine and formally denied it until May 1973, although rumours were rife in the capital. A committee of Haile Selassie I University professors finally blew the whistle in April 1973 when they returned from Wello with pictures and reports. (Marcus 1994: 182) The international media publicized the news, including in Britain a television film by Jonathan Dimbleby.

3 University students had demonstrated in support of radical ideas as early as the failed 1960 coup, whose protagonists had linked Ethiopia's economic stagnation to the exploitation of the peasantry. From this time politicized students developed an increasingly articulate analysis of Ethiopia's ills.

[4] Aregash Adane, 10 April 1991; Meles Zenawi, 29 March 1991; Roman Gebreselassie, 10 February 1987; Yemane Kidane, 25 March 1991 among others.

under way since the early sixties, triggered by Haile Selassie's re-annexation of Eritrea. Student sympathisers in Addis Ababa closely followed the bitter factional feuds within the Eritrean movement in 1972-3 on the conduct and aims of the Eritrean struggle, from which the EPLF emerged as victors. Ethiopian students saw their Eritrean friends leaving their studies to go 'to the field'. One of the hottest issues was the political problem presented by the multiple, linguistically-distinct nationalities in Ethiopia, the 'national question'. When two student organisations, *Abiot* and *Democracia*, combined to form the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) in 1974, the largest and most important student opposition group, it was this issue which drove Tigrayan members to join Tigrayan nationalists in forming the alternative Tigray National Organisation (TNO), a precursor of the TPLF. The Marxist-Leninist EPRP held the view that the primary question in Ethiopian politics was class. Class oppression was also high on the agenda of the Tigrayan radicals, hence one of the two main aims of the TPLF was anti-feudalism, but they were not convinced that class contradiction alone could account for or address the problems of national oppression experienced by the Tigrayan people.[5] It was not only their awareness of long-term economic discrimination against Tigray and political discrimination against its notables, as outlined in the previous chapter, but also a sense of deprivation of the most basic human rights to food, shelter, education, health, particularly in the countryside, and their sense of grievance at the suppression of their own language and culture.

> W e could see that a better world could be created. We were furious about the oppression. We wanted change; we wanted justice; we wanted education, medical facilities, science and technology, and we understood from our lives that unless we struggled, unless we stood up and said 'no', then we were going to perish as a people.[6]

[5] The relationship between class and the national question was expressed by Dr Gebre-Ab Barnabas, Head of TPLF Health Training Programme until 1991: 'The content of the national question was class-based, but the form of its expression was national in Ethiopia.' Conversation, Sheffield, 28 July 2000.
[6] Netsanet Asfaw, 4 April 1985

The opposition movements had no practical programme of ideas or organisation to replace the imperial administration. However, by September 1974, a committee of about 120 army officers took advantage of the power vacuum and formed the Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC) or 'the Derg', taking Haile Selassie into custody, declaring a state of emergency and clamping down on opposition. The students, their hopes of a democratic system dashed, reacted with anger and frustration. In response to the public mood, the Derg espoused a radical agenda, but without political preparation or substance, inaugurating a Development through Cooperation Campaign *(zemacha)*, whereby students would set up alternative state structures to the displaced feudal authorities and impose land reform in the countryside, where peasants were already resorting to violence (Donham 1999:31). In December 1974 students were dispersed to different locations. Former *zemacha* students who afterwards joined TPLF insist that the Derg's primary motive was the subversion of the student movement by dispersing its members.[7] As Derg repression spread, the student opposition broke up into differentiated political groupings, according to their response to the new measures. Student leaders were being arrested and killed, but the government's land reform, the main demand of the student movement, confused groups like the All Ethiopia Socialist Movement (MEISON), who used it as an argument for supporting the Derg. However, EPRP and TNO perceived the Derg as essentially counter-revolutionary because their economic reforms were not linked to political reforms. Both organisations began to oppose them and to conclude that the only alternative was armed struggle.

[7] Berhanu Abadi, fighter, Min Minay, 5 March 1997

The founding of TPLF

'Ten revolutionary students, with five outdated guns, went to the forest of Dedebit to start the revolution.'[8] This was the standard TPLF formula for describing the start of the revolution, the heroic mythmaking formula taught in training camps, presented as drama or tableaux at celebrations and the form in which I first heard this history. In fact the founding of the revolution, like so many events of great moment, was both more considered and more muddled.

This was an opportune moment to move to the countryside for several reason. First, the collapse of the Haile Selassie Government and the summer of 1974 had changed the landscape beyond recall.

> People had begun to take their destiny into their own hands. There was a pull of confidence in the feasibility of resistance and there was also the push, the frustration created by the oppression after the relative liberalisation of the previous six months, so those of us who joined the armed struggle decided we should boycott the *zemacha* and concentrate on speeding up the armed struggle.[9]

The repressive policies of the Derg prevented any possibility of working for change democratically and openly. Secondly, the TNO concluded that, with EPRP, MEISON, and the EDU all competing for support against the Derg, it was important to approach the people as soon as possible. Thirdly, the Derg's assumption of apparently progressive policies made it difficult for the politically inexperienced to distinguish between alternative political groupings.[10]

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[8] Netsanet Asfaw, 4 April 1985
[9] Meles Zenawi, TPLF founder fighter, Chairman of TPLF/EPRDF from 1988 and after 1995 Prime Minister of Ethiopia, interviewed in Hagere Selam, 29 March 1991.
[10] Asgede Gebreselassie, TPLF founder fighter, Endaselassie, 16 April 1991.

In Tigray where the police were hunting down dissidents, it became a matter of urgency to leave the towns. A contingent of about twenty Tigrayan fighters left for EPLF training early in January 1975.[11] Another contingent planned to establish a base camp in Dedebit where their companions would return after military training, but nothing worked out so neatly. The date February 18 (*Yekatit* 11, Ethiopian calendar), celebrated as the anniversary of the founding of the revolution, was accidental. TNO Members were delayed in Asmara by a battle between government forces and the EPLF and in Addis Ababa by having to wait for pass papers to go to Tigray. Eleven TNO members finally went to Dedebit and became TPLF fighters, although numbers changed as members went back and forth to do political work in towns.[12] Not until May were they joined by the trainees from Eritrea, returning with disappointingly few arms. EPLF, under pressure from active operations and from logistical problems following a huge expansion of recruits, was reconsidering which revolutionary parties to support. Later in the year they sent back to Tigray forty TPLF recruits they had previously agreed to train and relations cooled between the two organisations. However two EPLF fighters with Tigrayan parents, Musie and Jamaica, decided to join the Tigrayan struggle and their organisational and military experience was an important influence on its establishment.[13]

Dedebit

The founders of TPLF were not all students. 'Suhul' Gesesse Ayele, a member of Parliament, had been persecuted by the imperial regime for championing increased economic development for Tigray, where he had earned respect and popularity as a nationalist hero. Sebhat Nega had been a Director of Adua High School. Asgede

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[11] Yemane Kidane, 25 March 1991.

[12] 'In fact, from among the Dedebit founders, Kelbet, Seyoum and Aga Zitso joined those in Eritrea, further reducing the miracle number of ten fighters. However new others joined continuously.' Dr. Gebre-Ab Barnabas, Sheffield, 28 July 2000.

Gebreselassie, a soldier in the imperial army, had farmed land in the west. There were others, like Tewolde Woldemariam, Tewodros Hagos and Gebru Asrat, who remained behind in the towns to establish underground support. Yet the forty or so idealists who left Endaselassie for Dedebit or for training in Eritrea were all from urban backgrounds in Tigray. Although Tigrayan towns had close connections with the countryside, the first fighters, except for Asgede, were ill-prepared to survive in the countryside. There were 'problems of jungle and shortage of water. Wild animals? They had never even heard the roar', commented Asgede. They were poorly equipped and armed, but 'they had big sacks of books, Marxist books!'

> They would spend all the twenty-four hours discussing, reading and debating what were the political differences between us and the Junta, or between us and MEISON or EPRP. They would talk for hours about how they should approach the people, how they should organise the people.[14]

Dedebit put them in touch with the harsh realities of peasant life[15] and the difficulties of survival in the wilderness, teaching them that theory and ideology 'have to be tested hand in hand with practice'.[16]

> What is needed for the young is the conviction that they can change the world, to change our society in a practical struggle. In the early '70s I thought I knew everything. When you just have the books you think you know everything. When you come to real struggle you realise how ignorant you are. Now we know how ignorant we are and we have to learn everyday to keep up with the reality.[17]

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[13] 'Musie' and 'Jamaica' were the fieldnames respectively of Mahari Teklu and Yemane Kidane
[14] Asgede Gebreselassie , 16 April 1991.
[15] The peasants expected the fledgling TPLF to solve their problems. According to Dr Gebre-Ab Barnabas, they typically would include: 'There is an epidemic of measles – can the fighters solve it? Some feudal landlords are maltreating the peasants – what do you do about it? The only school in the area is closed after the locality is liberated – what will happen to the children? There is a conflict between two families related to marriage – how do you settle it?' Conversation, Sheffield, 28 July 2000.
[16] Yemane Kidane, 25 March 1991.
[17] Ibid.

Fighters from this time describe the training by local peasants in survival skills: where to find water, which plants were edible, how to identify different wild animals. They rebuked them for inappropriate behaviour in the forest:

> Do you want to throw away your lives? You came here to fight for people, but you are throwing away your lives by laughing, by sitting beside the stream where everybody can see you.[18]

This image of peasants as teachers is an inversion of conventional expectations of the relationship between educated and illiterate, urban and rural, and challenges the conventional view of a passive population 'receiving' revolution from an educated 'vanguard'.

Numbers in Dedebit were small, about forty altogether. Shortage of funds postponed recruitment in the field, so a few fighters were travelling long distances, usually in pairs, to publicise their existence and set up a network of contacts in the towns of Tigray and Gondar. On a mission in July 1975, Musie's arrest, the former EPLF fighter, a leader and one of the few with military experience, was probably a factor in their planning a move from Dedebit to a location more suited to guerrilla struggle. His rescue, their first organisational operation, gave them the confidence to plan a second operation a month later (Hammond 1999: 76).[19] On 3 September a carefully planned and executed robbery of the bank at Axum provided the funds to transform their small group of idealists into an effective revolutionary movement. Their Axum members provided information and logistical support.[20] They could now finance their underground activities in the towns, buy necessities, but, most importantly, recruit more fighters.[21]

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[18] Meles Zenawi, 29 March 1991

[19] For a fuller account see Hammond 1999.

[20] Joseph Belai ('Fanos'), Khartoum, 10 May 1991

[21] Yemane Kidane, 25 March 1991. 'In May in Dedebit there were about 40 of us; at the time of the Axum operation we were about 60. By the end of September we were about 100. In October the numbers doubled to

Securing a mass base

The liberation war demonstrated the conflict between different models of revolutionary mobilisation. The TPLF leadership saw the Derg `revolution' as a betrayal of the intense popular movement for political change, which ironically had helped bring the military junta to power. They described it as a `palace revolution'. In their view, little changed in the field of power relations: one largely Amhara elite, feudal in character, was replaced by another, drawn from the bureaucratic ruling class. The two big issues, rural poverty and the problems of a multinational state, remained unresolved and the military government's approach to rural problems was even more authoritarian than the imperial government, despite its socialist claims. The TPLF by contrast identified the rural population as its major resource. During the revolutionary period, the countryside was not only the arena of agricultural activity for 95% of the Tigrayan population, but also the main arena of the political and social activity of the TPLF.

The Front's strategy was to make military, political, social and economic transformation work together to win the confidence and support of the peasants. In the first ten years it 'liberated' one area at a time by freeing the population from oppressive landlords through land reform. It was not an easy task to win the confidence of the peasants whose past relationships with officials and townsfolk had taught them to be suspicious of all outsiders. The TPLF had to convince sceptical peasant farmers that the land could belong to them, but that the farmers themselves had to devise a just way of sharing it. It wasn't enough to complain about injustice and exploitation; they themselves had to help devise alternative

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about 120. They were continuously joining us until December. In January 1976 numbers rose to about 150 as 20 or 30 joined us in December.'

systems to meet their needs and none of these benefits would be permanent unless they worked to replace the state itself.[22]

After the Axum Bank operation, the fighters began a slow journey eastwards along the Eritrean border to Agame, where they planned to establish a base from which they would do their first systematic 'political work'. Publicising their aims and 'agitating' villagers on the two month journey, they attracted popular attention because their policy of discovering and solving local problems was a new experience for village people, 'imprisoning bandits, working against thieves and liars and establishing justice.'[23] The methods and principles which TPLF used to consolidate their rural base marked the identifying characteristics of their movement, their differences from other organisations contending for a following and help to explain the support of the peasants whose participation in the armed struggle was the crucial element in the Front's eventual military and political success. It is worth therefore looking in detail at the early stages of development of their practice, especially in northeast Tigray in the mountainous, rocky, inhospitable terrain of Agame on the border with Eritrea.

Agame

Agame was the poorest corner of a poor province. Like the rest of feudal Tigray, it suffered from land shortages in the context of land monopolies by church and rich landlords. Intensive farming of small plots and the absence of responsibility for development or land management, even among relatively rich landowners, had contributed to deforestation, soil erosion and loss of fertility. Taxation was high relative to income and despite health and education taxes there were no schools or clinics outside the largest towns and a lack of

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[22] Hassen Shiffa, head of *kefli hezbi* (Mass Bureau or Department 08) in the Edaga Arbi area 1978 –1983, taped interview, Mekele, 8 January 1997.

basic infrastructure such as roads and hospitals. Land shortages were more acute and rainfall less predictable than in the rest of Tigray. In order to survive, large numbers of adult males were forced into wage labour all over Ethiopia and in neighbouring countries, in addition to farming. This continues today. Their social status was signified by the names 'Agame' or 'dirty Agame', which still is a common pejorative term in Eritrea, often applied even to non-Agame Tigrayans.

In November 1975 the TPLF established themselves in the village of Marwa in the north-east corner of Agame, a remote and inaccessible area of the mountains near the Eritrean border. The following month they shifted to Dima, higher and even less accessible, hence more secure, but the incentive was the presence of other dissident organisations, ELF, TLF and EPRP. Furthermore TPLF had diagnosed a level of grievance among the poverty-stricken yet resourceful Agame population which they hoped would predispose them to revolutionary activity. It was in Agame that the issues debated in Dedebit of relations with competing anti-Derg organisations and methods of mobilising support among the people would begin to be worked out in practice.

Sobeya in 1975

The village of Sobeya on the Eritrean border, about three hours walk north across mountainous terrain from Marwa and Dima, was selected by TPLF for their first intensive political work because it was densely populated and there had been some evidence of anti-feudal feeling.[24] The first TPLF land reform was conducted there. It was also the site of a confrontation between TPLF and EPRP which demonstrated the different approach to rural people of the two organisations and hence their differing political philosophies. The Derg

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[23] Asgede Gebreselassie, 16 April 1991.
[24] Mebratu Adhanom, farmer, Sobeya, 6 April 1991

forces were two or three hours' walk westwards in the *wereda* town of Zalambessa, the border town on the main road linking the garrisons in the provincial capital of Mekele and the *awraja* town of Adigrat to Asmara, the Eritrean capital. This road was the conduit for military troops and supplies on their way to deal with the Eritrean insurgency. Army units hunting dissident groups were also a regular if transient presence in Sobeya.

In 1975-6, TPLF was the youngest and least powerful of several revolutionary groups and, although it is difficult now to find anyone in Sobeya who is not strongly supportive of the TPLF, small clues suggest this was not so at the end of 1975 when fighters began to be seen in the area. The people feared them as *shifta* when they saw their arms and 'were confused about who was who, between two kinds of fighters and the Derg.'[25] Extreme poverty had multiple effects. Most men of working age migrated annually to earn money or food. Others preyed upon their own kind, by turning bandit, mentioned by many people interviewed as a major problem affecting their survival. In Marwa and Dima demands to expel bandits took precedence over land reform, although a Sobeya priest explained that there were two kinds of bandit, the loathed criminal robber and the tolerated outlaw from authority (cf. Crummey 1986).[26] One of the Sobeya leaders, Bairu Gezahegn, chairman of the first Derg administration and elected to the Derg's Land Division Committee, later becoming a TPLF supporter, had been a well-known outlaw sustained by villagers.[27]

> You know, we support the second kind of *shifta* because he is against the government. We hid them and never reported them to the State. Because, during Haile Selassie, the people were dominated by missionaries, feudals, by officials, with no rights to speak because of the domination of the feudals, you feel something in your heart, so in my head I feel that he also is against the feudal system when I give *injera* to the bandit. That also helped us to feel sympathy for TPLF.[28]

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[25] Ibid.
[26] Keshi Barahi Wolde, priest and farmer, Gebelen Nr.Marwa, 5 April 1991
[27] Bairu Gezahegn, bandit, then farmer, Sobeya, 17 February 1997
[28] Keshi Uri, 17 February 1997

That argument would equally predispose them to the EPRP and passing references make clear that EPRP had its own following in the village, at least for a time.

Another indication of patchy support for TPLF was the number of spies operating in Tigray throughout the civil war. The Derg bought off poor Tigrayans in Eritrean or Tigrayan towns where they went for trade or work and paid for information about the location of TPLF bases and projects, on the basis of which they would organise MiG bombardments. *Banda* or small units of Tigrayan mercenaries were trained to infiltrate TPLF areas to destabilise by any means. Discretion became obsessional in TPLF; it was impossible to elicit information about the timing and destinations of journeys or the locations of particular people or events because of risks from spies.[29] Communities suspected of supporting the Front, particularly the armed TPLF militia who operated like locally based fighters, were as much at risk as fighters and paid a heavy price (Africa Watch 1991: 203-7; 257-266) The idealistic naivete of the first fighters was exposed in Dima when a new recruit managed to convince the leadership that a respected local elder and several fighters (one of whom was Marta, the first and at that time the only woman fighter) were all spying for the Derg. It threw the fledgling organisation into disarray and caused them to break their own rules about no 'physical pressure', before he was exposed as a spy himself (Hammond 1999:260).

> The biggest lesson was the strength of the [unjustly accused] fighters. TPLF was near to dissolution, without morale, without strength. From then on the organisation began to be alert to spies. From then on we began to appreciate the nature of a fighter.[30]

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[29] From my own experience of travelling in the war zone between 1986 and 1991, all travel was at night to escape surveillance and there was usually about four minutes notice before moving on to another destination. Locations of events, conferences, celebrations would be known only to a trusted few until the last minute.
[30] Iyassu Berhe, fighter and head of TPLF Cultural Department, Ruba Lemin, 31 March 1991

Derg spies brought reprisals upon the whole village for supporting TPLF. 'The cattle were slaughtered and the houses burned. They beat the women and children' to elicit information about the whereabouts of militia and fighters who depended for their security on the silence of the communities.[31] In the first three years there was rough justice for anyone caught spying, although after the first Congress in 1978 more sophisticated judicial procedures were worked out. It was not always easy to distinguish the genuine from the bogus recruit. On one occasion near Sobeya, a spy shot a fighter in the back at twilight in front of village witnesses. When he ran away 'into a rough place' the whole village surrounded him in the darkness and at dawn took him to the fighters who asked them to pronounce sentence (cf. Frederikse 1982:216).

> 'Why do you ask us this question? Why do you bring this criminal before us? He has killed a fighter who was fighting to liberate us. Even if you cut him up in small pieces we won't regret it. You should not bring him before us. This killer is a blood relation, but according to our principles the fighter who died is closer to us. We don't want to see his face again.' They took him away and we never saw his body.[32]

For these reasons, TPLF fighters wanting to initiate contact with a village carefully considered their tactics. They timed the visit on a Sunday or Holy Day when agricultural work was forbidden and people had more time. They targeted the church or the religious associations (*maheberat*) or they chose a strategic, easily defended house, to which the elders gathered the people.[33] They identified their aims with the interests of the rural poor, taking their cue from the villagers' own priorities. They appealed to Tigrayan nationalism and consciousness of past oppression by central government and local feudal landlords.[34]

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[31] Keshi Barahi Wolde, 5 April 1991.
[32] Halefom Tekelu, farmer, Marwa, 5 April 1991
[33] Yemane Kidane, 25 March 1991
[34] Desta Kidane, Sobeya, 6 April 1991. 'I decided to join TPLF because they were for Tigray, our nation. This was my reason – they were Tigrayan and fighting for Tigray.'

In Sobeya the fighters coincided their first visit with the end of the church service. On Sundays and Holy Days it is customary for Orthodox priests and elders to gather with the people after the service on the steps of the church compound to settle disputes or discuss village business. Villagers have different memories of that occasion.

> When they arrived at the Church people were very frightened to see armed men. They said, 'Don't be afraid. We are called TPLF. We have come to liberate you' and they told us their aims and their proposals. People were disturbed because they were armed, but they said, 'We are your children. We are ready to die fighting your enemies. We are from your own nation, Tigray. We are your sons and your daughters.'[35]

> Twelve fighters came the first time. The whole village were in the church. Afterwards, they gathered us round the church and told us their aims and what they wanted to do. They asked the crowd what were their immediate and burning problems. Everybody cried out, 'We want land. This is the problem here.' They replied, 'So far we have not distributed land anywhere before. But if this is your question, this is your issue, then so be it. Elect your committee and we will discuss with them how to do it. We will study land distribution here in Sobeya.' So from this moment I decided to work with them, live with them, to love them.[36]

Villagers recall the respect shown by the fighters for the priests and the church, especially the memory of fighters working with the whole village to carry stones from a kilometre away to help rebuild the church.[37] Keshi Uri, a priest of the new St Mariam Church, became an underground member 'and I began to teach the TPLF programme to the people, how good it was for the people and even for Christians.' Under both Derg and TPLF land reform, the church lost its privileged monopoly on land, yet the TPLF's respect for religion, whether Christian or Muslim, defined them as fundamentally different from the Derg, and, despite sometimes losing land to land reform, the poor peasant-farmer priests in Tigray, literate and respected in their communities, provided an important tranche of support.

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[35] Keshi Uri, 17 February 1997.
[36] Mebratu Adhanom, 6 April 1991

Rivals for support

Only when TPLF had dealt with rival organisations, EDU, ELF, TLF and EPRP, could it begin mobilising a revolution. Through this process of differentiation they acquired legitimacy, according to Ranger's definition, as they developed into a liberation movement in practical terms and gained acceptance by the peasantry (Ranger 1986: 373). It is not within the brief of this thesis to give a detailed analysis of the political character and history of these rival organisations in Tigray (cf.Young 1997), but clarity demands at least a brief outline of the main differences between them and TPLF and the significant markers of their relations.

The Ethiopian Democratic Union (EDU)

Teranafit, the feudal organisation that developed under Ras Mengesha into the EDU, began organising in western Tigray after the collapse of the imperial regime. Aristocratic landlords holding tracts of fertile land in the west felt threatened by the Derg's intended land reform announced in the 1975 Land Proclamation. The west, where state institutions were weak and the aristocracy had appropriated local administration, had a reputation for banditry and lawlessness (Young 1994: ch.7). According to local peasants, *Teranafit* reflected the same elements, an aristocratic leadership and an undisciplined following.[38] Appeals to Tigrayan nationalism and opportunities for looting attracted a peasant following, but few students or townspeople, who tended instead to gravitate to TPLF. When TPLF was a handful of fighters in Dedebit, *Teranafit* numbered thousands, but the outcry from local farmers against lawlessness made confrontation inevitable. TPLF forces steadily grew in numbers in the first three years, but their adversaries were also

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[37] Desta Kidane, 6 April 1991; Keshi Uri, 17 February 1997, both from Sobeya.
[38] Belaynesh, woman fighter, Tsebri, western Tigray, 3 March 1987

multiplying Although the EDU was not active in Agame and the east, the TPLF was compelled to send forces to deal with their aggression in western Tigray and this affected their ability to resist EPRP attacks in Agame. In 1976 and 1977 there were simultaneous Derg campaigns against TPLF and EDU, and TPLF was badly defeated in early engagements with EDU. Their numbers were low; they were militarily inexperienced; and these encounters were high in casualties they could not afford. Any attempt at rapprochement was doomed when EDU killed Suhul Gesesse, the TPLF leader and popular hero, in June 1976 (Hammond 1990:27). However the Front were already establishing their habit of self-criticism and evaluation, analysing the conduct of every battle and reinforcing practical experience with theoretical education in military strategy and tactics. By 1978-9 remnant EDU forces had been pushed out of Tigray into Gondar and the Sudan. Meanwhile TPLF's political work in the west was persuading communities in places like Sheraro, Adi Nebried and Adi Hagerai that TPLF's aims were more in tune with the their needs and interests than an organisation rooted in the imperial past.

The Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF)

The Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), operating in eastern Eritrea, saw Tigray as a legitimate field of operations against the Derg. Initially, this contact and the opportunities it provided for battlefield experience brought TPLF into closer relations with ELF than the more powerful EPLF. As TPLF grew in numbers and experience, however, ELF's wide field of operations in Tigray and their interpretation of Eritrea's boundaries beyond the Italian-defined colonial borders to include parts of north-western Tigray around Badme caused disputes between the two organisations (Young 1994: ch.6). Nevertheless, while the TPLF were based in Agame, ELF played an important role as arbiter in the struggle for dominance between TPLF and TLF and TPLF and EPRP.

The Tigray Liberation Front (TLF)

A consistent TPLF principle during its seventeen year armed struggle and even its post-war political strategy in the EPRDF was to work for unity, or at least cooperation, with other organisations, efforts more often disappointed than successful before 1989.[39] EDU was the only organisation it rejected, after the death of Suhul, and the fact that both ELF and EPRP engaged in tactical alliances with EDU discouraged positive relations with the TPLF. TLF was formed in 1972 as a political organisation and received training from ELF in Eritrea before the collapse of the imperial regime. When the Derg took power the TLF determined to start armed struggle in Agame, where EPRP had also established a base. TPLF was largely ignorant of TLF, but the importance both organisations gave to the national question prompted them to initiate discussions about closer political relations.[40] By the time TPLF arrived in Agame, they had contacted both EPRP and TLF, raising the possibility of a merger.

Serious differences emerged between them. TLF interpreted the national issue in Tigray as a colonial question. By 'Tigray' they meant the Tigrigna-speaking highlands of both Eritrea and Tigray, which they viewed as a country colonised by the Amharas, the solution to which was independence (TPLF 1976).[41] TPLF on the other hand viewed the national question as an effect of chauvinist suppression by successive Amhara governments of the legitimate rights to political and cultural self-determination of the distinct nationalities in Ethiopia, including Tigray. The oppression of non-Amhara nationalities and the rights of

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[39] In 1989 the mostly Amhara Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (EPDM), originally a splinter group from EPRP, formed a united front with TPLF in a coalition called the Ethiopian people's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). At the same time the Oromo members of EPDM joined forces with Oromo prisoners of war in Tigray to form the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO), the third member of the coalition.

Ethiopian nationalities to self-determination, ill-defined but sometimes interpreted as independence, had been popular items in the student movement agenda. Although TPLF accused TLF of 'narrow nationalism', for a short period they too flirted with the idea of Tigrayan independence, although they never defined the relationship of Tigray to the state as a colonial question (TPLF 1976). After about six months, they disowned the aim of an independent republic of Tigray and have since been open about acknowledging their own 'narrow nationalism' at this period when many political, ideological and practical issues were being worked out.

> TPLF was not clear and conscious any more than any other organisation. All the organisations had remnants of Maoism and were full of defects and incompleteness, but if you are committed to fighting for the people it is just possible to go the right way. This is the reason the TPLF managed to correct itself as it saw things always in the context of the interest of the mass. For a while there was chauvinism [in TPLF] and when we tried to make a united front with EPRP they called us bandits. After six months we changed from secessionist principles to a struggle for a united, democratic Ethiopia. Narrow nationalism was against the interest of the mass. You have to test each time what is for and against the interests of the people.[42]

The right of nationalities to self-determination 'up to and including secession' was to become a central plank of the TPLF programme, but at the same time they began to work out plans for an equitable and democratic federal system which they trusted would defuse secessionist claims.

The other serious difference with TLF was concerned with organisational politics and the election of leaders. The TPLF claim they were adamant that there had to be formal procedures for the election and accountability of leaders.[43] This principle later passed into

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[40] Gebru Asrat, TPLF Central Committee, Secretary of Tigray after 1989, Tigray State President after 1993, Mekele, 19 September 1991
[41] Ibid.
[42] Aklilu Tekemte, fighter, Axum, 21 April 1991
[43] Gebru Asrat, 19 September 1991

village codes of law (*serit*). According to TPLF and ex- TLF members, the TLF leadership were authoritarian to the point of justifying the use of violence and summary execution to settle differences with internal dissenting factions.[44] TPLF leaders expected to meet former student contacts at the merger discussions, but 'we were told they were on various missions to the towns and cities', although they were later to discover they had been killed.[45] Warned by TLF defectors to expect treachery, the TPLF moved to disarm TLF and conducted an investigation and trial. As a result, two of the leaders were executed and the rank and file fighters were given the choice of joining TPLF or disbanding. The Eritrean Liberation Front, which had close relations with TLF, 'were ready to crush TPLF' for the destruction of TLF. They conducted their own investigation and interrogation of witnesses, recorded on tape, and, according to TPLF participants, concluded the TPLF conduct was justified.[46]

The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP)

These inexperienced fledgling organisations were still formulating the political principles which would differentiate them. Formulations were imprecise, definitions and priorities often vague. Student radicals looking for a movement were forming loyalties while still unclear about the ideological underpinning of different organisations. Nothing succeeds like success, however. EPRP's success as the leading organisation made it the party of choice for many young people before it had developed its organisational capacity to cope with the political or military training of large numbers of recruits. TPLF allege that EPRP's swift growth brought about weak discipline and made it difficult to distinguish between

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[44] Ibid; also Wodisaba, ex-TLF fighter, conversation, 19 March 1991.
[45] Asgede Gebreselassie, 16 April 1991. 'These included famous university students like Amare Tesfu, Musie Kidane and Yohannes Andemariam.'
[46] Ibid.

Party members and sympathisers, that it became a large organisation united only in opposition to the Derg.[47]

EPRP was primarily an urban organisation whose Marxist-Leninist priorities were subversion in the towns and the mobilising of the urban proletariat rather than the illiterate peasantry. Rural bases were intended to serve operations in the towns. Tigray was selected for armed struggle as one of several areas of the country, because its inaccessibility and the closeness of Agame to Eritrean organisations seemed an advantage. Moreover, several of their leadership, including the chairman, were from Agame. EPRP, like TLF, began sending recruits to EPLF for training between February and September 1974, before TPLF had been founded.

After September 1974 several differences emerged between EPRP and TNO/TPLF, the most important of which was again the national question, but in an opposite way from TLF. The EPRP asserted that class was the primary contradiction in Ethiopia and they condemned as narrow nationalists all those who asserted the primacy of the national question, thus obliterating the distinction between TPLF and TLF. They differed also on the formation of a united front of different revolutionary organisations, asserting that the multinational character of EPRP qualified it to lead and control nationalist organisations like the TPLF. For the TPLF, however, 'it was a principle to unite against a foreign enemy, to unite and conquer as opposed to divide and rule, an alliance of oppressed peoples,' so they rejected EPRP's claim to leadership and EPRP rebuffed TPLF's approaches.[48] There were different democratic and undemocratic strands in EPRP and this was perhaps the explanation for TPLF's continuing efforts to work for cooperation with an

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[47] Gebru Asrat, 19 September 1991.
[48] Ibid.

organisation in which the authoritarian forces were dominant. However EPRP continued to conduct a hostile propaganda campaign against them in the towns and in 1977 pulled their forces from elsewhere in Ethiopia in an attempt to crush TPLF in open war. From 1976 TPLF forces had been engaged against EDU in the west and were unable to defend their bases in central and eastern Tigray. By early 1978 EDU was defeated and by March EPRP had also been forced out of Tigray. Meanwhile the disagreements in EPRP were beginning to break into factional conflict. Eventually a pro-democracy faction splintered from EPRP in 1981 and, as the Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (EPDM), made close links with TPLF with whom they finally formed a united front in 1989.[49]

Political warfare in Agame: TPLF vs. EPRP

Military and political struggles were necessary to settle who was in charge of revolutionary transformation in Tigray. TPLF's priority was to earn the support of the peasants, thereby gaining the opportunity to politicise them and turn them from supporters into participants. This policy underpinned recruitment and therefore the military struggle also. Its success is indicated by the fact that, in contrast to forced recruitment by EPLF in Eritrea, recruitment to TPLF remained voluntary during the civil war.[50] In fact from the mid-1980s volunteers were turned away to safeguard agricultural production and the politicising process in the villages.

Dan Bauer suggested in his research in Enderta that 'there is no great gulf between leaders and followers' and that they are all 'potentially full players in the game' (1972: Ch.3). The response of the Sobeya farmers to EPRP and TPLF suggests that his hypothesis is only plausible within certain conditions when self-interest on both sides is served in the pursuit

[49] The EPDM was renamed the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM) after 1991.
[50] This is not to deny that there was considerable psychological pressure on potential recruits.

of limited goals, but it ignores disparities in economic and political power, differences in motivation between leaders and followers and the fact that not all peasants became followers in the first place. No one knows more about the nature of power than the poor and powerless, because they familiarise themselves with those who wield power over their lives and become experienced in mitigating its effects, a kind of shadow power, whereas the powerful can be astonishingly ignorant of the detail of the consequences of their actions on others or how those who are less fortunate than themselves survive.[51] The poverty and political powerlessness of the people in Agame, as well as elsewhere in Tigray, undoubtedly bred a tradition of opportunism, the constant vigilance for chances to manipulate a situation or a person for personal and family advantage even at the expense of rivals. Scott points out that it is 'just this necessary "art of dissimulation" that has been largely responsible for much of the conservative historiography of the peasantry' (1985:285; cf. Newby 1975:146). Outsiders only see the deference of peasants in the presence of power and miss the subtle forms of resistance practised in conditions of relative safety. The saying Donham records (1986:7), 'The wise man bows low to the great lord and silently farts' is also widespread in Tigray. Poverty also made the peasantry open to manipulation by different paymasters, local elites, or local or *awraja* officials whether under Haile Selassie or the Derg, (or even EPRP fighters who were throwing cash or guns around). The mistake made by EPRP was to equate lack of education with lack of intelligence and so fail to respect the perspicacity of the peasants, who were articulate about their resentment of a system in which land monopolies, nepotism and bribery were endemic, even if they were forced to play by its rules. Their lack of education did not prevent them from analysing the situation that oppressed them, which in turn enabled them to construct a critique of the differences between TPLF, EPRP and the Derg.

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[51] Cf. Many examples of feudal leaders misreading the motives of their followers as love and loyalty instead of self-interest. Eg. Dj. Haile Selassie, Chapter 1.

The TPLF, EPRP and the Derg handled the Sobeya community in contrasting ways, reflecting the differing role and significance each ascribed to the peasants in their separate visions of the revolutionary struggle. Land reform was the issue against which the farmers judged these competitors for their support.

> When we saw EPRP first, in general they didn't trust the farmers. They didn't trust us. And when we saw TPLF, our *wedeb* [organisation], it was their principle to trust people and they came to live with the people and they had the aim of land distribution to the people. When you saw the Derg, it was dreaming day and night to eliminate the opposition parties, like TPLF and others. They didn't care about dividing the land. They didn't give attention for this matter.[52]

The villagers became disillusioned with the Derg's proclaimed intention of redistributing land 'to the tiller' throughout Ethiopia. Although other land tenure systems were rendered obsolete by the proclamation, nothing happened for several months. According to Sobeya farmers, no doubt with the benefit of hindsight, 'it didn't mean that the Derg loved the tiller. It was a tactic how to approach the farmers, who were the majority.'[53] As Hendrie has observed, it was the lack of coherent and enforceable guidelines, rather than the principles on which land reform was based that attracted peasant criticisms (1999:75). Certainly the attention paid by Derg officials in Sobeya seemed brief and perfunctory. They put in an appearance in January 1976, set up a new village administration and an elected committee to divide the land and departed. Despite broadly similar objectives, Derg land reform differed from the TPLF's in important ways. Rights to land were held by the household head, according to household size, under the jurisdiction of the Peasant Association, not by individuals as in TPLF's land reform which had important implications for women. The Derg also antagonised the peasants by outlawing tenancy and wage

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[52] Gebretsadiq Abadi, farmer, Sobeya, 5 March 1997
[53] Mebratu Adhanom, 6 April 1991

labour, both central features of the local agricultural economy and important means to survival in bad times (Dessalign Rahmato 1984:49; Hendrie 1999:78; Young 1997:182).

The villagers came to distrust EPRP, although some were Tigrayans. EPRP was better funded and armed than TPLF.[54] By rural standards they were well dressed, resembling the oppressing classes rather than the oppressed. Villagers' distrust is indicated by their allegation that 'the EPRP provided a hideout for thieves and all sorts of criminal people in the area.'[55] Poor and parsimonious farmers were suspicious that 'they would try to gain influence by offering money, paying more than they should.'[56] Others allege that they tried to recruit farmers by bribing them with kalashnikovs.[57] Undoubtedly some peasants were influenced by these tactics, but more surprising is the favourable impression created by the evident shabbiness and poverty of TPLF fighters, especially among the poor and landless.

> Because I was poor and downtrodden, I decided to help and support them with all my family. When we first saw them it was not hard to understand they were on the side of the poor. Their way of life was very poor. They were sharing a cup of tea, sharing one handful of *kolo* [roasted grain]. We could see how they were sleeping. Their way of life we could understand. It was very different from the others. It was clear to me. Why should I suspect them?[58]

This suggests not only the peasants' habitual suspicion of outsiders, but also that they supported the fighters 'because they stood for our reality'.[59] These accounts and indeed most of the peasant narratives of the Front's success in appealing to the Tigrayan people contradict Bauer's hypothesis (1973), that rural society was typified by vertical relations

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[54] Aklilu Tekemte, TPLF fighter, informed me that EPRP were given 300 kalashnikovs by the PLO. (Adigrat, 6 April 1991)
[55] This allegation was made to Dr Gebre-Ab Barbabas, who was working on a history research project for the TPLF, and passed on to me 28 July 2000
[56] Haleka Embaye, farmer, interviewed in Tigrigna, Sobeya, 6 April 1991; Keshi Uri, priest, Sobeya, 17 February 1997
[57] Mebratu Adhanom, 6 April 1991.
[58] Desta Kidane, 6 April 1991.
[59] Keshi Barahi Wolde, 5 April 1991

Launching the new monument to the revolution in Sobeya in 1977

and that competing for followers through the acquisition of status honour was the driving force in village relations. Although status is important in social relations, he overstates its significance or generalises to the whole village from a study of one relatively privileged social sector. To be treated with respect and asked for their views was a new experience for villagers and made a deep impression. Of course in other parts of Tigray, peasants were flocking to become soldiers for EDU, looking for material gain in the traditional manner through looting the areas they passed through.

A more important cause for distrust was the farmers' realisation that EPRP's agenda did not include land reform.[60] This contrasted with TPLF who arrived a few weeks later and made the people's agenda their own, with land redistribution as the burning issue. Keshi Uri, the priest, gives the briefest account:

> 'You have to tell us what you want,' they said.
> 'We need equality in land, a land divided equally among us and also to help the landless and poor to get land.'
> And they said, 'OK. If that's the decision of the people, OK.'
> And at last the people asked, 'When we have done these good things, if there are problems how can we find you?'
> 'First we were in Dedebit, but now we are in Marwa and Dima, so send your messages to that place.'
> They didn't tell everyone, but organised some members in Sobeya who knew their movements. That time was their first time to come to Sobeya so I can't say that everyone was supporting the aims of TPLF, so you had to be careful who you spoke to.[61]

The espousal of land reform by both the Derg and the TPLF forced EPRP to take it on board, with the result that both organisations, as well as the government agent, were competing to carry out land reform in Sobeya at the same time. Ironically, the official land reform committee set up by the government agent included committed TPLF supporters, one of whom was its headman, Bairu Gezahegn. A public meeting decided, on the

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[60] Mebratu Adhanom, 6 April 1991.

recommendation of the TPLF fighters, to retain the official committee which therefore 'replaced all the principles and methods according to the aims of the TPLF',[62] and to elect a second committee to be responsible for assessing fertility. 'This new committee, grading the land, worked side by side with the existing government committee, which measured out the land in metres.'[63]

Meanwhile EPRP called a village assembly to find out why their orders to divide the land had not been carried out:

> 'Bairu, why don't you divide the land?'
> But he said, 'If the people want the land divided by you, I will, but they are not willing.'
> And the EPRP fighters said, 'Who told you to discuss with the people? We only told you to divide the land.'[64]

EPRP fighters arrested Bairu Gezahegn, but the villagers collectively prevented their taking him away by force. By these actions EPRP managed to alienate even their own members in the village. A large contingent of TPLF fighters, summoned by the villagers, called another meeting at which both sides presented their cases. The villagers were adamant in rejecting EPRP:

> So [the TPLF] asked the people.
> 'They asked Bairu to divide the land. But Bairu refused because it was not the decision of the people, so Bairu didn't have any kind of right. So Bairu was correct. Then they tried to kill him. What we want to tell you, TPLF fighters, is that we don't want these Greater Ethiopian fighters. We don't want them to touch our village, so if you are going to cooperate with these people, we'll leave the village and go to the Derg place.'
> And the TPLF fighters said to the EPRP fighters in front of the people, 'As you heard, the people are giving their decisions on you. They don't want you in their village.'[65]

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[61] Keshi Uri, 17 February 1997
[62] Bairu Gezahegn, farmer, 17 February 1997
[63] Desta Kidane, 6 April 1997.
[64] Keshi Uri, 17 February 1997
[65] Ibid.



The paintings represent martyred fighters and events associated with Sobeya



The crowd scene represents the assembly which rejected EPRP

This was not the end of the story. EPRP reported to the ELF in Eritrea, charging the TPLF with forcing the Sobeya people to reject them. The ELF came to the village as mediators and called another meeting 'to test the decision of the people', with EPRP and TPLF fighters as observers. The ELF chairman judged that the EPRP had no right to administer or agitate the villagers, but that they had the right to pass through on their way. The people challenged this decision 'because there was hatred on both sides', but the ELF were adamant. Village scepticism was justified when EPRP tried again to capture and kill Bairu and in fact killed other villagers who supported TPLF.[66]

Oral narratives of the advent of TPLF and the conflict with EPRP are carefully preserved in Sobeya and retold at celebrations. While I was living there in 1997 they erected an impressive monument, covered in paintings, to the Tigray revolution. That the paintings exclusively depicted the part played by Sobeya in the early history, including land reform, the confrontation with EPRP, and portraits of martyred fighters who worked with them in the early years, indicates the importance of this period to their sense of community identity.[67]

Land tenure in Ethiopia

Land tenure in Ethiopia is a large and complex subject which has had significant implications for the economic, social and political life of the population. It is relevant here because land problems topped the list of priorities presented to the TPLF. In the imperial period the most widespread form of land tenure in northern Ethiopia was *risti* (Amharic:

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[66] Bairu Gezahegn, 17 February 1997. He gave me four names: Ghirmai Ye'abriga, Abraha Teklehaimanot, Hailu Kahsai and Haile Mariam Bizet.

rist), under which land could be inherited through the male or female line from a notional ancestor who had first settled the land. Up to a third of village land could also be assigned to *risti* of the Cross (*risti meskel*), land allotments to village priests in lieu of salary in addition to their individual *risti* plots, although according to Bruce it was rarely as much as a third (1976:53). Class attitudes to *risti* in the Ethiopian highlands support Abercrombie and Turner's contention, (despite their context of European feudalism), that the dominant ideology is 'typically directed at the dominant rather than the subordinate class' (1978:149). The myth of *risti* as a land tenure system which provided for all, was promulgated by the dominant classes and their adherents, ranging from wealthy feudals and bureaucrats to rich peasants, who manipulated it to accumulate land as a 'right'. According to Tekeste Agazi, quoted by Hendrie (1999), '25% of the peasants had little or no land. Those who owned land had very small holdings: 45% had less than a hectare, 23% between half and one hectare and 21% between one and two hectares' (1983:3-7). The widespread dissatisfaction in the countryside at the inequalities of *risti,* as well as exactions of landlords, was exposed by the reception of the TPLF and demands for land reform, even by those who held *risti* plots. Exceptions were rich peasants who had large landholdings (Hendrie 1999:77) and the higher clergy, whom land reform divided along economic lines, the poor rural priests tending to support land reform (Young 1997:185). This general support contradicts Allan Hoben's conclusions, in his investigation of *rist* land tenure among the Amhara, of the peasants' implacable opposition to land reform because of their fear that 'the introduction of freehold tenure and land sale [would] increase the economic dominance of powerful men and cut off avenues of upward social mobility now available to every young man' (1973:11). This equates all land reform with one interpretation of it. The Tigrayan peasantry embraced land reform, although they were, and still are, opposed

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[67] Discussions with the *wereda* administration in Zalambessa in 1997 somewhat ironically revealed a slight impatience with the Sobeya people for living too much in their past glories to the detriment of the new

to freehold tenures and land sale of the kind that Hoben describes. TPLF's solution in Tigray was to make the peasants themselves responsible for the way land reform was devised and implemented.[68]

However there were also forms of communal land tenure developed since the second half of the nineteenth century which had different names in different places, as well as variable practices: *chiguraf-gwoses* in most of Tigray, *shehena* in northern Tigray and parts of Eritrea and *desa'a* in Eritrea. In Sobeya, *shehena* took the form of a three-yearly land lottery. In addition a third form of rights over land was *gulti*, gifts of land from the Emperor to his supporters to mark his favour or gratitude, often to his soldiers for achievements in battle. *Gulti* land was a fief-holding system rather than land ownership and coexisted with other forms of usufructuary land tenure, but 'combined fiscal, administrative and judicial rights of the locality held as *gwilti*' (Bruce 1976: 62). In Tigray much *gulti* land was held by ecclesiastical institutions of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Different forms of land tenure and administrative authority not only existed side by side in neighbouring villages, but even co-existed in the same locality. Both the *risti* system, as practised in Endachiwa, and the *shehena* system, as practised in Sobeya, are described in greater detail in Appendix 3.

The *chika shum*

At the heart of the *shehena* system was the *chika shum*, the liaison between district administration and the village. Although the district governor confirmed his appointment, it was usually hereditary. The c*hika shum* was the governor's representative in the village

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priorities of development.

[68] Peasants' antagonism to a free market in land was demonstrated in April 1994 at a symposium in Addis Ababa on the making of the new constitution, where farmers from all over Ethiopia spoke out against

and expected to carry out his orders. His primary responsibility was the collection of taxes for which he had to assess the breakdown of the community tax burden upon individual landholders and collect it on time. His second area of responsibility was court disputes concerning land: serving summonses to court hearings, investigating absences, supervising land valuations and determining jurisdiction, and ensuring the execution of court orders. A third area of responsibility was law and order. However, the source of his power in the village was his responsibility for land allocation through his supervision of the land lottery.

One of the last *chika shums*, Araya Gebremichael, who held office from 1968 until its abolition by the Derg in 1975, is still living as a farmer in Sobeya. His father held office before him, but not his grandfather. His father 'was rich therefore he had good relations with high-posted government officials. Therefore they assigned him.'[69] The village of Sobeya was divided into three sections each under its own *chika shum.* With the help of assistants called *quaderes,* each was responsible for land division every three years in his sector. No doubt influenced by new revolutionary orthodoxies, Araya admitted without being asked that 'at that time we did bad things. We didn't give land to the poor farmers,' although he stated a few minutes later that 'everybody had the right to claim land under *shehena*...Land was freely available, but you had to pay tax on it.' These inconsistencies support allegations by Sobeya farmers of gross disparities between the theory and practice of communal land allocation before 1974. According to Araya, *chikas* and *quaderes* had *risti* land, that is, inalienable rights to a particular plot which they could pass on to their children. What the farmers make clear is that, whatever land the *chika* started off with, he had the power to add to it from the communal pool. One describes 'a kind of public meeting' called by the *chika*. 'The agenda was his land. "I need land. Please give it to me."

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relaxation of the law prohibiting buying and selling of land. So far the EPRDF government has withstood the pressures from the IMF to 'privatise' land in that sense. Peasants in Tigray regard their land as 'their own'.

And then he could get other land and the people gave him land.'[70] No one opposed it 'because it was important to keep in with him. "You can't plough the sky and you can't oppose a posted man" was one of the sayings at the time.'[71] As a young man in 1968, Bairu Gezahegn was forced to take up a career of banditry because he dared to oppose the *chika shum*:

> The reason was he wanted to come and take my land and plough it for himself. When he came to plough I said `No, neighbour no, you will not plough my land.' At last we began to fight. The c*hika shum* is a high post, so they took me to the *chika* office in Zalambessa and fined me 120 birr and sent me to jail. When they threw me in jail, as you know me, I broke the iron roof of the jail and ran away to the field. This was during 1968 and there were no *weyane* and no fighters.

In Marwa, Haleka Embaye, who later moved to Sobeya, opposed the local feudal who had taken his land in the courts. In the Adigrat court he won, but the appeal was heard in Addis where his rich opponent won. 'All my money was finished. I was about to sell my son. I had sold everything else – my son and daughter were all I had left. Then the 1974 revolution happened and solved the problem, because everything was nationalised anyway.'[72]

Sobeya farmers allege that the *shehena* lottery was regularly rigged. Bribes were necessary to secure a share of land and those offering the largest bribes would secure the fertile plots. 'If they loved you they would give it to you; if they hated you they would not give it to you. Even they might not give it to you at all.'[73] Although 'if you were a relative of the c*hika shum* you could get wide land', he was not the only recipient of bribes. After a farmer had received 'whatever land you could get, you could swap with a bribe to other land and

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[69] Araya Gebremichael, former *chika shum*, Sobeya, 13 April 1997.
[70] Abadi Welde Kirkos, 21 April, 1997
[71] Damana Gebrehiwot, farmer and chairman of Sobeya Executive Council, 21 April 1997.
[72] Haleka Embaye, 6 April 1991.
[73] Damana Gebrehiwot, 21 April 1997; Desta Kidane was landless before TPLF land reform, despite being married for three years, presumably because he could not afford bribes, 6 April 1991.

powerful people could lean on poor people and take the better land.'[74] This was confirmed by the ex-*chika shum.* 'There was a law against this, but people didn't practise it. If people came and forced you in fact you had no alternative to giving them the land.' Even the residence qualification was open to manipulation. The evidence was a village house, whether rented or specially built. There was no system of control over illegal claimants, who could build a house, stay for the lottery and return to the town, only returning to the village for the next lottery (Bruce 1976).

> Some were businessmen or civil servants ... Yes, we poor peasants murmured and discussed about this problem, but we had no power to do anything. We didn't even have any rights to discuss or criticise or have meetings. We could discuss with friends in our house, but not hold meetings.[75]

Only landholders paid tax, although in Sobeya information was contradictory on the amount of tax paid. According to Araya Gebremichael, when he was *chika shum* the total tax bill, that is the land and agriculture tax and the health and education tax together, was three *birr*, a considerable sum for farmers to find at the time. However Damana Gebrehiwot, the village council chairman in 1997, remembers a heavier tax burden: 'Taxes were very heavy, 8 *birr* for land, 1.50 for health and 2 *birr* for education.' At the time three *birr* could buy a goat or a sheep and an ox would cost between twenty and thirty *birr.* Villagers grumbled and blamed the *chika shum,* who still felt aggrieved twenty-five years later: 'They didn't know the problem of the *chikas*. We had pressure from above and the villagers only knew their own problems and acted as if we were collecting the taxes for ourselves.'[76]

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[74] Abadi Welde Kirkos, 21 April 1997.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Araya Gebremichael, former *chika shum*, Sobeya, 13 April 1997

The 'feudals'

So the *shehena* system and conditions governing access to land in the imperial period are the context in which we are to understand the desperate appeal Sobeya farmers made to the Front and the land reform that followed. The fact of a three-yearly land redistribution seemed to contradict farmers' accounts of severe hardship associated with land. The injustices were ascribed to 'feudals', but it is not easy to identify to whom that word referred. Some informants were referring to nobles who had accumulated the most fertile land in Agame; some to the *chika shum*, the point of intersection between the peasantry and the administrative world of the local ruling elite, the *awraja* governors and civil servants; yet others seem to be speaking of these civil servants themselves and other privileged townsfolk whose relative power made itself felt even in the village. In other words the farmers themselves did not always discriminate between the forces that bore down on them. Even my research assistant, following their lead, would sometimes refer to the *chika shum* as a 'feudal'. The legacy of feudal repression is that to this day peasant farmers will not tolerate being told what to do. In 1997 when I was attending village and district meetings, on several occasions the accusation '*feudal*' was levelled at district officials or elected village representatives if they were felt to be dictatorial or even bossy.

The political context of land distribution varied from village to village. In Marwa and Dima, 'no one had his own land. Our lives depended on a handful of individual feudals.'[77] In Sobeya, despite *shehena*, the peasants made frequent reference to 'feudals' (*mesafinti*), meaning those who had power over their lives beyond control, including the *chika shum*, whom villagers saw as their agent. They complained that the nobility had claimed a tenth of the land, including pastures, and that 'half of the land was under the feudals and half

[77] Halefom Tekalu, 5 April 1991

under the farmers.'[78] Recurring names are Tegromo Honiburu and his family,[79] and Fitaurari Dori, 'a very famous feudal in Agame who had all the best land, leaving for the poor very unfertile and small plots of land.'[80] Sobeya was one of the poorest villages in Tigray, where many villagers had to survive by working on others' land. The plots given by lottery were so small that farmers adopted a combination of alternatives. They had to compete with each other with bribes to work for rich landlords, 'otherwise you would not get the land.'[81]. Even then their share of the November harvest would run out by January or February and they would be compelled to find work in Massawa or Humera.

The Derg Land Reform Proclamation was an undoubted advantage to the TPLF in depriving the large landowners of legitimacy.[82]

> The emotion for land was so intense and volatile. The feudals who had large plots of fertile land were fighting in underground ways through blackmail and other covert schemes. They were never open because in some cases if they began to speak out in meetings the whole community would shout them down. Everyone knew them and attacked them.[83]

Feudals, unable to sabotage the process, for 'the peasants were watching them so closely they could do nothing.' left Agame.[84] Sira Suvagadis with a private army of twenty or thirty soldiers went to Sarse and demanded food from the peasants. When land distribution started his brother Kasai went to EDU in the West.

> Only one of the family was left here. He wanted to live peacefully like the peasants. He is still a strong supporter of the revolution. His name is Zowdu Dori.

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[78] Damana Gebrehiwot, 21 April 1997
[79] Mebratu Adhanom, 5 March 1997
[80] Ibid.
[81] Gebretsadiq Abadi, 5 March 1997
[82] The Derg's Proclamation No.31of 4 March 1975 nationalised all rural land, permitting farming households usufruct rights over a share of land. They also established the Peasant Associations (PAs) as a new mass organisation and organ of local administration. They were given authority over internal security and economic life and were also responsible for the redistribution of land.
[83] Mebratu Adhanom, 5 March 1997.
[84] Desta Kidane, 6 April 1991.

> He quarrelled with all his brothers because he sided with the revolution. He is their half-brother, sharing the same father. His mother was from near Adua and not from the feudals. For this reason he was not treated as a member of a feudal family, and it was a big problem living with them when the revolution came. 'I have nothing to lose with this revolution,' he said, 'so I will join them.' He was even fighting with us. In fact now he is one of the judges who is responsible for looking after cases of land distribution.[85]

TPLF only pursued recalcitrant feudals who rejected land reform and peasants' rights. Most of the founder fighters were educated and therefore by definition from a relatively privileged background and some were connected to feudal families. Political allegiance was respected as a conscious choice to which families' socio-political background was irrelevant. Despite their Marxist orientation, they saw the Front strategically, that it had to appeal to the widest possible support. Therefore the only constraints on diversity of opinion were the two aims, 'anti-feudalism' and 'anti-imperialism'.[86]

TPLF land reform in Sobeya

This brief analysis of existing systems in Sobeya provides a perspective from which to view the TPLF land reform. The process lasted from January to April, 1976. It started with a village assembly, chaired by a TPLF fighter, at which the people discussed the necessity of land division and the criteria for both dividing and claiming land. They decided to divide the land into three types, fertile, medium and poor, and that everybody should get equal plots from each type. Each of the four *kushets* (subdivisions) elected three members onto a fertility committee. Both committees, one previously elected on the instructions of the Derg official and the other elected under TPLF supervision, received guidance from

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[85] Haleka Embaye, 6 April 1991

[86] Meles Zenawi, Dejena, 5 January 1987: 'I don't think there is one theory of democracy in TPLF because it's composed of different political trends and opinions. We have a basic minimum political platform for all forces within the TPLF. We believe that democracy must mean anti-feudalism, which means we have to crush feudalism. We have to disown feudal landownership. We have to stamp out feudal resistance, even if it means we have to do it by undemocratic means, including arms. So there is one limitation to our outlook on democracy… Then our democracy does not include the right of exploitation by external powers and external imperialist forces.'



Sobeya farmers describing the process of land reform during the war

TPLF fighters. The fertility committee assessed the land, including that formerly in the hands of feudals, the *chika shums* and illegal claimants. Following a census, the land was divided into *gebris* (land share), according to the 'method of *tsemdis'*. A *tsemdi* was the amount of land which could be ploughed by one pair of oxen ploughing the whole day. 'If a person has six children he can claim two *tsemdis*; If a man has three children he can claim one *tsemdi.*'[87]

The influence of TPLF can be seen in the new criteria for claiming land. The villagers would probably have been content with a system only a little better than before, with *shehena* properly implemented perhaps, with a regulatory system against abuses, and fertility taken into account. The new criteria went much further, revealing that delicate balance, characteristic of the Front's relationship with rural communities, between consultative processes and the revolutionary agenda of the TPLF.

The new land division was evaluated in each *kushet* by village nominees and judged satisfactory. However 'we can't say our division was so perfect and absolute. For one thing it was our first time to divide the land … and at that time there were also some political movements like EPRP … And again as you know in 1976 people were in big emotion.'[88] Despite the positive evaluation in 1976, a second land division was carried out in 1982-3 to correct distortions from the Derg reoccupation of Sobeya.[89] The area was strategic for both the Derg and the TPLF because of its proximity to the main Adigrat/Asmara road and the border town of Zalambessa. Official control of the area remained mostly with the Derg,

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[87] Gebretsadiq Abadi, 5 March 1997 A *tsemdi* is a measurement of time in relation to space, which had different meanings in different areas. In the highlands two or three *tsemdis* make up one *gebri*, depending on the land available relative to the size of the population. However in lowland areas, where the heat makes it impossible to work in the middle of the day., a *gebri* might be made up of five or six *tsemdis*.
[88] Mebratu Adhanom, 5 March 1997
[89] Gebretsadiq Abadi, 5 March 1991

but the presence of troops was intermittent, whereas the TPLF maintained a continuous relationship with the villagers. Sobeya was not finally liberated until shortly before the Derg evacuated from Tigray in February 1989. The second round showed a development in experience and growth of political consciousness in both TPLF and the people they influenced. In the 1976 land division, marriage was retained as one of the criteria for claiming land, but dropped in 1982-3.

The first land division in Marwa makes an interesting comparison with Sobeya.

> The first ones to be elected to distribute the land clung to their old ways; some began to take bribes and give unequal plots, so they were all arrested and taken to prison. They were brought from Agai prison and exposed before the whole village for their crimes and we were asked, 'Do you want to replace them as your representatives? So, at the beginning of the next year in September 1977 we changed our representatives and they redistributed the land all over again.[90]

At the second round in Marwa the *serit* or local law was established, including the minimum age of marriage (twenty-four for a man and seventeen for a woman) as a qualification for claiming land, as in Sobeya. Marwa had a large proportion of the minority Irob Saho-speaking nationality, many of whom were Muslims, who hitherto had had no rights to land. For the first time 'the same shares were given to all nationalities and religions without discrimination.'[91]

In Sobeya one suspects a fine line from the peasants' point of view between losses and gains. The downside for rural communities was not the result of compulsion, because decisions were taken by the farmers, so much as the problem of acceptance in practice of changes which contradicted ancient traditions of behaviour and ways of ordering society. The gains were larger and more equitable shares of land and a greater measure of control

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[90] Keshi Barahi Wolde, 5 April 1991.
[91] Ibid.

over their lives. Although highland Christian farmers were higher up the hierarchy than women, Muslims or minority nationalities, they also were poor and oppressed and stood to benefit from the new criteria. Children were included in their parents' share; unmarried sons over twenty-two, daughters above sixteen and daughters in law would bring precious land into the family.[92] The inability of poor families to afford a dowry frequently led to children remaining unmarried. The new land rights provided a dowry and enabled the newly married to set up a separate household.

Conclusion

Land reform was a means to an end. High on TPLF's agenda was the aim of social integration, which they saw as an essential basis for a revolution. Land reform was the first means of unifying the numerous divisions which fissured Tigrayan society. It was a practical strategy, as well as a principle, that the oppressed as beneficiaries of the revolution should become the basis of its strength. Discriminations of status not only separated different social sectors into a hierarchy, but even set them against each other. Political divisions between central and eastern Tigray were encouraged by Haile Selassie; highland culture was perceived as superior to lowland culture, particularly when combined with a difference of nationality; the four minority nationalities in Tigray, the Kunama in the north-west, the Afar in the east, the Irob in the north east and the Agew in the south were all targets for discrimination; women and girls were treated as servants, as property, or the means to property through marriage; muslims and minority nationalities were denied access to land. The most despised class of all were artisans of all kinds, but particularly metal-workers, who were considered scarcely human and the object of fearful

[92] Different decisions on the minimum marriage age were made in different areas, the most common being fifteen for a girl and twenty-two for a man.

superstition.[93] Land division became the primary instrument of unification because all adult residents qualified for shares, even those forced to the towns by poverty who were keen to resume farming.

Land reform had serious implications for social as well as economic life. From now on family size would be a factor in plot size. Adulthood was defined by marriage age, but not marriage itself. Child marriage would henceforth be illegal. It would no longer be simple for a man to abandon or divorce his wife, because he would then lose her share of land. All previously discriminated groups had equal rights with Christian Tigrigna-speakers to claim land. Perhaps the most important effect of the land laws was their levelling effect on economic disparities in village communities. They 'severed the organic link between the political and economic aspects of land tenure that existed under *risti*' (Hendrie 1999:148), so that it was no longer possible for a landowner to accumulate sufficient wealth through land acquisition, as Bauer describes (1973), to establish a network of dependents under his control. Barbara Hendrie notes, in a Tigray village in the mid-1990s, the modest capital, measured in livestock, of former big men and the passing of *kibri* [status honour]. As one remarked, '*Kibri* is now only for *wereda* administrators' (1999:166).

[93] Artisans, especially blacksmiths, were associated with *budda,* spirit beings who had the capacity for harm through the evil eye; they were/are thought to turn into hyenas after dark.

Chapter 3

Garrison towns and the control of space in revolutionary Tigray a)1980 – 1989; b) 1989 – 1991

Small towns in Tigray

The study of small towns defies the too easy dualism of centre and periphery. Provincial towns fall anonymously between the two poles of capital and countryside which have dominated thinking, both Ethiopian and Western, about Ethiopia. The conventional relationship in which the town was the centre of economic, political and administrative activity for a local area, was the norm under the imperial regime and from that period Tigray inherited a hierarchical administrative structure, the point of which was to facilitate expropriation. At the apex was the provincial capital, Mekele; then the *awraja* (county) towns like Adua (Adua), Axum (Axum), Endaselassie (Shire), Abi Adi (Tembien); below that level the *wereda* or local districts, each with its *wereda* town. All the towns in Tigray are small, but some are smaller than others. Tigrayans define as towns settlements that are so small they would be called villages in the West. What they call villages (*kushet)* are small clusters of farms, which for administrative purposes are grouped together into *tabia,* an area often defined topographically. The Derg introduced the *kebelle* as the administrative subdivision in towns, but only the five largest *awraja* towns in Tigray were large enough to be subdivided into *kebelles*.

Under the Emperors the distinction between town and village was, in broad terms, an economic one. The economy of the countryside was based on agriculture; the economy of towns was based on trade. The markets were in the towns, but most of the goods they

stocked came from the surrounding rural area. Muslims were not allowed to own land and so became traders and merchants, sometimes weavers, usually settling in the towns. Women without other means of support made their way to towns to scrape a living by selling local beer or through prostitution. These towns were often very small indeed and the only education and health care before the intervention of TPLF was in the larger towns.

However, although town-dwellers, especially in the main towns, emphasise the *social* distinction between town and country, in many ways the urban/rural dichotomy is a false one, and the smaller the town the more false it is. The Tigrayans believe themselves to have been severely discriminated against in that before 1991 there was not a single industry in Tigray, even in the provincial capital, Mekele. The lack of educational and employment opportunities was a factor in keeping the economy of the towns intimately connected with the rural economy (Solomon Inquai 1983-4:12).[1] The small towns were brokers or mediators between the countryside and the administrative centres of Mekele and Addis Ababa, but also functioned as mini-centres themselves to their rural hinterland. If the tracks and paths could light up and become visible they would show the usual radial relationship we expect around towns. Many town dwellers have land and relatives in the surrounding countryside to which they go back and forth; peasants come to market to sell small surpluses or handicrafts or charcoal or wood fuel for cash to purchase cooking oil, ploughshares, anything they cannot make themselves. Livestock of all kinds wander the streets. So it is impossible to talk about the towns except in some kind of relation to the rural area, either of interdependence or opposition.

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1 In the context of reprisals by Emperor Haile Selassie after the 1943 peasant uprising in Tigray, Solomon Inquai recalls that `forty-nine schools were closed in 1949 under the pretext that there was not enough revenue generated in Tigray.

At the same time the larger towns were connected in an economic web to the centre. A glance at the road map before the 1990s makes clear the centralised and expropriatory relationship between Tigray and the capital. The only all-weather roads until recently, built by the Italians at the end of the thirties on the site of older tracks, join the main towns of Tigray (still very small) in a chain to Asmara in Eritrea to the north and to the larger cities of Gondar, Dessie and the capital, Addis Ababa, to the south. These roads both symbolised and facilitated the centralising, autocratic and ethnocratic process which, until the defeat of the Derg in 1991, is the context to any proper consideration of the transformative interactions between small towns and the rural area during the time when the young revolutionary movement was consolidating its relationship with rural people. The useful distinction for us to make during this period is the one between towns on the one or two all-weather roads, which for that reason attracted a larger population, especially Mekele, Adigrat, Adua, Axum, and Endaselassie, and towns connected by rough roads and tracks.

The expansion of militant opposition in the countryside was a process that by degrees confined the Derg to those towns which were connected to each other and to their supply lines in the south by all-weather roads. At the same time the TPLF Transport Department was extending the network of dirt roads to facilitate connections between the small countryside towns and to their own supply lines in the Sudan. As localised dissent expanded into general civil war in the early 1980s, a new political relation in the towns began to supersede the economic relation, inherited from the past, between the areas of agricultural production and the larger cities to the south. Urban communities were still looking both ways, caught between the repressive Derg presence in the towns and the revolutionary process in the countryside. However, as the hierarchical administrative structure based in different types of town broke down, the towns remained as physical entities of course, but the political, social and economic relations that had sustained them

disappeared under the impact of the civil war and were replaced by a new structure of relations.

So it was that during the period of armed struggle (1975 - 1991) the traditional relationship between town and countryside became on the whole inverted. As we saw in the last chapter, central to the revolutionary strategy of the student movement activists who started the TPLF was the political work of converting the scattered and poverty-stricken farmers in the rural area of Tigray into a politically-conscious mass base able to defend their interests. Thus in this strategic sense the countryside became the centre and the towns the periphery. This inversion largely went unnoticed at the `centre', first because the Ethiopian elite and the international media were oriented to the capital city; second, because it was gradual. The strategic importance of the rural people to the making of a revolution began as an idea in the heads of a group of urban students in Addis Ababa, was argued out in the Dedebit forest in the early months of 1975,[2] but became a political reality only through a long process of negotiation and working with the people themselves.

Awraja towns and *wereda* towns

Government activity, by contrast, was based firmly in the provincial capital, Mekele, and the more important *awraja* towns, the largest of which were on the main roads. In these were situated the infrastructure of state control: administrative buildings, garrisons, police stations, courts and prisons. As TPLF extended their control, government forces and officials became more or less confined to the *awraja* towns as they came under increasing pressure from revolutionary forces in the surrounding countryside.

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2 Asgede Gebreselassie, farmer, ex-soldier and founding member of the TPLF, interviewed in Endaselassie, 16 April 1991. 'They would spend twenty-four hours discussing reading and debating what were the political differences between us and the Junta, or between us and MEISON or EPRP. They would talk for

The TPLF at this stage had little to gain from military assault on the towns; the towns were strategic for the Derg, but not for guerrilla forces. Not only their military strategy, but also their political strategy ruled this out. The successful capture of a town would make them and the townsfolk an easy target for air attacks and thereby alienate the population. Exceptions were towns situated far from main roads and therefore from logistical support, but which were large enough to attract Derg occupation and from which garrison harassment impeded both local trading networks and the political priorities of creating a reliable and supportive rural mass base (Africa Watch 1991:143). Towns like Abi Adi and Sheraro changed hands several times. The TPLF fought a big campaign from 1977 to take Abi Adi, the main *awraja* town of Tembien in southern Tigray. The Derg was forced to abandon it and retreated to Hagere Selam, a small *wereda* town on the top of a mountain range about fifty kilometres from Mekele. It was ill-adapted to support a large garrison and Derg administration, as it had only one small generator, no running water, pre-existing shortages of fuelwood and no facilities for a large garrison. The people of Hagere Selam strongly resisted occupation in 1979 and in the reprisals and pacification that followed many people were killed and houses and crops burned to the ground. Although the Derg evacuated the town in 1989, the scars from that time still have not healed, particularly because the effects of soldiers' assaults on women and the attraction into prostitution of the poorest women had very disintegrating effects on family structure.[3]

By contrast, the tiny market towns at the *wereda* level, often at a distance from main roads, had by the mid-eighties been absorbed into the `liberated' areas. However, government forces did not renounce these areas without a struggle. Sheraro in Shire was the site of a

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hours about how they should approach the people, how they should organise the people. This was their daily work - politics!'

prolonged tussle with the Derg. Not far from Dedebit, where the revolution started, it was a centre of resistance to both the Ethiopian Democratic Union (EDU), and the military government, whose attempts to subdue it by military means only served to intensify resistance.

> In 1983 the Derg invaded Sheraro again. There had been a heavy war around Sheraro which lasted for five or six days. TPLF pushed the Derg back, so the Derg bombed the market place, killing thirty-one people and injuring many more. Then they brought in reinforcements from Eritrea. This included about forty tanks. At this point TPLF (*wedebna*] retreated and the Derg took the town. Everyone left the town except for some very old people who were unable to travel. They were treated badly. They were denied the right to go to their land because they were suspected of spying or running messages to the TPLF [*wedeb*]. The Derg stayed for thirteen months. The people simply left the town and made a temporary settlement in the hills. We had shops; we taught school lessons and went on as normal. But the Derg had many problems. They had no way in and out of the town, because the surrounding area was liberated and they had no food. The Derg was totally encircled, imprisoned.[4]

Sheraro demonstrated that a town is defined by its inhabititants and their activities, rather than by its physical structure. This experience taught the Derg not to take isolated towns remote from logistical support, and the TPLF that siege tactics were more effective than armed confrontation or capture. The absence of roads was a contributory factor to the Derg withdrawal by the mid-eighties from most of the rural areas of Tigray. Nevertheless MiG bombardments continued to be the typical experience of towns like Sheraro during the remainder of the eighties.

Throughout the civil war only the Derg had airpower, supplied by the USSR in the form of MiG 21s, MiG 23s and helicopter gunships, and used it to harass and punish small towns in the TPLF-controlled area. The most severe atrocity was a massacre on market day in the

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3 Gebrehiwot Agaba, interviewed in Oxford in April 1995.

market-town of Hausien on 15 August 1988, where bombardments by MiGs and helicopter gunships continued for seven hours with casualties of more than two thousand people. Yet the absence of the Derg on the ground allowed people in these towns to maintain a cohesive culture of resistance. Every family had air-raid shelters dug out of the road in front of their houses, making walking at night rather hazardous as none of these small towns had any form of street lighting. MiG raids only took place during daylight hours, so that, as bombing raids were stepped up, more and more town activities took place after dark, including markets.[5] After the first few years the TPLF intelligence system became sufficiently sophisticated to enable them to warn small towns of an impending attack, so that the people could, as in Sheraro, decamp into the hills. In the last three years of the civil war, towns like Adi Hagerai and Adi Nebried in the western lowlands, one of the earliest liberated areas, spent increasing amounts of time camping outside the town, at least in daylight.[6] However this necessary strategem, together with the Derg's practice of heavy bombardments at sowing and harvest times, was disruptive of the agricultural economy, destructive of the TPLF Agriculture Department's projects for food self-reliance and contributed to food shortages and famine (Young 1997:132). However the effect on the alienated peasantry was to intensify their hatred for the government and support for the Front (Africa Watch 1991:147-154).

The towns as frontiers

Within the five main towns, the urban populations became adjuncts of military garrisons and of the paraphernalia of Derg control. Instead of being the centres of commercial and administrative activity for a region, the towns became peripheral, in effect the frontiers.

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4 Tsahytu Fekadu, interviewed in Sheraro, January 12, 1987

5 I visited many of these small towns in western Tigray between December 1986 and March 1987, such as Sheraro, Adi Hagerai, Edaga Hibret, Adi Nebried. All markets were held at night.

6 Zafu Tsehaiye, woman Chairperson of Adi Hagerai Baito, interviewed in Adi Hagerai, 17 June 1989

The main towns were for most of the Tigrayan population the site of the enemy in much the same way as towns occupied by colonizing powers. As frontiers, they also became contact zones or places of encounter between the forces of the Derg and the populace. Towns are thus shown to be not essential entities, but a set of relations, and in this period what had seemed their essential nature in relation to the countryside was radically transformed by a relation with a de facto conquering power. Their reduced function, as places of encounter between Dèrg forces and a subjected population, had serious consequences for the towns and for the sense of identity of their inhabitants. Identity is not an essential entity any more than towns are (Comaroff J.L. 1995:249) and the people in the Tigrayan towns at this period were the site of multiple and contradictory subjectivities, developing hybrid identities in a `third space', as Homi Bhabha describes it, in response to the forces of compulsion and intimidation which were constructing their lives on a daily basis (1990:209; Gupta and Ferguson 1992:18).[7]

The experience of living with repression made the garrison towns very different from the smaller towns. Perhaps the most extreme example was the 1978 Red Terror campaign by the Derg. This brutal attempt by the government to eliminate opposition, particularly the two opposition parties, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary party (EPRP) and the All Ethiopia Socialist Party (MEISON), took the form of arbitrary slaughter of mainly high school and university students in larger towns throughout Ethiopia in 1977 (cf. Dawit Wolde Giorgis 1989).[8] The three armed insurgencies (EDU, EPRP and TPLF) made Tigray the worst target of the Red Terror outside Addis Ababa, leading to the loss of a generation

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7 Homi Bhabha exlores some broadly similar ideas in the different context of post-colonialism and multiculturalism. 'The concept of a people is not `given', as an essential, class-determined, unitary, homogeneous part of a society *prior to a politics*; `the people' are there as a process of political articulation and political negotiation across a whole range of contradictory social sites.'

8 Zafu Abraha, woman fighter, interviewed in London on 15 August 1989; Kidane Asahegne, hotel manager, interviewed in Gondar on 15 March 1991; Garamo, teacher, interviewed in Gondar on 15 March 1991.

of educated young people. According to Alex de Waal, it led the Derg 'to an addiction to rule by terror' (Africa Watch 1991:108-111).

> There were teachers, like Fikre and Fasil who were shot and their students were killed. They were about twenty years old. The mothers were forbidden to weep or to take their children's bodies which were buried in a mass grave. We knew where they were buried and it's now farmland, but since the TPLF took that land for the first time last year, some parents have taken the remains and given them a church burial.[9]

It was certainly an irony that the Derg strategists presumed that the absence of schools, the prevalence of illiteracy and the dispersal of the population outside the larger towns also meant the absence of a radical opposition movement needing to be eradicated. Yet it was in the villages that intensive TPLF education and agitation created the politically-conscious support which would eventually defeat the Derg and which the bombing campaigns of the 1980s only served to strengthen.

The prohibitions on visible mourning and the inability of most families to buy back the bodies of their dead children in order to bury them[10] have meant that the experience was repressed in Tigray until after the Derg evacuation in 1989. For those students who did not or could not `go to the field' to join the revolution the repression worked. From then on many of them tried to avoid political involvement.

> Most of the students by that time were terrorised by the Red Terror so they tried to keep out of politics. Some of them started to support the Derg out of fear and were even recruited as cadres and military officers. Only a few youths continued to support the TPLF.[11]

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9 Berhe Gebremichel, hotel washerwoman, interviewed in Endeselassie on 16 June 1989.
10 Mourning was forbidden on the grounds that it indicated sympathy for counter-revolution. The bodies were left on the streets for a time as a warning to the populace and relatives were allowed to bury the bodies of the victims only if they could pay the price of the bullet that killed them.
11 Berhanu Abadi, student, teacher, 'underground' member of TPLF, imprisoned for six years in Mekele Prison until he was released by the TPLF in the Agazi Operation in February 1986, after which he became a TPLF fighter. Interviewed at the top of Min Minay valley, Western Tigray, 23 February 1987.

> After I was released I hated politics intensely. I didn't want to be involved in any political affairs. There was a study group in our school for that Party [Workers' Party of Ethiopia], but I never went there. In the women's *kebelle,* they were asking why I didn't go, but since those politics were the cause of my being in prison, I wouldn't go any more. They continued watching me.[12]

The authorities became increasingly repressive throughout the eighties. The immediate hinterlands of towns were also under Derg control, but their status was more ambiguous than the towns themselves. Derg troops and police were sensitive about possible infiltration from areas outside their control and this meant that the five large towns, which remained in their control until 1989, were ringed with mines and guard posts. Access to towns resembled border crossings between distinct states. Peasants from the surrounding areas were subjected to body searches, beatings and abuse at checkpoints and were frequently arrested as `political' prisoners suspected of being in touch with the TPLF. Freedom of movement became increasingly restricted. The towns thus became progressively cut off from the rural area. Natural economic relations were severed, town markets declined, civil transport links ceased to operate and the towns became islands of Derg control within a largely `liberated' province.[13] Finally, when the roads became too insecure for convoys, nearly all supplies had to be flown in by plane. A false economy, totally dependent on the garrisons, grew up. Only Derg personnel and employees like teachers and civil servants had salaries. Dependent services mushroomed: restaurants, bars, small shops and hotels, and of course prostitution.

> They gave us no help against poverty, just hand-outs of wheat and flour from foreign places. We became very poor with no ability to do anything for ourselves... There was no improvement. All the people were gathered in different associations, which were always working in the interest of the Derg. The money of the associations was taken by the Derg, and the people were

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12 Aster Fitiwy, teacher, Vice-chairperson of the Derg Women's Association, imprisoned in Mekele prison for two years and seven months, interviewed at her home in Mekele on 8 June 1989.

13 Aregash Adane, the Mass Bureau of the TPLF, also on TPLF Central Committee, interviewed in a mobile camp near `Beloved Sand' in Tembien on 9 June 1989.



The towns were ringed with mines, wounding or killing many children and animals

> heavily taxed. Because of this we could not build houses or improve our homes or living standards, so there was much poverty. There was no money, no consciousness; everyone dependent on the wheat of the Derg and a few salaries.[14]

The experience of occupation was broadly similar in all the garrison towns. The presence of government troops and authorities, particularly the hated and powerful Workers Party of Ethiopia (WPE) gave rise to pressures of an opposing and incommensurate kind. This was a war zone, but it was also a contact zone. Of course the population learned to `live with the Derg', as they express it. The needs and demands of the garrisons and Derg representatives necessitated not merely copresence, but interdependence and interaction of all kinds generating a multitude of interlocking understandings and practices on a daily basis but within radically asymmetrical relations of power. In general terms it was a life of coercion and fear of reprisal for real or imagined resistance activity.

> In 1984 with the establishment of the Workers Party of Ethiopia (WPE) a lot of Tigrayans were being sent to prison. I was frightened about what would happen to me. Many who had been elected in Farmers, Women's and Youth Associations were being sent to prison. Here in Mekele there was an underground organisation. The officials suspected the Tigrayans of resisting the rest of the Party so they arrested them as the best solution. I knew one person, the chairman of the mass association, who was tortured at that time. He was hung upside down and beaten with stick on the soles of his feet. He confessed to being a member of TPLF, although he wasn't.[15]

There was a marked escalation of rape, enforced prostitution, and violence to women (Hammond 1990:144).[16] The townspeople resorted to different survival strategies. Some collaborated fully with the authorities; government employees on the whole equated

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14 Lemlem Mahmas, wife of Derg militia and sewa-seller, interviewed in Axum on 5 June 1989.
15 Aster Fitiwy, 8 June 1989.
16 Abrahet Teklemuze, prostitute, aged twenty, interviewed in Endaselassie on 15 June 1989; Rahma, prostitute, aged twenty, interviewed in Endaselassie on 4 June 1989; Lemlem Mahmas, aged 28, wife of Derg militia, interviewed in Axum 0n 5 June 1989; Aster Fitiwy, teacher and ex-vice-chairperson of Derg Workers Association in Mekele, interviewd in Mekele on 8 June 1989. For fuller testimonies see Hammond 1990.

survival with their salaries; many women became prostitutes or capitulated within more regular relationships with officers and officials to whom they bore children.

> There were women whose husbands were killed, and who lived all the time in terror. After their husbands died they used to marry the security officials. They never loved them, but said, 'Since they've killed our husbands they'll probably kill us'.[17]

Others kept their heads down and tried to escape notice.

> In every part of society we had bad memories. We tried to erase these by joining in government infrastructure, so many clubs. This made it easy for the officials to get their hands on the girls easily. They mentioned a club and pulled out whatever boy or girl they wanted. The officials organised it so that they could always track down a girl they wanted and know where she was. We were always occupied with organisational work and they were always calling us out of the safety of our families, so we were exposed to whatever they wanted to do.[18]

Every strategy involved concealment, evasion and the adoption of false identity to accommodate to the occupying culture. Yet, although the rural community was demonised as supporters of 'counter-revolution', the majority of townspeople had branches of their families in the villages. Many had relatives from both inside and outside the town who were TPLF fighters. These relationships as well as the natural economic ones mentioned earlier had to be denied and concealed. The wives or parents of young people who had escaped `to the field' to become fighters for TPLF were particularly vulnerable to the authorities. For that reason many of the early fighters adopted field names to protect their families. However the arbitrary paranoia of the Central Intelligence Department (CID) meant that imprisonment, torture and death were a routine hazard. Mekele prison was bursting at the seams.[19] It was very common for women to prostitute themselves in the

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17 Aster Fitiwy, 8 June 1989

18 Askale Yohannes, mother and ex-bank clerk, interviewed in Mekele on 8 June 1989.

19 Mulugeta Gessesse, Berhanu Abadi, Haile Abraha, Assefa Bekele, Sahle Gebre Egziher, Tesfai Lema, interviewed on 4 January 1987 in the caves of the Propaganda Bureau in western Tigray. These men, all

hope of release for their imprisoned relatives.[20] Meanwhile, Western food relief proved an 'enormous subsidy' to government projects or was diverted to garrisons in dissident areas (Africa Watch 1991:191-208).

Torture survivors interviewed included loyal employees or supporters of the Derg. Tigrayan `intellectuals' (denoting `educated') were particularly under suspicion. They were to discover that identifying themselves with the politics and institutions of the Derg brought no guarantee of protection.

> The Youth Association chairperson was arrested and tortured; they told him to tell them the names of the TPLF members. 'I know Aster. She is a member of the TPLF. She is contributing five birr a month to the TPLF.' But it wasn't true. I was the vice-chair of the [Derg] Women's Association. They called me and accused me, 'Are you a member of the TPLF?' `No, I am a member of COPWE, and I am working in the Association.' 'You are a member of the TPLF underground.' But I was not. Then when I said no, they never believed me. They beat me and kicked me cruelly. They tied my hands and my legs and put sticks under my knees and hung me upside down. So I confessed to being a member of TPLF because I could not bear their cruelty. 'Yes, you are controlling other TPLF members. Tell us their names.' But I didn't, because I didn't know them. They tortured me continually for four days, and my right hand was painful for two to three months afterwards. I felt pain around my womb, so I was admitted to hospital and then they sent me to the main prison.[21]
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> They started to torture me and I couldn't stand the torture. I decided if they refused to accept I was not a traitor, then I would become a member of that forbidden organisation, starting from now. 'Who else?' they said. 'No one. I was a member all alone.' 'Give us the names of all the others, of your comrades.' I told them so many times, but they tortured me again and I gave them the names of all my friends.[22]

Tigrayan but of differing political affiliations, had all been prisoners in Mekele Prison until released in the TPLF Agazi Operation in February 1986.

20 Yeobmar, prostitute, aged sixteen, interviewed in Endaselassie on 4 June 1989; Genet Negash, interviewed at Marta School in western Tigray on February 13, 1987.

21 Aster Fitiwy, 8 June 1989.

22 Assefa Bekele, interviewed in caves in western Tigray on 4 January 1987. He was a teacher and chairperson of the Kebelle under the Derg until he was arrested and imprisoned in Mekele prison. In February 1986 he was among those released by the TPLF in the Agazi Operation.

The TPLF 'underground'

On the other hand, it could be argued that government paranoia was justified. The TPLF did operate clandestinely in the Derg-controlled towns. Their political objectives were to mobilise support and encourage in their supporters a political consciousness appropriate to their aims. They also had the more mundane objective of the acquisition of essential supplies. Their military equipment was acquired through engagements with government forces or from raids on army installations, but they also needed non-military equipment and materials which could not be provided by the small towns in the liberated area. Convoys managed by the Relief Society of Tigray (REST) brought in goods from the Sudan, many of them humanitarian supplies like food and pharmaceuticals, but also including diesel and spare parts. For other routine essentials, however, like torches, batteries, soap and sanitary towels for women fighters, they had to rely on increasingly dangerous missions to the Derg towns.

The TPLF had networks of agents working in cells, often unknown to each to each other. A wing of TPLF, later to become a fully-fledged department, was formed in the first year to infiltrate the towns for information, for supplies, for `agitation' against the government and to spread propaganda on their own behalf. They became skilled in disguise as peasants, traders or even beggars, an ironic counterpart to the different kinds of `disguise' adopted by townspeople. The high school students in Mekele and Adua were a strong source of support. Zafu, in the following extract, describes the double life of working in the underground in 1977. A few months later she fled to the TPLF with many others, narrowly escaping the Red Terror.

> We had to collect information. We had many meetings. The sort of questions we discussed were: Why are we oppressed? What is TPLF? What are its

aims? How can we help our organisation? TPLF's only help at that time came from the underground supporters, so we raised money for TPLF [*wedeb*] through knitting. Most of us girls used to knit, making jumpers, bedcovers, pillows to sell. We also had to be in the Derg's Women's Associations. All the women were told they had to spin cotton and make garments to be collected and sold to make money for the Derg. But, underground, we were getting the materials from the Derg and selling half for the TPLF and only half for the Derg. We also made tea and coffee and different kinds of bread and sold them. Our mothers too gave us money to make things to sell and gave food for TPLF [*wedebna*], like flour or lentil stew. If it had been discovered we would all have been arrested, and our mothers too.[23]

In fact many young students working for TPLF's clandestine operation paid dearly for supporting a vision of a different and more democratic society.

> Before I was married when I was a 6th Grade student in 1975, I was an underground TPLF contact for three years until 1978. Then I was arrested and sent to prison in Tembien. I lived in Abi Adi then. Seven of my friends from school were killed. The Derg used to come to the market place and kill people.[24]

In these various ways people suffered displacement from their normal identity and relationships.[25] The effect was a kind of schizophrenia, not helped by the cultural repression of the government's enforced Amharisation policy, inherited from the imperial regime. Tigrigna was forbidden in schools or for any written or formal transaction. This was unenforcible in the rural area, where in any case there was widespread illiteracy, but in the towns Amharic displaced Tigrigna in any public use. It therefore made a deep impression on students that the TPLF wrote their programme and leaflets in Tigrigna, unfamiliar to educated Tigrayans. A Tigrayan university graduate of that time, about to join the underground, found written Tigrigna an unfamiliar challenge.

> I found it hard to understand! This was the first clandestine programme I had ever had in my hand and it was in Tigrigna. It was duplicated. There were new

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23 Zafu Abraha, woman fighter, interviewed in London on 15 August 1989.
24 Asgaria, interviewed in Adua on 12 June 1989.
25. Lisane Yohannes, member of TPLF underground in Gondar, interviewed in Khartoum, 9 May, 1991.

> words and new expressions, so it took me a number of days to read and understand that programme. I was happy. I felt honoured in fact. I had that feeling that I was about to do something very important, that I was about to be engaged in a very difficult task.[26]

For those who were able to escape in time, the Red Terror was the cause of hundreds of young people fleeing to the TPLF and brought to a close the first period of TPLF's clandestine activity.

> Before the Red Terror I was working with the TPLF (*wedebna*) as a cell member, but afterwards the cell started to deteriorate. Even though I was a sympathiser there were so many spies. I believed in TPLF's politics, but I had to keep it very secret. Although my behaviour was very restricted, I tried my best. The Derg was propagandising about the TPLF, "If you fall into their hands they will torture you, they will cut off your hands, they will brand you with a hot iron".[27]

Through the 1980s the TPLF's subversive activities in their second phase became much more sophisticated as they became much more hazardous.

TPLF `spectaculars'

Town and country were opposed territories and the Derg and the TPLF made forays into each others' territory for strategic campaigns. Derg campaigns were conventional in military terms, using mechanised and infantry brigades and airpower. It was not until the Battle of Dejenna in 1988 that the TPLF began consistently to get the upper hand in military engagements. However, before that time they occasionally penetrated the towns in a different way from their routine clandestine missions. They were able to turn the towns into an arena for spectacular engagements which they turned to propaganda advantage. These provided vivid instances of small but successful confrontations with a hostile and brutal administration, which raised the morale of supporters and began to create those

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26 Ibid.
27 Askale Yohannes, 8 June 1989.

myths of invincibility among townspeople which much later in the war were to become a factor in demoralising the army.

The following examples all had practical and immediate aims and are well-documented factually within Tigray, but operated in the public consciousness in a number of versions, like myths.

1. The first happened in August 1975 and was the first operation of the new Front, only a few months after the founding members went to Dedebit to start the revolution. Musie, one of the most important members, was captured in Adi Daro and imprisoned in Endaselassie. In a carefully planned and executed operation, his companions seized him, shackles and all, and carried him off into the wild. The fact that it was the height of the rainy season, that the countryside was deep in mud, the rivers in flood and the head of the band, Suhul Gesesse, barely escaped drowning added details to the legend, but the fact alone was enough to serve as a propaganda coup for the TPLF (Hammond 1999:76).[28]
2. The second, a month later, was the spectacular robbery of the bank at Axum (Hammond 1999:299).[29] Again, this was an example of precision planning and timing. The rescue of Musie had been carried out by fighters moving in from the outside; the Axum Bank operation was carried out in collusion with underground agents in Axum itself. It was successful on several counts: it was carried out without mishap, although there were some unpredictable turns of event which make it very funny to hear in detail; they carried off a huge amount of money which financed the organisation for a considerable time and enabled it to expand its

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28 Asgede Gebreselassie, 16 April 1991, was the main source for this information. He was a founder fighter of the TPLF in Dedebit and justly reputed for his exceptional memory. Other sources were: Yemane Kidane, interviewed in Mekele on March 25, 1991; Aklilu Tekemte, interviewed in Mekele on February 6, 1991. Fuller eye-witness and participant accounts may be read in Hammond 1999.

recruitment; it provided a second propaganda coup of even greater proportions and made the TPLF well-known and respected throughout Tigray. Because Axum had been the cornerstone of Ethiopian religious and political traditions, it was a particularly significant choice for such an operation. The incursions of TPLF cut across Axum's traditional and mythic status. In fact the story of the Axum Bank operation has gained mythic status of its own; it was taught in fighters' training camps as the heroic story of Desaligne the Mule, after the organisation's famous first mule who carried away the loot on his back (Hammond 1999: 109, 299). The giant stelae, the Church of St Mariam Zion and the Axum Bank are all monuments of different kinds which reverberate in important and overlapping ways in the culture of Tigrayan people.

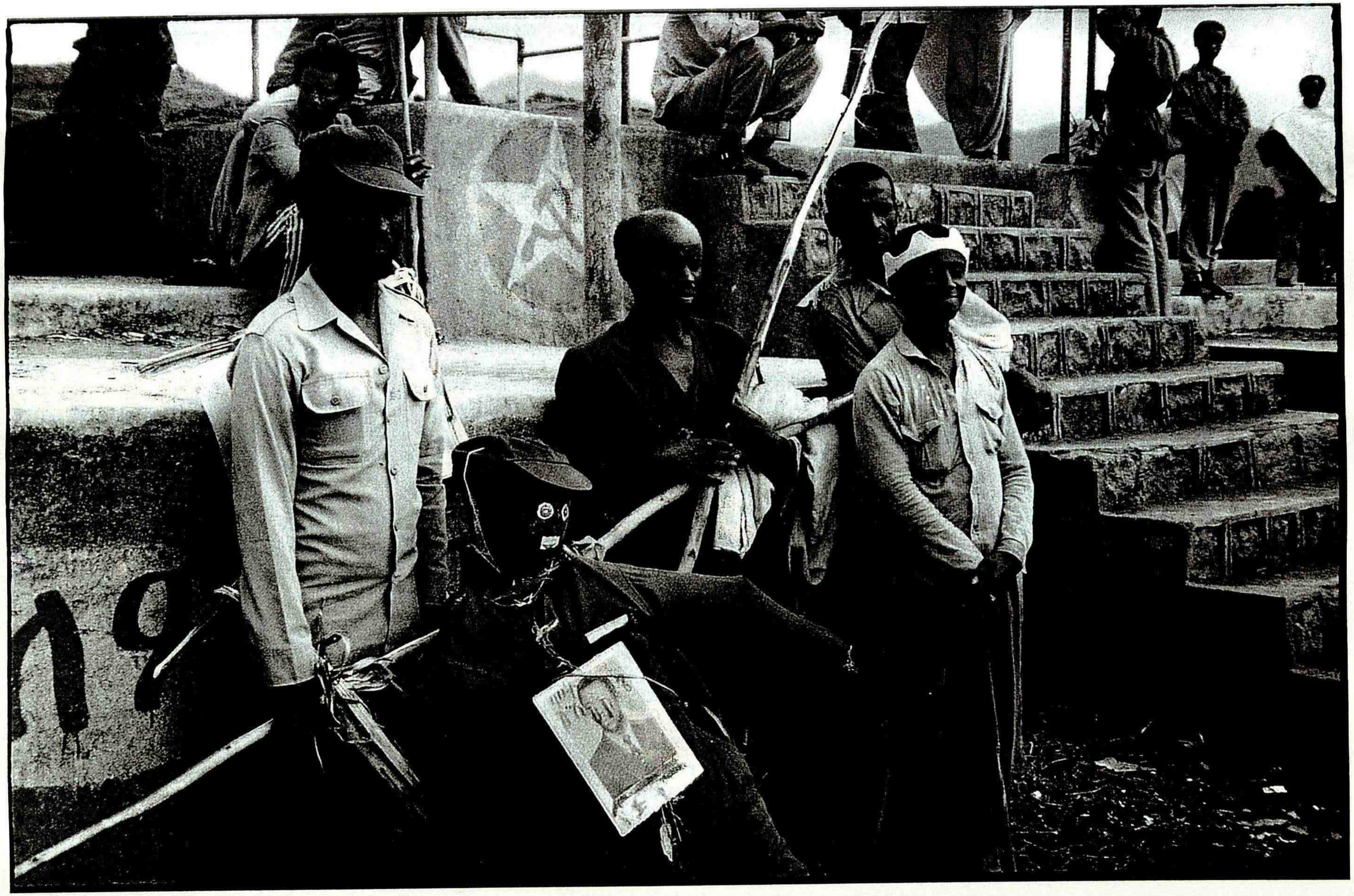
3. The third example of an urban spectacular was in February 1986, when a small force of fighters penetrated Mekele and, through a series of imaginative diversionary tactics, were able to release eighteen hundred political prisoners from Mekele Prison. It was called the Agazi Operation after one of the founder fighters who had been killed a few years earlier.[30]

These operations and others were extremely important in building up a reputation for the revolutionary movement which contrasted in every way with that of the Derg. As time went on stories began to filter into the towns of TPLF defeats of landowners, disbanding of bandit gangs, land reform, democratic reforms, and so on which, whether they could be substantiated in fact or not, provided a vivid contrast with the daily experience of living with the Derg garrisons. Of course there was scarcely a family that did not have members

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29 Ibid.

30 Drar Gebreyesus (`Ambassa'), Commander in Agazi Operation, and Berhane Aberra (`Meley'), Commander of diversionary force. Both were interviewed in Mai Humer in western Tigray on 30 January, 1987.



Burning an effigy of Mengistu in a newly-liberated town

who were fighters and in Tigray the TPLF were not only believed to be efficient, but also humane. Their reputation even managed to penetrate Addis Ababa, on the whole well instructed by Derg propaganda, where an efficient blue and white private minibus taxi service had been introduced. They were popularly known as '*weyala*' (a corrupt name given to TPLF fighters) because they were so swift and so quiet; the taller taxis, on the other hand, which had two benches facing one another on which people sat with their knees almost touching were called `*weyeyit'*, after Mengistu's forced political discussions.

The Derg evacuation

The opposed nature of the Derg and the TPLF was also reflected in their military tactics. The Derg had a huge conventional army, was armed and supported by the USSR and advised at different times by the Cubans, the East Germans, the Israelis and the North Koreans. It had mechanised brigades and airpower. The TPLF on the other hand had only the weapons it had captured from government forces, including anti-aircraft weapons during the eighties, but without heavy artillery or airpower. It resulted in a kind of stalemate. In 1985, for example, the military government sought to exploit the devastating 1984-5 famine by launching the Eighth Offensive, a three-pronged attack using mechanised and infantry brigades, backed by airpower, against the rural areas in the south east, centre and west of Tigray (TPLF 1985). The Seventh Campaign, as it is officially known in TPLF, did enormous damage and further alienated a hostile population, but it could not in fact win against the guerrilla tactics of the TPLF, through which, supported and protected by the Tigrayan people, they continuously ambushed and harried the Derg troops. The roads between garrison towns became increasingly insecure for the army who were forced to retreat to the garrison towns. Yet it was hard to see how the TPLF could `win' either or how such tactics could gain its ultimate objective of final defeat and

replacement of the military government by a democratic alternative.

After a period of political and military stagnation in the mid-1980s, the TPLF conducted a prolonged reappraisal and reorganisation of its military strategies and tactics. Then in March 1988 it began an offensive against the major Derg-controlled towns and drove government forces out of Endaselassie, Axum, Adua and Wukro. The Derg evacuated from Adigrat and retained its garrison only in the provincial capital, Mekele. In the capital the government started a massive recruitment drive in preparation for a retaliatory offensive, but the TPLF response was to evacuate the newly-won towns after three months to protect their inhabitants from attack on the ground and from the air.[31] However the Derg army suffered a string of defeats. According to the TPLF General Command, `They had a problem of commanders and other logistical problems. They had an untried army of freshly recruited soldiers, and the logistical support was poor and slowed them down.'[32]

The Derg forces, after briefly reoccupying and evacuating in turn the towns of Axum and Adua, retreated to Endaselassie and consolidated their position. Axum and Adua were immediately reoccupied by the TPLF. On February 10, 1989, the garrison left Endaselassie under orders to recapture Axum, but, strung out on the narrow mountain road, it was attacked, totally defeated and dispersed in a nine-day battle. On the 19th the Derg retreated from Adigrat to Asmara and on 21st February from Humera in western Tigray to Gondar. On 27th February the Derg evacuated from Mekele, leaving Tigray to the administration of the TPLF.

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31. Gebru Asrat, TPLF General Command, interviewed at Asrega Training Camp, western Tigray, on 2 June 1989.
32 Ibid.

In the eight days between the Derg defeat at Endaselassie and their evacuation of Mekele, witnesses reported `extreme tension' among the remaining Derg forces in Mekele. Askale Yohannes, a bookkeeper in the Bank of Ethiopia, was told in confidence to expect an attack at short notice and that it was a matter of duty `to save the money in the bank'.[33] Both deposits and employees would be transferred to Addis Ababa.

> This was a secret. No one must know it or it would create chaos. They told us this on the Saturday and gave us an appointment for Monday at eight in the morning. They cheated us. They all left on Sunday, so this meant that many workers who were told that they would leave, didn't leave... Then the Amharas went on foot to Dessie, Asmara and Addis, but all the Tigrayan workers refused to go. Actually it wasn't state money but that of the SOS School, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the Ethiopian Evangelical Church, merchants, and the Ethiopian Cartological Secretariat, as well as the private money of workers. I myself had three hundred *birr* in that bank.[34]

Townspeople describe a scene of deception, disorder and panic. Many people expected an imminent attack from the TPLF, but reactions to this possibility depended on individual political affiliations. Officials, Party members and civil servants feared for their lives if the revolutionary Front took over the town.

> Everyone who was not in the know was being tortured mentally. They saw them streaming to the airport by car and on foot. The household equipment of the key persons, the colonels and the generals, was all packed up and taken. The higher ranks and officials took away all their household furniture, but the lower ranks were not allowed to take anything to Addis. Some other members of the Party left their children and their homes and went alone to the airport, crying and very frightened. They were never told the secret that they were pulling out of Mekele and going to Addis. They thought that the TPLF would kill them if they stayed behind. They went to the airport, some holding suitcases, some holding their children's hands, and some children were left behind. When they reached the airport the policemen and guards were kicking them and calling them names. The army chiefs listed the prostitutes' names instead of the members of their Party. The leaders called the prostitutes' names for the airplane and the party members were kicked by the guards. Many wives are now left behind because they are not Amharas.[35]

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[33] Askale Yohannes was a member of a 'typically TPLF' family. Her brother, Lisane, and sister Harnet, a leading singer for the TPLF, were both fighters. Shortly after this interview Askale also became a fighter.
34 Ibid.
35 Aster Fitiwy, 8 June 1989.

Meanwhile, in parallel with the military struggle, the TPLF had been making political preparations for the expansion of the war south of Tigray. The leadership had been confident of liberating the whole of Tigray and now they expressed confidence in the project of spreading the revolution to the rest of Ethiopia.[36] They had been cooperating with the Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (EPDM), a mostly Amhara liberation movement operating in Wello and Gojjam, since it splintered from the EPRP in 1981.[37] At the beginning of 1989 the two organisations formed a united front called The Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). Long-term Oromo members of the EPDM also decided to form their own Oromo organisation and were joined by Oromo prisoners of war who were hostile to the Derg and were willing to fight for a democratic political system. After months of discussion and argument, they formed a third member of the coalition, the Oromo People's Democratic Organisation (OPDO).[38]

Life after the Derg in the liberated towns

It was a paradox that for the remaining two years of the war, while the military struggle was intensifying south of Tigray and EPRDF forces were closing in on Addis Ababa, life in Tigray itself was more peaceful than at any time since 1975. The passing of the front to Wello, then Gojjam and Gondar meant that Tigray was virtually demilitarised except for training camps for new recruits.[39] The only overt signs of war were the clusters of mothers

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36 Meles Zenawi, interviewed in a mobile camp on 9 June 1989

37 The EPDM was renamed after the end of the war as the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM) because it was largely Amhara and entrenched in the Amhara region. The title 'Ethiopian' was a relic from the EPRP.

38 A fourth organisation in the EPRDF coalition was the Ethiopian Democratic Officers' Revolutionary Movement (EDORM), composed of Derg officers who were prisoners of war. The TPLF became very skilled in using the POW camps to re-educate politically the inmates and win them to the revolutionary cause.

39 This relative demilitarisation was to put the security of Tigray at risk on 1 March 1991. After several defeats in Gondar and Gojjam in Campaign Teweodros, Derg forces tried to create a diversion by invading Tigray from Eritrea north of Adua. They were repulsed with some difficulty after a force was hastily mustered from non-combat fighters, militia and new recruits.

around trucks from the south, hoping for news of their fighter children, and clusters of people around radios, hoping for news from the front.

The Derg had evacuated Tigray, but the problems of occupation remained. Some of these were in the nature of psychological scars which, as in the rest of Ethiopia, would take many years to heal. However many more immediate problems faced the incoming administration. The evacuation had split the population roughly along class lines. The great majority, although not all, of those who had salaried jobs for the government, teachers, health workers, skilled workers, civil servants and officials, left with the troops and Derg Party members, uncertain otherwise how they would survive. In many cases they left their families behind. Government troops in Mekele had destroyed with tanks the electricity generating station, so there were problems of power and water supply.[40] This in turn affected the functioning of the hospital, where the most serious implications were for the refrigeration of drugs.[41]In Adigrat they had burned the clinic to the ground. Rings of anti-personnel mines at random intervals up to five kilometres from the town were killing and injuring herders (mostly children) and their animals. The towns, under virtual siege, had survived through services to Derg garrisons and officialdom. With the sudden departure of the military and civil administrations this dependent economy collapsed. Economic links between towns as well as with the countryside took some time to restore. Some sectors of the urban people were deeply suspicious of the TPLF. Aster, a teacher and Party worker for the Derg, had been nevertheless arrested by government authorities and tortured in Mekele prison:

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40 The EPRDF learned from this experience of Derg destructiveness. Two years later when EPRDF forces were preparing to capture Bahr-Dar and Gondar they appealed by radio to all skilled workers in the factories and power installations, to staff and students in hospitals and to teachers and students in schools and colleges to protect their workplaces from Derg sabotage. At the same time they promised to continue paying their salaries. I was present at some of these salary pay-outs in Bahr-Dar.

41 Dr Yemane, interviewed in Mekele Hospital, 10 June 1989

> I was there during the Agazi operation, but refused to go with the people who released the prisoners, because I didn't know anything about them and I thought they would kill me...We turned off the light and hid ... After I was released I hated politics intensely ... I decided not to go with the Derg but to stay with the TPLF, but even now hatred for politics never leaves my head ... [42]

The bank clerk, Askale Yohannes, a TPLF supporter, had a very different attitude to the incoming TPLF:

> After six hours TPLF (*wedebna*) came. First of all I couldn't find the words, they came through the castle at about six in the evening in a single line. The light was getting dim and there was no electricity. Many people expressed their joy and they were ululating. Everybody came out of their houses and showed their joy. From that instant we believed that they could destroy the thieves and agents, and as time went on the cheers and ululation increased. They came down, men and women fighters together in a single line, and dispersed to different corners. 'Everyone be calm. Be settled. We are here now. Be glad.'[43]

Despite the inevitable reductiveness of brief extracts from long and complex life histories, these two snapshots by two educated women, one a teacher, the other a bank employee, one skulking in fear of the guerrillas, the other describing their welcome, are some indication of contrasting responses to the experience of living in a Derg town (Hammond 1990:154,156).

Yet the towns had to be fed and administered. In the countryside the TPLF had mobilised the people to share in the decision-making and in the solutions to problems. The TPLF strategy in the towns, drawing on their practical experience in the countryside, was to tap the resourcefulness of the townspeople in much the same way. On the whole the townspeople look much more sophisticated than the traditionally dressed farmers from the countryside. They tend to wear Western dress; the women have straightened hair; the more educated speak English. Yet, compared to the self-reliance and political consciousness of

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42 Aster Fitiwy, 8 June 1989.

the long-liberated rural areas, the townspeople in 1989 had the mental habits of dependency and fear. Research in the towns in May and June provided many examples of the inversion of the conventional relationship between town and country. In one town meeting in Mekele the townspeople were addressed by peasants from the surrounding countryside, where they had been running their own affairs for some years. They described their own experience of self-reliance and self-determination and told their audience in no uncertain terms to pull themselves together and start thinking how to solve the practical problems they faced. Problems were gradually and typically solved through widespread consultation, not just with leaders but in meetings involving the whole of the population, category by category, merchants, workers, youth, women and so on.[44]

Out of these meetings a series of solutions began to emerge. By May 1989 the links between the towns and the surrounding countryside were beginning to be restored. Restrictions on freedom of movement were lifted and farmers were returning to the markets. I observed the expansion of Mekele market week by week, not only in terms of numbers but also in the range of goods. Residents of other recently liberated towns told the same story. A woman community leader in Adigrat observed that 'under TPLF the most important thing I have observed is that the rural area and the towns have become interconnected again.' She continued:

> Before, the rural people had a problem. If they came here they were always questioned by the soldiers if they tried to enter the town. If they didn't have pass papers they were often arrested and imprisoned. So the relation between town and rural areas became very distant. Now we are closer. Relatives visit each other, and country people come to bring their produce to sell in the market. We are creating a hand to hand movement between the towns and the villages.[45]

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43 Askale Yohannes, Mekele, 8 June 1989.
44 Tadelle, TPLF Administrator of Mekele until the formation of the Baito, interviewed in Mekele on 10 June 1989.
45 Radiet Gebretensai, interviewed in Adigrat on 11 June 1989

However, until reconstruction could begin after the final defeat of the Derg, there were shortages of jobs, resources to pay workers and essential goods. In the rural area, although the TPLF was the de facto state, there had been no resources to pay salaries. The fighters who staffed the Departments as health workers, elementary school teachers, agricultural advisers or local administration officials, received their 'keep' at a minimal level in kind, either from the organisation itself or through the *baito*, if they were based in the communities as teachers or health workers.[46] The same system was extended to the newly liberated towns. There were only four conventionally-trained doctors/surgeons for the four million or so population of Tigray.[47] They were fighters and had been based in the field hospitals, but were now brought into the town hospitals. The three hospitals (in Mekele, Adigrat and Axum) which before had been open only for the military were now opened to civilians, staffed by health worker fighters and trainees.[48]The same system was used to staff elementary schools, but there were never enough trained teachers to reopen the secondary schools and shortage of resources kept all facilities at a minimal level for the remaining two years of the war.

In June 1989 a credit system set up by the TPLF encouraged merchants to buy a fleet of trucks to begin operating across the Sudan border and between the towns. However, some goods, like metal products, were in such short supply they needed to be manufactured

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46 The concept of `fighter' (*tegadalai,-it*) under the TPLF was very different from `soldier' (*watader*). Although all fighters were armed and given basic military training, they were not all combat fighters. The essential criterion for a fighter was dedication to the liberation struggle in whatever role s/he could contribute. After the first few years those with education were usually employed in one of the Departments.

47 These doctors were: 1) Tewelde Legesse, trained in Russia and an outstanding self-trained surgeon. He was killed two weeks after the war was over in 1991; 2) Dr Gebre-Ab Barnabas, Director of the TPLF Central Training Hospital; 3) Dr Tewelde Kahsay and 4) Alemach Tekle Haimanot, the only woman doctor, was a civilian member of the TPLF.

48. From the late 1970s the TPLF set up first battlefield clinics, then field hospitals and clinics, including a training hospital. From the early 1980s these were extended to a network of clinics for the civilian population based mostly in small towns, which were staffed by fighters with at least 6th grade education, who were

cheaply within Tigray itself. The scarcity of metal goods may have been connected, at least in part, by the exodus of Falashas to Israel.[49] Falasha communities, mostly in Gondar and some in western Tigray, were among the chief producers of metal goods, particularly ploughshares. Metalworkers, like potters and other handicraft workers, had long been victims of superstitious discrimination and therefore tended to belong to certain alienated communities. Outside these groups, there were strong prejudices against taking up metal-working as a trade. A project in the now-empty Mekele prison attempted to solve several of these problems at one go by establishing the prison as a metal working training centre. The raw material was furnished by defunct military vehicles and old oil drums. A payment was made to the trainee blacksmiths as an incentive for those not from traditional metal working families. By the time I visited it early in 1991 the project was in full swing, turning out not only ploughshares in quantity, but cooking stoves, buckets and other metal objects.[50]

If progress on material and economic problems was necessarily slow, the re-education of the townspeople was moving ahead with some speed.

> During this period the people didn't know about TPLF, so they had to be educated about them -- their aims, what is democracy? What is a *baito* -- a people's *baito*? Therefore it was necessary to establish a temporary *baito*. It would have been very difficult to establish the real *baito* straightaway, because of the *kebelles* and the people who worked in them. So you have to clean up all this, you have to know who is for and who is against the Derg. After all this the

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given an initial six months training in the diagnosis and treatment of the main epidemic diseases and in first aid. Every year there would be additional training of two or three months.

[49] The first groups of Ethiopian Jews or Falashas started emigrating to Israel in 1977 in a secret deal between the then Israeli Prime Minister , Menachem Begin, and Colonel Mengistu, in exchange for arms. After the scheme was exposed in 1978, the Israeli secret service, Mossad, took over the operation and masterminded Operation Moses, a series of airlifts at the end of 1984 in which at least 12,000 Falashas were transported to Israel. In January 1985 this secret also leaked out. Israeli continued to supply advisers, technical assistance and, reportedly, arms to the Derg and in a further agreement, allegedly involving large cash payments to Mengistu (The Guardian 25, 26 May 1991), another series of airlifts, code-named Operation Solomon, ferried out 16,000 more in the last days of the Mengistu regime in May 1991.

50 Metal workshops in ex-Mekele Prison, visited on 16 February 1991

people at least knew one another and it was on this ground that the real *baito* was established.[51]

Development and the *Baito*

The Derg and the Front had different models of social organisation and therefore different priorities for social, economic and political action. The practical experience of the townspeople after 1989 brought these differences home to them. Consultation and participation were unfamiliar and habits of passivity took time to shift, but the year's preparation for the first *baito* was a time of significant change. Gebru Asrat described this time.

> At present we cannot solve the majority of the problems which are facing the population; we cannot solve the problems of drought and backwardness, the low level of education and skills. Therefore our present work is laying the basis for development.'[52]

The main strategy was the formation of the *baito.* These local assemblies and their elected executives had long been the foundation of political and administrative life in the countryside, including the small *wereda* towns. The elected *baito,* the *baito* laws (*serit)* and the evaluation of tasks and progress (*gemgam*) were the triad on which rural participatory democracy was founded. The TPLF interim administrators saw the *baito* as `a means of rebellion and struggle' against the old order and they were convinced that a relatively higher standard of education, advance information of rural *baitos* and the experience of

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51 Abrahet Woldu, pharmacist and member of the Controlling Commission of Mekele *Baito,* interviewed in Mekele on 19 February 1991.
52 Gebru Asrat, Secretary for Tigray and TPLF Central Committee, interviewed in Mekele, on 10 April 1991.

undemocratic administrations under the Derg would combine to make progress towards local democracy in the towns much swifter.[53]

In Mekele an assembly of elected representatives elected a temporary *baito* to be responsible for administration until a proper *baito* could be established. Preparation began in October 1989 and the first real *baito* was in place the following year in November 1990. The *baito* assembly of four hundred first had to debate the new laws, drawn up beforehand by an elected committee, and then elect an executive to carry out local administration. Laws prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of religion, gender or place of origin were finally accepted. The fiercest arguments were on the marriage age and on property shares in the event of divorce. As in the countryside many years before, it was the women who were the force for change in the marriage laws. The new WA at first encountered resistance from women because of their negative experience of the Derg Associations, but by the time the assembly convened about 40% were women. The men wanted the minimum legal age of marriage to be no older than fifteen; women wanted it to be eighteen to safeguard the education of girls. The women eventually won the vote. The other confrontation between women and men was on women's share of the wealth of the family, especially in the event of divorce. Muslim women were particularly active in this debate.

> The most important point was her participation in gaining wealth. Muslim women participate more than Christian women in shops, in the market, in the terrible business of selling small things all day long in the market. If he is a weaver, she has her own part. He does the weaving; she does all the rest of the process.[54]

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53 Tadelle, interim TPLF Administrator of Mekele from February 1989 until the formation of the *Baito*, interviewed in Mekele, 10 June 1989.
54 Hiwot Ayele, teacher and chairperson of Mekele Women's Association after 1989, interviewed in Mekele on 10 April 1991



Taking Addis Ababa. The end of the civil war.

According to the WA chairperson, Muslim and Christian women `fought together' and the assembly finally accepted that all property should be divided equally between husband and wife on divorce. This had been included in *serits* (codes of law) in the rural villages for some years.

There was a marked contrast between my first visit to Mekele just after the departure of the Derg and a second visit two years later early in 1991. Tigray had had two years of peace, except for air attacks, and these had decreased since the disintegration of the USSR had forced a tighter armaments budget on the Derg. On the first visit the twin symptoms of dependency and fear in the people were still marked. My subjective impression on the second visit was that even their posture had changed; instead of scuttling down the streets, as if afraid to be noticed, people walked upright and looked you in the eye. In some areas of town people were stopping me to make sure I knew that where I was walking freely had previously been restricted to Derg officials, soldiers and Party members. They spoke of the *baito* with pride.

Conclusion

The end of the civil war opened up the towns to many changes. The constitutional change to a federated Ethiopia had obvious implications for towns in Tigray. Regionalisation itself marked a redefinition of relations between the old centre of Addis Ababa and the regional periphery, which modified the importance of the capital and, along with elections, the power of the traditional governing elite. Mekele was now the seat of state government and of the regional council. The war had been turned into an opportunity to bring benefits to the Tigrayan people in the rural areas, despite their sacrifices. However real developmental improvements in agricultural production, education and health care depended upon

increased resources made possible by political and economic stability in peacetime.

So what effect did freedom from war and relative peace and stability have on towns in Tigray? The towns' function as economic and administrative centres began to be restored to them after the departure of the Derg forces, and federal autonomy of the region gave them an increasingly important role. But this is not to say that the old regional centre-periphery model of town and country has been restored. It seems that a partnership of a new kind is being mapped out. On the one hand, the EPRDF economic programme tipped the balance in favour of the small farmer, with a five-year plan of investment in small-scale sustainable agriculture; on the other, there was no longer enough land in Tigray to absorb the working population into agriculture, so a programme of gradual industrialisation, decentred to provincial towns and encouraged by tax incentives, was initiated, but urban unemployment remained a recalcitrant problem.

In the war years, it seemed reasonable to speculate about whether the TPLF emphasis on working with rural communities in ways that were appreciated by those communities was not so much principled as opportunistic (because they needed to mobilise fighters in large numbers) or expedient (because that was the field of operations imposed on them by Derg power in the towns). How much could the statements of principle by the TPLF be trusted? In 1989, when they won control over the whole of Tigray, the question to be asked was: Would they revert to an earlier secessionist phase, despite their assertions to the contrary? In 1991, with the future of Ethiopia in the hands of the EPRDF, the question was: Would the TPLF reverse their avowed priorities by leaving the countryside to its own devices and identify with the interests of an urban elite? In the event the Front did neither of these things, and their insistence on bottom-up politics in the villages and small towns of the

countryside, as the basis of all economic and social development, has continued into the post-war era.

Chapter 4

Visions of a new Tigray: Political education from 1975

Introduction

When people in Tigray, whether men or women, are asked why they support the TPLF or what benefits they associate with the revolution, they invariably cite land ownership, participation in the *baito* and a reliable and fair system of justice, usually in that order. Early land distribution has already been examined in Chapter Two. However, before we turn to the development of local government institutions in the next chapter, I want to examine the different strategies through which the TPLF paved the way for their formation.

In Chapter 2 we glanced briefly at the Front's awareness of the importance of winning the psychological space. As a generalisation, it is true to say that there is also an emotional dimension to the attachment of the rural people to *wedebna* ('our organisation'), even if they criticise individuals within it. They talk about it with an intensity not observed in other contexts; they refer to TPLF fighters as 'our sons and daughters', with both literal and figurative intent; they identify the revolution as their own and themselves as participants. How did the TPLF create a revolutionary consciousness and a coherent unified movement out of a factionalised peasantry who, despite sporadic resistance, had internalised the principles and mentality of feudal hierarchy? As beneficiaries of the Tigray revolution since its inception, the rural population of those areas which had been liberated from Derg control, even temporarily, became its supporters. However there is a difference between a supporter and a participant. This chapter will investigate the multiple processes

of consciousness-raising and political education through which the Front sought to reconstruct the subjectivities of its supporters and so construct the participating revolutionary subject. This was and continues to be a process of cultural transformation.

Precursors of cultural change

The most appropriate discussion of the definition of culture for the purposes of this chapter is the one made by John and Jean Comaroff.

> We take culture to be the semantic space, the field of signs and practices, in which human beings construct and represent themselves and others, and hence their societies and histories. It is not merely an abstract order of signs, or relations among signs. Nor is it just the sum of habitual practices. Neither pure langue nor pure parole, it never constitutes a closed, entirely coherent system. Quite the contrary: Culture always contains within it polyvalent, potentially contestable messages, images and actions. It is, in short, a historically situated, historically unfolding ensemble of signifiers-in-action, signifiers at once material and symbolic, social and aesthetic. Some of these, at any moment in time, will be woven into more or less tightly integrated, relatively explicit worldviews; others may be heavily contested, the stuff of counter ideologies and 'subcultures'; yet others may become more or less unfixed, relatively freefloating, and indeterminate in their value and meaning. (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992:27)

In other words, cultural formation is a constant and continuous process, with which groups and individuals are in dynamic and differing relation, recalling Sapir's rejection of the notion that culture is a 'given', rather than 'something to be gradually and gropingly discovered …Elements of culture that come well within the horizon of awareness of one individual are entirely absent in another individual's landscape, [and] according to the biographical conditions various elements of culture [will be accepted] with entirely different meanings' (Sapir 1956).

Power is an intrinsic factor in the construction of cultural and social subjectivities, 'the ability of human beings to shape the lives of others by exerting control over the production,

circulation, and consumption of signs and objects, over the making of both subjectivities and realities.' (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992: 28) Feudal power in Tigray enforced and reinforced a culture, a way of looking at the world, which accepted a set of political and social relations as unchangeable (cf. Bourdieu 1977:72). However the fact that households and individuals lived their lives within the rules and terms of this culture did not prevent there being a range of responses to its effects. Dan Bauer's work (1973) gives a useful picture of one half of this process, but misses the less easily discernible counter-narratives of the peasants. Testimony evidence suggests that there was a range of attitudes towards the feudal status quo, that hegemony is never total. Many of the early fighters seem to have been predisposed to opposition by earlier influences. In describing how as a student she ran away to join TPLF in 1976, Mebrat Beyene explicitly states that 'My family background helped me. My family never supported Haile Selassie or the feudals.'[1] Asgede Gebreselassie, one of the founder fighters, explains:

> When I joined the Ethiopian army, my parents had a very bad life, because the feudals had confiscated all their land and sent them to prison, so our whole family had a lot of problems ... I decided there was nothing else to do but work to get my parents released from prison, so I became a soldier. The Ethiopian army was a terrible life, but I had no choice... I saved all the money I could and used it to get my parents released and then left it at once. This is how my hatred for the state, for the chauvinists, began.[2]

Nevertheless even Asgede's hostility did not gather revolutionary impetus without the help of determined 'agitation' by politically conscious contacts in his home town of Endaselassie. Other testimonies contain similar clues that the student movement was often a catalyst for dissent rather than a cause.

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[1] Mebrat Beyene, interviewed in Khartoum in March 1987
[2] Asgede Gebreselassie, interviewed in Endaselassie, 16 April 1991

Women too responded in diverse ways to the imposed limitations on their lives. There were always exceptional women, even before the revolutionary cause became a catalyst for the temperamentally rebellious. Women were among the most admired praise poets (*melkesti*) at funeral ceremonies. Women in imperial times often played a supporting role on the battlefield. Roman Ayenew, the mother of Hyelom Araya, one of the top commanders of the TPLF, had a reputation as a woman warrior from the time of the Italians and her courage in defying the bully boys of successive regimes is legendary in Tigray (Hammond 1999:294).

In the early days of the TPLF, the first women fighters challenged the stereotype of women's passivity, overcoming not only the sanctions of society, but even the reluctance of the early fighters to accept women at that stage. Some of these women have suggested the importance of women relatives in encouraging alternative models to early marriage:

> My mother was a handicrafts teacher and encouraged me. My aunt was a handicraft teacher also and was trying to influence me to finish my studies and finish university. "Do not distract your attention by marrying," she said to me, "That can come later after your studies are finished." She tried to fulfil all the programmes for my studies and tried to understand all the papers. This had an influence on me and caused me to challenge male students and be a success in my studies.[3]

The mother of another fighter, Zafu Abraha, 'didn't like the culture of the Muslims for women. "I just want my daughters to be independent," she said.' Zafu's older sister finished at college and became a teacher and Zafu herself stayed at school until 12th Grade when she joined the TPLF. Again, there was a range of responses to the predicaments arising out of child marriage. Many of the women fighters interviewed have cited the conditions of

[3] Aregash Adane, interviewed in Mekele, 10 April 1991.

marriage as an important motive for joining the TPLF.

It is to be expected that urban women students, who came from relatively educated sectors of society or who had been initiated politically by the radical student movement, would be better able to shake off the limitations of the past than peasant women. However the TPLF performed a similarly catalytic function for the rural peasantry by giving voice and ideological shape to contradictions no longer hidden by the prevailing culture. The crisis of the end of imperial power and continued opposition to traditional authorities, both central and local, were exposing the *doxa*, in Bourdieu's terms (1977:168), the existing hegemonic feudal domination, particularly over relations of production, so that it crumbled into an ideology past its sell-by date and became open to challenge from the counter-ideologies of the subordinate. The role of the TPLF was to give ideological expression to peasant discontent, inciting 'a questioning of what is not normally questioned' (Gledhill 2000: 136) In a protracted process they would transform it into a new hegemony, at least in Tigray. By providing military and ideological alternatives to the prevailing structures of power, they constructed their own power base from the least powerful sectors of society.

Although women in general were the least powerful, especially peasant women, there were exceptional peasant women who showed, first of all, perspicacity in perceiving the relevance of the revolution to the conditions of their own lives, and, secondly, a determination to join the struggle. The first woman fighter was of peasant origin, but had worked in a shoe factory in Asmara. She took the name Marta for a fieldname after an earlier Marta who had been active in the student movement and had been executed for attempting to hijack a plane. Another example was Hiwot Negash ('Laflaf'), a teenage servant girl, who in 1975 worked for a household of young TPLF supporters employed in a

government agricultural project in Sheraro. She insisted on accompanying them when, exposed as Front members, they fled to the field and then refused to be discouraged by the fighters' refusal to accept her (Hammond 1999: 143). Muslim women, the most subjected of all, were strong supporters of the TPLF and some of them played a prominent role.[4]

The TPLF grand narrative

The feudal structure of centralised Amhara power in Ethiopia and its administrative network of governorships and appointees depended for its legitimacy on a grand narrative or 'history' in which a mutually dependent church and monarchical state traced an unbroken 'historical' succession back to Menelik I, the firstborn son of King Solomon of Israel and the Ethiopian Queen, Sheba or Makeda, and the Ark of the Covenant he had allegedly brought back with him from Israel. Its weakness was that it depended on a hierarchical assertion of authority, backed by military force, which deprived large sectors of society of any rights at all. Even after the fall of Haile Selassie in 1974, the internalised ideology of feudal culture continued to be the determining factor in social relations. The replacement of the monarchy by a military dictatorship brought about an intensification rather than a diminution of the social and economic ills which had roused such opposition to Haile Selassie: centralised authority, Amhara domination, elites and hierarchies, repressive apparatuses of the state and suppression of non-Amhara languages and cultures. Yet the legitimating myth of feudalism continued to have hegemonic power over the Christian peasantry, although it could have no force over the large Muslim population in the south and east, however much they were forced to accept the realities of domination, or even over the smaller Muslim communities who lived as discriminated minorities among the Christian highlanders.

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[4] Saadia Ibrahim interviewed in Edaga Arbi, 24 January 1997, played a key role in organising resistance to

I argued in Chapter One that there were competing versions of the past, dependent on yet critical of feudal power, counter-histories of Tigrayan subordination based on a perception of Amhara domination, the complicity of the Tigrayan aristocracy and the unjust treatment of Tigray, particularly of the rural population. The founding members of TPLF had also absorbed these narratives. During the years of political apprenticeship in the Marxist-Leninist student movement and their months in Dedebit, the explanations and example of past and contemporary revolutionary thinkers enabled them to transform these fragmented secret histories of the oppressed into a coherent parallel 'grand narrative' which was expanded to include a vision of a future Ethiopia in which the people of Ethiopia, as nations, as minorities and as individuals, would have a voice in determining their own future in a participatory process. It not only provided an interpretation of the past which explained the necessity for revolution, although for the farming communities in rural Tigray the need was self-evident in the daily conditions of their lives, but also supplied what the farmers could not have provided for themselves, a coherent formulation of how it could be achieved. The strength of this master-narrative was its inclusiveness of the most subordinated and excluded sectors of society such as women, minority nationalities, Muslims and minority religions. It was a vision which, gaining legitimacy from practical demonstrations of land reform and administrative participation, underpinned every aspect of propaganda, agitation and political education.

In their formation of a counter-ideology to feudalism and Amhara domination, the founder members of the TPLF were undoubtedly influenced by Marxist-Leninist theory, although severely critical of its practice. However, they gradually assembled a critique of past

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the Derg troops and material support for the TPLF in the early years of establishing Edaga Arbi as the centre

implementation of Marxist-Leninist theory, including top-down doctrinaire approaches, along with the imposition of models from other countries or theoretical solutions to Ethiopia's problems which would override the cultural sensitivities of the peasants or imply coercion.

> For us, Marxism Leninism means the practical democratic participation of the mass in the day to day life of the society. For us, what is important is the objective analysis of the situation and then changing the situation step by step in conjunction with the real life of the people. I'm not interested in superimposing the experience of China or Russia. We take our own experience and put into practice our own solutions for our own problems according to our social and cultural values, the historical as well as the socio-economic experience of our people. You need concrete realities to guide you. The solution is embedded in the objective problem.[5]

The emphasis on practice implied in Jamaica's words underpinned the relations of the TPLF fighters first with rural people and, after the 1989 evacuation of Derg troops and administration, with town populations. Although the student movement had immersed itself in revolutionary theory, the core group of founder fighters reassessed many of their ideas in the light of their contact with peasant communities, in other words in the light of revolutionary *practice.* Alex de Waal notes that from the early 1980s the TPLF increasingly relinquished agricultural intervention in response to peasant demands in favour of free enterprise (Africa Watch 1991:155). They also conducted systematic studies of other revolutionary movements. The 'sacks of Marxist books' of the Dedebit days were succeeded by years of rigorous study in less nomadic situations. When I visited the Propaganda Bureau in January 1987, at that time established in large caves in the western mountains of Dejena, they were the site of a library and research centre, as well as a publishing operation of textbooks and written materials of all kinds.[6] Suitable graduates or

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of a liberated area.

[5] Yemane Kidane ('Jamaica'), founder member of the TPLF, interviewed in Mekele, 25 March 1991

[6] The term 'propaganda' in Tigray had a wider range of meanings than is usually true in the West. It referred to information dissemination generally within the revolution, without pejorative overtones, and included

12th graders among TPLF fighters were recruited from the early 1980s as part of a team researching the history and practice of all the major revolutions from the 18th century onwards to make an assessment of their strengths and weaknesses in order to learn from them and if possible avoid their mistakes. This was the background to a fundamental reassessment of their own practice in the mid-1980s, after a period of stagnation following the migrations and military setbacks associated with the 1984-5 famine, which led to the reformulation of many practical policies.

The TPLF narrative of past and future laid claim to the 'moral high ground' of lofty aims and unimpeachable practice. This not only accorded with the youthful idealism of the founders and their quasi-religious adherence to their Marxist ideals, but was also an important element in gaining the confidence of their constituency, by presenting a character as far removed as possible from the general perception of exploitative feudal culture and behaviour. The concepts and codes which structured fighters' relations with village communities chimed in many ways with the codes of behaviour already expected and encouraged in the villages. High moral standards overlap into other ethical codes governing hospitality, mutual help and seemly behaviour of all kinds. Dignity and restraint are prized and encouraged; chatterboxes, unrestrained laughter and indiscipline are not. Elders and priests, always vigilant against outside influences, regard townsfolk, Western dress, smoking and pursuits such as card playing as influences likely to be corrosive of traditional values. The young are thought of as particularly at risk and therefore even the schools, which have been established in many villages since 1995, and the new educational

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informational and educational texts. Not all the textbooks and written materials that I saw in the Propaganda Bureau were overtly political, yet in the context of serial dictatorships they would certainly have had political implications. For a start they were written in Tigrigna, instead of Amharic, and thus contravened the law; secondly, such texts as the History of Tigray would have contradicted official histories and been used to mobilise resistance; thirdly, almost any educational text used in a revolution for previously oppressed people would have had political resonance.

opportunities they bring, are viewed with some ambivalence. An important factor in the Front's successful mobilising of support in the countryside was their ability to appropriate the religious propensities and imperatives of villagers to a 'faith' in an alternative vision. The monk-like sexual and social discipline of fighters, as well as their poverty, helped to establish TPLF within the codes of good behaviour laid down by village custom, despite the fact that, once established, they would work against certain traditional attitudes, especially those which discriminated against women, Muslims, outcasts and ordinary Amhara people. This did not mean of course that all individuals, whether fighters or civilians, lived up to these ideals, but the movement itself was established as a 'noble cause' and provided moral standards by which to judge the past, the activities of the Derg and its adherents, and the backslidings or weaknesses of Tigrayan individuals. Priests, as powerful and literate village leaders, were and remain an important sector of support for the changes associated with the revolution.

This moral and idealistic framework not only united the rural population within a common struggle, but enabled both fighters and civilian population to make astonishing sacrifices for the common interest. They use the word *siwu'at,* 'one who sacrifices his life for the good and just cause of the people', for those who died in the war and translate it in English as 'martyr'. Awareness of mutual sacrifice, ties of blood, became a further factor in binding the population to TPLF support. It is as difficult to provide hard evidence to support my argument as it is to communicate the quality of the revolutionary fervour of the time to those who did not share in it. Nevertheless I will give an example which at least suggests the character of the times.

In 1997 I interviewed Hassen Shiffa, who had been k*efli hezbi* organiser from 1978 to 1982 of the district which included Endachiwa village where I was living at the time. K*efli hezbi* (Mass Bureau or Department Code 08) was the department responsible for mobilising and organising the population to support armed struggle. He drew my attention to something that had long puzzled him. Why should people willingly risk not only their own lives but also those of their children for the armed struggle?

> Why were the mothers giving their children? You have to explore this area. Why does a mother give her child, saying, 'Go, and never give your back to the enemy'? In that area of Endachiwa they gave many children. There were mothers who had given two and then gave more. What was making them give that contribution? I don't have explanations... That is what sometimes bothers me. Why should a mother do this, after sending four of her children who never returned? Normally, you see in a society, 'Had Hassen not agitated them I would have my children with me.' Even though they love you, [you expect] to see a resentment against you because she has lost four of her children. Yet when I go she salutes me; she sees me as her child. I feel for myself guilty-consciousness, but she doesn't.[7]

I found a partial answer to Hassen's question in a conversation I had with a woman in Adi Nebried, a long liberated and very politically-conscious area in the west. Eight of her nine children had become fighters, despite a general regulation that only two should be accepted from each family.

> When I see all these developments it's all worthwhile, even if my children have to die. Life is changing, particularly for women. Before, you produced with your husband, you worked with your husband. Quite apart from the oppression of the feudals, let's look at the sex oppression. You had the baby on your back while you were working, but you were still being beaten by your husband. Women were the most oppressed of all. The change when I see it now, it's so great. Now the life of the two partners is much more democratic. If you don't like each other, you leave. If you are divorced, the property is divided equally. You have your own land. It's become mutual and this is a very great development in the life of women. For me, there are more things than the days of my daughters and sons to disturb me. I have seen many heroes who died in front of me. I knew all the old fighters and

[7] Hassen Shiffa, district, then zonal, then regional organiser in Department 08, interviewed in Mekele, 8 January 1997.

> most of them are no longer with us. Their vision always knocks my mind. Death is not new, unique or strange for me.[8]

In the same interview Hassen refers to the annual celebrations of the founding of TPLF in Edaga Arbi under the noses of the Derg troops.

> Why were the people doing that, celebrating *Yekatit* (February) under the Derg? They were together in the same place – it was shocking for me. How the hell was the Derg not informed [ie. by spies] when three hundred ladies were coming together to celebrate *Yekatit*?

Despite the risks of reprisal and despite the high casualties among fighters and civilians, the armed struggle represented to the followers of TPLF the possibility of a better world for the survivors. Their faith in its achievement was maintained by the conviction of the fighters and the tangible benefits already received.

Principles, concepts and codes

A body of concepts and principles emerged as a distillation of revolutionary ideology and best practice. Some of them served for the membership and followers of TPLF as reminders of the aims and nature of the revolution rather than as slogans, which some of them in some ways resemble, and some had an influence on slogan-making, although they were not slogans in themselves. The following list is not exhaustive.

1. One of the basic tenets was the importance of *being aimed*. The principle that every fighter and supporter had to know why they were fighting and what they were fighting for was fundamental to political education. This was borne out in the large body of interviews I have conducted with survivors of Derg prisons and torture.

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[8] Dahab Tesfaye, aged 55, woman farmer, chairperson of the Baito and judge in Adi Nebried, interviewed in Adi Nebried on 17 April 1991.

Those who saw themselves or were seen by others as *aimed* were better able to resist torture and to withstand its damaging psychological effects than those who were not.[9] *Being aimed*, that is being a conscious element in the struggle against feudal oppression and the Derg, also suggests the importance of the process and nature of struggle from its inception and not just the emphasis on achieving ultimate goals.

2. The twin concepts of *struggle* and of a people *in struggle* were an important part of being aimed and also reinforced the emphasis on process. The struggle was not seen as an exclusively military struggle, but included the efforts made to improve conditions of life for people in the liberated areas through the various TPLF departments. Poverty, backward agriculture, illiteracy, soil erosion and so on were conceived as problems to be solved by the combined *struggle* of leadership and people.

3. There is a distinction between a *tegadalai* ('fighter') and a *watader* ('soldier'). The concept of a *fighter*, closely associated with the idea of 'struggle', was defined not in terms of combat, but in terms of dedication to the cause of the revolution. Only during the first few years were all fighters combat fighters. After 1978 when the Departments of Agriculture, Education, Health and so on began to be founded, all new fighters were given basic military training and then sent where their education or skills would make them most useful. All teachers, health workers, administrators and agricultural advisers in the liberated areas were unsalaried non-combat fighters, provided with accommodation and food through the *baitos* where they were working.

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[9] Berhanu Abadi, torture survivor, released from Mekele Prison in the Agazi Operation, interviewed in Min Minay, 23 February 1987. See also Ch.3, Note 19.

4. 'Self-discipline' was the principle which should regulate a fighter's conduct. The most striking example was the sexual restraint for the first ten years which marked fighters' relations with each other and with women from the villages. Villagers also remark other forms of discipline, especially non-aggressive behaviour off the battle-field.
5. The civilian equivalent of a fighter was the village militia *(weyanai)* and the female civilian cadre was called a *shig weyanit* or 'torch of the revolution', both founded in 1981. Forced recruitment was never practised in the TPLF. They had the opposite problem of too many peasants wanting to become fighters. The general policy was to accept not more than two or three recruits from each family, not only to safeguard agricultural production, but also to encourage a stratum of activists among the villagers to work with fighters in mobilising and raising consciousness in the villages.
6. The cause towards which the energies of fighters and *shig weyenti* were directed was most commonly defined in terms of 'the people', perhaps the most frequently used term of the revolution, except for 'struggle', of which 'the people' and their well-being were the justification. Working in the villages with the *kefli hezbi* (Mass Bureau) to raise consciousness was the most popular assignment and fighters working in the remote base camps and facilities in the TPLF base area frequently expressed a longing to 'go to the people'. The Tigrigna word for people, *hezbi,* was supplanted in TPLF's revolutionary language by *hafash,* a neologism closer to the Marxist concept of the broad masses.
7. The TPLF leadership held as a principle the inseparability of politics, social life and the military struggle. Out of this conviction emerged the concept of a 'liberated area' and a base area. In the base area were the institutions of the TPLF, the

command centre, training schools and hospitals, often in remote or less populated places. The base area moved several times during the seventeen year war for security reasons. However the important areas of political activity were the villages beyond the base areas, where, in the areas freed from feudal landlords or Derg administration, the farming communities were able to work with the *kefli hezbi* fighters to gain political confidence and experience in self-administration and collective problem-solving. In the mid-1980s the TPLF had a series of well-publicised disagreements with the EPLF (TPLF 1986). In one of these the TPLF was critical of the EPLF's policy of operating from a base area and 'leaving the people to the Derg', rather than sharing in and guiding the people's struggle.

8. Closely associated with the last item was the tenet stressing the inseparability of theory and practice, in which practice had primacy and was held to be the test of the validity of theory. Practice must be located within the specificities of local history and culture.
9. Benefits should accrue to the people from the beginning of the struggle. They should not be fobbed off with promises awaiting victory.
10. The people should be allowed to learn from their mistakes. Local democracy should be based on dialogue, open debate and discussion. The people must make their own decisions and not have decisions imposed on them, even if it means making mistakes.
11. The basis of political relations is knowing who is your friend and who is your enemy. For example the enemy is the Amhara ruling class, not the Amhara people.
12. During the first ten years sexual relations for fighters were forbidden.
13. Fighters must not take so much as a needle from the people without their permission and paying a fair price.

14. The TPLF must never lie to the people. The relationship with the people is built on trust (Turok 1980:123).[10]

Transforming consciousness

The TPLF vision of a new Ethiopia could ultimately only be achieved through military victory, but as important was the parallel symbolic struggle between TPLF and the Derg in which the field of battle was the consciousness of the people themselves. 'Consciousness' in this context meant encouraging in the people a new way of looking at themselves and at their world, in which the dynamics of power were fundamentally changed. Consciousness as the site of creativity and agency had to be mobilised to defeat an adversary, the state, which had hitherto been accepted as unbeatable. Fighters and civilian activists used the word frequently, and still do, to describe the degree of political awareness of different individuals and groups. That the TPLF succeeded in this to the point of victory in 1991 is unquestionable. It is less easy to determine how it was done, although TPLF leadership have rejected the conflation of political education with indoctrination, a common conviction in Western propaganda.

> 1) We can indoctrinate and indoctrinate and create somebody who can parrot slogans, but that doesn't mean that he is politically conscious in any manner. It's not the time that you spend indoctrinating a person, but the time that that person is actually involved in real political movement through which the indoctrination gets life and becomes part of the person himself. So political education without political participation of the people is, we think, futile and meaningless. [11]

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[10] Cf. Amilcar Cabral's 'Tell no lies, claim no easy victories'. The TPLF were particularly interested in African political thinkers and African liberation struggles. This was reflected in the fact that several of the early fighters took as field names the names of great African liberation leaders. Examples are Cabral who died in the war and Samora, after Samora Machel of Mozambique, a TPLF Commander who is now a Major-General in the Ethiopian army.

[11] Meles Zenawi, interviewed in the TPLF Command Centre in Dejenna on 6 February 1987. At the time he was the member of the TPLF Central Committee responsible for political education. Since 1995 he has been Prime Minister of Ethiopia.

> 2) As a member of the TPLF for nearly seventeen years, I heard the word 'indoctrination' only once or twice. 'Orientation, 'agitation' and 'education' were the buzz words.[12]

Although the most important and effective aspects of political education were rooted in the practical experience of decision-making in the people's associations of farmers, women and youth, in the *baito* assemblies and in the evaluations, as well as the experience of working their own land for the first time, yet the line can never be clearly drawn between the participatory and educational elements of political education, because they continuously overlapped.

The TPLF's conviction of the importance of political education can be gauged from the large proportion of its scarce resources and the numbers of personnel it directed to educational programmes appropriate to different sectors of the population. Apart from literacy schemes, formal education programmes were not seen as appropriate for the mass of the rural population, but were reserved for fighters and selected activists, the *weyenti* and *shig weyenti*, from the villages and small towns in the liberated areas. The huge increase in recruits to the TPLF from the towns after the 1977-8 Red Terror both enabled and made necessary a much more sophisticated training and education programme for fighters. Thereafter the organisation was able to set up the institutions which would facilitate mobilisation, education and recruitment among the peasants. Although from the end of the 1970s the mass of fighters were drawn from the rural peasants, the political education of the fighters and the people was conducted on the whole through separate programmes because peasant fighters in the training camps and political schools could be exposed to full-time education, whereas civilian activists selected for political educational programmes were constrained by the exigencies of the agricultural year from June to December.

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[12] Dr Gebre Ab Barnabas, head of the TPLF training programme for health workers in Tigray until 1991,

Kefli hezbi or Department 08

Department 08 was the Bureau for Public Affairs in Tigray, the first department to be organised. Usually called k*efli hezbi,* or the Mass Bureau in English, it was responsible for mobilising the people in the villages and small towns for the revolution. 'Propaganda' in the Tigrayan revolution has a positive, not a pejorative, nuance. When I asked the meaning of the term in this context it was defined as follows.

> In general `propaganda' means political education for the people. `Propaganda' means making them understand their problems, making them class conscious, making the mass feel what is their problem, how can it be solved? What is their role? What are their solutions? Knowing the real cause of their oppression is arming the mass.[13]

At the time I interviewed them, the Bureau was headed by two Central Committee members, one the overall head, responsible for propaganda, and the other, his deputy, responsible for organisation.[14] At the zone level there were two zone heads of organisation and propaganda; at the *wereda* level (district) four propaganda and organisation posts, one for each of the four mass associations of farmers, women, workers and youth; at the *tabia* (village) level there were four more and at the *kushet* (village sub-division), a secretary and a commissar working with a group of about twenty five. K*efli hezbi* was perhaps the most important department in the TPLF, reflecting its responsibility in recruiting and mobilising support for the revolution and sustaining the confidence of the people. Its personnel were selected from the most outstanding fighters available.[15]

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from a conversation in Sheffield, 28 July 2000.

[13] Haleka Tsegai Berhe, Head of Organisation and Propaganda , interviewed in Wukro, 11 April 1991

[14] Bitew Belay, head of organisation in *kefli hezbi* and member of TPLF Central Committee, interviewed in Dejena, 7 February 1987; 'Haleka' Tsegai Berhe, head of Organisation and Propaganda, in Wukro, 11 April 1991.

[15] Dr. Gebre Ab Barnabas, 28 July 2000.

The first and most general propaganda tool was *meberebar,* usually translated into English as 'agitation', although in fact its meaning is closer to 'induction'.[16] It is used by fighters and villagers as a positive term. The majority of people in the countryside were illiterate, so that the task of politicising the people became a labour-intensive, face-to-face, verbal task. Agitation/induction, a concept covering a range of persuasive and politicising techniques, preceded and accompanied every activity. In different contexts it could mean teaching, informing, persuading, or encouraging, outside formal educational programmes. Its use began in the later 1970s in the context of land reform and the development of the *baito* and continued after 1991 until the present to convince people to attend literacy programmes, turn up to meetings, bring children for vaccinations, register for development help or use the new micro credit banks.

At first it was fighters who used agitation, especially in k*efli hezbi*; later it became a necessary tool in the hands of village leaders and priests, *baito* executives, leaders of mass associations, and agricultural agents and cadres. The first contacts between fighters and people were seen as opportunities for agitation. In Endachiwa, according to the head priest of Zerabera Kushet, TPLF fighters had already made a good impression before they had physically appeared in the village. Their aim of liberation for Tigray and their reputation for discipline (sexual restraint) and lack of violence preceded them and contrasted favourably with EPRP ('Even they tried to force our women to have sexual intercourse') and with the Derg.

> Especially the Derg came round here killing people. These people didn't kill anybody. Even if people did crimes they didn't kill them. They took them to justice. So they are very disciplined. That's why we supported them.[17]

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[16] Ibid.

[17] Keshi Desta, chief priest of the church of St Mariam, Zerabera Kushet, Endachiwa, Adua, taped interview in Tigrigna, 22 October 1996

Kefli hezbi fighters took men from Endachiwa in groups of about five at a time to a wilderness area called Werhi where they had established a base camp and for five days agitated them 'about their aims and politics' and the historical justifications for armed struggle.[18] The priest, Keshi Desta, who was in the first group, insisted that they knew that history already: 'We knew everything about our enemies but we didn't have educated persons at that time to organise us, to lead us to fight them'.[19] He also clearly remembered the fighters using the metaphor of a fire still burning beneath the ashes, but ready 'to burst one day. We will burst it, so you have to follow us.' I have heard the 'fire from the ashes' metaphor from peasants in many different parts of Tigray to describe the relation between the first revolution and the second, which suggests that even by 1978, when they first approached Endachiwa, TPLF agitation had developed a number of agitational formulae.

However in the early years fighters discovered it was not easy to communicate effectively with rural people. Although in formal terms they all spoke Tigrigna, in practical terms the two sides, the urban fighters and the rural peasants, might as well have been speaking two different languages, according to k*efli hezbi* personnel, especially when they tried to raise political awareness in any systematic way. Hindsight makes it too easy to diminish the enormity of the task.

> To teach people new ideas, it's very hard. They don't know anything about what struggle means by itself. In our culture if someone has a gun and stands against the government, he is called a bandit. They didn't know the difference between banditry and revolution. People having power had never been seen before in Tigrayan society. So when we tell them that we are going to overthrow the Derg's government and have power in our own hands, power of the people, they can't imagine it. So although you bring your theories and say that this will happen, they never accept it …It's only because they see the revolution is very powerful that they join and feel that it's their revolution.[20]

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[18] Werhi, low-lying and malarial, is an isolated and unpopulated area between Mai Kinetal in Adua zone and Abi Adi in Tembien.

[19] Keshi Desta, 22 October 1996

[20] Iyassu Berhe, head of Cultural Department, taped interview, 15 February 1987

The different cultures of communication were made worse by the absence of any formal education in the countryside. The first series of pamphlets produced by the 08 headquarters as guides for discussion in mass associations were frequently too detailed or incomprehensible. A breakthrough came in 1981 when the peasant cadres, the armed militia (*weyenti)* and female cadres (*shig weyenti* or 'torches of the revolution'), were founded. Selected for intelligence and active participation, promising men and women were sent away to cadre schools for periods of intensive literacy and political education to be leaders and teachers of the people.[21]

Rural communities are used to subtle forms of oral poetry and use imagery in their conversation for rhetorical or humorous effect, but the language is direct, simple, non-abstract and taken from the daily experiences of rural life. Working closely with these cadres, fighters gradually developed skills in adapting political materials to the communicative modes of their peasant audience. The content of the political education was decided by the TPLF central body, but the materials were prepared every three months by a special section of the Mass Bureau in careful consultation with the peasant cadres, and tested in the mass associations.[22]

> When we teach them about the tactics of guerrilla fighting, we tell them it's like the dog and the flea. The flea jumps on the dog's back. The dog starts scratching. Then the flea jumps to another place. Soon everywhere there are fleas. They suck his blood and the dog becomes skinny and in the end it will die.[23]

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[21] Bitew Belai, 7 February 1987
[22] Ibid.
[23] Iyassu Berhe, 15 February 1987

The cadres themselves varied in their capacity, especially in the early years. One example was true or false test set by a teacher to test student *shig weyenti* in the cadre school. At first the cadres were unable to understand it.

> The lecturer was bald. One *weyanai* said, 'This old, bald man is a child. True or false?' and all the *weyenti* cried out, 'false!' So they understood it. He had clarified the idea in a way they could understand. It is the presentation which is important.'[24]

Political education was not only a matter of language. In combating superstitions of all kinds the different departments had to prove their case by different means. At a big conference for priests, Agriculture Department fighters negotiated a reduction in holidays from work on holy days. When hailstorms subsequently damaged crops, farmers, encouraged by the priests, were convinced that God was angry, so the fighters 'took fridges to the priests and told them to put water inside. We showed them that ice was formed by cold temperatures, that it was a scientific matter, not a religious problem'[25]

Agitation was a powerful and necessary tool, but the bonds between *kefli hezbi* fighters and peasant communities were established by actions rather than words, by working closely together, by sharing a common life style, but most of all by the experience of the 1974-5 famine. The fighters responsible for each village travelled with their village groups, supporting their morale and carrying the children and the sick, hiding them from MiG bombings during the day. Political education continued in the refugee camps in the Sudan, where EDU activists competed unsuccessfully for followers with the TPLF. 'They carried our children on their shoulders'; 'We saw their tears when our people died.' These are the memories cited most frequently by villagers when asked to account for the close ties with *wedeb*.

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[24] Bitew Belai, 7 February 1987.

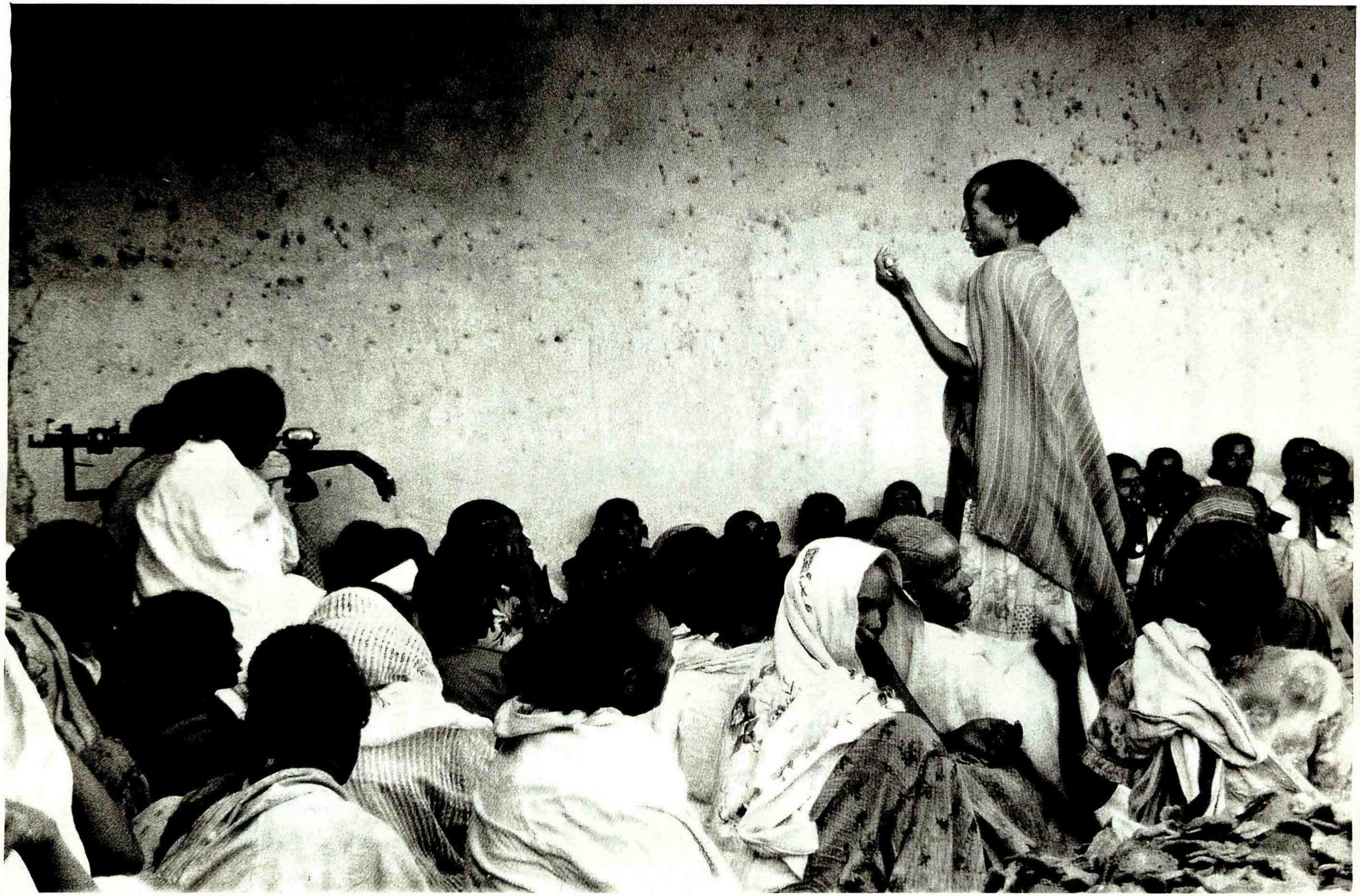
Mobilising women

Kefli hezbi singled women out for special attention 'because women have special problems arising from their history and experience, therefore separate organisation is essential so they can become part of the general struggle of the people.'[26] 'Separate organisation' meant separate associations in which women could talk over their specific problems, increase their understanding of the forces oppressing them and gain confidence to struggle for equal rights. The main responsibility for mobilising women in the villages was taken by women fighters, and the process enabled them to confront these issues themselves in their own lives and in the TPLF. The first women's fighters started the earliest form of the women's association in 1976, during the second year of the armed struggle, as a women fighters' committee with about seven or eight members. Their aims were to mobilise women to join the armed struggle, to set up mass associations for village women, set policies for women and get land for women through land reform.[27]

The most valuable contribution made by women fighters, both before and after the expansion of their numbers in 1977-8, was in mobilising peasant women in the villages. In Tigrayan society what women and men did and did not do was laid down in fixed binary terms. Woman's place was in the home and her primary duties were domestic. Yet by the mid-1980s, between 25% and 30 % of *baito* members were women and about a third of all fighters. The great majority were peasants. Large numbers of women activists (*shig weyenti*) were also working in the villages as cadres. In *wereda* towns like Adi Nebried,

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[25] Belai Gebremedhin, responsible for TPLF agriculture in Region 1 (Western Tigray), interviewed at the Tekezze Agricultural Project, 1 February 1987.
[26] Aregash Adane, Central Committee member, member of the Women Fighters' Association, interviewed at Dejena Command Post, 5 January 1987.
[27] Kidusan Nega, Chairperson of the Women's Association of Tigray (WAT), interviewed in Mekele, 6 April 1996.



A Woman's Association meeting in Sheraro in 1987

Adi Hagerai and Sheraro, women were among the executives of the *baito*. In others, women were respected judges in local courts. How did the TPLF achieve this level of participation in a society in which women had been more or less confined to the domestic sphere and in which femaleness had been inherently inferior?

Some of the first women fighters began to contact rural women before they even became fighters. Soon after the founding of the TPLF in Dedebit in February 1975, a group of young women who had also been radicalised by the student movement and TNO, began work for an agricultural project (TAADU) near Sheraro in western Tigray.[28] They were conscious of the importance of the peasants to a revolutionary struggle, but also of their own ignorance and wanted 'to adjust to the life of the peasants'.[29] The project itself was a hotbed of political opposition. In the interval of about a year, before it became a proscribed organisation and its administrator arrested, they decided to use their time there to make links with village communities.

> We tried to adjust ourselves in order to be accepted as much as possible, to wear the same clothes and adjust our style of life, our style of talking and standard of life to that of the peasants. Women with trousers and shoes could not build the confidence of peasant women at that particular time. The male section of society was afraid that women would rebel against them. We tried to convince the men too that the problems of women were the problems of society and not a problem of men. But especially the feudals were opposing our attempts to politicise women.[30]

The feudal organisation, *Teranafit* (EDU), also opposed to the Derg, worked to subvert potential threats from TAADU, which was agitating for health centres, or from the 'land to the tiller' sympathies of its young personnel. They used the women's issue to distort TPLF

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[28] Some women fighters joined the struggle in eastern Tigray and some in the west. Those who worked for TAADU in the west included Aregash Adane, for a long time the only woman on TPLF Central Committee, and Roman Gebreselassie, who was to become Secretary of the Women Fighters' Association.
[29] Aregash Adane, Mekele, 10 April 1991
[30] Ibid.

views to the farmers, working on male fears of female insubordination, and women's fears of abandonment and inferiority, that 'we were going to take their husbands because we couldn't find husbands for ourselves in the towns, that we were educated and could manage houses better.'[31] *Teranafit* represented the project workers as a threat to the family and marriage and 'the women were trying to close their doors against us'. However the TAADU women employees, in typical fashion, 'prepared a paper, studied the question and tried to make ourselves more conscious.' They persisted in their contacts with women in all the places women gathered, exchanging life stories, explaining themselves: 'We were students, we wanted to share their problems, help with their children, their health, discuss all the issues of their life, help with the grinding, to handle their children and wash them.' Their understanding grew of effective ways of approaching farming communities in order to avoid misunderstanding, but, ironically, they also gained in household skills, at least as they were conceived in the village, as the peasant women did not think much of the students' expertise in cooking or housework and became their teachers. The contact became a two-way process 'so we were educated by their lives and their descriptions of life and this made us more revolutionary and committed to the struggle'. Most importantly, however, they grasped some of the psychological and cultural complexities which had to be the context for any politicising process.

> We realised that opposition is not simple, even a non-feudal can misunderstand a political line. Non-feudal men can support the idea of feudals, therefore we realised the struggle would not be simple, that women are fearful about educated women and women influence their husbands. The other deep impression was that once we contacted women they became deeply involved in what we spoke and taught and then very sympathetic and interested in everything we raised. We tried to raise issues appropriate to their lives. They became enthusiastic about expressing their views and their sense of oppression.[32]

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[31] Ibid.

After these women went 'to the field' as fighters and were joined by others, this first contact with peasant women was replicated again and again, as new areas were liberated, but by this time women fighters were gaining expertise and passing it on in appropriate training, eventually through *kefli hezbi*. It was impossible to persuade women to come out to meetings, so the women fighters went to their homes, to the springs where they filled the water jars, to stand with them in the churches on Sundays and feast days, to cook with them in preparation for the feasts of St Michael and St Mariam, but the initial contacts remained problematic. At this early stage the contested space for revolutionary struggle were women's bodies themselves (Cf. Comaroff and Comaroff 1992:69f; Bourdieu 1977:94).[33]

> At first, when we were a few, when we were starting as fighters, wearing trousers, shorts, carrying guns, with short hair, without any decoration, they didn't imagine we were women. They said: "You are not a woman. You must be a man. How can a woman hold a gun? How can a woman go fighting? You are not a woman," they said. To show them we were women we had to show them our breasts![34]

Neither did women fighters have an easy ride within the organisation itself. With a few exceptions like Marta and Laflaf, the first women fighters were urban women who had been politicised by the student movement in the towns. Before the Red Terror forced the Front to absorb large numbers of women who fled to the field to save their lives, the organisation encouraged women supporters to work in the underground movement in the

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[32] Ibid

[33] Bourdieu points out that 'societies ... that seek to produce a new man through a process of 'deculturation' and 'reculturation' set such store on the seemingly most insignificant details' of appearance and behaviour, thus 'em-bodying' principles beyond the reach of consciousness. There is little doubt that the transformation in the appearance of women fighters and their rejection of traditional proscriptions regarding women's dress played a significant part in the redefinition of female identity and capacity in the civil war. After the war, interestingly, opposition media in Addis Ababa (newly liberated, ironically) expressed their political distrust as scorn for the appearance of EPRDF women fighters. Within a few months most women fighters decided they could achieve more politically if they adopted the appearance conventions of elite women in the capital, straightened hair, make-up and suits.

[34] Harnet Yohannes, woman fighter, programme presenter and main singer for *Dimtsi Weyane Tigray* (Voice of the Tigray Revolution), TPLF radio, interviewed at the Propaganda Bureau, 4 January 1987.

towns rather than joining the guerrilla forces in the countryside. The established gender discourse of women's weakness and special needs (menstruation) were evidently enough of an influence to persuade the early fighters that, despite their theoretical Marxist position on the political inclusion and equality of women, women would not be able to handle the physical demands of a small mobile fighting force.

> There were hardly any women in TPLF. Their acceptance of women was a long process. At first all I knew was that the organisation was reluctant to accept women fighters because the natural things that make us different from men were seen as an obstacle. The discussions went like this: "We are poor. We often have to do without food. We have to travel fast. How can we provide such things as panties or pads for menstruation? Even if pads cannot be provided, there have to be clean clothes and this is not possible. If people are starving, how can an organisation provide pads, when we have not even enough clothes to cover ourselves from the rain?" I don't believe they were saying women have no role to play, but at that early stage of organisation it seemed a great problem. In fact it has never been solved completely. It has been one of the biggest problems of female fighters.[35]

In a few cases they were forced to accept women agents, like Aregash Adane and Roman Gebreselassie, to save their lives and it was the fortitude and determination of these women which persuaded the male fighters that there was a place for women in the field even at this early stage. Other women, like Lemlem Gesesse, Mebrat Beyene, Yeobmar Asfaw and Heriti Meheret-Ab gained acceptance through sheer persistence. After this first group was accepted, there was a long period when TPLF refused to accept any more women into its ranks, which put the few women fighters under intense pressure.

> It is easier to prove our equality to the men physically than mentally, so we refused to carry less than the men. There were very few of us, widely scattered, but if we met, the first things we gave each other were words of encouragement: "Never show you're tired. Don't let them make you carry less." We not only helped each other physically, but gave each other moral support as well. Even if men had to stay behind for some reason, we were in every battle. In addition to our own guns, female fighters always helped with the heavy guns.[36]

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[35] Lemlem Gesesse, woman fighter, interviewed in London in Tigrigna in July 1988.
[36] Ibid.

As time went on they were to see the limitations of this emphasis on physical equality. According to Aregash Adane, discriminatory attitudes towards women recruits increased as fighters' numbers expanded, especially of peasants. The inevitable confrontations provoked the positive outcome of intense political discussions 'on what were the problems of women, what was the political position of women.'

> The men were trying to say women were not equal, based on a very narrow definition of equality. We also had a very narrow idea of equality. We were trying to assert there was no difference, even physically. We said our background affected us, because we had no opportunities. That was why we were weak. If we were given equal opportunities we would be equal. Anyway with these extreme views from both sides, equality could not come.[37]

Women fighters eventually rejected physical capacity as a criterion of equality and, through a combination of debate and experience, decided that 'equality is measured by participation in political, economic and social life, the productive activities of society, their understanding of the political condition, their capacity for leadership in different fields of activity, their capability of handling different problems of society.'[38] They also came to understand that 'you cannot convince any individual or oppressed sector of society through theoretical discussion and you cannot convince men through political discussion or argument on the equality of women.'[39] If women were to be accepted as equal, they would have to demonstrate their participation and their capability in practical situations.

Political debates, formal and informal, within TPLF as a whole and between women fighters in particular, about the nature of women's equality and ways of achieving it continued throughout the 1980s. Successive policies were decided on the basis of these

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[37] Aregash Adane, 10 April 1991
[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid.



A woman ploughs her own land

ideas and changed as practical implementation revealed the ideas themselves to be flawed. The two important U-turns were on women ploughing and women as combat fighters, the 'practical situations' which seemed more than anything else to have 'proved' women's equality. The overthrow of these ancient prohibitions, against women ploughing (in the civilian sphere) and women as soldiers (in the military sphere), in themselves became icons of women's equality. In every village, women cadres had learned the hitherto exclusively male skills of ploughing and passed them on to other village women; all female recruits received military training alongside men and, except for those with sufficient education to work in the departments, they joined combat units. The sight of women performing these tasks successfully, as well as speaking out in public assemblies for the first time, did more to shock men out of customary contempt for women than any amount of agitation and women recruits began to flock to TPLF from rural communities.

However by the mid-1980s evidence was accumulating that the benefits to women of these activities were more in appearance than substance. The policies were discussed thoroughly in the 1987 Women Fighters' Congress and it was decided to abandon them. The reasons for rethinking the policy on encouraging women to plough their own land was not a change of principle, but an effect of the overall burden of women's work. The women's leadership were open about the mistakes (Hammond 1990: 68, 117).[40] The original plan had been to involve only those capable of bearing the extra work of ploughing, but 'the policy was not guided properly' and the enthusiasm generated by such a radical policy sent it out of control in terms of numbers, while insufficient attention was given to the political work of preparing men to accept it.[41] Some priests laid the blame for the 1984-5 famine on women, asserting that God was angry because women were ploughing. After 1987 women were not

[40] See Hammond (1990) for full transcriptions and explanations from Aregash Adane and Geday Legesse.

forbidden to plough, but no longer actively encouraged to do so.[42] The long-term policy was to solve the problem of women's unacceptable workload through the provision of grinding mills, local water supply, alternative fuels and fuel-efficient stoves. However, although a start was made when Marta School graduates began to teach the construction of alternative stoves, the Congress acknowledged that substantial improvements for women could not happen until the defeat of the Derg enabled the expansion of material resources for development in peacetime.

The TPLF women's leadership also revised their stand on accepting women as combat fighters. They had come to recognise that many women could not cope with the physical conditions of the combat forces, although the ones who were fit enough would be able to continue (Hammond 1999:415).[43] More important than the issue of women's physical capability was the argument that their inclusion in combat might be deleterious for their equality in the long-term by preventing their involvement in the political and economic development of the society as a whole. At the same time the involvement of women in non-combat activities presupposed their education up to at least fifth grade, so that although there were new opportunities for some, especially in health work, there was an overall reduction in the numbers of women fighters from the 30% there had been before 1988. The majority of women fighters were in the combat forces and, according to Aregash, 'they were furious'. There were many heated discussions in local meetings of the Women Fighters Association (WFAT) and finally a conference. The policy change also 'created resentment in the villages', where most women fighters came from, 'because being a fighter was such a liberation for them'.

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[41] Geday Legesse, woman agricultural cadre, interviewed on the Sudan border, 31 May 1989

[42] In Endachiwa in 1997 one woman, a single parent, was still ploughing her own land.

[43] A considerable number of women continued in the TPLF army until the end of the war, including women commanders, some of whom were in the forces who captured Addis Ababa in May 1991.

> We have by ourselves created those feelings through the way we have conducted the course of the revolution. It has demanded an effort to make them understand that change of policy, that the change is eventually in the interest of their equality and of the struggle in general. [44]

The Front's leadership, looking ahead in 1988-9 to the end of the war and planning accordingly, were seeing the dangers in creating a force which saw itself as an elite and separate from, even superior to, the rest of society, an unacceptable attitude which was only a hairsbreadth away from the invaluable contribution fighters were making as role models to the civilian communities. The risks of combat fighters becoming 'uprooted from the active life of society, forming their own groups and sections' were not so relevant to the fighters working in or for the departments, whose work was involved with the farming communities and whose training continuously emphasised the importance of 'the people'. The TPLF view was that the future well-being of women lay with the latter group and with the development of their participation in the *baito* and administrative activities.

The Mass Associations

TPLF's aim of transferring the task of agitation, at least in part, to representatives and organisations of the people was achieved mainly through the mass associations (MAs). The twin tenets underpinning agitational work ('Draw them to practical work, not theory' and 'You teach them by guiding them to organise themselves') guided the fighters through the introduction of land reform in Sobeya as early as 1976.[45] Two years later *kifli hezbi* began to organise the people into farmers, women and youth associations, believing that political education was more effective if it were appropriately directed through interest groups, in which members could discuss relevant problems and gain confidence in speaking out,

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[44] Aregash Adane, interviewed in a mobile camp in Tembien, 9 June 1989
[45] Haleka Tsegai Berhe, Vice-President of the Tigray Regional Government with responsibility for law and justice, Mekele, 10 May 1997

learning to express ideas and criticisms in public fora in ways that had previously been forbidden.[46]

The MAs were TPLF organisations, but membership was voluntary and their members were not all members of the Front. Membership was predicated on activism, either as a fighter, a *shig weyane* (village cadre), a *weyanai* (militia) or an individual activist peasant. The *baitos* were the elected councils of the people, independent of the TPLF. The way they sought to influence decisions in the *baito* was through the MAs, led by trained village cadres. The relationship was clearly set out in a conversation in 1987:

> The TPLF influences the decisions of the *baitos* through the mass associations. Mass associations are members of the TPLF, so we try to educate them what type of policies and principles ought to be used in their state organs. They send their representatives to the founding congress of the *baito*. In the congress they discuss everything, plans for the *baito* for the next two or three years, policies, agrarian rules and regulations and so on and so forth. Now, by and large, what we educate the peasants the peasants accept and enforce it in the congress, but not always. Sometimes there are variations. In some areas we have things the way we would like them to go, almost 100%. In some areas 90% or 85%.[47]

Revolutionary changes, voted on by *baito* assemblies, implemented by the executives and codified as laws in the *serits* of every district, had previously been discussed by the MAs: the laws on land, the marriage laws, the prohibitions on discrimination on the grounds of gender, religion or place of origin, prohibitions on cutting and felling of trees and so on. In this way, communities had time to consider the issues, discuss them formally and informally, and form opinions with no pressure. The role of *kefli hezbi* was not only to persuade them to accept ideas which the TPLF thought would be good for them and society, but also to train them to think for themselves and in the longer run be able to protect their interests against powerful,

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[46] There were no industries in Tigray, but in the small towns there were very small Workers' Associations for teachers, hand weavers, health workers and so on.
[47] Meles Zenawi, 5 January 1987

reactionary forces, which, in the TPLF's view, would always be waiting in the Ethiopian wings to make a come-back in the future.

In 1987 in Sheraro I sat in on a Women's Association meeting to find out how it worked in practice. It was January in the dry season when there is more time for meetings. About a hundred and fifty women sat in the shade of a large open-sided barn and listened to Medhin Gebrehiwot, *shig weyanit* and the chairperson of the Sheraro Women's Association, talking from a text. It presented the theme of 'prison' within a simple Marxist analysis: that it emerged with private ownership and class society as an instrument for controlling the oppressed classes and a means for exploitation by the ruling class. 'Where there is oppression there is also struggle; where there is struggle there is also prison.' It looked at the expansion of the prison system and the development of torture under Emperors Menelik and Haile Selassie and the Derg and surveyed the history of resistance, especially since 1975. It dwelt particularly on Mekele prison, 'because it was built during the first *Weyane* in 1943 and because our struggle has developed from that day to this.' (Since the audacious raid a year earlier when TPLF had released eighteen hundred prisoners from Mekele prison, there had been extensive coverage throughout Tigray of the prisoners' experiences.) Rather like a sermon, it ended with a short homily in which a moral lesson was drawn.

> But we Tigrayans we bear this torture, this oppression, and under this we are struggling for our total emancipation and surely we will be victorious. The Derg has imprisoned many innocent Tigrayans, but also many members of the TPLF. These have faced terrible torture with strength, because of their faith in their organisation. So this teaches us that a person must have an aim, an outlook, that a person who is a part of an organisation will be strong and if we are to struggle against our enemy we must be strong.[48]

[48] Women's Mass Association meeting, led by Medhin Gebrehiwot, Sheraro, 11 January 1987

The meeting was then thrown open to discussion and different women, about a dozen in all, gave their own views on the topic. These ranged from references to the experiences of prison and torture experienced by members of their family, to family memories of the First *Weyane* and reminders of the Derg assaults on Sheraro a few years earlier.

On a number of key issues the TPLF mobilisers met with stiff opposition. One of these was the equality and participation of women. Another was the Eritrean question. The people did not understand why their organisation should support either in principle or in military campaigns a secessionist struggle. They could not perceive Eritrea as a different country or understand the colonial argument; they only saw that the highlanders shared a common language and culture and a common history under the Axumite Empire.[49] A third issue was the TPLF's principled distinction between the Amhara ruling class and the Amhara people, who they believed to be as oppressed and downtrodden as the Tigrayan people, but the peasants whose stories of the depredations of the armies of Menelik and Haile Selassie were passed from generation to generation, were not easily convinced.

> In the beginning the people were totally against the Amhara. They wanted to kick the Derg soldiers we captured to express their hatred. They said the Amhara did this, they did that, but we said the Amhara oppressed people are your friends. We tried to show them it was only the Amhara ruling class that oppressed them. We tried to show them their class enemies. Now the situation is improved, but the old people don't accept very much. Especially if they were in the First *Weyane*, they are against the whole of the Amhara.[50]

In fact in 1988 the TPLF carried out a daring programme of political education on this subject. They intended introducing new military strategies which involved attacking the core of the enemy command, which once dismantled would leave the mass of the army

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[49] Bitew Belai, 7 February 1987.
[50] Ibid.

leaderless and scattering. They started a campaign of agitation and training of local peasant communities to capture the fleeing Derg soldiers and, instead of killing them, bring them in as prisoners of war. The Derg soldiers had committed many atrocities in the villages and 'one of the most difficult things about our military tactic is convincing the people that those who are burning their huts are not the enemy.'[51] The TPLF used prisoners of war who already felt that their orders had been criminal, to convince villagers face to face that they were ordinary human beings and not monsters.

> They will go to a village and say, 'We have burned your huts. We have also our own huts in our own village. We have been forced out of them. We came here. We were given guns and ordered to shoot and to burn your houses. If we didn't, we would die. So, in order to save our lives we had to burn your huts. That's very bad, and criminal and we regret it, but that's a fact.' A very simple statement like this would immediately change the outlook of the peasants. From a state of hostility you see a feeling of sympathy towards the plight of the ordinary soldier, the fact that he has been forced to leave his wife and his children, taken to a place he has never seen before and forced to fight.[52]

In early 1991, before the end of the war, when I was researching the earlier history of the twentieth century, including the First *Weyane*, I could discover little sign of hatred for the Amhara people as a whole. Perhaps the TPLF campaign had made a difference or perhaps the consistent military successes against the Derg or the formation of a united front in 1989 with the Amhara front, EPDM, had reconciled veterans of the 1943 uprising to Amharas in general, or perhaps they had learned to be circumspect in expressing their views. These strategies not only led to military victories, but also to the capturing of huge numbers of Amhara and Oromo prisoners of war. Many of them, after receiving political education in the camps, joined EPDM, since 1989 within the EPRDF coalition, or the newly-formed Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO) and began to fight against the Derg.

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[51] Meles Zenawi, interviewed near Tsebri, 9 June 1989
[52] Ibid.

Chapter 5

Developing 'democracy' and local government institutions

Introduction

In January 1997 I was invited to a wedding in Endachiwa. The *arci*, the group of young men who dance with the bridegroom and sustain him through the wedding and the first week of marriage, were dressed as an iconised form of TPLF fighter, in a compendium of styles associated with fighters (very short shorts, tight-fitting tee-shirts, shin guards, long hair and head bands), which suggests an influence of the TPLF on village youth culture even six years after the war. However, there were two other incidents which indicated a more profound influence and which could not have occurred before the advent of the TPLF. The first was that the coordinators of the dance were elected; the second, that when the young men grew unruly, invading dances designated for particular groups like women, old women, or old men, certain elders and priests stopped the celebrations to hold a *gemgam* or evaluation of the young people's behaviour, to 'tell them off' and encourage an alternative model of behaviour. This illustrated graphically how the language, concepts and practices of democratic institutions introduced in TPLF controlled areas have penetrated even such traditional events as village weddings and other activities of village life not normally associated with political change. Of course interventions by elders and priests, particularly to mediate disputes, were not new, but they were couched in a new language and the practice of evaluation as a fundamental part of the now entrenched rural democracy, I have seen used to criticize priests and elders themselves.

In this chapter we will look more closely at how the development of the institutions of decision-making, administration and justice featured in securing support and participation from the Tigrayan people for the revolution. These institutions were the decision-making body (*baito* assembly), the administrative body (*baito* executive), the local community court (*ferdibaito*) and the evaluation procedure *(gemgam*). We shall also examine the *serit* or code of laws which underpinned local government operations.

The theory of democracy in the TPLF

The word *democracia* (or its English counterpart) is frequently heard in Tigray from the regional government level to the village. However, as it is a notoriously unstable concept, we should focus on its interpretation and implementation in Tigray. First of all, the equation of 'democracy' with its Western definitions, implying liberal constitutions, political parties, periodic elections, the rule of law, press freedom, and civic institutions free of government control, does not necessarily coincide with democratic priorities in other parts of the world. Even in the West these elements have evolved over hundreds of years. In Africa, concepts of democracy emphasise rights and a consciousness of rights derived from specific histories of oppression or deprivation: for example the right to freedom from colonial oppression, closely allied to the right to self-determination. It is in this context that Meles Zenawi's definition of TPLF as anti-imperialist and anti-feudalist should be viewed.[1] A second democratic right of importance in Africa is the right to life, to survival, comprising the rights to a minimum level of nutrition, health, shelter and a share of land to work and produce food. In addition, the peoples of Ethiopia had a right to peace, progress and the development only possible in peace time. The right to vote has been less

[1] For my understanding of TPLF political theory I am indebted to a series of conversations and interviews I held with Meles Zenawi between 1987 and 1991, in addition to my independent observations of their working institutions from 1987 to 1997. This conversation took place 5 January 1987. In 1987 Meles Zenawi

prioritised, despite elections featuring in the earliest forms of participatory democracy introduced in Tigray from 1976.

The TPLF developed as a liberation front in the absence of any possibility of legal and democratically articulated dissent. Their awareness of Emperor Haile Selassie's successful 'divide and rule' policy made unification of resistance groups desirable. The leadership began to work towards unity from the time they left Dedebit. Consensus, as a means of avoiding factions, became a priority not only in their own decision-making, but in the forms of political organisation developed under their guidance in the countryside. In fact the slow processes of discussion and debate to achieve consensus became an important part of villagers' political education. In village assemblies, discussion and evaluation became the preferred ways and always preceded voting, often a last resort.

The TPLF leadership has denied applying external political models, claiming their methods developed organically from their own needs.[2] They defined TPLF's political orientation as 'revolutionary democracy'. Its short-term aim was freedom from the Derg dictatorship through armed struggle and the structural and political changes which would prevent the revival of dictatorship, particularly the devolution of power to the regions after 1991 and reorganisation of the armed forces. Its long-term aim was freedom from underdevelopment and poverty for the peoples of Ethiopia, which TPLF analysts attributed to feudal domination and extraction. Although this second aim had to wait until peacetime allowed the momentum of armed struggle to be transferred to the struggle for development, with the necessary refocusing of human and material resources, the strategies of the development campaign depended largely on the participatory structures and new political

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was on the Politburo and Central Committee of the TPLF, responsible for politics, and in 1989 he became chairman of TPLF and EPRDF.

[2] Meles Zenawi, 5 January 1987.

cultures that had been slowly constructed during the armed struggle before 1991. In order to replace feudal relations of production they had to reconstitute social and political relations on a new model. Thus from the beginning they parted company with traditional Marxist models based on autocratic centralism by diffusing power from the centre to the regions, and within the federal states to local districts with strong inputs from village administrations. Some argue that regional self-determination is not new, but a return to past practice.

> Even if you go to the past, to the times of fiefdoms and kingdoms in Ethiopia, the provinces have always managed their own affairs - their administration, police, courts. Therefore we are going back in a more modern way.[3]

TPLF's ability to present revolutionary initiatives as developments from a familiar past undoubtedly aided their acceptance.

They encouraged maximum participation as a means to the construction of the hegemonic consent that; according to Meles Zenawi, was the only way of safeguarding revolutionary change and the surest guarantee of the rights of different sectors of the population.

> For this revolution to be successful it has to have the support of the people. Otherwise it will be open to either internal degeneration or external blackmail and defeat …Any other way of doing it would not only be undemocratic, but also self-defeating because, as far as we are concerned, socialism is built by the people, not for the people by somebody else. Any system that is given in charity can be taken away at any time. So we believe we should continue this process of active participation of the people in their political life.[4]

In principle, there was no one definition of democracy, because, except for certain constraints, it was conceived as a party comprising different political trends and opinions,

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[3] Taye Aske-Selassie, Constitutional Commissioner, Addis Ababa, 22 March 1994
[4] Meles Zenawi, 5 January 1987.

as a way of making the widest possible appeal to the Tigrayan population.[5] However the absence of experience or preconceptions about democracy in the rural people, meant that the body of practice which began to emerge in the liberated areas in the late 1970s inevitably became 'democracy' for them. The 'constraints' on freedom of opinion in TPLF were anti-feudalism and anti-imperialism, their minimum common programme.

> By democratic front, we mean an anti-feudal, anti-imperialist organisation, an organisation that is struggling to put a stop to imperialist domination, feudal backwardness … All other peoples outside this restricted sector have the right to organisation, free speech and expression and all the normal democratic rights.[6]

In Ethiopia, under both the Transitional Government (TGE 1991-1995) and the EPRDF Government, elected into power in 1995, there have been different levels and categories of democratic practice. At the macro or country-wide level, the TGE established a federal system which sought to give self-determining power (according to the 1995 constitution *up to and including secession*) to thirteen regions, reflecting the most populous of the multiple nationalities which make up Ethiopia.[7] Minority nationalities were given the right to autonomous organisation as a zone or a *wereda*, depending on population numbers, and could elect representatives to the regional parliament.[8] For the first time since Menelik II, local administration, education and justice could be conducted in local languages. In 1995 the first nation-wide general elections launched Ethiopia as a representative parliamentary democracy with a (theoretically) multi-party system of central and regional government.[9]

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[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.
[7] The many small nationalities in the south of Ethiopia voted to combine within a Region called The Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' State (SNNPS).
[8] An example is the Agew nationality in Amhara State, Region Three. In 1994 I attended the Founding Congress of the Agew people in Sekota, Amhara Region. The Agew in Amhara are found in two localities. The first, in Sekota and its environs, was organised as a zone; the other, with a smaller population, to the south of Lake Tana, was organised as a *wereda*.
[9] There have been teething problems. It is taking time to establish responsible opposition parties, although more opposition parties and candidates were prepared to stand in the second general elections in 2000.

However this thesis is more concerned with the evolution of popular power through participatory systems of administration and decision-making at village level, a process begun as soon as TPLF began to organise in the countryside. Multiparty parliamentary democracy adopted at the levels of regional and central government was never deemed appropriate in the countryside, where it could only introduce or encourage factional divisions to subvert the unity hard won by *kefli hezbi* and the early fighters.

Integral to TPLF theory was the importance of practice and what worked, so that their view of democracy was not a set of theories cast in stone, but the result of constantly evolving negotiations with the peasants about the transfer of decision-making power to the villages. Of course they started with some firm political principles influenced by the Marxist-oriented student movement of the early 1970s. However the differences between the various movements suggest that the TPLF made some unique contributions of their own, notably the special status and respect accorded to 'the people'. The importance of establishing active consent to the revolution meant accepting that the process of devolving and diffusing power into the hands of the people themselves could only proceed at a pace the majority could follow and understand.

> There is no point in trying to speed things up, because unless there is somebody to carry it, who will do it? We can't enforce anything. If we try to enforce anything on the peasants and at the same time fight the Derg then we are stuck in thin air. So we let the peasants go their own way. We try to convince them through practice in a protracted process. Once they hold it through this protracted process, they are sure not to forget it at any time, so when they hold it, they hold it fast, and we want it to be held that way, so that any problems that may be created, any defeats that we may have to face, would not dismantle what we have done.[10]

Yet they believed that politicisation did not proceed at an even pace. According to Meles Zenawi in 1987, different factors could cause it to slacken or speed up so that 'what might

take several years in Tigray may not necessarily take that many years in the rest of Ethiopia'. The long, slow democratising process in the Tigrayan villages would underpin an accelerated political process in the newly-liberated towns and, more controversially, eventually have an impact on the political atmosphere in the rest of Ethiopia:

> … not only because the ruling class will start to crumble, but also because in the meantime the movement of the people in the rest of Ethiopia will increase and grow, as the people become more active politically and as competing political organisations compete democratically and in the heat of the revolutionary struggle, in the heat of active political participation of the people, the people will be ready and will be capable of choosing whom to follow, whom to accept, the principles to struggle for. [11]

The origin of the *baito*

Of the four interlocking local government institutions considered here, the main instrument of local government was the *baito*. There were two sets of influences on its development. First, it evolved out of consultative methods of collective problem-solving in village communities; second, it developed on the back of considerable political organising and education carried out in the villages by *kefli hezbi*, especially in the mass organisations of farmers, women and youth.

The Tigrigna word *baito* referred, in an older usage, to a village assembly and only by extension to the local administration it elected. Although village assemblies had existed before 1975, their function had been completely different.

> During Haile Selassie there was the *danya*, the *tabia* [village] judge. During this time of the *danya*, he or the *chika* could call the people and discuss their individual problems. There was no discussion about how to solve the social problems, the political problems. The only thing was to fulfil the *ristis* [local land tenure system] and the other necessary things for the feudals, like *risti*, *feses*, *asrat* [types of taxes] For example, if any accident had happened in the village like a fire, there would be a collection in the village for the victim. They would

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[10] Meles Zenawi, 5 January 1987

[11] Meles Zenawi, interviewed at the Dejena Command Post, 6 February 1987.

> give a small amount of money to the victim and a large amount, like eighty per cent, would go to the *chikashum*, the coordinator of the village.[12]

In the First *Weyane*, village assemblies were specially summoned as a means of organising the revolt and hammering out political objectives and demands, but they had been called *gareb*. There was no precedent for an assembly gathered to administer themselves. Under the TPLF, the assembly became the most important of the decision-making bodies in the *wereda* or the village, as no decisions made by the higher executive bodies could be implemented without acceptance and ratification by the *baito*. *Baito* executives in Sobeya claim the 1976 land reform as the foundation of their *baito*,[13] whereas TPLF assert that the first *baito* was established in Sheraro in 1980 (TPLF 1988). However, the pattern of consultation followed in Sobeya in 1976 was essentially the same as that followed in the early years of the struggle for problem solving, for setting up the *baitos* after 1979, including Mekele town *baito* after 1989, and even for establishing terms of the Constitution debate in 1994:

1. Setting the task or identifying the problem.
2. A meeting of all the people called by village leaders to discuss the issue and elect a small group to propose and draft solutions with the *kefli hezbi* fighters of their locality.
3. Circulation of these for community discussion, through the MAs.
4. Meeting of whole community to discuss, amend, reject or endorse proposals.

Development of the *baito* system

By the early 1980s a large part of the countryside was in the hands of the Front. From the early days in Agame the mobilising strategy of *kefli hezbi* was to work with village

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[12] Tsegai Weldemichael, farmer and chairman of Endachiwa *baito*, interviewed in Endachiwa, 31 October 1996.
[13] Gebretsadiq Abadi, Vice-chairman of Sobeya *baito* administration, interviewed in Sobeya, 21 February 1997

communities and influence and guide them to take increasing charge of their affairs. Fighters were assigned to work in every village and the local *kefli hezbi* office was established in the *wereda* town, supervising political education and mobilisation work in local villages. To this end the *wereda*, rather than the zone, was established as the power base for local government, first conducted by *kefli hezbi* and after 1980 by the *wereda baito* of the people. This was a departure from the administrative practice under Haile Selassie and the Derg, for whom the provincial capital was the apex of administrative power, followed closely by the *awraja* towns, which were the sites of government offices and courts. Poor farmers living at a distance could spend several days travelling on foot to conduct business, as well as having to find accommodation and living expenses. The *wereda* town on the other hand was much more accessible and a trip could be completed within one day.

As early as 1980 replacing both the old feudal institutions and the interim TPLF management at *wereda* level by democratic district assemblies was well under way (Wake and Assefa, 1990, Barnabas 1997) and sixty such local governments had been established in different parts of Tigray (Barnabas 1997:68). The *baito* was elected by a local congress. At the village level an assembly of the community met to elect the council and discuss the programme, whereas at the *wereda* level delegates from the surrounding villages and invited observers attended the congress. Arrangements were made by an elected Preparatory Committee whose job included reviewing the eligibility for election of the delegates. Thus it was not only an electoral college, but also a parliament, where important issues, policies and proposed legislation that affected the community were debated and voted on.

When the population of Sheraro evacuated the town in 1981 during the first occupation of the Derg, the *Baito* continued to administer 'Sheraro in the hills' for twenty months and to work with *kefli hezbi* to extend the *baito* to the *wereda* level. The TPLF then selected Zana and Edaga Arbi in Endabatsahma *wereda*, which includes Endachiwa, as pilot projects for local government and the second *baito* in Sheraro, elected in 1982, played a major role in helping to establish this *wereda* baito in Edaga Arbi. 'The criteria for selection were the organisational capacity, combativeness and political awareness of the people, and the closeness of their relationship to TPLF.'(TPLF 1988:11) However, in Edaga Arbi Derg oppression had encouraged a passive resistance in the people to any form of imposed authority.

> First of all when TPLF asked the people to be organized by *baitos* everyone was surprised and there were rumours among villagers about this suggestion. The Derg had been trying to organize the people by different mass associations, peasants and youth associations. These were neglected by the people already. They hated it, you know, the fascist activities of these associations. Then the TPLF came and requested the people to be organized by *baitos*. Some people became confused. After that TPLF gave them orientation on what '*baito*' means, what is the difference between a democratic *baito* and a fascist association, the democratic *baito* criteria. Then the people accepted the *baito*.[14]

That the people saw little difference between the authoritarianism of the Derg and the autocracy of the feudal authorities reinforced TPLF's strategy of persuasion as opposed to force in their negotiations with the local population. Membership of mass associations and participation in *baito* activities were voluntary, and the *kefli hezbi* fighters reiterated at every opportunity that the *baitos* were the councils of *the people*, of their own making and the first genuine self-administration they had ever known. In fact informants in both Sobeya and Endachiwa who were instrumental in setting up the first *baitos*, some of whom

[14] Tsegai Weldemichael, 31 October 1996

are among the present executives, insist that the role of *kefli hezbi* fighters was restricted to guidance.

> In fact our organisation (*wedebna*) did not administer us. We did it ourselves, but they guided us and showed us the direction. We elected our own officers. No fighters were elected.[15]

In 1982 the Endabatsahma *wereda* congress in Edaga Arbi was attended by over 2000 participants and observers, a quarter from within the *wereda*, of which three hundred were delegates eligible for election. The remainder were invited observers, including hundreds of TPLF fighters from all over Tigray, *baito* members from other *weredas,* and even representatives from Gondar and Welo regions (TPLF 1988). Although the draft legislation had been discussed at village level in the weeks beforehand, the articles on marriage caused the longest and most heated debates, particularly the proposed new minimum ages of betrothal and marriage: for boys 21/22 and for girls 14/15. The woman delegates spoke out against child marriage, arguing from their own experience that marriage at eight or nine years old frequently resulted in mental and physical damage. Despite strong attempts to defeat the proposal and after a debate which lasted one and a half days with a total of 276 speakers out of three hundred delegates, the legislation was finally adopted.

My first visit to Tigray coincided with the second round of land redistribution in 1987. Congresses were organised in each zone by the local *kefli hezbi* fighters, and attended by delegates from the zone's *weredas*. They formed a significant part of a strategic reassessment and restructuring programme after a period of TPLF weakness and stagnation and Derg dominance following the 1974-5 famine. I attended the congress of Adi Abo Zone held in Adi Hagerai. The formal aim was to construct a war economy by

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[15] Gebretsadiq Abadi, 21 February 1997.

restructuring the organisation of land and agriculture to increase production. A preparatory committee drafted new land laws for debate and voting. The most important proposal was to expand the number of producers by reducing the age from which young people could claim land to the minimum age of marriage, from 25 to 22 for men and from 18 to 15 for women.

> The main reason for reducing the minimum age for land ownership is to have a good production force. Young people are powerful; they can easily plough. The main aim is to increase productivity. These are the respective legal marriageable ages for men and women. The development of women is very rapid compared to men. At fifteen they can be married and in control of the domestic economy, so that they must be allowed to share the land.[16]

Another strategy for increasing food production was the policy of 'standardisation', whereby the most productive local farmers would become models for their communities, aiming to standardise at the level of the middle peasant. A third policy decision, which would have far-reaching implications for land improvement, was to set aside a proportion of community land for cattle pastures and for reafforestation. The recently established Agriculture Department (Code 054) would have a central role to play in giving advice, setting up tree nurseries and initiating soil and water conservation. These congresses demonstrate the TPLF 'method'. Instead of passing laws and sending cadres into every area to bully the peasants or increase the extraction rate (the top-down or Derg method), the Front created a structure for explaining the problems and involving the farming communities in their solution. The new land laws were then taken by the delegates to their own *weredas*, where a *wereda* assembly, attended by the village executives, would go

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[16] Habtom Gebremichael, farmer, member of Adi Hagerai *Baito* Congress, interviewed in Adi Hagerai, 12 January 1987

through the same process.[17] Finally they would be explained, discussed and voted on in the village assemblies.

The structure of local government

To give the people the opportunity to develop the experience and confidence they needed for the task of self-administration, local government was introduced in two stages (TPLF 1988:12). First, representatives from the mass associations were elected to form a Provisional Administrative Council (PAC) with a chairperson, secretary and treasurer and a specified number of members, who worked closely with *kefli hezbi* as they and their communities gained experience. The second stage was a fully-fledged people's council, to which councillors were elected after two or three years or when the villagers felt ready. All members of mass associations over the age of sixteen had the right to elect and be elected.

By the mid-1980s the structure of local government had been established throughout liberated Tigray (most of the rural area) in the form of *wereda* and *tabia baitos*. The TPLF was the acting state at the national (Tigray) and zone levels. Policy and programmes were drafted by the Central Committee and appropriate departments to be debated and voted on by a TPLF Congress of equal numbers of elected representatives of civilians and fighters which met every three or four years. One of its tasks was to elect a new Central Committee which would be responsible for implementing decisions of the congress. During the war there were TPLF congresses in 1978, 1983, 1987 and 1991. In January 1991 there was also the first congress of the EPRDF. Since federation, this function has been taken over by the

[17] It was at the *wereda* level that the different, sometime unique, practical problems of implementation were discussed. One of the interesting debates in Sheraro was about the minority Kunama people whose lands were situated north of Sheraro. The *wereda* congress proposed for debate that the Kunama lands should not be available for redistribution on the grounds that they had long been discriminated against by the majority Tigrigna-speakers who had already deprived them of most of their ancestral lands. After a most heated debate the motion was passed.

executive body of the Regional Government and its elected Council of Representatives. Before 1991 the *baitos* were a permanent administrative institution at the *wereda* and *tabia* levels and from 1988 at the *kushet* or hamlet level. Zonal congresses of TPLF fighters and *baito* executives from the lower levels were convened only for special purposes like the 1987 land redistribution.

Although policy came down from above, it was debated and amended by district and village elected delegates at the *wereda* level, and from there village *baito* executives took the proposals to their villages for discussion by village assemblies. During the war, both recruitment drives and development plans were handled in this way by the *baitos* at *tabia* level and, since the war, all the local implementation of the five-year plan and other development activities.

Revolutionary governmental structure (Tigray) before 1991

TPLF Congress (every four years)

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Zone *baito* congress (occasional)

↓

Wereda (District) Congress (standing)

↓

Wereda Baito (standing)

↓

Tabia baito

Table 2

The local government process at *wereda* and *tabia* levels was essentially the same in 1997 as before 1991, the main difference being not the structure of government, but the content of programmes. `Defeating Mengistu' (it was usually expressed in such personal terms) was the driving priority during the war and, since its end, TPLF within Tigray and EPRDF outside it have tried to transfer the same impetus and motivation to the struggle for development. The Chairman of the Gulumakeda *wereda*, which includes Sobeya, was quick to emphasise that development priorities are frequently set at the village level, not the other way around.

> What I want to assure you is that the Regional Government will never give us an order. That is not our way. Our executive members are spread to different *tabias*, inside to the people. They will work with the people; they will listen to the people; they will attend to burning issues in different parts of the *tabias*. What are the heartbeats of the people at this time? And they ask all the people, 'What's your problem at this time?' 'We are just dying. There is not a hospital, no clinic' and so on. So our executive members listen and bring these problems to us. This is a demand raised by the people. From us, we send it to zone and the zone will send it to Regional Government... This is the way it works, not just from top to bottom, but from bottom to top.[18]

Consultative procedures at the design stage often take possible problems into account and `agitation' before they become agenda items makes consensus likely.[19] A consensus is reached therefore 'without opposition or abstentions'.[20] In really controversial cultural issues the authorities will characteristically work behind the scenes for years rather than

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[18] Murutz Tsehaiye, Chairman of Gulumakeda *Wereda* Executive in Zalambessa, interviewed in Zalambessa, 2 April 1997.

[19] Consultative techniques and community and *baito* collaboration are now taken for granted in most programmes in Tigray. In September 1995 an International Conference on malaria control was convened in Axum at which the outstanding success in Tigray, compared with other parts of Africa, at achieving a high acceptance rate of impregnated bed nets by villagers was identified with extended consultation with village communities.

[20] Although after twenty years of agitation and political education villagers are generally convinced in theory of the importance of literacy and health programmes, of extending school building, of collaborating in dam building in return for payment in grain and so on, they still raise many questions about the negative effects of such projects and want these to be addressed in advance of voting on them. Typical anxieties have been increased risks of malaria after the completion of microdams, the corruption of moral principles in young people through allegedly urban influences in schools, the mixing of the sexes in schools, loss of child labour through education, superstitions about maternal and child vaccination programmes and inadequate payments in food for work schemes. Yet such issues seemed to influence discussion rather than the vote.

risk a vote likely to be lost. Examples would be pharaonic circumcision and infibulation of women practised among the Afar,[21] or the effects on agricultural production of the Church's prohibitions against work on holy days.

Barnabas (1997:69) gives a useful list of the wartime functions of the *wereda* local government assembly (LGA), the policy and legislative body of the local authority, which I will reproduce in full: 1) Legislating and emending the *serit* by convening a local government assembly every two years; 2) election, promotion or demotion of the LG executive by a regular or extraordinary meeting of the LGA; 3) the appointment of judges of the LG court; 4) the settlement of all disputes except for those related to war security; 5) the distribution and administration of land; 6) the establishment and management of primary schools, clinics, including building, purchase of drugs, clinic beds, microscopes (where applicable); school building, school furniture and exercise books; 7) use of militia to protect communities from enemy harassment; 8) mass mobilisation for soil and water conservation; 9) recruitment of fighters to the TPLF on a voluntary basis; 10) distribution of relief food to needy members of the community; 11) support and supervision of lower level (*tabia*) administration; 12) rehabilitation of villages bombed or burned by the military government.

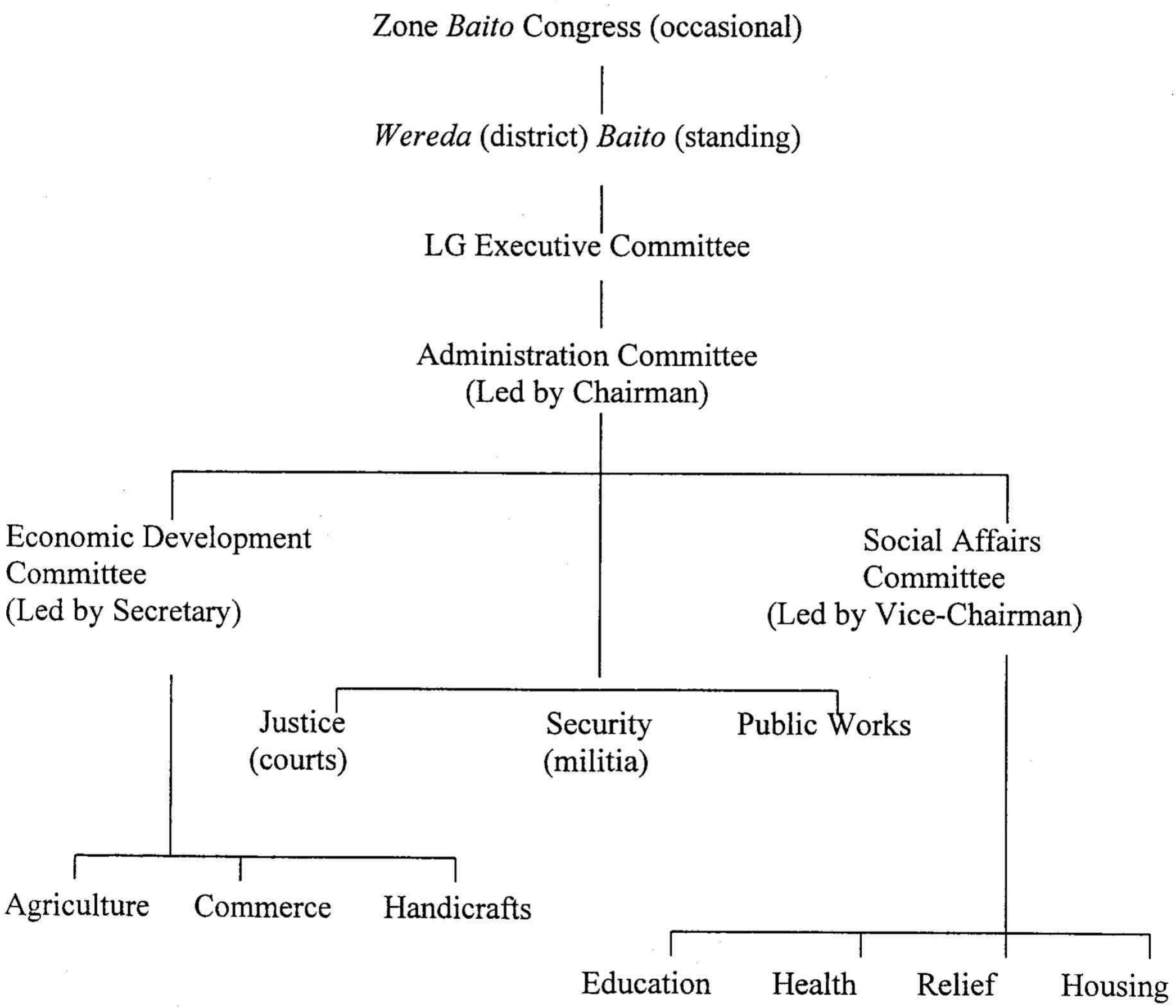
Day to day administration of local areas, including implementation of decisions of the congress was, and is still, undertaken by an executive body elected by the congress. Local government structure has stayed much the same from the early 1980s up to 1997, although the institutions the committees are now responsible for became more sophisticated during

[21] As part of the regionalisation programme of the new federal state in 1992-3, the Afar areas in the eastern lowlands of Tigray and Welo became the self-governing federal Afar State.

the 1990s, as development programmes, including school and clinic building, were implemented.

Table 3

Local Government Structure Sheraro 1987



The *serit*

The *serit* was a body of local laws debated and voted on at the founding congress of the *baito*. The local equivalent of a constitution and sometimes referred to as such, the *serit* laid down the system of laws and sanctions without which the *baito* could not function and which it was the business of the *ferdibaito* or community court to enforce.[22] The *baito* and the *serit* were thus interdependent and cannot be considered separately. The enormously significant role played by the *baito* in enabling and facilitating in Tigray the TPLF vision of a more equitable Ethiopia was thus carried out through the *serit*. None of the decisions which brought about more democratic community and household relations were made directly by TPLF. They originated in TPLF, were discussed intensively in the villages, but were brought about first by debate in the village assembly and then legislation in the *serit* and enforcement through the *baito*. '*Serit*' was not a new word. Under the empire the customary rules or byelaws governing village life and passed down orally to succeeding generations were known collectively as *serit*. As with '*baito*', '*serit*' acquired new meanings under the TPLF and the laws were written down for the first time.

The similarity of *serits* in different parts of Tigray suggests that most of these by-laws were proposed centrally and agreed locally. There were heated arguments in the assembly, but the most radical clauses had already been discussed in the context of land reform, such as equal land rights for men and women and minorities and the raising of the minimum age of marriage.[23] The acceptance of clauses on marriage or the equality of long discriminated social groups which contradicted customary law must have been preceded by intensive political education. The Sobeya participants in the drafting committee, however, insisted

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[22] After 1994 the place of the *serit* was taken, in theory at least, by the Ethiopian Constitution.

[23] Gebretsadiq Abadi, 21 February 1997: 'When we came to consider the rights of women, it was explained so clearly there was no need for discussion. The age of marriage for girls had already been briefed as above sixteen and the people accepted it.'

that 'the role of TPLF fighters was only to teach the people to administer themselves, and that the *serit* is necessary; to teach the people to discuss, emend, improve and so on. There was no other help in drafting.'[24] If that was the case, then the political education that preceded the drafting of the *serit* must have been intensive and effective. Reliance on persuasion, however, meant that TPLF's recommendations were not always accepted and some *serits* were out of line, the minimum age of marriage being one area of divergence between *weredas*. The TPLF often tried to agitate for a later age for girls, but had to be satisfied on the whole with fifteen years. Exceptions included Alitena in Irob *wereda*, which, possibly influenced by the domination of the Catholic Church in that area and its prohibition on divorce, had already developed a culture of later marriage, and Mekele, where in the 1990 *Baito* Congress women argued hard for a minimum marriage age of eighteen for girls and succeeded in winning the vote.[25]

The TPLF, and after 1989 the EPRDF, took the view that compulsion was counter-productive. Some assemblies in areas liberated by EPDM, having first insisted on electing feudals or Derg Party members, had to vote them out again when they resisted land reform or other rights.[26] If their recommendations were rejected, the Front claimed to accept that

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[24] Abdul Fetiwy, Sobeya *baito* executive member responsible for security and justice, interviewed in Sobeya, 21 February 1997

[25] Hiwot Ayele, Chairwoman of Mekele Woman's Association and member of *Wereda baito*, interviewed in Mekele, 10 April 1991

[26] Tamrat Layne, at that time head of EPDM, gave me the following examples in a taped conversation on 29 March 1991: "There have been some examples of people refusing our opinion and not excluding feudals from elections, around Geant, for example, and around Alamata in northern Wollo. And in southern Wollo there is a place, where during the elections EPRDF [in 1990] gave as its opinion that bureaucrats of the Derg and feudal remnants must not be elected. The people rejected this. In some places the people rejected it wholly; in some places they rejected [our advice] on the point of individual bureaucrats and feudals. `We know this person; we'll elect this person'. We had our opinion, we described it, we explained. `No', they said. `We know them; we'll elect them.' We said, `OK, the final decision is yours.' After some months, the people found those people sabotaging land reform, those feudal remnants round Kobo, Alamata. And they brought them down from the leadership of the *shengo*. They brought down two people and re-elected. `EPRDF told us and we didn't listen. We have learned from this,' they said. There's also another example in Geant. The Geant one is still in the *Shengo*. Anyway he has got experience from the northern Wollo case and is being very cautious. There are also laws of the *shengo* which the people rejected. There is an example of Debre Tabor. In Debre Tabor there was a [proposed] law which was saying from the side of EPRDF, that when there was shortage of land it can come from another *wereda*. A certain *wereda* rejected this and said that all

another form of political education was to allow the people to gain experience from making mistakes.

> All popular ideas have to be respected. Then people learn from their mistakes because the peasant sees for himself. Sometimes we turn out to be wrong, but more often than not we turn out to be correct. For example we suggested to a village that they have a large protected area for growing fodder, but they said no, they preferred to put the whole area under cultivation. We told them it was idiotic, but they went ahead. There have been other disagreements, where they have wanted to build schools but not to take responsibility for them. Over the age of marriage we never managed to get it over fifteen years outside some towns, despite our efforts. We worked hard against the attitudes to Muslims in Axum where mosques have never been allowed to be built nor Muslims to own land. We were defeated, but we have never hidden our point of view. In Tsegede in Wolkeit, one of the last areas to be liberated and to have land reform in 1987, even when we were there they were selling slaves in the market. In the lowlands of Wolkeit there are whole villages composed of former slaves... We lived with these things, but at least we spoke out.'[27]

On the whole, however, the differences between the by-laws of different areas lay in the ordering of clauses, the wording and the details of implementation, which were decided locally.[28]

So what did these codes of law look like?[29] What issues of village life did they cover? The Endachiwa and Sobeya *serits*, both written in longhand in school exercise books, have a curious double impact. On the one hand the articles relate to the most traditional life of peasant communities, many a continuation of previous customary law. Written in a spare style, without rhetorical flourishes or political theorizing, every clause relates to the practical daily life of the people, to birth, marriage, death and inheritance, to animals, agriculture and forestry, to petty crime and punishment for law-breaking, such as fines for cutting trees or allowing cattle to eat a neighbour's crops. Yet a closer scrutiny reveals the

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land must be allocated within the *wereda*, whether there is shortage of land or not, and we accepted. That is still unchanged. One day they will reconsider perhaps."

[27] Meles Zenawi, Prime Minister of Ethiopia, in a conversation in Addis Ababa on 20 April 1996.

[28] Final acceptance of proposals was often preceded by heated and lengthy debates when the issues before the assembly were controversial. Examples were the debate about exemption of Kunama land in the Sheraro *wereda* congress on land redistribution in 1987. Other controversial issues have been whether women should be encouraged to plough and the new laws of marriage.

[29] For a transcript of the Endachiwa *serit*, see Appendix 6.

serit to be a revolutionary document. It constitutes a discourse about the rights and needs of ordinary village people and its more controversial clauses emerged from intense and contested discussions. The sub-text was the prerevolutionary life of the rural poor, with its absence of rights for women and minorities, inequities of land tenure systems, depredations of the *chika shum* and powerful landowners, because these were the social, economic and political context of the *serit*. Reading the chapters sequentially tends to obscure their radical nature. Revolutionary clauses such as those establishing a minimum marriage age and the right to claim land from that age, or that Muslims and women should have equal access to land with Christian men or that divorced couples should divide the property and assets equally are mingled with relatively neutral administrative rules such as registration of marriage at the *baito* court.

A lateral analysis of the text discovers significant political priorities and suggests the effectiveness of TPLF's persuasive strategies. The clauses ending forced child marriage, for example, or those stipulating equal rights of women, are part of a range of prohibitions against discrimination on grounds of sex, religion, illegitimacy, ethnicity, or place of birth. One interesting clause found in all the *serits* I have looked at proclaims:

> If a person insults another by saying `*budda*', `*bharia*', or `*wata*', or insults the weavers or uses insults about heredity or religion or who discriminates between *kushets*, *tabias*, *weredas*, zones or regions, should be punished by being fined between 100 and 150 *keshi* [*birr* or Ethiopian dollars]. If he does not improve his behaviour he should be questioned by the responsible officials.[30]

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[30] *Serit* for Endabatsahma *Wereda*, Central Zone, Chapter Six: Punishment, Heading twelve, Clause three. The *budda* were evil spirits thought to inhabit the persons of metal-workers and other artisans, like potters. Their power to curse was thought to be exerted through the gaze, the 'evil eye', but they were also believed to change into hyenas after dark and eat people, especially babies; *bharia* (slave) was, and often is still, used to denote people of darker complexion; *wata* denoted the player of a musical instrument, another category of despised persons.

The severity of the fines indicates the seriousness of offences which outsiders could easily dismiss as trivial repartee.[31] Clearly these *baito* laws aimed not only to promote equality under the law, but also a new culture of unity. On one level the *serit* was a discourse about people's rights and needs; on another a reminder that TPLF had inherited a deeply divided province. Unless they could unite resistance across gender, class, and religious and cultural divides, they could not hope to defeat the Derg. Encouraging participation in the villages, backed by *serit* prohibitions, contributed to discouraging traditional discriminatory attitudes. Many of the injustices suffered by women and children focused around marriage. Codes of law could not in themselves prevent divorce, outlaw adultery, eliminate rape or reduce the numbers born outside marriage, but they could lay down a system of proscriptions and sanctions which would mitigate their worst effects. In particular they regulated the economic consequences of such behaviour by clarifying a system of payments and property division to protect the vulnerable.

Tigrayan society was a litigious society, where most court cases concerned *risti* land disputes. Land reform swept this culture away and with it the issues dividing so many families. However by devoting much of their content to potential causes of dispute the *serits* also suggest a disputatious society. For the first time the *baitos* established village courts (*ferdibaito*) to settle local grievances and petty crimes. The *serits* emphasised the importance of registering with this court and thus legalising all agreements such as those concerning engagements, weddings and property and wills. Common causes of dispute all

[31] Interestingly, social disturbances in Sobeya, particularly involving fights between young men, frequently hinged upon allegations of 'insult'. 'He insulted me' seemed to be taken as sufficient justification by the contending parties for a retaliatory brawl.

had their place, whether in criteria deciding between rival claims to swarms of bees or prohibitions on grazing cattle on stubbles until all neighbouring crops were reaped.[32]

The codes of law were devised and implemented when Tigray was a war zone. An ironic effect of the emphasis on unity in TPLF's agitation and the institutions it encouraged, aided no doubt by natural solidarity in the face of a common enemy, was that war time, especially after 1989, was paradoxically experienced by many Tigrayans as peaceful and harmonious in the liberated areas, despite the risks and realities of air attack. Most *serit* articles were devoted to civil life in the villages and war lurks only at the margins. It is noticeable however that the *serits*, although directed to defusing potential disputes, were uncompromising over relations with Derg forces and authorities. Such crimes, as all serious offences, were not dealt with locally but at *wereda* or zone level. 'A close relation with the enemy' by a person leaving the village justifies confiscation of his property. Spying is the only crime other than murder to deserve the death penalty. 'If a person makes contact secretly or underground with the enemy and if a person gives shelter to unknown persons or if a person spies, he should be sent to the higher authorities.'[33] In fact awareness of the danger of spies put all strangers under suspicion as spies or infiltrators: 'If a person comes to your house and enjoys hospitality without being reported to officials he will be sent to the responsible authorities.'[34] The 'responsible' or 'concerned' authorities, a recurrent phrase in the *serits*, refer to *kefli hezbi's* responsibility for judicial procedures above *wereda* level until the elected structures of the state were expanded with the introduction of the new federal state in the 1990s.

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[32] That neighbours let their animals stray onto others farmers' crops, whether in the field or in the stack, remains one of the most persistent causes of grievance in Tigrayan villages. Farm plots are unfenced in Tigray and it would be impossible to keep animals within one plot if the adjoining plots tempted them with standing crops.

[33] The *serit* for Endabatsahma *Wereda*, Chapter Two Duties of the Judge, Article 13.

[34] Endabatsahma *Serit*, Chapter Six Other Necessary Laws, Heading No.9, Criminal Cases.

Two other lateral categories (or underlying themes) in the *serit* reveal the political and economic priorities of the TPLF, working behind the scenes to make them the shared objectives of the people, as part of their long-term policy for improving the economic capacity and food self-reliance of the peasants. One deals with land and environmental protection; the other comprises clauses which together become part of an enduring drive against traditions damaging the people's economic capacity. These measures discouraged or set limits to extravagant and impoverishing dowry, wedding and funeral expenditure and payments to priests. Behind the injunction that 'the engagement and wedding ceremonies should be appropriate to their economic standard'[35] lay a competitive tradition of lavish display identified by TPLF with feudal culture, which made poor farmers even more vulnerable to the unpredictable by depriving them of any surplus.

Law and order

During the war, the *ferdibaitos* or justice committees were the law enforcement arm of the *baitos* and helped to bolster the legitimacy of newly-formed local administrations (Young 1997:189) Officially, at the end of the war Ethiopian law superseded the *serits*. In practice, 'Ethiopian law', laid down under Haile Selassie, had not been properly implemented even in imperial times.[36] Brutal dictatorship then further corrupted the legal system with judges and judicial officials seriously tainted as fellow travellers. Since 1991 a just and efficient legal system has taken time to emerge and at the time of writing all problems, particularly of supply of adequately trained personnel of integrity, still have not been solved. In Tigray, TPLF local law became fused with Ethiopian law at *wereda* and state levels under the 1994 Constitution, but many articles originating in the *serits* continued to resolve common problems of behaviour and dispute in the villages. The structures of law enforcement, the local militia and

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[35] Ibid. Chapter One, Marriage, Article 7.

the community court, also continued, but their training and practices were refined. In the *wereda* towns and larger villages, like Sobeya, which was developing into a small town, they were joined by police forces, which before 1991 had been a feature only of the Derg-controlled towns. During the war members of the militia (*weyenti*) were armed and treated almost like fighters. As politically-conscious Front members, they shared local responsibility for agitating and mobilising farming communities, but also carried out important liaison and surveillance missions. They were particularly targeted by Derg forces to deter rural people from supporting TPLF and many lost their lives in battle.

After the war, militia, no longer volunteers, were elected to responsibility for village security and law and order, and were regularly evaluated.[37] Their responsibilities include working with *baito* members and the court to deliver charges or secure absentees' attendance at court; keeping the peace at public gatherings, such as weddings; patrolling the village and its boundaries to deter thieving and law-breaking activities such as cutting trees. The Sobeya militia had the additional responsibility of working with the *wereda* Immigration and Customs and Excise officials in Zalambessa to patrol the Eritrean border to discourage smuggling. Militia continue to be armed, but regulations governing arms have been stringent and well-enforced: rifles and ammunition have to be registered and accounted for; firing guns is a chargeable offence, except in certain circumstances of extreme insecurity, and incurs serious fines;[38] in public assemblies, or private gatherings such as weddings, militia are forbidden to bear arms at all; no weapons are allowed to cross *wereda* boundaries, or, if they

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[36] Tekelu Tesemma, Judge for Assefasobeya *wereda,* interviewed in Sobeya, 4 May 1997
[37] Abdu Fetiwy, Coordinator of Militia in Sobeya, interviewed in Sobeya, 30 March 1997
[38] I saw a member of the militia arrested and imprisoned for a few days in Sobeya for firing once over the heads of an unruly gang of young men who had drunk too much. On the other hand, when there was an incursion into the neighbouring Irob *wereda* by militant Afars in April 1997 who raided cattle and took hostages, the militia assembled from all the surrounding *weredas* to confront the Afars and restore order. On this occasion there was no question that they should not use their arms to prevent a violent incursion.

do, have to be left with the police or militia in the host district until the time of departure.[39] Whereas police are employed, militia are elected and serve voluntarily. In fact not all villages have a police force or may have one policeman working with the militia. In Endachiwa, the militia were responsible for law and order until the seriousness of a crime entailed handing over of the suspect to *wereda* town police in Edaga Arbi.

In the past, local 'justice' meant the unilateral decision of the *chika shum* or the *danya* (feudal judge), and the higher courts were often at a distance.[40] Villagers allege that the judicial system was rife with nepotism and bribery (Bruce 1976), hence the demand for a just judicial system addressed to the first TPLF fighters as early as 1975. In Endachiwa the proposals for a *ferdi* committee were presented to the people in 1980 and the court started working the same year. Judges had to be respected members of the community, trusted to make rational and fair decisions, but inevitably, in a largely illiterate community, some were also illiterate, particularly women judges, without it being seen as a bar to their position. With the restoration of Ethiopian law after 1991, literacy was seen as an absolute requirement and some of the most respected judges, including most of those who were women, had to be dismissed. However, the corrupted reputations of many conventionally trained judges from previous regimes and the lack of alternatives, led to flexibility about educational qualifications for judges in community courts. In Endachiwa the present judge, Gebre Exhibier Berhe, was elected in 1984 and explained the differences between training during the war and under the Ethiopian judicial system afterwards.

> At that time [1984] we got training from TPLF fighters, not proper training, but lessons and we also discussed with the people. We got lessons from the people

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[39] In weddings in Sobeya between Tigrigna-speaking and Irob families, I observed several occasions when groups of Irob militia arrived on horseback, splendidly caparisoned and fully armed. Sobeya militia and police would be waiting to disarm them before any alcohol had been consumed.

[40] John Bruce's studies of court cases provide interesting examples of the relevance of distance from the court for poor litigants who would be forced to give up the case.

The three judges of Sobeya Community Court; the prosecutor is on the left

A Woman's Association meeting in Endachiwa

> and we also observed the *serit*. In 1994-5 we got training from professionals in Addis Ababa and also training this year [1996-7] for 18 days in Edaga Arbi by professionals from the *wereda.* Our first training was by the justice representatives in Edaga Arbi, but the recent training was by the *wereda* administration.[41]

The judge who attended the *wereda* court in Sobeya, Tekelu Tesemma, was trained in the recently founded Civil Service College in Addis Ababa in a six months course with six hundred students, all of whom were members of EPRDF and fighters. Such a training programme recalls the pragmatic approach of the civil war years and indicates the extent of the crisis in the post-war judicial system. Tekelu Tesemma remarked, 'In fact the private newspapers insulted us: "Oh these EPRDF judges with three months training!", but in fact so many of the existing judges had been fired for corruption, especially in Addis Ababa.'[42]

The seriousness of the crime determines whether a case is heard by the local or the *wereda* court. 'Our Community Court can see the cases of fining in criminal cases up to 300 birr and we can also see disputes about property up to 1500 birr.'[43] As serious crimes in the villages are rare, the local court deals with most offences. 'Most cases are about insulting each other and about forestry abuses, cutting trees, and about stealing money, not repaying loans or denying they took any loans in the beginning.'[44] The court sits on feast days and holidays, so as not to withdraw time from agricultural labour. In addition, in Endachiwa the judges were on hand at the new dam construction site to sort out disturbances and trouble-makers immediately.

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[41] Gebre Exhibier Berhe, Judge of Endachiwa Community Court, interviewed in Endachiwa in 4 February 1997
[42] Tekelu Tesemma, 4 May 1997
[43] Gebre Exhibier Berhe, 4 February 1997.
[44] Ibid.

Village assemblies often provide a first hearing for grievances and disputes. The assembly hears both sides of the case and the chairman summons witnesses and where appropriate mediates to restore damaged goods, stolen bee swarms, compensation for crops consumed by a neighbour's cattle and so on. Only if this is unfeasible is the case sent to the Community Court, which assesses its seriousness and fixes a hearing date or refers it to the *wereda* court. Both assemblies and court sessions take place under the huge *sagla* tree. A typical day's cases in Endachiwa and Sobeya are included in Appendix 5.

Gemgam

The concept of *gemgam* (evaluation) originated in the determination of the early fighters that, just as their own revolutionary motivation was rooted in conviction, so the mobilisation of the peasants should be grounded in an understanding of the issues and a confidence that new political practices were in their own interests.

> The idea came from the strong belief in the TPLF leadership that both the people and the leadership could collaborate and help implement policies. Evaluation grew dynamically within our movement, but with no real guidelines except from our own experience. We started with the people. How is land division? Is it good? Or is it wrong? Did he get his share or does he feel `That person hates me and is getting his revenge'. It developed. The leadership wanted to do things with the full participation of members and fighters. We should not be afraid of criticism and in fact we wanted to be told if it was wrong. The people must participate in the implementation at every stage.[45]

Evaluation is practised in the villages and up to the highest level. Before 1991, not only was the four-yearly TPLF Congress on future policy based on appraising the effectiveness of the preceding term's policy, but my understanding is that the highest organs of the Front, such as the Politburo and Central Committee, have continued to use the technique to make themselves accountable and keep themselves on their toes. At times of crisis and





October 1996 *wereda gemgam* in Edaga Arbi, viewed from the front and the back

division in TPLF, even in the central executive, ways forward were found through discussion and evaluation.[46]

The opportunities offered by *gemgams* for appraising institutions, policies and programmes have made them the form of participation most adapted for rural communities to gain political experience locally. They have extended participation of local communities in administrative processes, encouraging accountability and effective implementation of decisions, and are now integral to administrative procedures, not just at every level of government and administration, but in *weredas,* villages, schools, workplaces and people's associations. Executive council members are specially trained to guide the assembly or gathering to evaluate the task rather than the individual, but directing and practising evaluation takes skill and experience and these are sometimes lacking.

There is general acceptance in villages that programmes agreed by village representatives at *wereda* level, which come to them for ratification, are beneficial. The village *gemgam* is about the gap between how programmes should work and how they do or not in practice, between how people should act and how they behave `in real life', and about how the new democratic discourse is embedded in old cultural practices. Therefore, in Endachiwa and Sobeya the problem for administrators was not public endorsement of future plans, so much as the gap between registration and take-up of programmes of vaccination or literacy or building schoolrooms or dams. Minimising this gap seemed to be one of the main functions of the *gemgam*, by exposing absenteeism, addressing reasons for non-attendance, or making accountable inefficient or corrupt administrators. This is not always either

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[45] 'Haleka' Tsegai Berhe, founder fighter and Vice-president of the Regional Government at the time of interview, interviewed in Mekele, 10 May 1997.

simple or clear-cut. In Endachiwa superstitious rumours spread about vaccinations causing sterility in women. Health clinics and veterinary medicine were only slowly, through much agitation and education, displacing *zars* and wizards, and an animal husbandry located more in superstition than traditional wisdoms. The *gemgam* is an opportunity for the whole community, its representatives, or a sector to come together, discuss anxieties and safeguard their common interest.

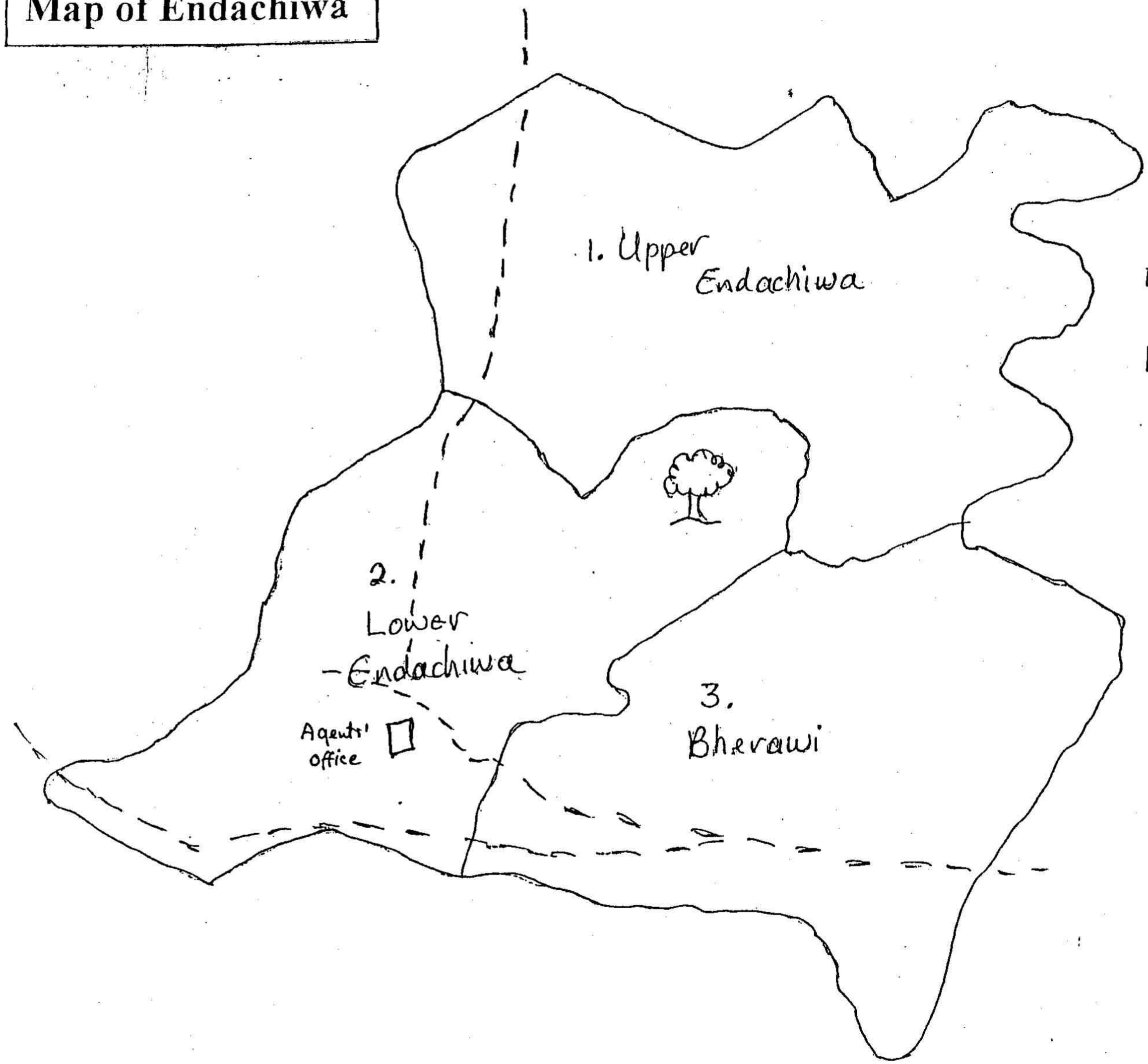
Gemgams in the villages

But how does a village *gemgam* work in practice? What are its procedures? How does it sound? How are the personalities and practices of daily life reflected? In one village in 1996 I coincided with the main *gemgam* `season', September to December, the beginning of the new year, when the past year's programmes were being evaluated and targets set for the coming year. Most evaluation meetings assess performance on past programmes and discuss future programmes already agreed in principle through their representatives and there is not much to be gained from a close examination. The agenda of the Endachiwa village evaluation in October 1996 covered the Global 2000 agricultural extension programme, irrigation, illiteracy, forestry, security, propaganda, and health. A week earlier when the executives had attended the *wereda* assembly, future programmes had been voted on `without opposition or abstentions' because they knew they were in their interest. The problem of both assemblies was punctuality and reaching a quorum. The following two examples, one from each village, diverge interestingly from the above pattern, but demonstrate the relationship between evaluation procedures and village life.

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[46] Dr Gebre Ab Barnabas cited TPLF's internal struggles of the mid-1980s as an example, where debates in the Front's assembly, followed by a vote decided important political differences. Conversation in Sheffield, 28 July 2000.

Map of Endachiwa



Key

External line - tabia boundary

Internal lines - administrative areas

meeting place / centre of tabia

Road

This is the agricultural agent's map. It is interesting because it is not just an abstraction, like any map, but a symbolic abstraction. It bears no relation to objective reality. It is roughly round in shape, instead of a long thin valley between mountains. The three administrative areas into which the kushets are divided are roughly equal, and the sagla tree, which is central to village community and business because village meetings are held in its shade, has been placed right in the centre.

Case study 1: Endachiwa

First is the annual evaluation of Zerabera *kushet*, the village sub-section where I was living. There had already been evaluations at district and village levels and this was the lowest level in the *gemgam* hierarchy, the one literally closest to home, which organised and evaluated the registration for programmes like literacy and the personnel and times for work groups (*gujele)* to achieve the soil and water conservation targets. This meeting, like all *kushet* meetings, took place in the shade of a huge *sagla* tree. It was the second attempt to hold a meeting scheduled for the previous Sunday, but not enough people had turned up for a quorum. This meeting failed too for the same reason, although different people came this time. So in one sense this was an evaluation that never happened, but the reasons for failure offer some interesting insights into the conflicting pressures of village life. The meeting was supposed to be about village activities, but it became a short *gemgam* on the reasons for non-attendance.

The Sunday meeting had failed because the day before had been the annual feast day of the local church, St Mariam Zion. Hospitality to those returning from far places to celebrate in the village of their birth had been given priority and the visitors were still being entertained by the host family or resting after two arduous nights of praying and chanting the rituals for St Mariam and the Sunday mass. Absenteeism at the Tuesday meeting, on the other hand, was attributed to the urgency of threshing. A severe hailstorm in Zerabera in September had devastated crops about to form seed; unseasonable rains in November on reaped and stacked *teff* and other crops were causing them to sprout; too much time had been taken up preparing for the feast-day. Now economic and domestic survival was in question. As one farmer expressed it:

> People today are working. They are turning their crops to the sunlight. Because of the rain they are not in good condition. I told my friend to come to the meeting, but he said, `I cannot come to the meeting. First I have to do the threshing to survive. The *Baito* can do anything it likes to me.[47]

[47] Farmer speaking at the Zerabera *Kushet* evaluation, 3 December 1996.

The meeting became a catalogue of peasants' problems, including the lure of wage labour in Adua, the nearest big town, which put in the shade the three kilos a day grain payment for the food-for-work scheme in the village dam construction which had just started. Yet the reply of Nguse, the *baito* executive member present, also had validity: `I am a farmer too. We can't solve our problems without meeting together.'

This meeting illustrates a number of factors. It shows the difficulty in a poor farming community living at the margins, of balancing short and long term goals and the importance of constant agitation from the executive and *wereda* officials as a part of that balancing process. On this occasion this role was taken by Kidane, an ex-fighter seconded from the *wereda* administration to mobilise the villagers for dam construction. He was experienced from his *kefli hezbi* days in effective ways of talking to villagers and was respected as much for his eloquence, in a society that admires eloquent argument, as for his commitment to development:

> We have to think always about the advantage of the water, not only of the grain payment. Zerabera is a victim of hail, but if there was a completed dam here, you could use irrigation in the dry season and replace your lost crops. You mentioned earlier working for better pay in Adua, Axum and Shire, but if you work here you are working with your families and you sleep in your own home, eat your own *injera* and drink your own *sewa*. But when you go to cities there are many expenses - so which is the best? During the struggle we gave our forehead to the bullets, now we give it to the stones and the soil. This is easier work than before.[48]

This meeting reveals the peasants as far from passive. TPLF recognised that it is impossible to make peasants act against what they see as their own interests. *Gemgams* are the gatherings in which agitation, training, and persuasive techniques enable farmers to see the validity of longer-term strategies.

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[48] Kidane Desta, 3 December 1996.

Case study 2: Sobeya

The second example is the annual evaluation of the Farmers Association in Sobeya.[49] There were over eighty farmers present, including eight priests. The meeting began slowly and very late (as usual) and gradually became more vociferous. The shortcomings of the three executive members, Chairman Adhanom, Vice-Chairman Mebratu and Secretary Hadera, were in the critical spotlight. The pace of criticism was slow but relentless, gaining momentum through the morning. The main complaints were: there had been no meetings and no organisation of activities; their only talent had been in collecting money (in some cases for two years instead of just the current year); some members did not know who the executives were; the executives `had no unity among themselves'; new membership cards from the *wereda* had not been distributed; the programmes and principles of the Association had not been circulated; benefits such as reduced-price seeds and tools had not been forthcoming; offers of help from the membership had not been taken up. Anticipating no doubt a negative evaluation, Adhanom had opened the proceedings by admitting their `weakness' as executives, but the farmers were not satisfied by this breast-beating. `Be open and clear', `Why were you so weak?' and `What was your problem?' were common responses. As criticism intensified the executives started to defend themselves and called further acrimony on their heads by blaming each other. The farmers dismissed Adhanom's attempt to blame his shortcomings on Mebratu and the allegation of `no unity' proved accurate when he accused Mebratu first of having an inferiority complex and so coveting the chairmanship, and later of having a superiority complex about his reputation in the armed struggle. In return Mebratu scorned Adhanom's excuse that he felt '*tesakife*', oversensitivity or a 'broken heart' about 'giving orders to my people': 'You have no *tesakife* in your character. You had no problem in knocking at people's doors and asking for money.'

The point of this catalogue is not to suggest the inefficiency of elected officials, which would not be accurate, but to show how the people interpreted the opportunity to assert

[49] Sobeya Farmers Association annual evaluation meeting, 22 April 1997.

their rights by investigating the causes and preventing a recurrence. Arguments expressed in eloquent or colourful language were especially relished.[50] One farmer compared the executives to 'a torch going on and off, on and off. At last it stays off because the batteries are flat'; another compared them to porridge (*desti*) which bubbles up for a time, but removed from the heat goes off the boil. 'If pressure come from the top you start running, but after a time you become cool.' When Adhanom stops defending himself and acknowledges the criticisms, they pass on to Mebratu: 'You, Mebratu, why don't you tell us the truth? ...I am sure your tongue tells us something different. Your heart is hiding the truth, so there is good conversation between your heart and your tongue at this moment. The problem is we have no X-ray to see that hidden secret present in your heart.'[51] Finally Mebratu admitted: 'My weakness is that I gave priority to my private business because I spent my time during the armed struggle for the struggle, so I need to rest. Because of this I didn't participate in this association.' At once this is accepted by the assembly, but one speaker also put Mebratu's status as war hero in perspective: 'You were not the only one to sacrifice yourself to the armed struggle. All of us, with all the Tigrayan people, gave sacrifices for our struggle (*kalsina*).'

The third member of the executive, the Secretary, Hadera, had contributed even less than his colleagues, but so thoroughly admitted his weaknesses that little time was spent on him, especially as there were witnesses to his having a seriously sick wife. Several speakers paid tribute to his having made everyone laugh by his joke, 'I was dead, but I was not buried,' later speakers building on his remark. 'We don't have to kill time with Hadera. He said himself that he is dead, then how can we discuss with a dead body?' raised further laughs and was appreciated as a form of eloquence. Ironically, throughout the torrent of criticism, Adhanom conducted the meeting with exemplary efficiency, following the set procedures: Agenda, statements by executives, general contributions from the floor,

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[50] In one evaluation a disgruntled agricultural adviser commented, 'As long as you can prove a stone is bread, then you will win the argument.' Congress of Village (*tabia*) Representatives, Edaga Arbi, 26 October 1996.
[51] Some of these images reflect a changing material base in the countryside and the penetration into the rural area of knowledge from the urban centres and more sophisticated goods than was the case 12 years earlier when I first spent time in the Tigrayan countryside.

specific questions and answers, suggestions on levels of punishment, a vote by show of hands. The levels of punishment were: advice, warning, hard warning, final warning, firing. I had been present at *wereda* meetings where unsatisfactory elected officials had been fired after proper procedure, so I was surprised at the contrast between the heated discussion and the leniency (in my view) of the punishments. Mitigating factors were considered: Mebratu's record in the armed struggle, Hadera's sick wife and his raising a laugh, but none for Adhanom, for whom blaming others was seen as an additional weakness. Two speakers recommended a hard warning for Adhanom, but only five people followed this recommendation in the voting and the rest voted only for warning. 'Mebratu criticised himself and he was open and clear when we evaluated him and he has good experience in the past armed struggle. Because of these things, 'advice' is enough for him.' And so the house voted with one abstention. For Hadera, four votes were for warning and the rest for 'advice'. Voting was followed by statements of future intent from the executives.

Contrasting responses to evaluation

The main focus of this thesis is rural Tigray and with evaluation as part of the revolutionary process in farming communities. Here, where it has been practised for twenty years or more my research showed it to be working well. However it would give a false impression of the status of evaluation in post-war Tigray to ignore the towns. There the *gemgam* has been much more controversial. For most of the war the main towns were occupied by Derg troops and civil servants so that even opponents of the regime there had little direct experience of working with TPLF/EPRDF. The towns have been marginal to the great collective drives of the countryside, first to defeat the Derg and since 1991 to accelerate agricultural development. Survival patterns in towns tend to be more individualist and relatively better modern communications make townspeople more susceptible to Western cultural and consumerist influences. Those with professional training and skills, often referred to generically as `intellectuals' in Ethiopia, have tended to be hostile to evaluation. Health professionals, university teachers, lawyers and others with

education and skills who spent the war years either in Addis Ababa or abroad and who have had little direct experience of working with TPLF and EPRDF, have been particularly critical as a group of what they interpret as infringement of their professional status.

Another group resisting evaluation have been the trained professionals with rural development expertise. In the past, education has been a means of escape from rural poverty. The larger towns and cities with their improved facilities and communications have been equated with achievement and opportunity. In Tigray the policy of devolution of power to the *wereda* towns, so that these professionals can best facilitate agricultural and environmental programmes, is proving very unpopular with a group who thus see themselves sentenced to life in the sticks as opposed to being rewarded for education and expertise. Conventionally educated under past regimes to think of themselves as experts, they often expect to dictate technical solutions for technical problems without being questioned, let alone evaluated and criticized in evaluation processes which include farmers. In fact the farmers are long used to consulting and discussing with an agricultural department composed of non-combat fighters dedicated to explaining and educating them in ways carefully adapted to rural culture and educational levels.

Conclusion

The regional administration has responded to some of these problems in ways that are consistent with long term TPLF practice. Since 1997 separate conference series have been held for different urban groups of students, teachers, priests, health professionals and those working in the countryside as civil servants or professional experts and agents. Each conference emphasised the appropriate professional relationship, 'health with the doctors and nurses, general development activities and problems with the professionals; the village areas in the five-year plan with the non-professionals (certificates and diplomas) working at *wereda* level. If they are working in rural areas as teachers, nurses, extension workers, water and soil conservation agents, so we focus on their tasks and their problems, their roles in

achieving targets and what we expect in the future.'[52] At one level the conferences have been about providing information and an overview about the development effort throughout Tigray; at another listening to complaints and demands and trying to give perspective by sharing information about achievements, goals and budgetary constraints since 1991.

> We want to discuss what their future role should be in planning development activities. We want to enlighten them and encourage them to make comments and criticism and also come to the forum with their issues and learn from it ourselves. Finally we had the objective that people in the conferences could bring change in Tigray, not alone, but together. Everybody's responsible and we wanted them to know we were encouraging them.[53]

In brief, it seems that the government of Tigray hopes to solve problems of urban disaffection by absorbing urban elements into the culture, so crucial to rural survival, of collective action to achieve common ends. But in the countryside this culture has evolved through practical participation; it is hard to see how those practical applications of collective interests could be generated in the very different and fractured urban environment.

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[52] Aregash Adane, TPLF woman fighter, member of TPLF Central Committee, elected member of the Executive Committee of the Regional Council of the State parliament, interviewed in Mekele in English, 10 May 1997.
[53] Ibid.

Chapter 6

Construction of the revolutionary subject: culture, language and education

Short and long term political education strategies

The endeavour to mobilise the Tigrayan population against both feudalism and the Derg was not helped by the low level of literacy in the province. At the end of Haile Selassie's reign, roughly 95% of the population were illiterate and only 10% of children had any access to education.[1] In 1949 forty nine schools were closed down in the punitive aftermath of the *Weyane* on the pretext that Tigray did not generate enough revenue to justify the expenditure (Solomon Inquai 1983/4:12). The remaining three high schools and a small number of elementary schools were all in the larger towns and made little impact on the majority of the population. In the turmoil of the last years of Haile Selassie's reign the high schools were closed in response to student unrest and agitation for change. A few of the small *wereda* towns had an elementary school, but these were soon closed by the Derg on the pretext that the teachers were sympathetic to the TPLF.[2] The TPLF believed that not only was lack of literacy a serious obstacle to efficient propaganda initiatives, but also that lack of education left the people open to irrational beliefs and superstitious practices which set back their reconstruction as 'conscious' participants in the revolution.

That the Front perceived the revolutionary project as much wider than military struggle and military victory is indicated by the emphasis they laid on formal education projects from the late 1970s, as opposed to the political education systems already described. They could not

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[1] Negash Legesse, TPLF Department of Education 1978 –1991, taped interview in Propaganda Bureau, 18 February 1987
[2] Ibid.

act upon their conviction that education was a fundamental human right for all until they gained power after 1991 and initiated a school building programme in the villages, but from the number and kinds of schools they nevertheless established during the liberation struggle it is clear that they perceived a close connection between political and academic education in the project of revolutionising social and political attitudes. Formal education, even at the level of literacy, was a long-term project to which the TPLF demonstrated long-term commitment, as will be seen by the examples I give later in this chapter. In the short-term, however, until it bore fruit, they had to devise short-term strategies for influencing, educating and informing the people, in addition to consciousness-raising programmes organised for the MAs.

The Cultural Department

The Cultural Department, using song, poetry, drama and radio, was the principal means by which the Front bypassed educational limitations and appealed directly and immediately through their culture to both fighters and people. Tigrigna poetry and song also carried a nationalist message for a nation whose language and culture had been downgraded and despised in the process of compulsory 'Amharanisation' of the provinces, which had been the policy of central government since Menelik. The task of the Front's Cultural Department was not only to propagate their vision and their aims through poetry, plays and song, but at the same time to restore Tigrigna speakers' lost pride in their own language and culture.

Because poetry and song are a part of the everyday oral culture of the Tigrayan countryside, it was a natural development for the early fighters to make their owns songs to reflect their ideals and experiences and to discover that these songs were an effective way of appealing to people in the villages they passed through. The Cultural Department was the first department to be formed, possibly as early as the end of the first year. All the

fighters were members and the *mogogo* (*injera* bakestone), struck like a bell, was their first musical instrument. Perhaps this influenced their first song:

> The bell is ringing for the revolution.
> The big bell is ringing.
> All you people, stand up!
> You have your arms,
> Come on fight
> Against the oppressors.

The first songs, recorded on cassette, were copied and distributed in the towns and had a powerful effect on recruitment to the movement's underground cells.

The first Congress at the end of the 1970s decided that the Cultural Department must be separately organised to carry out its part of the political education project. New recruits included singers and instrumentalists. The growth of TPLF membership, both in the field and in the underground, accelerated the process of liberation of different areas. Tigray by degrees was organised into three regions, Region One in the west, Region Two the central highlands and later Region Three, eastern Tigray. Each region had its own cultural troupe which travelled around the area performing its latest songs, dances and plays. These were organised at first like separate departments with separate areas of responsibility, but after 1983 a central Cultural Department was established with its own performance troupe. It researched dances, poems and songs of different areas and from feudal times, as well as composing new ones. The Cultural Department had an important role to play in promoting the Front's doctrine of equality and self-determination of nationalities in the different areas of minority settlement. Each cultural troupe had minority nationalities within its region, the Kunama in the north west, the Afar and the Saho in the east and the Agew in the south central and would concentrate on its own regional dances. The main troupe included

dances and songs of all the nationalities in every programme, all performed in the appropriate national dress.

By the time I first visited Tigray in 1986-7, a Music School had been set up in the base area in Kasa to organise the teaching of composition, instrumental instruction and lessons in nationality dances. In 1986 two British musicians had been imported from London to teach fighters in the School certain Western instruments and the theory of music and notation, so that knowledge of music from the past and present, as well as the words, could be accurately transcribed and preserved. There were subsections of the department responsible for compiling both a photographic and a video archive of the whole revolutionary process, of participation and decision-making in baitos and different conferences and congresses, of significant events such as the liberation of new territory, of battles and military progress, and of development projects and the work of the Relief Society of Tigray (REST). There was also a radio station, *Dimtsi* Weyane Tigray (DWT) or the Voice of the Tigrayan Revolution.

Poetry and song as mobilising tools

Enthusiastic to reclaim Tigrayan culture, the Cultural Department researched poems and songs from feudal times in remote villages for use in their mobilising project. Their findings astonished senior fighters and those of urban background, for even Iyassu Berhe whose enthusiasm powered the research project had 'no idea that such poems existed', for the cultural abyss between townsfolk and the rural peasantry was, and remains, very wide, and is exacerbated by urban contempt for rural life. *Melkes* which were not revolutionary in themselves articulated anti-feudal sentiments by stressing abuses of power, often in the context of the transitoriness of human life and material gain. The reckoning would come in

the next world. In the following example the different tone and content of the last four lines make it likely that these were an addition after the advent of the TPLF. God's reckoning is preceded by a revolutionary comeuppance.

> O God, don't come down from your holy place.
> We are being beaten by the feudals.
> If you come here,
> They will beat you too.
> They will treat you like one of us.
> Don't come and make more trouble.
> You just stay in heaven
> And when their time is over
> When the lord has exchanged his gold and wealth
> For a rope and a shroud,
> That will be the time for judgement.
> Only the good will go to heaven,
> But he will slip through the thin line
> And fall to the fires of hell.
> Now we are waiting for the guns,
> The guns of the oppressed
> In the hands of the peasants.
> Your time is near![3]

Some of the newly-discovered songs were sung at big assemblies and congresses and some were incorporated into simple dramas portraying recruitment from the villages and the evils of the feudal landlords or the Derg along with new compositions. The plays were usually set in a peasant household and often dealt with painful subjects, such as bereavement of fighter children or rape by Derg soldiers. On the one hand such plays served the political purpose of broadcasting across Tigray the human consequences of Derg atrocities, such as the 1988 massacre at Hausien, thereby drumming up indignation; on the other they provided a way of sharing, and in part exorcising, these experiences, particularly through contextualising them in the revolutionary rhetoric of heroic sacrifices for the common good. Musical dramas were teaching aids for a largely illiterate society.



Music and dancing accompany every event



The national instrument, the *tchira*

One of the more ambitious was a musical drama called 'The Land' (*Eta Meriet*), which incorporated some pre-revolutionary songs and was widely performed in 1989. Its message was that the story of poverty and human misery, replicated in households throughout Tigray, was constructed by an unjust political system and was capable of change only through the concerted efforts of the peasants themselves.

Cultural troupes did not only exist in the Cultural Department. Every teaching institution and local Youth Association had its own performance group and all training courses and assemblies took breaks for singing revolutionary songs or performing plays which encapsulated appropriate political messages. These cultural troupes played a significant role in politicising the rural population and drawing them to support the Front.

> We were not only singing our national songs, we were singing political ones. In fact the [TPLF] programme was translated by a very beautiful way of expressing, a poetical and musical programme. We were telling them something about the future time, about the land question, about the rights of human beings, about self-determination, about the women's question, all the minimum programme. [4]

In the 1980s, as the liberated areas and peasant support expanded together, there were new songs and poems which did not seek to educate the peasants directly and politically, so much as express their sense of shared responsibility for fighting the Derg and their emotional bond with the 'sons and daughters' who were their literal and figurative children. 'The mother' (*Abishai*) occupies an important position in the mythology of Tigrayan family and society and the TPLF poets made use of this. She was the focal point in the long musical drama described above and of another famous drama, called 'The Mother'. A young boy, ignorant of his militia father's death by the Derg, meets a column of fighters as they pass by the village. Their explanation of the struggle and its aims fire

[3] Translated by Iyassu Berhe, 19 June 1989

him with enthusiasm to join them. Unable to dissuade him, his mother tells his father's story, giving him his shin guards and gun belt and her blessing before he leaves with the fighters and she is left alone. Other poems astutely adopt the mother's point of view. The following was sung for women martyrs in 1983.

We see their footprints in the dust.
Did they pass by,
Our children?
The sound of distant firing
Guides our footsteps
As we bear them food.

We hear the distant firing of their guns
And we must follow.
Be strong, our children!
We are bringing food and drink to you.
Can a needle sew without thread?
Can children fight without their mothers' support?

Other poems, in a reversal of feudal traditions, become praise poems of the peasants. In the following poem it is the women whose sacrifices have made the revolution possible, both of their children and their possessions. The images of loss are those of production and fertility: the bull, the plough and the seeds.

Our beautiful bull has been slaughtered
Our plough has been turned to ash,
Our faces burned with soot and smoke.
With bombs instead of seeds our yard is sown,
Our hay washed away to dam the flooded river.
They are out to destroy us.

But we, the mothers of heroes, have given birth
To lions who don't shrink from death.
Our children we have given to the revolution
And we have become as poison to the enemy;
Our husbands, the militia, give them hell.

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[4] Iyassu Berhe, 13 February 1987

Their bombs pour like winter rain,
Can an elephant be killed if it is guarded by lions?

Songs and dramas continued as educational aids after 1991. In 1997 I attended a series of training workshops for village WA executives in Zalambessa, attended also by the chairpersons and secretaries from Sobeya. The WA at the *wereda* level (and indeed at zone and state levels) was disturbed at the apparent and increasing apathy of the village women's associations and were hoping to restore dynamism and motivation to their leaders. Towards the end of the course the women, who had very low literacy, were encouraged to devise short plays to sum up aspects of the programme and to help them remember them. Two of these were shown to guests at a celebration lunch and entertainment on the final day.[5]

The radio station

The radio station, *Dimtsi Weyane Tigray* (DWT: Voice of the Tigrayan Revolution), founded in 1979, broadcast up to 1984 two half hour programmes each week from the EPLF radio station in Nakfa, Eritrea. Not until July 1986 did the acquisition of transmission equipment enable the TPLF to install its own radio station in caves in the Dejena highlands, not far from its command centre. The new equipment was not of a professional standard and its maximum power was only one kilowatt, but it was nevertheless to prove an important advance in the Front's propaganda capability. According to Fire Tesfaimichael, head of DWT since 1988, there was no distinction between the work of *kefli hezbi*, and the radio station. 'They are two aspects of propaganda. *Kifli hezbi* personally approaches the people and the radio approaches the people with the voice, but the final aims are the same.'[6] Its aim was 'to mobilise the

[5] The five day workshop in Zalambessa , Agame, ended on 7 April 1997
[6] Fire Tesfaimichel, Director of *Dimtsi Weyane Tigray*, interviewed in Mekele, 10 February 1997.

people around the programmes and principles of TPLF', first by supplying up-to-date information about Derg atrocities and, secondly, by addressing the peasants' specific problems. The most important of the TPLF principles adopted by programme directors was 'not to lie to the people, … never to exaggerate things and, if we may misinform, knowingly or unknowingly, we must apologise to the people and tell the truth. And that is why we have such credibility in the eyes of the people'.[7] The primary message about the Derg was its fascist nature, exemplified by the killings of civilians at Samre, Chilla, or Hausien. The primary emphasis of broadcasting was practical experience, incorporating personal experience, eye-witness accounts, typical situations reflected through the experience of particular individuals.

> What we broadcast is just a reflection of what is being done in the society, in the people. The *gemgam*, we took it into the radio and showed what was being done in that meeting, different outlooks. So any work done by the radio was not isolated from what was being done inside the society. They went side by side. And that is why it was effective.[8]

DWT took seriously its educational mission to raise the standard of understanding of its listeners across a range of issue, seeking to convince the people through information and soundly-based argument. Their strategy was to explain not only the TPLF line, but also the 'stand' of the Derg, the EDU, the 'chauvinists' and so on. 'We tell them and we try to compare.' They would take a single issue and discuss different approaches, the fallacies of principles the Front believed to be wrong and the reasons why their principles were correct. The radio station, in other words, reflected the TPLF obsession with discussion, debate,

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[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.

explanation and the importance of convincing people in the long term 'so that they hold it fast.'[9] This principle applied equally to non-political issues:

> Take the soil and water conservation programme - it was not easy to convince the people that the soil and water conservation programme was for their own benefit. So when we wanted to tell them about [it] through the radio ... we just told them what it meant and how it should be done and what benefits should come about. Then there may be different ideas from different people, even from the peasants themselves, from the farmers themselves. We just simply took it to the radio and showed them what they said. And also some experiences which could support the performing of the soil and water conservation programmes. So, after comparing all different ideas, we wanted to show them, to push them to practise it. Then after they had practised it, then evaluate their own practice, tell them what they have got and, if they have lost, what they have lost.[10]

DWT combined the aims and practices of *kefli hezbi* in politicising the people with the methods of the Cultural Department in music and poetry programmes. It discussed and displayed the cultural practices and musical traditions of the minority nationalities to the majority Tigrigna speakers, reflecting TPLF's policy of counteracting traditional prejudice. In the land redistribution congresses in western Tigray in 1987, when the TPLF was recommending the exclusion of Kunama land from redistribution on the grounds that long-term discrimination had already severely eroded their ancestral lands, the radio played an important part in publicising and familiarising the issues and arguments. In 1987 I coincided with a visit from Wello of the cultural troupe of the Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (EPDM). The TPLF and EPDM were already working together, although it would be another eighteen months before they would formally declare a united front in the coalition known as the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). The EPDM and TPLF cultural troupes performed together all over Tigray in the liberated rural areas.

Although TPLF political education had long been working against traditional anti-Amhara

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[9] Meles Zenawi, interviewed 5 January 1987
[10] Fire Tesfaimichel, 10 February 1997

feeling in Tigray, the presence of these Amhara performers was one of the most effective methods of dissipating prejudice and so paving the way for the closer political relations of a united front that were already at the planning stage. Radio broadcasts publicised the visit and the music.

An important role for the radio station was to mobilise support for TPLF in the towns. People listened clandestinely to TPLF radio, despite the risks of arrest and even death, and depended on it for accurate military information from the front, for an analysis of the propaganda of the Derg or for encouragement in the dark days of occupation.[11] Through this link, families felt connected with their members who were fighters. Although it was not possible to do systematic audience research, DWT had its own means of evaluating its success in towns. They collected and assessed information from 'moles' and general supporters in different areas under the control of the Derg, even beyond Tigray. 'We even had a channel which went inside into the territory of the enemy, right to Addis Ababa. We had so many informations, people listening at night behind closed doors.'[12]

TPLF conducted propaganda campaigns outside Tigray through DWT, targeting not only Amhara listeners in general in Dessie, Gondar and Addis Ababa itself, but also the Derg armed forces.[13] This propaganda played an important part in the formation of the Ethiopian Democratic Officers Revolutionary Movement (EDORM), founded in 1989 as one of the partners in the EPRDF coalition. The leaders and first members of EDORM, an association of junior officers, were politicised and recruited by the TPLF in prisoner of war camps.

According to Fisseha Garedew, an ex-Captain of the Derg and member of EDORM staff,

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[11] Askale Yohannes, bank employee under the Derg, interviewed in Mekele, 8 June 1989; Gedeon Kiros, conversation in Mekele, 10 February 1997

[12] Fire Tesfaimichel, 10 February 1997.

the radio broadcasts were influential in sowing doubts in the already disaffected and underpaid Derg army.

> While I was in the army, my attitude towards TPLF was that it was an army of bandits. I was working as an intelligence officer, so I had the opportunity of monitoring the radio station. I was agitated by the radio station, especially the way POWs were being handled. I didn't really believe what they were saying, but it slightly neutralised [my hostility] and raised doubts about the bandit propaganda ... In the radio programmes they were exposing the Junta and many points I took as correct, because they were correct.[14]

After its founding, EDORM was responsible for maintaining the propaganda offensive. They broadcast three times a week, focusing all their material on the Ethiopian army, analysing its problems, the grievances of the soldiers, exposing the 'fascist nature of the Derg.' The broadcasts, based on the knowledge and experience of ex-soldiers in the Derg army, aimed to reflect accurately the poor working conditions, inadequate training, low pay and low morale of the Derg forces and hence their military weakness. Perhaps these were the reasons they were so popular, as EDORM claimed.

> A special programme called `Who should speak' says these officers have been in the army and can tell the truth. There are different interviews with officers who really analyse the situation, the life in the army, the problems and so on. Those who join directly follow the news programmes and get hold of pamphlets. They get a vacation and go to their home area. They study a route and escape. The other way is in battle, through getting taken prisoner.[15]

In the last year of the war, defections, desertions, foot-dragging and other indicators of demoralisation gathered momentum in the Derg army, recalling Scott's descriptions of small-scale resistance strategies soldiers resort to in ill-understood wars imposed against

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[13] Interviews with Derg prisoners of war, patients in the TPLF Central Hospital, Kasa river valley, western Tigray, 12 February 1987

[14] Fisseha Garedew, captain in the infantry in the Derg army, in 1991 member of staff in the office of EDORM Central Committee, interviewed in Hagere Selam Command Post, 29 March 1991.

[15] Fisseha Garedew, 29 March 1991

their interests (Scott 1985: 293).[16] In the early months of 1991, radio played a significant role in Campaign Tewodros, the successful military campaign to liberate the provinces of Gojjam and Gondar from the Derg, and set up an EPRDF interim administration. Before the assault on the two provincial capitals of Bahir-Dar and Gondar, the EPRDF broadcast three addresses through DWT, to persuade factory and hospital personnel and teachers to guard their workplaces from Derg sabotage, EPRP in their base area on the Sudan border to work with EPRDF and Derg military garrisons in Gondar to surrender peacefully.

DWT is still the most popular of all the Ethiopian radio stations in Tigray. After 1991 it became a part of the campaign to maintain revolutionary momentum by substituting the struggle for development for the war against the Derg. The main focus is on agricultural development, soil and water conservation and health in the rural areas, although the Director was quick to assure me that, 'We are looking at the townspeople too. We raise problems in the towns, social problems, administrative problems, economic problems.' The rural people continue to trust it, maintaining that in the past they have never found it to lie. During the civil war *kefli hezbi* fighters carried radios and only rarely members of village administrations. In 1997, although I did not do a proper study, almost every household seemed to have its own radio and at certain times of day certain programmes had priority over every other activity. I was present at a wedding in 1997 when the festivities were brought to a halt for all the guests to listen attentively to a long poem about 'the struggle'.

Language

According to Fire Tesfai-Michael of DWT, 'one of the main roles of the radio is developing the Tigrigna language itself', as part of the revolutionary struggle to restore

[16] Early in 1991, when I interviewed prisoners of war in hospitals in Tigray and in Bahr-Dar in Gojjam, many of them expressed intense relief at having been captured and removed from the field of war.

cultural autonomy to Tigray. Broadcast performances of poetry and songs and even the status of the broadcast Tigrigna word did much to help counteract the sense of inferiority built up over a century of discrimination and underpinned the development of Tigrigna as a written language. The seventeen years of war during which Tigrigna was the all-purpose language of the liberated areas was an important transitional stage to its status as the official language of Tigray state after 1991. One of the main difficulties was the non-standardised character of Tigrigna. Every local area has its idiosyncrasies of language, and there are broader dialect differences between the central highlands and the southern areas of Wajirat and Raya, and between these and Eritrea. These are not just differences of pronunciation. One of the problems I have had in translating testimonies and poems is that there are many instances of vocabulary which is incomprehensible even to Tigrayan interpreters.

Language was one of the battlefields of the revolution. Freedom from proscriptions on dissent and free speech inspired a babble of talk and revolutionary *rumor* which swept through the rural areas like a kind of excitement. This is difficult to prove as it was the stuff of informal conversation and impressions, but peasants cited *talk* and *discussion* to me in the *baito*, in meetings, in the home, as a kind of joy of living in Tigray even in time of war. Fighters in the Foreign relations Department or assigned to Region Four would talk as if in exile and that homecoming meant to them the ability to 'say whatever we like'.[17] Talk undermined the language which inscribed the hegemony of the *ancien regime* and the authority of the new regime of the Derg. The new freedom to talk inspired new uses of language and was itself stimulated by the work of the Cultural Department and DWT.

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[17] Seyoum Mesfin and 'Jamaica' Yemane Kidane, in an informal conversation in Dejena Command Post, western Tigray, 5 January 1987

Until the late 1980s, TPLF revolutionary rhetoric was heavily influenced by Marxism-Leninism and similar to that of the Derg, although its political practice was so different. After the evacuation of the Derg from Tigray in February 1989, this rhetoric vanished almost overnight. The people of Derg-controlled Ethiopia hated the Derg and therefore the Derg's Marxist-style rhetoric and vocabulary, whereas the Tigrayan majority in the countryside never had the same experience of prolonged control by the Derg. The liberation of the whole of Tigray compelled the TPLF leadership to confront the imminence of final victory and the necessity to appeal to the Ethiopian population as a whole. No party using that language could hope to win their confidence. Between one of my visits and the next the language of revolution changed. New conceptual and practical needs also encouraged an expanded vocabulary, although most of these were old terms given new meanings or expanded from infrequent to common use. *Hezbi*, the old word for 'people', was overtaken for certain purposes by a new word *hafash*, closer to the Marxist political concept of 'the mass' or 'broad masses'. In the Tigrigna version of the name of TPLF, the word for 'people' is *hezbi*; in the primary slogan of the war years, *Awat na hafash* or 'Victory to the mass', the word for 'people' is '*hafash*'. Both *hafash* and *wedeb* (organisation) were loan words from the EPLF.

The word *weyane* (revolt, revolution) originated in Raya/Wajirat during the First *Weyane* in 1943. More interesting was their application of the word to the TPLF militia. The *weyenti* (*weyanai* in the singular) were elected from local communities to bear arms and take responsibility for local security in the liberated areas. It is significant that the highly valued term 'revolutionary' should be given to these representatives of the people, rather than to the fighters, and again reflects the TPLF ideological concept that the most crucial contribution to the revolutionary struggle is that of the masses. The term *tegadalai* (fighter)

was not a new one. It was used of the patriots in the war against the Italians and comes from *gedali* (struggle), so that a more accurate translation in English of *tegadalai* would be the awkward 'struggler'. The more common word for 'struggle' in the TPLF revolution was *kalsi.*

Tigrigna expanded to accommodate the new political and administrative culture. *Baito*, an old word for village assembly, acquired a new significance as the village administration, elected and run by the villagers themselves, which supervised every aspect of village life. Neither was *gemgam* (criticism) a new term; it also existed in Amharic, but its use as an evaluation of tasks and progress made it part of the new revolutionary culture. There was an important distinction between *gemgam* as an evaluation of issues, not personalities, and *nek'fieta* (criticism related to people) or *arse nek'fieta* (self criticism). In the imperial period, *serit*, the word for customary rules, also covered land rights and differed both from *higgi*, the term used for written law enacted by government and from *bahili*, custom in the sense of things cultural or merely habitual (Bruce 1974:488). It is significant that TPLF used the term most familiar to rural people, yet extended its meaning to encompass written codes of law in the liberated areas which had constitutional significance and which were superseded only by the new Ethiopian Constitution of 1994. New conceptual needs gave rise to new combinations of old words, for example the political term *mesel arsewusane* (self determination) or *maien hameden igeba* (water and soil conservation) in the development context.

'Backward' cultural practices

The restoration and development of Tigrigna language and culture was an important symbol both of Tigrayan autonomy and of Tigrayan rejection of Amhara political and cultural domination. Yet the TPLF distinguished between positive and negative aspects of

cultural practice and they worked to eradicate 'backward cultures', as they called them, which contradicted the education systems and standards they were seeking to introduce. They were particularly concerned with customs which contributed to the oppression of women, such as traditional marriage arrangements and 'harmful customs' like female genital mutilation. Some studies have also concluded that women have been more involved than men in spirit culture (Pankhurst 1992:156; cf. Boddy 1989; 1995:19).

It is important to be aware of the context of traditional beliefs prevalent in Tigray if we are to understand the problems facing the new educational initiatives and assess their achievements in the longer term. In the mid-1980s the Front always mentioned 'superstitions' and 'superstitious practices' as if they were a culture of the past, part of the 'feudal culture' against which they had been successfully campaigning. My experience in the field since then inclines me to think that this is far from the case. Despite the TPLF references to 'superstition', with its suggestion of irrationality, the fact that such attitudes and practices are associated with belief systems that have a rationale for their adherents which is deeply entrenched in the culture, means that their eradication will only be possible when the reasons for their formation are no longer relevant and when the needs they satisfy have been answered by other systems. It would be surprising in fact if the TPLF did have illusions about the ease of eradicating such beliefs and their optimistic assessment may have been a public relations tactic for foreigners. They would be more likely to agree that the eradication of 'superstitions' would have to be a long-term project and dependent on their replacement by modern systems of education and healthcare, which will also take a long time to construct, not only as a system of funding, infrastructure, distribution and personnel provision, but as alternative cultures commanding respect and confidence in the minds of the people.

The most significant evidence for the liveliness of 'superstitious' beliefs is that elected executives in *wereda* and village assemblies and evaluations that I attended in 1996 and 1997 in the Endachiwa and Sobeya areas were agitating constantly against such beliefs and practices. Agitation *for* modern health practices such as child vaccination, preventive medicine and early attendance at clinics to catch diseases at an early stage, were regularly accompanied by exhortations *against* traditional healers of various kinds.[18] The Church also forbids sorcery, although it is not immune from superstition itself. For example, priests gain income through fostering belief in the healing powers of holy water and holy wells. The world of the Tigrayan peasant is full of unseen, powerful and unpredictable forces to be propitiated in a game of influence, of which the outcome is uncertain, rather like propitiating 'the feudals'. Ill fortune, including illness, can be an effect of God's displeasure or one of the other powerful spirits; cures can be brought about by corrective action, at the direction of a priest on the one hand, or a *zar* or a sorcerer, on the other (Hammond 1999: 81). People can also seek out wizards to help them achieve goals, win disputes or take revenge, so they can be relevant to village politics. In a village evaluation in Endachiwa, a militia who was being evaluated for losing the soil and water conservation tools, was also criticized by a neighbour:[19]

> Neighbour: You are my neighbour, but you put a hair under my compound. Why did you do this? Tell these people who the wizard is who ordered you to do this?

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[18] Traditional healers are usually thought to invoke certain spirits, as follows:
Zar: a spirit which is thought to take possession of certain individuals who thereby gain special powers, especially of bodily and spiritual healing.
Owlia: the name given to a powerful spirit which is believed to take possession of certain people who then have special powers to heal all kinds of sickness.
Debtera: previously a highly-educated class of the priesthood of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, particularly skilled in the interpretation of sacred texts and usually trained in the elite monasteries of Gondar and Gojjam. Allegedly because they abused their knowledge or their position or because their special powers were perceived as arcane knowledge, their links with the Church have been severed. They make a living as fortune-tellers and, within the superstitious rural culture of Tigray, are often regarded as sorcerers.
Fukuras: these were highly educated in the Muslim religion and were thought to possess special powers and practice sorcery, often involving *anderebi*, a kind of poltergeist.

[19] Under the TPLF revolution, a man elected from a local community to bear arms with responsibility for village security is called a *weyanai*, which they translate into English as 'a militia'.

> Militia: Yes, I went to the wizard's house in Na'adir because I was sick for a long time and I wanted to get medicine from him. He told me you are my enemy and I did put the hair under your compound.[20]

The difference from previous times is that, although the culture still persists, it now attracts public and official disapproval. In this case the assembly decided to send the man to the Community Court.

The *budda* culture, whereby artisans are feared for their powers of the evil eye, is a part of a wider culture surrounding the eyes and the power of the gaze, of which the 'evil eye' is only one manifestation. It is widely believed that catching the attention of others through their gaze can draw down misfortune. It is not the jealousy of others, so much as their admiration that attracts the attention of the spirit world. People believe it is safer to go unnoticed, as the following four anecdotes illustrate.

1. There was an interesting clash of old and new cultures at a training workshop in 1997 for the elected executives of village women's associations, including Sobeya. At one seminar on the Sasakawa Global 2000 Campaign, an Ethiopia-wide drive to increase agricultural production through the facilitation of inputs, improved seeds and advice to farmers, the Global panel, keen to advertise success, advised the women that they should not hurry to reap the crop because the standing crop would attract more farmers to register for Global. The women demurred on the grounds that a magnificent crop would attract attention that could only be harmful. If it became the focus of the gaze of passers-by that would be sure to decrease production.[21]

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[20] Annual village evaluation, Endachiwa (Adua), 8 November 1996

[21] Getachew Dagnew, *Wereda* Administration representative assigned to Sobeya. Conversation in Sobeya, 9 April 1997.

2. A man in Sobeya had so many fine cows that he was disturbed at the thought of taking them from one place to the other in case they should attract attention. He found a very heavy stone and carried it on his head, which so riveted people's gaze that they were distracted from looking at the cattle.[22]
3. If a baby is beautiful you must say the opposite to hide your admiration, so it won't attract disaster. If you have anything fine or beautiful you must hide it from sight.[23]
4. The mother of Gedeon Kiros, my research assistant and translator, was anxious at his predilection for bright white shirts. 'Take care.' she said. 'You will attract attention. People will look at you and you will become sick.' She was a widow, but her husband had been a priest in Axum, an indicator that Christian piety is no bar to such widely-shared beliefs.[24]

It is difficult to gather more than anecdotal evidence for the power of traditional beliefs or 'superstitions'. They are influenced by a number of factors, particularly age and education. Younger people, who have received some education tend to express more scepticism. Such beliefs seem to have a greater hold in the countryside, perhaps because schools until very recently have been in towns. My fieldwork experience suggests that 'superstitious' beliefs are in a state of flux, exemplified by a story from my research assistant's family. The following is a transcript of his account, taken from my diary.

> Conversation with Abba Tesfa-Michael in the afternoon about *zar* and *budda*. Gedeon told a story about his older sister who was sick in Addis. She doesn't believe in *budda*; neither does Gedeon and apparently their father, the priest in Axum, had *budda* among his friends, one of whom was his brother's godfather. (That is, you are *budda* by heredity, not by practice; all handicrafts people and musicians are likely to be despised and distrusted.) Anyway, the sister's husband said, 'Oh, Oh, you must have been got by a *Budda*. Who is it?' She

[22] Told by Abba Tesfa-Michael Seyoum, priest at the Catholic Mission in Sobeya, 9 April 1997
[23] Ibid.
[24] Conversation in Axum, 3 January 1997

denied believing in *budda*, but was so worn down by her husband's insistence that she gave in. He tied her thumbs very tight to her big toes, so the budda couldn't escape before the right moment and gave her a special drink. She pretended to be a *budda* and cried, 'Yes, yes, it is me. I am …' and she gave the name of her father's friend.

'How can this be?' said her husband, ' You are a friend of her father the priest.'

'Oh, but she is far away from there, so I wanted her because I miss them.'

'What do you want to go away?'

Usually the spirit within the victim then calls for chicken shit to eat, but Gedeon's sister said:

'Merinda, I want Merinda.'

'Oh, what is that?' said her husband, 'That is something new for us.'

So he got a Merinda for her [a bottled orange fizzy drink] and she recovered.

'Oh you stupid!' she said later. 'I told you I did not have a *budda*.'[25]

This story illustrates how people of urban background and with education can still be susceptible to 'superstitions' and that different people within the same family can adopt different positions in relation to such beliefs. His sister even felt relaxed enough about the *budda* culture to take it in vain by mimicking the spirit.

Education under the TPLF

TPLF educational initiatives have proceeded on a parallel course alongside traditional superstitious beliefs, which they contradict so profoundly. They were a long term investment in accordance with the TPLF's conviction that only an educated populace would be able to defend its own interests and preserve the participatory democracy that they believed would be the underpinning of a developed, modern society in Tigray and Ethiopia. Until the evacuation of the Derg in 1989, the high schools were in the Derg towns and most teachers safeguarded their salaries by moving to Derg areas. In response to demands for schools from small towns in the liberated areas, the Front established an Education Department in 1979 and began short

[25] Conversation with Gedeon Kiros, recorded in my diary, 7 April 1997

teacher training courses.[26] The curriculum included the academic subjects: English, Tigrigna, mathematics, science, geography and history, and the professional subjects: psychology, history of education and curriculum development. Political education was not usually a curriculum subject; for the general population it was conducted through the mass associations, although it was included in the curriculum of some schools, but it should also be stressed that in a revolution almost any kind of education has political implications for a population previously deprived of it. Tigrigna and History, the one hitherto forbidden in education and the other now leavened by the Tigrayan perspective, would certainly have had a political resonance.[27]

Local councils were expected to claim their right to a school and then provide accommodation and food. No fighters were salaried in any case. It was the same system used to supply and staff the health clinics, which in a parallel initiative began to be opened in the liberated areas by the Department of Health. The first schools for the public were opened in 1981. By 1983, 245 classrooms had been built in Central Tigray, as well as others in the west. Resources were few and conditions basic. Classrooms were usually flimsy structures of tree branches covered in plastic sheeting; pupils sat on large stones, writing on their knees, and classes were large, but enthusiastic. The few towns with custom-built school buildings from Haile Selassie's time were forced to abandon them, because of bombings by MiGs, for peripatetic classes or the temporary structures described above.

The TPLF's second Congress reassessed educational needs and opened a Teacher Training Institute, replacing with one year courses the summer courses of the preceding four years.

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[26] Negash Legesse, 18 February 1987

[27] Adi Hagerai School, according to its Director, Tsegai Gebreselassie, included Political Education in the curriculum, which he defined as, 'The history and development of society, the history of TPLF and of the mass organisations.' Interviewed in English/Tigrigna, 9 January 1987

However, by the mid-1980s the shortage of literate people was proving an obstacle to the expansion of any development initiative, whether in agriculture, health or education, so that the Education Department replaced its children's education policy with a programme of adult education for fourteen year olds and above, in order 'to produce manpower which could provide basic services for the people and to produce students who will be able to pursue further studies which will be of value to the public.'[28] Even fourteen year olds, by the time they had been educated to grade six would be nineteen or twenty and capable of becoming the teachers, health workers, and agricultural cadres so badly needed. The 27,000 children who had already received education to grade six, but who were too young to 'serve the society', were meanwhile recruited as teachers in literacy schemes.

The Department adopted the TPLF principle that 'education is a systematic and scientific way of shaping social consciousness. If you want to shape the child according to your outlook there must be democratic participation of the students.'[29] Every school and educational institution had a student organisation which helped the students share in decision-making. Rules and regulations were discussed by the student body and only accepted if they were agreed by a majority. Students had the right to criticise teachers if necessary and corporal punishment was forbidden. It is important to see this emphasis on student participation in context. Tigrayan culture, and Ethiopian culture as a whole, inculcates respect for elders and those in authority. Traditional teaching tends to rely on passive reception and recording of information from the teacher, with little argument or even discussion. Encouragement of student participation may be a factor in the long process of overcoming the negative effects of respect, as well as a typical example of TPLF emphasis on participation at every level.

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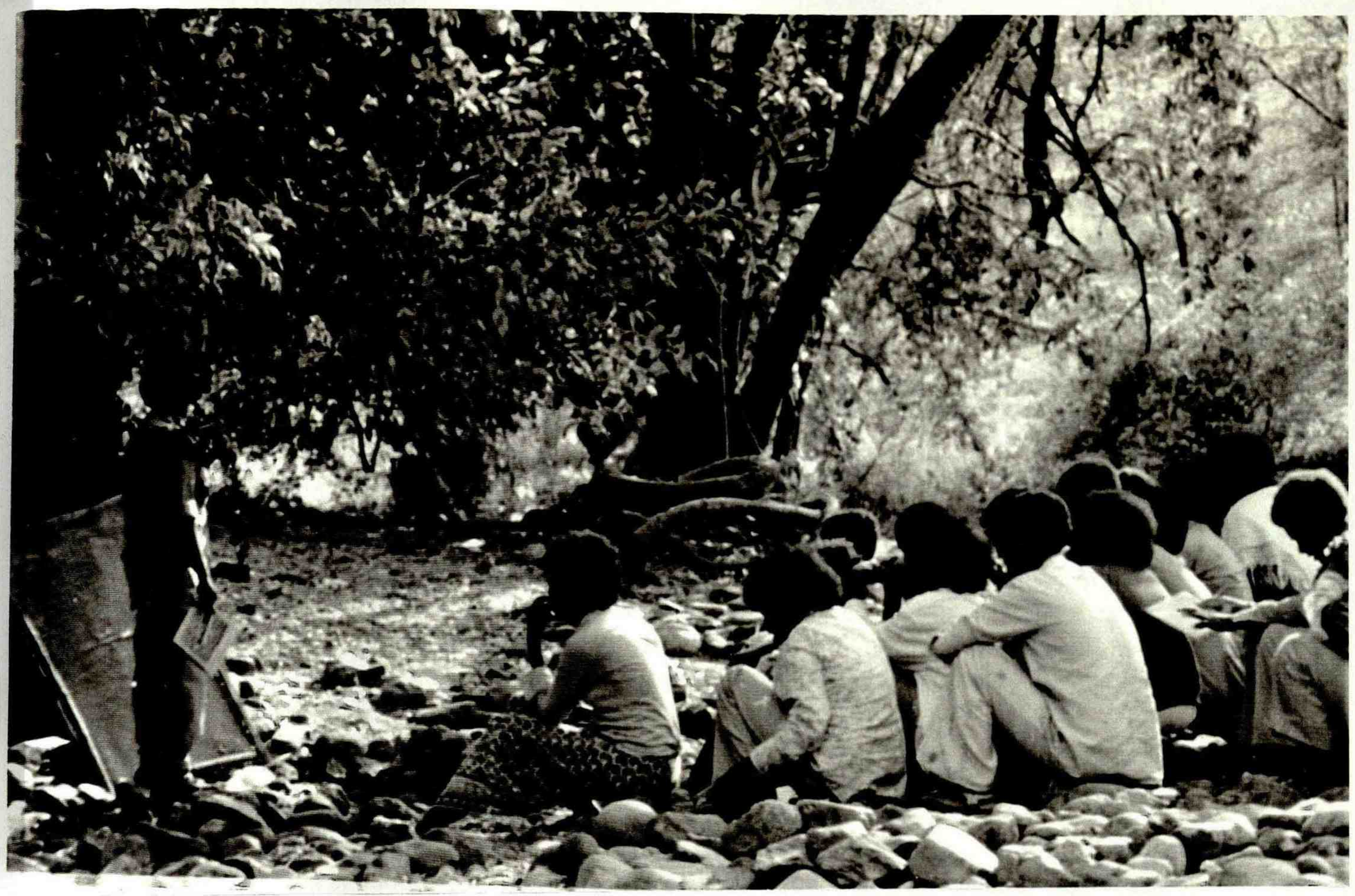
[28] Negash Legesse, interviewed 18 February 1987
[29] Ibid.

TPLF schools

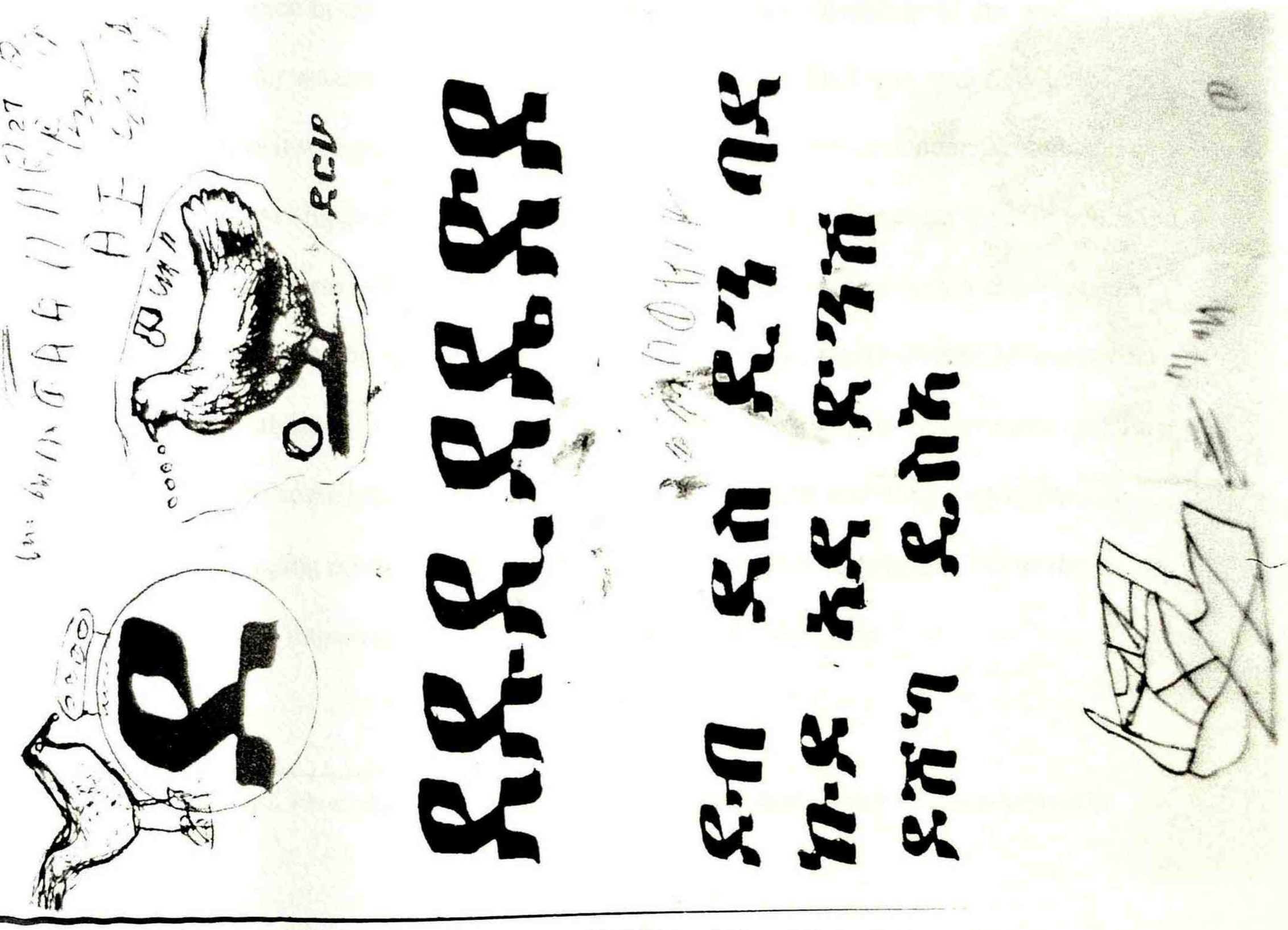
The Department of Education was also responsible for 'organisational schools' or schools for fighters. Fighters' lack of education was only a problem in the departments, especially *kefli hezbi*, because these fighters were seen as 'vanguard' role models in every village. They helped to guide land reform and the foundation of the *baitos*, establish the *serits* and encourage agricultural and rural developments of all kinds. They had responsibilities to local communities which not only required literacy, but included encouraging villagers to become literate and forward thinking themselves. Improving their education was the first stage of the TPLF project. At first fighters acquired literacy within their units. When they could read and write, they attended a TPLF elementary school until they had completed grade six, after which they would rejoin their units. There was no difference in curriculum between civilian and organisational schools. The difference was in attendance patterns. The constraints of the agricultural year limited civilian adult students to the six months of the dry season, taking over four years to complete grade six, whereas fighters could attend full time for two and a half years.

In addition to organisational schools, political schools were set up in 1983 in each region for fighters working in the departments. Quotas from each department depended on available staff. Admission criteria were: basic literacy, at least one year of post-training service, and the ability to understand the courses. In 1987, when I visited the Political School in the west, shortage of teachers had enforced a drop from six hundred to three hundred students, although they were expecting more teachers to arrive from training, so numbers for the next round of courses were due to rise to six hundred again.[30] The classes I observed were in fact big

[30] Tekele Radiai, teacher at the Political School, interviewed in English on 10 February 1987.



Classroom under the trees. Marta School in 1987



The letter 'D': Literacy leaflet with doodles.

assemblies addressed by a teacher over a sound system. These political schools were the lowest level of political education for fighters. After the students had returned to work, some would be selected for admission to the Cadre School in the base area.[31]

The 1983 TPLF Congress also assessed the achievement of the movement in relation to women.

> It evaluated the women's movement in Tigray. Did they have equality? Were they conscious? It decided they were equal in law, but not in practice; they lacked education, skills and political training. The Congress decided to form a school to teach these skills. The Congress itself decided the name too. Women fighters were nominated to the school and teachers were sent. This is the history of Marta school.[32]

Two women's schools were established in 1983, Marta School and March Eight School.

The aim of Marta School was to train women fighters in rural skills and domestic tasks to work with women in the villages to encourage them to take advantage of the new opportunities for women. March Eight School on the other hand was open only in the dry season because it was set up to educate together equal numbers of women fighters and *shig weyenti* (women village cadres or 'torches of the revolution'). The years spent in education indicate the long term aims of the TPLF, that they saw the revolutionary movement as a creature of slow growth, in which the solution of present problems became an investment in the future stability of Tigray, which in turn would make eventual victory more certain. Education itself contributed to changes in the social and educational base and therefore adapted to changing needs. The first students took four years to graduate, but as the educational base improved, later students graduated after one year.

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[31] The Cadre School was established in 1980 before the Political Schools, which were founded in 1983.

Other training establishments, like the technical workshops, the Central Training Hospital and the three regional hospitals, all in caves, dug-outs or under canvas in western Tigray, had problems in the early years with lack of education and were compelled to conduct short term training courses to fill immediate or urgent needs. Here too elementary education and vocational training at first proceeded side by side. The two workshops, Gedaref Workshop in the Sudan and Tekezze Workshop in western Tigray, were established as part of the Front's overall concept of self-sufficiency, to provide more skilled people at appropriate, mostly low, technological levels. Their most important role was to work in partnership with each other to maintain the cross-border convoy to Sudan, which trucked essential supplies, like medicines, grains, foods and fuel into the liberated areas. Both Gedaref and its partner workshop, camouflaged by the heavily wooded Tekezze river basin, maintained machine shops, woodwork shops, metalwork, electrics, welding and forging sections, each providing training for fighters. Courses of political and academic education ran concurrently.

Elementary school curriculum texts after 1991

The most important issue for this chapter is whether post-war curriculum development demonstrates continuity of principle from the revolutionary years before 1991. In 1997, the Department of Curriculum Development in Mekele agreed to facilitate a study of new curriculum texts which were already in use in elementary schools. Seven categories were selected, based on important revolutionary principles: promotion of Tigrayan history, language and culture, including the revolutionary struggle; promotion of understanding and respect for the multiple nationalities in Ethiopia; teaching of development awareness and activities; promotion of gender equality; promotion of equality between religions; promotion

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[32] Saba Teka, deputy head of Marta School, interviewed at the School in western Tigray in English, 11 February 1987. Marta was the name of the first woman fighter, martyred in 1976.

of greater understanding of democracy and political systems; and health education and improved practice.

The investigation was necessarily limited and impressionistic. It was restricted to elementary curricula because the greatest expansion of school provision was taking place at this level. One educational principle in Ethiopia is the widening focus in successive grades, from the local area in Grade One to international concerns in Grade Twelve. Therefore a study at the elementary level could not expect curricula to address wider Ethiopian issues, other nationalities, or international affairs, as these would be dealt with at the High School level. Secondly, some categories, like promotion of religious and gender equality or improved health practice, were ancillary to the main teaching subjects, whereas Tigray history and culture, democracy and development strategies could be taught as distinct subject areas. As one would expect therefore, these categories were the largest. Thirdly, the content categories under investigation overlapped with each other and could not be quantified in any satisfactory manner. Nevertheless the study did indicate the commitment of the education authorities to the principles under investigation and demonstrated continuity from the period of civil war to peacetime in the 1990s.

The two categories showing greatest coverage were topics on Tigray and on development issues. Social studies curricula addressed issues of local political and social organisation (Grade Two) and national and international political systems, including democracy and human rights (Grade Five). Grade Six Tigrigna included material on forestry in Ethiopia, the uses of trees, on rivers and erosion, and on development activities such as terracing and soil and water conservation. Gender equality was also a large category although most of the items were short. I expected one of the smallest categories at primary level to be other Ethiopian

nationalities, but in fact there were courses on the histories of the Oromo people and the peoples of Southern Ethiopia.[33]

In order to illustrate how different categories of information, political principle and exhortation interweave with one another within one course, I will examine one Grade Five course in Social studies.[34] Entitled 'Tigray and its people', it makes use of informational text, dialogues, stories and parables, as do all elementary level courses. After an introduction to Tigray's main physical features, its five zones and main towns, and its culture represented by its musical instruments, the main theme of the course is introduced, 'work'. A story about a widow, whose basket-making in the face of many difficulties becomes an exemplum for hard work, also reminds us of the Derg whose forces killed her husband. It becomes a mobilising text for development work by stressing the necessity of work to society and the importance of 'working together for change'. Young people, drawn with balloons showing their words, talk about changing the environment in a conversation about the soil and water conservation campaign in which the punch line is given to the girl, 'OK, all of us should work together'. This message is reinforced by a story called 'The wise father', the main point of which is 'unity is strength', one of the main slogans of both the armed struggle and the struggle for development. The next unit contains a parallel moral fable about 'The laziest boy'.

Christian/Muslim relations are not addressed directly, but there are several dialogues between Muslims or Christians and Muslims, easily identifiable through their names. Amina and Ahmed (both Muslims) have a conversation about health, in which the clinic near the mosque is mentioned. Another dialogue between a Christian girl, Hadis, and a Muslim boy, Abdu,

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[33] Social Studies, Grade 7, Tigray Education Bureau, 1st Edition 1996, Chapter 9.
[34] Social Studies, Grade 5, Tigray Education Bureau, 1st Edition 1995.

entitled 'What people do at work', addresses not only the overt topic of employment, but also Christian/Muslim relations (implicitly) and women's equality (explicitly):

Hadis: What is your mother's job?
Abdu: She works in an office.
Hadis: What does she do?
Abdu: She is a secretary. Does your mother work?
Hadis: Yes, she is a primary school director.
Abdu: But there aren't many woman directors in Tigray.
Hadis: Of course not. But don't you accept that women can do the work of men?
Abdu: Yes, it is true that women can do the work of men.[35]

A number of items, which I have put under the category 'health', show clear signs of an educational policy anxious to strike a blow against 'backwardness'. 'The food we eat' stresses the importance of vitamins and minerals and a balanced diet.[36] A comparison of two families suggests that viability of family size is dependent on income and expenditure. Assefa earns only 700 birr a month, but with only two children, he can manage financially; Haile on the other hand, although he earns as much as 1200 birr, is in trouble because he has six children and some expensive habits. Anomalously, in the middle of the course book, the thematic treatment of the issue of work is interrupted by a unit on 'How we travel', which refers to places outside Tigray, the cities of Dessie and Addis Ababa. It includes a letter from an EPRDF fighter, describing the 1000 year old city of Harar where he is posted.

Addressing gender

Gender issues are addressed in a number of ways throughout the courses. The cover illustrations, although sometimes gender neutral, often suggest gender equality or at least the intention of counteracting the more obvious gender stereotypes. The cover of the Grade 1

[35] Social Studies, Grade 5, Unit 17
[36] Social Studies, Grade 5, Unit 12

Social Studies workbook shows a girl and a boy shaking hands against a rising sun. Inside the same text, an illustration of a family group shows the father standing, the daughter cooking, and the mother reading a book. The Grade 2 cover picture shows a boy and a girl both doing homework. A similar illustration for the Grade 6 course book shows a girl reading at a desk with a pen in her hand, while a boy looks over her shoulder. A few pages later, an illustration depicts a woman brick-layer and Unit 16 of the same book, called 'Talking about occupations', presents a more advanced version of the above dialogue:

Tekle: Does your mother have any occupation?
Beletu: Do you mean is she employed?
Tekle: Yes.
Beletu: Yes, she is a sales assistant. She works in a big shop in Addis Ababa. What about your mother?
Tekle: My mother is also employed. She works in REST.
Beletu: You know that women were considered inferior to men until recently.
Tekle: But why was that?
Beletu: Many people considered that women should be occupied with household work only.
Tekle: Right you are. They used to believe that women were unfit for office work.
Beletu: But now, thanks to the struggle for freedom, democracy and equality, we can be employed with equal rights to men.
Tekle: Yes, I believe women can do what men can do. We are equal.
Beletu: Thank you. Goodbye.[37]

The Curriculum Department writers have taken the opportunities of Tigrigna language courses to include lessons on gender, Tigrayan history and culture and development. A long story for Grade Six students entitled 'Double oppression' is a serious critique of the culture of marriage in Tigray. It describes the miserable experiences of a young woman who is forced to leave home with her child when her arranged marriage breaks down because of the husband's violence. She wanders from place to place with her child suffering the social prejudice the

[37] Social Studies, Grade 6, Unit 16, Tigray Education Bureau, 1st edition 1996

society reserves for lone women, finally resorting to bar work and prostitution to survive.[38] The outspokenness of this unit in relation to its academic level reminds us that, as many girls only remain in school until Grade Six, when they leave to get married, it is important to communicate these messages at an age when they can be of use. The following unit continues the theme by examining positive and negative aspects of culture in Tigray. The positive is exemplified as the use of Tigrigna language and song, whereas negative culture is represented by the custom of consulting wizards, superstitious beliefs and the refusal to accept health clinics.

Conclusion

The TPLF's commitment to education provides the evidence that their objective was to effect a revolution in the social, political and economic life of the people of Tigray and Ethiopia, and that military victory over the Derg was a stage in a much longer process. A fundamental principle in Tigray was that the people had to understand and approve the objectives and participate in their achievement, making education, whether academic or political, vocational or technical, formal or informal, an essential concomitant of revolutionary aims and programmes. Informal cultural activities, poetry and song and plays, backed up by the radio station, were the early educational tools, until more sophisticated formal educational programmes could be organised through the relevant departments. The Regional Government embarked on a huge school-building programme after the end of the war. By the end of 1996 the number of schools had risen to the record figure of 777 schools, 754 primary schools and 23 secondary schools, the great majority of which were in the countryside, making education accessible to rural people for the first time.[39] At that time three more secondary schools were under construction, bringing the

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[38] Tigrigna Language, Grade 6, Tigray Education Bureau, 1st edition 1995
[39] Adhana Haile Adhana, head of Tigray Education Bureau, taped interview, 6 May 1997, Mekele.

number up to 26 by the end of 1997.Ten years after military victory, education is still seen as the way forward by the EPRDF, for those who were fighters or among the leadership as much as for the general population.[40]

[40] Meles Zenawi, who completed an MBA in the early 1990s and is currently completing an MSC on development economics, is an easy and well-known example, but in fact the majority of those in the upper and middle echelons of the TPLF and EPRDF have been engaged in educational programmes since 1991.

Chapter 7

Women's predicaments in the post-war period

Introduction

Early in 1991, before the end of the war, I met a woman in Tembien, who had been a *zar* many years before.[1] After the arrival of the TPLF in the area, she abandoned her 'sickness', as she called it, and began to support the organisation, so much so that fighters called her *adey weyanit* or 'mother of the revolution', a term frequently given to older women who became their staunch supporters. She wore the traditional clothes of an older Tigrayan woman, an ankle-length dress of heavy hand-woven cotton with embroidery around the neck and hem and bands of woven colour on the thick sash. After telling her story (Hammond 1999: 81), she asked a favour. Could we swap clothes? She wanted to try on a pair of trousers and her reaction when she did suggested delight, daring and a sense of personal transformation as if trying on an identity about which she had long been curious. During the war the appearance of women fighters had symbolic resonance for women, dressing 'like men' with short hair, trousers, even shorts, without decoration. There were many women fighters in the area, so women in trousers were not an unfamiliar sight, yet for this woman the act of wearing them herself had serious symbolic significance. The two modes of dress came to signify for me the contrasting role models available to women at that time.

An account of the construction of the category 'woman' (to adopt the terminology of Henrietta Moore) during the period of TPLF's increasing ascendancy is one of competing

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[1] *Zar:* a spirit which is thought to take possession of certain individuals who thereby gain special powers, especially of bodily and spiritual healing.

gender discourses, principally the tussle between the discourses of feudalism and the TPLF. The TPLF devoted considerable attention to the task of the construction of the female revolutionary subject, with the result that peasant women *en masse* were considered more supportive of the struggle than men. The twin images of a woman in trousers carrying guns and a woman in traditional dress behind a plough were vivid representations that women could do everything that men could do.[2] However it was representations from peasant women themselves about their impossible burden of work which led to the reversal from1987 onwards of the policy encouraging women to plough. Furthermore, since the end of the civil war in 1991 there have been indicators, borne out by my own research, that women's zeal for struggle has lost momentum. This chapter will look at the position of women in rural Tigray in the post war period both to assess the TPLF claims to have improved the longer term conditions of women's lives and also to use women as exemplifying the ways in which both women and men respond to the big collective events which change their lives.

Progress for women after 1991

The Front's sensitivity to women's specific problems had already been indicated by the U-turn at the1987 Women's Conference about women ploughing and women in combat.[3] The Women Fighters' Association of Tigray and the Women's Mass Association were examining within the constraints of the war, the whole process of advancing women's equality. In September 1991, the two associations merged to form the Democratic Association of Tigrayan Women (DATW), later renamed the Women's Association of Tigray (WAT), and assumed new responsibilities at different levels of political, economic and social development.

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[2] TPLF used such images very effectively for posters during the war. One example is reproduced inside the

The first task after the Derg downfall was to organise regional elections and institute the regional council and executive bodies from regional down to *tabia* levels. Secondly, preparations had to be made for drafting and ratifying a new Ethiopian constitution. Third, the development programme for Tigray had to be planned and implemented through the transitional period, before the first general elections instituted a democratically elected central government and a centrally enabled and resourced development strategy. All these tasks involved WAT in devising strategies for women's participation at every stage.

Elections in the federal region of Tigray

By 1991 rural people had long been used to the electoral process for *tabia* and *wereda* level administrations. After the end of the war, however, for the first time electoral processes, including the regional government, became subject to Ethiopian law and the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) framework, standardised throughout the country and open to outside scrutiny. Four rounds of elections were held, of representatives to the National Constituent Assembly to discuss and ratify the new Constitution (May and June 1994), the Regional Council and National Parliament (June 1995), the *wereda* councils, (October/November 1995) and the *kebelle/tabia* councils (February/March 1996). A programme of seminars and workshops was organised through WAT, local MAs and the *baitos* to politicise both men and women, but especially to agitate 'that women are capable and fit to be elected to any position on the Council and the executive body'.[4] According to Aregash Adane, women were not biased against electing men, although 'men were biased

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British edition of Hammond (1989) and on the cover of the American edition (1990).

[3] See Chapter 4.

[4] Aregash Adane, Secretary of the Tigray Regional Administration, interviewed in Mekele Regional Administration Office, 11 April 1994.

against women and thought them incapable and women were furious and challenged them'.

> Women were convinced that we should participate fully in order to secure the empowerment of women in political life and also secure that every woman over the age of eighteen should come out of her home and vote. In terms of numbers women were more active than men. Also they were worried that EDU would infiltrate and seize power.[5]

It is worth drawing attention to three points in the electoral results (Appendix 5). Firstly, a higher proportion of women than men registered for the vote and actually voted in all these elections. Second, women on average were 20% of those elected at regional, *wereda* and *tabia* levels, not only to the council, but also the executive. Third, these results have to be seen in the context of women not being allowed to take public office before the time of TPLF.

Preparation for the new Constitution

The new Ethiopian Constitution was adopted by an elected Constituent Assembly on 8 December 1994. This is not the place for a detailed analysis of its contents, even of article 35, which addresses the rights of women (Appendix 6). Other articles on democratic and human rights implicitly include women and one of the most important provisions is the anti-discrimination clause in Article 25 *Right to Equality*.[6] However, of interest to this

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[5] Ibid.

[6] 'All persons are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to the equal protection of the law. In this respect, the law shall guarantee to all persons equal and effective protection without discrimination on grounds of race, nation, nationality, or other social origin, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, property birth or other status.' (Article 25, Constitution of the Federal democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa, 1994) Of course, constitutions, can be effectively ignored by a dictatorial state, as in the case of the constitution adopted under Haile Selassie, but the particular problem of the recent constitution ratified under the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) was the corrupt or tainted judiciary inherited from the Derg regime, the replacement of which has been going ahead, but is taking both time and resources. This has been an obstacle to the speedy incorporation of constitutional principles in effective legislation.

chapter is the preparation at village level for the making of the constitution and for the elections to the Constituent Assembly.

The Constitutional Commission embarked on a consultative process throughout Ethiopia in January and February 1994. Its effectiveness for women varied, but in Tigray, where local communities were highly organised under the *baitos*, it seems to have been an efficient operation.[7] Villagers were encouraged to perceive the constitution as a *serit* on a grand scale and the constitutional discussion groups as a variant of consultative processes they had long taken for granted. Small groups within *kushets*, debated together with a leader 'concepts' explained and circulated in a Concept Paper produced by the Constitutional Commission.[8] These were short statements under headings, arranged in chapters, mostly devoted to defining democracy, explaining the importance of a constitution, arguments for and against different democratic and electoral systems and other issues. It was a grand public education venture aimed at enabling Ethiopians to understand and participate in political developments at the centre.[9] Finally, the concepts were presented as items in a questionnaire to be filled in by group leaders.

> During the draft meetings, women were participating through their associations. They also discussed their experiences in the *baitos* and what they were going to have in the constitution and opposing ideas not mentioned in the draft. They formed a Constitutional Advisory Committee at *wereda*, zone and regional levels and discussed the agendas about the constitution and the *baito* system in the past and they were ready. In the women's associations it was working like that, writing about the constitution in our journal and taking the ideas to the grass-roots level. All participated, especially Muslims, in discussing marriage and land and other

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[7] In the Constitutional Symposium for women, 19/20 March 1994, to which women delegates came from all regions of Ethiopia, the representative of Region 6, Benshangul, denied that Muslim women had been allowed to participate in the local debates: 'We didn't participate in the constitutional debate in Region 6. Some Christian fighters might have had some discussion, but Muslim women did not.' Other women blamed this on husbands and local religious leaders. Women from some localities in the South informally confirmed the patchy nature of their participation.

[8] 'Basic Constitutional Concepts: A Background Paper for Public Discussion', the Constitutional Commission, Addis Ababa, November 1993.

[9] Taye Eskeselassie, Constitutional Commissioner, interviewed in Addis Ababa, 22 March 1994.

issues.[10]

In addition, in March 1994 a series of symposia on the constitution, including one for women, was organised in Addis Ababa for various sectors to bring suggestions and objections from their regions to a central forum. The symposium for women was remarkable in not only bringing together women from all regions, but also women of widely differing education and class. Women ministers, leaders and socially sophisticated graduates from Addis Ababa mixed with women with a few years elementary education from small towns and peasant women from the countryside with no formal education. However all were activists and, despite diversity of opinion, language, religion and culture, had a common zeal to improve the lives of Ethiopian women.

The most interesting debates were on whether a number of seats should be reserved for women in the Ethiopian Parliament; on a constitutional right to abortion (a priority for speakers from Addis Ababa); on the particular oppression of Muslim women and its attribution to men and male interpretations of the Koran, rather than to the Koran itself; on instituting Sharia as an alternative to Ethiopian law, advocated by many Muslim women, including those most critical of male discrimination against women. Discrimination against women through arranged and early marriage, and through punitive and impoverishing customary laws about the division of property on divorce, was causally linked by many speakers to the problems of urban poverty, prostitution and AIDS. The conference asserted that the problems of rural women, as the majority, be given priority and saw urban prostitution as largely a symptom of the problems and poverty of rural women.

The basis is the economic problem. Abortion will not solve this. Today we must

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[10] Heriti Meheret-Ab, interviewed in Mekele , 11 April 1994.

> discuss higher priorities. Women's biggest problems are fetching wood, water and so on. These are what we must solve.[11]

However some submissions arose from misunderstanding the difference between constitutional and legislative issues and many saw the symposium as a chance to air grievances rather than discuss constitutional issues. The Tigrayan contingent argued cogently for equal rights for women to organise politically, equal access to health and educational provision, an Ethiopia-wide minimum age of marriage, equal rights to divorce and equal property rights on divorce, equal rights with men to land ownership, and also that `special attention' be addressed to cultural and social impediments to women's access to power, social services and economic benefits, rather than special representation through reserved seats in parliament. Women, they argued, had to organise, to struggle for their rights and, if necessary, make sacrifices to improve their collective position.

> During the struggle we managed to be elected to local government, the *baito*. We became judges. We became fighters. These achievements became possible because we Ethiopian women have paid for it in lives. Some women here are asking for special rights. We are not demanding a gift. It is our right. We've fought for it. We deserve it.'[12]

Development priorities for women

The basic problems and needs of village women were well known, especially those of clean water, cooking fuel and grinding facilities, but resources were limited and overseas fund-raising difficult and lengthy. This was a hard lesson for people who had sacrificed much for the war effort and expected victory to bring material rewards soon.

> Even digging a borehole takes time, the survey, geologists, hydrologists and so on, but the people want it immediately. Therefore there is a contradiction between the process of development and the needs and expectations of the people. But the

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[11] Speaker from Oromiya, Sunday 20 March 1994.
[12] Amina Mohammed, a Muslim woman elected as a judge in Axum *wereda* during the war.

> population is learning something about what development is. It is not a simple thing to rehabilitate an area. 1992 was the height of demand; now it has cooled down. In 1991/2 there was dissatisfaction not only among the population, but also among the fighters because people thought that after the downfall of the Derg everything would change at once. They thought one factory could be established in one year, so even they were telling us [the executive body of the Council] 'You are just sitting!' 'TPLF had gone to Addis!' 'When you go to your offices you just warm the chairs!' 'When we were under the trees it was good.' 'The chair was the Derg's chair and now it grows hot with you sitting on it'.[13]

Nevertheless, by the end of the 1994 dry season a programme introducing grinding mills was under way in country districts in cooperation with different NGOs

Grinding Mills constructed or under construction by 1994 in Tigray

Grinding mills	**Donor agency**[14]
100	REST
12	WAT and FAO
2	WAT and TDA
20	YA, FA and RRC
Total 134	

Table 4. Source: WAT

[13] Aregash Adane, 11 April 1994. The then President of the regional council, Gebru Asrat, admitted to me in 1994 that even the TPLF leadership had seriously underestimated the time it took to get projects under way after 1991, especially if they involved the multilateral organisations, the IMF and the World bank.
[14] The Relief Society of Tigray (REST) was founded in 1978 to run cross-border convoys from the Sudan of essential supplies and relief aid into western Tigray. The Tigray Development Association (TDA) was founded in the mid-1980s to raise funds in the developed world, primarily from expatriate Tigrayans for rural development projects. The Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC), an Ethiopian NGO under the Derg, was retained under the Transitional Government of Ethiopia and eventually replaced by the Disasters

The aim was to give women employment in and financial control over the grinding mills. Women's training courses in technical maintenance skills were set up.[15] However the mills in Edaga Arbi and Sobeya were run by men. Well-building was already underway and programmes for dams, roads, clinics and schools initiated, as well as village literacy projects on a wider scale than during the war. Ironically, the severe restrictions imposed by *baitos* on tree-felling and cutting on reserved slopes as part of the Tigray-wide campaign to reverse deforestation and soil erosion, bore particularly heavily on women, who now had to walk greater distances to find dead trees or twigs for cooking fuel. Aregash Adane expressed the contradiction for women between their need for participation and their perennial work burden.

> There are too many things to be done and women should be encouraged to participate because that empowers women the most and gives a positive view to society in general. But trying to involve them in productive activity is contradictory to their involvement in household activity because of the number of hours it takes and they are also expected to work in political activities and economic activities. So we try to cut their involvement in such activities - *they* decide how they will be involved and how to balance their activities. If men are involved for eight hours women will be involved for 4/5 hours.[16]

WAT's second post-war congress in 1995 decided 'the socio-economic condition of women has not changed. The problem is still the burden of women, in water, fuel, grinding, health. Of course there is some change, but the problems are very deep and for many years.'[17] WAT registered as an NGO to raise project funding, particularly for women and child health, vaccination and literacy programmes and worked closely with the Health Bureau, building clinics and improving the availability of traditional birth attendants (TBA)

Prevention and Preparedness Commission (DPPC). The Associations of Farmers, Women and Youth worked with all these agencies and also, the UN agency, the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO).

[15] Kidusan Nega, head of the Woman's Association Of Tigray, interviewed in Mekele, 6 April 1996

[16] Aregash Adane, 11 April 1994.

[17] Ibid.

and Community Health Assistants (CHA). Progress was uneven. Sobeya, an aspirant town, had a relatively well-equipped and staffed clinic, with a separately housed mother and child unit. The nearest clinic to Endachiwa, by contrast, was in Edaga Arbi, a seventeen km. round trip, but in several *kushets* they had health *fana* ('flaming torches'), village women trained to give health advice, assist at births and distribute contraceptive pills, overtly to help women space their children rather than reduce numbers.[18] However in 1996 the effectiveness of TBAs and health *fana* was constrained by lack of essential equipment.

> TBAs are respected by the peasant women because they are near their home and so they call them, but they don't have kits and, if it's at night, there's no electricity or handlamp, no baby clothes. An important project is to equip TBAs, through giving them delivery kits and through retraining programmes. For example they have no gloves and HIV is spreading everywhere.[19]

There was no shortage of analysis and ideas, but everywhere a shortage of resources. WAT also supported a training programme to promote income-generating activities, because 'the capacity of peasant women is very low, although they are interested in working, therefore they have no capacity for income generation and no skills in finance, reporting or management.'[20] In Mekele, WAT members started a successful restaurant in the early 1990s which was still running at the end of the decade. For village women, spinning training and a poultry farm project were introduced in the mid-1990s. An Indian spinning box design, taking a fraction of the time of the traditional method, was adapted for manufacture in Tigray. In 1996 the first 125 women were trained to use it and teach others at *wereda* level, who would in turn pass on the skills to village women. The poultry farm project, started in 1996 in Mekele, distributed cockerels and hens to women throughout Tigray. Credit, to be paid back out of profits, and training by the Agricultural

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[18] Ngisti Tadesse, health *fana* and TBA for Zerabera kushet, Endachiwa, interviewed 2 January 1997

Bureau was available for women to buy cows, goats, or chickens. These facilities were especially important for the huge number of woman-headed households after the war.

Literacy classes were a strong priority for women's development. Ideally, women's association executives needed to keep records and file reports, but most were still illiterate. Many of the most impressive women activists, elected to *baito* and *tabia* judiciaries in wartime, lost their posts in peacetime because of illiteracy. Yet it was not easy to persuade women to attend until after 1994 when classes were organised in the *kushets* (*tabia* sub-division), instead of the *tabia*. Since 1990 REST had sponsored and funded through donors literacy campaigns for both men and women to run in conjunction with other projects for which literacy was necessary.[21] In Endachiwa such facilities were made directly available where people congregated anyway. Literacy classes were held in the middle of the day at the site of a new microdam they were building and child vaccination programmes conducted at WA meetings and other public gatherings. Sobeya's classes were well attended, but upon examination attendance was minimal compared to the potential numbers of older illiterate residents.

Women's strength or women's weakness?

Many remarkable women emerged from the Tigrayan liberation struggle, both as fighters and local activists. Following demobilisation, women combat fighters have been retrained to redirect their skills in civilian life. Those working in the departments have continued their education or retrained as teachers or prosecutors or judges in the local judiciary up to *wereda*

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[19] Kidusan Nega, 6 April 1996.
[20] Ibid.
[21] In the later years of the civil war, Christian Aid funded an extensive literacy project running in conjunction with a REST-supervised soil and water conservation project. Local communities were convinced that the project was in their economic interests. Literacy and numeracy skills were closely tied to

level. Early women fighters, formerly university or 12th grade students, are now in government, getting degrees, or graduating from the new Civil Service College in Addis Ababa in numbers which would have formerly been impossible for any but privileged women from Addis. Small town and countryside activists who started out organising women in MAs are increasingly involved as *wereda* committee members, agricultural agents, or local government executives. Recognition of their ability to serve for the whole community and not just as women's organisation leaders thus marks a new stage of achievement.

Even during the civil war, meeting women fighters (including commanders) and women executives in village and *wereda baitos*, hearing women speaking out and assuming responsibility, persuaded me their struggle had been won in Tigray. However, living in two villages in 1996 and 1997 has led me to reassess my conclusions. Such fundamental changes as the TPLF has set in train are part of a long and complex cultural process which will only be achieved through the confluence of many factors, perhaps over several generations. How are we to quantify and assess such social and political change and how many women's lives must change to constitute real change for women? We should not underestimate what has been achieved for and by some women through the exigencies and opportunities afforded by the armed struggle, but we must also investigate conditions and opportunities for the mass of women still in the villages.

Women's commitment to the post-1991 phase of struggle encouraged by the regional government is marked by contradictory indicators. Most obvious is the decline in numbers attending WA meetings, formerly conceived as the cradle of political education, motivation and participation for rural women. Women's attendance at village assemblies in both

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the needs of recording daily attendance and work programmes and computing necessary calculations for

Endachiwa and Sobeya was also low. More serious but less immediately visible indicators were a lowering of the marriage age for girls and an apparent resurgence of dowry. These, together with the cessation of land redistribution since 1987, until then the single most significant blow against anti-women discrimination, suggest a possible deterioration in the conditions affecting women's lives. On the other hand, more women were supporting development drives, such as soil and water conservation campaigns, and attendance ratios for girls and young women attending new village schools were encouraging. In other words, in the six post-war years, economic and infrastructural developments had begun to redirect the possibilities and opportunities for the whole Tigrayan population, including women.

Legacies of the past

However developments since 1991 cannot be considered without reference to the past. The Imperial period is over, yet not over. Its cultural legacy of customs, practices and attitudes still interpenetrate the present. Its discourse of women's inferiority and domestic confinement, its definitions of good wife and dutiful daughter, reinforced by the Church, co-exist with the revolutionary discourse of women's equality, political participation and attainment of economic and political rights, each working contradictorily through powerful symbolic processes and objects to influence and determine behaviour. Objects symbolising feudal culture would be the bloody wedding sheet, rural women's clothes, hair coverings, mesh baskets for newborn babies, the grindstone, all of which are alive and well in post-war village communities. Although economic reforms have mitigated the worst effects of the births of girl babies,[22] they are still announced by only three ululations, compared with the seven that broadcast the birth of a son.

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catchment terraces etc and so perceived as very relevant and were well attended (Hammond 1991).

[22] According to Netsanet Asfaw, 4 April 1985, the birth of a girl baby was regarded 'like a curse' by peasant families because she was not seen as productive and her marriage depended on their finding a dowry.

If the baby is a girl she is baptized at eighty days, if a boy at forty days. For a boy the women ululate seven times, but for a girl only three. A newborn baby boy is laid in a sifting basket which has very fine mesh. This signifies he can keep a secret, that he is strong, that he doesn't show emotion and doesn't have to explain himself. The female baby is put in a basket with big holes to show that she is weak emotionally and talks too much. This is still done in the countryside. The TPLF are trying to change all this, but it takes a long time.[23]

Such pre-revolutionary cultural practices not only tell us about women's status before the advent of the TPLF, but also about their status now. Priests still teach, and the pious repeat, that Eve caused the entry of sin and suffering into the world for which women should make continuous (and hopeless) reparation. In church women stand in a designated place, peripheral to the ceremony, from where they can see little. Nothing forbids women singing the church's songs, but in Endachiwa and Sobeya women did not join in with the priests and men. Their deportment in church was very different. Men stand straight and watch everything, except for bowing at times of special reverence, while the elderly lean on church staves in long services. Women, however, bow their heads throughout, their faces largely concealed by shawls, and prostrate themselves on the sanctuary steps during the most important parts of the ritual. Women's presence in church is more polluting than men's. Whereas sexual intercourse the preceding night debars both from entering the church compound, women are additionally forbidden if they are menstruating or have recently given birth. 'It is forbidden. It is a really bad sin. She doesn't want to, because she feels really dirty.'[24] On Sundays and holy days in my local churches in both Zerabera *Kushet* (Endachiwa) and Sobeya, there were more women praying outside, their foreheads pressed against the compound wall, than inside. On the feast of *temket* in Endachiwa (Sunday 26 January 1997), after the morning baptism celebrations by the river, a large

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[23] Berhan, interviewed in London in August 1988.

crowd of women began to sing.[25] They were surrounding a small group of five or six women who, doubled over from the waist, were moving round in a small circle and singing, 'I am the slave (*bharia*) of the lord. Lord give me your blessing on my future life'. It is difficult to know how to assess these apparently small details of daily life or whether an observer might exaggerate their significance, but it seems reasonable to conclude they reinforced what TPLF called the 'backward' or 'feudal' culture and subverted women's confidence in sharing in the opportunities of post-feudal society.

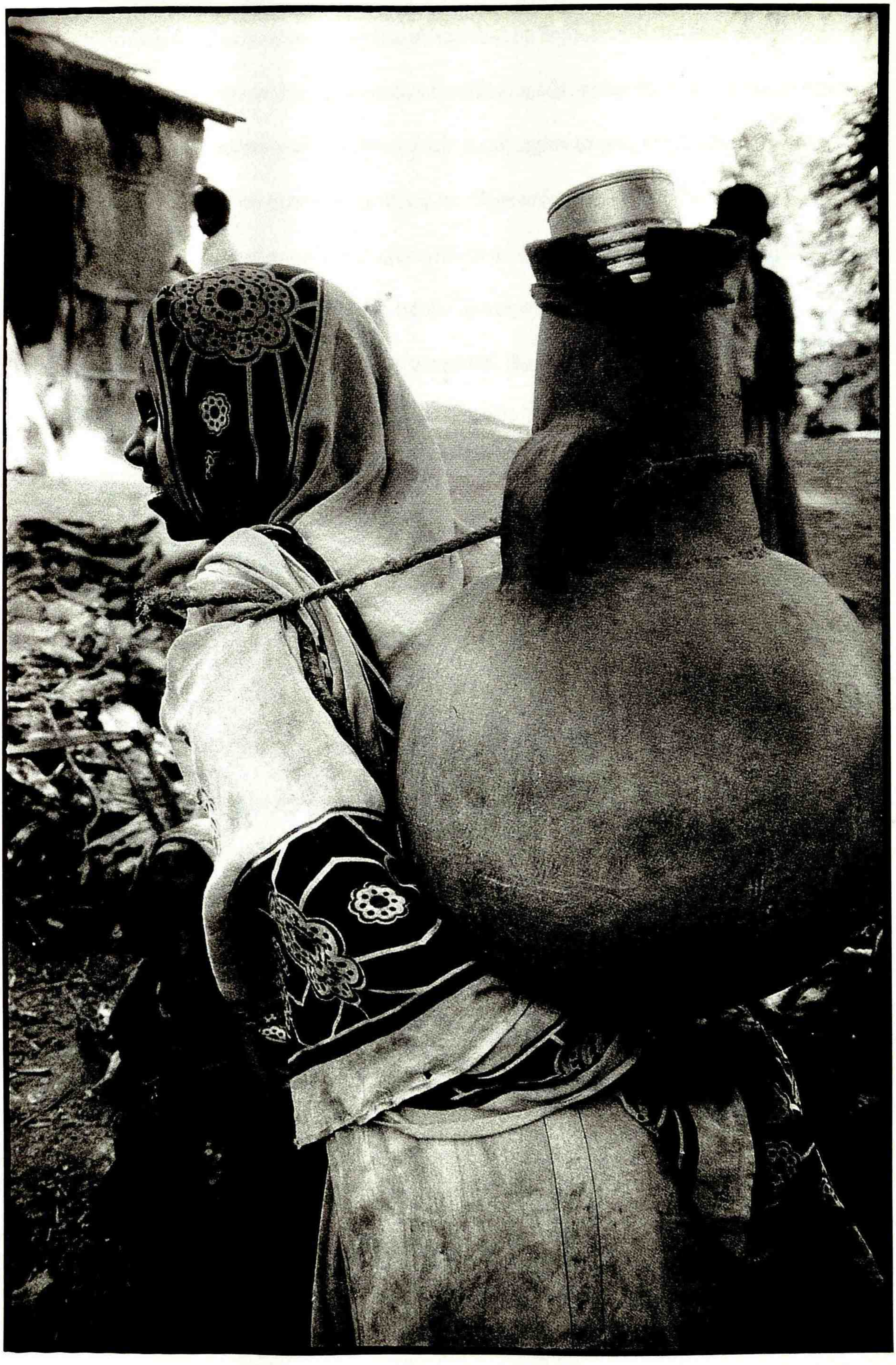
The notion of the subject 'as the site of multiple and potentially contradictory subjectivities' (Henrietta Moore 1994b: 141) is useful in explaining the response of Tigrayan women to their post-war realities.[26] Nor is it confined to women and in Tigray is paralleled by the contradictory subject positions produced by class, which have also precipitated changed social relations. Subjectivity is constantly in process and therefore identity is also multiple and even self-contradictory. The generalisations it is convenient to make about-women whether under feudalism or the revolution obscure the heterogeneity of their experience and response, although facing a common enemy in the Derg, whose brutality daily reinforced support for the TPLF, did much to unify the population in a common discourse of revolution.

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[24] Zodie Woldeselassie, interviewed in London in August 1988

[25] *Temket* in Ethiopia celebrates the baptism of Christ, although it is usually translated as 'Epiphany'.

[26] Henrietta Moore and Marilyn Strathern have taken up in feminist anthropological theory what philosophers like Lacan in psychoanalysis, Barthes in semiotics, Derrida in deconstruction and Foucault in discourse, have been investigating since the 1960s. Catherine Belsey has pursued the multiple constitution of subjectivity within literary theory: `[W]omen as a group in our society are both produced and inhibited by contradictory discourses. Very broadly, they participate both in the liberal-humanist discourse of freedom, self-determination and rationality and at the same time in the specifically feminine discourse offered by society of submission, relative inadequacy and irrational intuition. The attempt to locate a single and coherent subject position within these contradictory discourses, and in consequence to find a non-contradictory pattern of behaviour, can create intolerable pressure.' (Belsey 1980:112)



Women carry heavy water jars over long distances

This revolutionary discourse is now dominant and that of feudalism a residual and subversive influence. Thus when asked about the gains made under the revolution, women are invariably and immediately eloquent on their equal rights to property, whether acquired in a past land division, or on marriage or divorce. They mention their rights to participate in the *baito*, vote, be elected to office or elect others and take their grievances, including those against husbands, to the community court. However this does not mean the old discourse of women's inferiority is not still powerful, the more so because its power is inscribed and normalised in the humble objects of daily life and accepted practice. That different discourses are accepted in different contexts does not mean they reflect the objective reality. Village women *sound* revolutionary, but this does not seem to be reflected in attendance at or participation in many of the marker events that are the fruit of revolutionary struggle. The old excuse given by husbands to the early fighters, 'She cannot come. She is always in the house', has reinstated itself as a self-evident truth. Yet it is equally self-evident they are not. Women move around their locality for all sorts of reasons, including the primary domestic duties of fetching water, gathering fuel and marketing, but also to work in the fields. 'The house' has come to signify women's work wherever it takes place and her unavailability for participation in other activities, such as meetings. Similarly, although women have gained economic status and respect for bringing their share of land into the family, they are still not regarded as productive in the same way as men, although they work long hours in the fields and their responsibility for certain tasks such as weeding and reaping makes them demonstrably so. Women fighters have been demobilised and few village women now plough their land. In Endachiwa I could find only one woman who still ploughed her own land in 1996-7 and in Sobeya none. The only women who wear trousers are foreign anthropologists and aid workers. The vivid images of women with the plough and the gun are no longer a counterweight to the

grindstone, the water jars and the *mogogo* bakestone. In fact, the 1987-8 policy change on women ploughing and women in combat suggest TPLF were no longer constructing women to do the same jobs as men, but exploring their different potentialities. What now are the outward signs of women's power and participation in society? More importantly, has the promise of better living conditions and wider opportunities, which these outward signs symbolised, continued after 1991?

Case studies: Endachiwa and Sobeya

Endachiwa ('place of the nobles') had the reputation, not only of being notoriously feudal before the revolution, but also (and therefore) one of the most politically conscious of liberated areas afterwards, sending a high proportion of its youth to fight, including 'so many active women fighters'.[27] According to Hassen Shiffa, who directed *kefli hezbi* operations in the Edaga Arbi area from 1978 to 1983-4, including Endachiwa, the first land division 'changed the attitude of men towards women' by bringing women economic equality. It also broke barriers of discrimination and inequality between Muslims and Christians, because for the first time Muslims had equal rights to land, so that 'the ladies and the Muslims came very close to us [because of] their economic and equality rights'. Several Edaga Arbi women interviewed became active TPLF members in spite of their husbands. 'When we were in Adua I was a member of TPLF underground, but he was not. I asked him to go with me to fight the Derg, but he was afraid, so I went and he stayed there.'[28] The first Muslim woman member in Edaga Arbi played a key role from the late 1970s, refusing to be deterred by her husband's opposition.

> At first my husband was unhappy about my activity in TPLF but I was highly agitated by TPLF fighters and their aims were in my blood and they told me to go

[27] Hassen Shiffa, head of *Kefli Hezbi* 1978-84 for Edaga Arbi area, interviewed in Mekele, 8 January 1997.
[28] Tariq Kidane, ex-fighter, now a prosecutor in the *wereda* court, interviewed in Edaga Arbi, 24 January 1997

> slowly, slowly and solve my problems gradually. So I smiled at my husband when he quarrelled with me and told him TPLF was important for us. At that time I was trying to convince him about TPLF, but I had a plan if he was going to stop my action in TPLF I would divorce him.[29]

In Endachiwa, the Muslim population of Atagemuz *kushet* expressed its support for the revolution and its pride in sending a woman fighter. In 1997 Muslim women interviewees identified equal division of property on divorce as the issue that won their support, recalling 'when TPLF proclaimed the equality of women our husbands were not happy and they are still murmuring'.[30] As in Christian communities, the benefits of land redistribution persuaded Muslim men, most of whom were landless, to accept the less palatable issue of women's equal rights to property. However recent agitation for *sharia* law has again unsettled relations between men and women.[31] It is the same issue raised so often by Muslim women at the 1994 Addis Ababa Constitutional conference: male insistence that *sharia* law proclaims the *inequality* of women in property ownership and inheritance and female rebuttals that this is male interpretation and not intrinsic to the Koran.

> According to our Constitution in Ethiopia, there are two ways of getting rights – you have the right to *sharia* law or equal rights under Ethiopian law. If a woman now wants to divorce her husband, she has rights. Women now are more conscious and want to prove these rights in practice. But what is happening now is that some Muslim men are agitating women that if they oppose the laws of the Koran they will be excluded from Muslim society. For example, if I divorced my husband and claimed equal shares of the property, then the men would say, 'She is out of Muslim society. She hates Muslims and is against the Koran.' They would demoralize her. Those who are conscious or are members of TPLF or are members of the Woman's Association don't agree with the *sharia* laws. Even if I divorce my husband I don't want to leave my home and I want my share, but

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[29] Saadia Ibrahim, now chairperson of Edaga Arbi Women's Assocation, interviewed in Edaga Arbi, 24 January 1997.

[30] Tunura Ahmed, 53, interviewed in Atagemuz, 13 January 1997.

[31] Since the end of the war demand in Muslim areas of Ethiopia has resulted in *sharia* family law being available in the lower courts, as a parallel system to Ethiopian law, as long as it does not contravene the constitution. This has had its effect in Tigray also where it is more controversial because Muslim communities are in the minority and they have been heavily influenced by the Tigrayan revolution.

> because of the new Constitution of Ethiopia which allows both systems of law, many Muslims are trying to practise it now, even in this village.[32]

Women in Atagemuz might not be as articulate as this Muslim head of Edaga Arbi Women's Association, but they were just as conscious of their rights and prepared to fight for them.

> Now there is a problem again and many people are agitating to go back to *sharia* law and old times. There is a big dialogue under way, mostly reflecting men's opinions. In the past women Muslims had no rights. Her husband could just say 'Go!' She had no right to even take her scarves or a piece of *injera*. The only thing we Muslim women can do is to refuse to leave home if our husbands send us away. We are saying this: 'If you want, you leave, but we will stay.' This is happening all over Tigray.[33]

One couple, interviewed together, argued in front of us, he supporting *sharia* and his wife declaring, 'Whatever they do, we will fight these chauvinist men. We women always say long live the TPLF who gave us freedom.'[34] In order not to give a distorted impression, I should add that laughter followed this exchange, but this increased rather than diminished the impression of serious intent on both sides.

Most of these points applied equally well to Sobeya, but there were differences, notably the absence of a Muslim community in Sobeya. Moreover, whereas Endachiwa is in the central highlands, Sobeya's position on the Eritrean border has affected its history and identity, particularly its early adherence to TPLF, its antagonism to EPRP and its relation with the Eritrean parties. Its long-term poverty arising from mountainous terrain and stony, infertile soils make the Agame a seasonally migratory people chasing income elsewhere in Ethiopia, Eritrea and Saudi Arabia. The frequent absence of young men has affected the stability of marriage, and therefore women.

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[32] Saadia Ibrahim, 24 January 1997.

Marriage and dowry

In 1993 Aregash Adane, speaking at a conference, linked landlessness and dowry as the two factors most responsible for creating 'a negative culture for women'.

> The fact that there was intense competition to acquire the dowry on the part of the man's family meant that the marriage age was reduced to early childhood. The marriage age before the distribution of land was only seven to nine years. This unjust cultural practice had a tremendous effect on the physical and psychological well-being of young girls.[35]

One of the great achievements of the Tigray revolution was the decision by *baitos* to include a minimum marriage age in local *serits*, aided by the fact that at that age girls also qualified for a share of land, an important incentive to retain them in the parental household. Furthermore entitlement to land was its own dowry for those too poor to afford one and offset poor families' need for one.[36] Such changes, and women's high profile in the armed struggle, helped replace negative with positive attitudes to women. It was therefore disturbing to discover, with the 1990s abandonment of the *serit*, both a return to a lower marriage age and regeneration of the practice of dowry.[37]

This is the more disturbing because high divorce rates in the Ethiopian highlands have long indicated that marriage as practised there has been unsatisfactory for participants. That most divorces are initiated by women suggests a negative culture of marriage for women,

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[33] Amina Said, interviewed in Atagemuz, Endachiwa, 14 January 1997
[34] Mohammed Tuku, 68, and Tunura Ahmed, 53, interviewed in Atagemuz, Endachiwa, 13 January 1997.
[35] Aregash Adane, 'Women and Democracy', a paper presented at a Symposium on *The Making of the new Ethiopian Constitution*, sponsored by the InterAfrica Group, Addis Ababa, May 1993
[36] The practice of dowry was one of the factors which helped to differentiate peasants into the three economic categories, poor, middle and rich, as distinguished by the TPLF. Only rich peasants could operate the dowry system with advantage. 'Middle' peasants were often impoverished by trying to scrape one together and the daughters of poor, often landless, peasants, unable to provide a dowry, would be unable to marry, accepting unofficial liaisons or resorting to prostitution to survive.
[37] Concern over unresolved problems to do with marriage led WAT in 1996 to take the first steps towards regularising the marriage laws, including reintroducing a minimum marriage age. They collaborated with the Tigray Justice Bureau in founding a committee of equal numbers of representatives from each organisation to take responsibility for revising the articles on family law. They considered the Article in the Constitution stating the equality of women in every respect needed to be more specific. Unfortunately I left Tigray before the new articles had been completed or implemented.

the more striking because economic and educational weakness have restricted rural women's prospects outside marriage virtually to prostitution. Pankhurst (1992) draws attention to the frequency of divorce in one area of Shewa, but the same could be said of Tigray. Not only did her findings indicate the average number of marriages per adult was 3.3, but that 49% of marriages lasted less than five years. Bauer notes that in the early 1970s in an Enderta village 45% of all recorded marriages with one partner still living ended in divorce (1977:127). In Enda Mariyam near Hagere Selam twenty years later 37% of marriages ended in divorce, although remarriage was common (Hendrie 1999:186). It is difficult not to associate such a high incidence of brief partnerships with forced early marriage and a culture of discrimination against women even in the home. Both Hendrie (1999:191) and Pankhurst (1992:118) suggest that the high divorce rate is an indicator of women's autonomy, her power to at least leave an unhappy marriage and Hendrie records the perception of villagers in Enda Mariyam that divorce had become more frequent as a result of TPLF's law. The TPLF and *baitos'* attempt to raise marriage age, insist on free choice and expand women's educational opportunities and so their options, has to be seen in the light of this domestic instability. However, it is too early as yet to assess the effects of these measures.

In Endachiwa, according to a teacher, 'many girls married under age' in the previous year, 1995-6.[38] This was confirmed by *baito* officials, although considered exceptional.[39] They ascribed the rash of marriages, at ten, eleven and twelve, to rumours that the state was intending to make the minimum marriage age eighteen years for girls and thirty for men. Such a response to unsubstantiated rumour suggests other powerful cultural and economic factors at work. Those in authority emphasised economic factors, that when a daughter

[38] Seyoum, teacher at Endachiwa Elementary School, in a conversation 27 October 1996

marries 'there is less pressure on scarce resources',[40] but most stressed cultural pressures such as fear of loss of virginity ('Even death is better than that'[41]) by rape or kidnap and shame at having an unmarried daughter grow to physical maturity.[42] The intense shame this brought is indicated by the saying: 'If a hyena should eat your grown daughter, consider it the gift of an ox'.[43] The hated and feared hyena performs along with vultures the useful task of clearing away carrion, the rubbish of the animal world. It is presumably this service the saying alludes to with such economy. The ox, the plough animal many have to share or hire, signifies wealth in Tigray and here has the metaphoric force of a negative dowry, saving a daughter's maintenance in the shameful absence of a wedding to celebrate. The cultural attitudes suggested by this saying persist despite their feudal associations.

Village people are suspicious of urban culture which they regard as far from civilised and many fear the contamination for women and children of increased contact with towns. In fact such studies as the Comaroffs' of the cultural subversion of the Tswana people by alien signs and commodities imported by missionaries, including clothes and horticultural methods, suggest there is some justification for villagers to feel threatened by modernity (1992: Chap.9). Towns mean decadence: smoking, drinking, Western clothes, AIDS, but above all loose sexual habits. The division of attitudes towards prostitution reflects the double standards governing male and female behaviour and exemplifies the social control under which women live their lives. Men visiting the prostitutes widely available in bars is regarded as normal, yet prostitution hangs over women's heads as a threat and a sanction

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[39] Asmelesh Geday, ex-chairman of Endachiwa *tabia*, current chairman of Zerabera *kushet*, member of *tabia* baito; Letehauria, chairperson of Endachiwa Women's Association, both interviewed on 4 December 1996.
[40] Aregash Adane, 10 May 1997.
[41] Letehauria, Chairperson of Endachiwa Women's Association, 4 December 1996.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Collected by Netsanet Asfaw and passed on to me in October 1996



A new bride riding on a mule with the *arci*



Women help build the new Sobeya school

against any behaviour out of line with the dominant gender discourse prescribing the conduct of respectable women. For many, these anxieties translate into arguments for early marriage. Nor should the importance of weddings to the social life of the community be underestimated. Restoring 'normal' life after the war also restored the social significance of giving and receiving invitations and mutual hospitality.[44] Weddings help form social bonds through the practice of neighbours contributing *injera* to lighten the cost burden, followed by stringent social obligations to return the favour to roughly equal value.[45]

The generalisations about marriage possible in feudal times were no longer valid in 1997, but neither were those that fighters made to me during the war, that child marriage, forced marriage and dowry giving were no longer practised. Some village informants argued for a return to the minimum age of marriage under the *serit* when violations incurred fines, but this was not possible under the new constitution, and was anyway difficult to monitor because date of birth records were rarely kept. After 1991 child marriage was still forbidden, but TPLF and *wereda* authorities believed education and agitation, rather than law and punishment, were the best way of tackling entrenched cultural practices such as child marriage or female genital mutilation.[46] In fact TPLF acknowledged frankly that cultural change took longer than they hoped, but pointed nonetheless to the steady erosion of the customs of 'Haile Selassie's time'.[47] My research confirmed this.[48]

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[44] Aregash Adane, 10 May 1997.
[45] Rishan Gebremariam and others, interviewed in the Awhie area, 28 January 1987, give an example of intermarriage, manifested in wedding celebrations, playing an important part in creating new communities. In the early 1980s the TPLF with the help of REST conducted a programme of voluntary resettlement from the overcrowded central highlands to the underpopulated western lowlands.
[46] Murutz Tsehaiye, Chairman of Gulumakeda wereda, interviewed in Zalambessa, 2 April 1997
[47] Hassen Shiffa, 8 January 1997; Murutz Tsehaiye, 2 April 1997; Aregash Adane, 10 May 1997 and others.
[48] Asmelesh Geday, 4 December 1996

In Endachiwa, under-age marriages were in the minority and there was no return to the seven to nine year old average of the past. There were no exact figures, but personal observation and attendance records at the school provided some indicators. Local *baito* and Front members were outspoken against early marriage, although *baito* officials did not seem to be referring offending parents to the *wereda* authorities. Increased interrelations with local towns, where average marriage ages were higher, seemed likely to influence practice in the villages. Villagers often cited this (as a feared effect). Most importantly, education at the village school to sixth grade and a new high school in Edaga Arbi to twelfth grade were counteracting limited perceptions of women's roles and hence the custom of child marriage.

> You can't solve administratively the question of marriage. The people have their own values. To change their values, you can do some administrative restrictions, but what we are thinking in broad terms is you bring development to the peasant. If the standard of living improves, if people get something to eat and if we distribute education, health and other things, if the exposure to the cities grows, then virtually it will come to the normal way of marriage. Of course we'll have the legislation, but the most basic problem will be resolved through development. There are so many ladies who reject to marry now. They say, 'We want to finish our school.'[49]

Other knowledgeable informants, like Aregash Adane or Kidusan Nega, head of WAT, are also optimistic about the longer term.

In Sobeya the average marriage age seemed higher than in the rest of Tigray, even before the revolution. Although my evidence for elsewhere is largely anecdotal, random interviewing of women since 1986 throughout Tigray has reinforced it. Older women among these all told of forced marriages of seven, eight and nine year olds, sometimes even younger, with varying consequences from physiological injuries and psychological

disturbance to apparently stable relationships. In Sobeya, however, the average age of marriage was thirteen or fourteen before TPLF came and in 1997 many girls married at seventeen or eighteen.[50] The Sobeya WA chairperson, aged fifty-five in 1997, remembered only one exceptional case of marriage at seven or eight years old. She herself was married at sixteen.

Some people attribute Sobeya's later marriage age to the influence of the Catholic Church and an alternative hypothesis is difficult to find. In neighbouring Irob to the east, where the Catholic Church was established in the mid-19th century by an Italian Lazarite priest, the average marriage age is even later. The centre of Catholic influence is Alitena, although there is a Catholic cathedral and seminary in Adigrat, and many of the Saho-speaking Irob people profess Catholicism.[51] There are links between the Saho language and both Afar and Oromifa and the non-Catholic population tend to be Muslim. Sobeya on the other hand is largely Tigrigna-speaking and Ethiopian Orthodox in faith with only a small Catholic minority. Nevertheless there may be an influence from Irob where the average age of marriage is eighteen to twenty years. The Catholic Church's prohibition on divorce has given it an interest in promoting later marriages and its long practice of recording dates of birth and baptism, in contrast to either the Orthodox Church or civil administrations, has enabled it to monitor marriage age more effectively.

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[49] Hassen Shiffa, responsible for *kefli hezbi* operations in the Edaga Arbi area, including Endachiwa, 1978 - 1982, interviewed in Mekele on 8 January 1997.

[50] Desta Berhe, Director of the Catholic Mission School of the Holy Trinity, interviewed at the school on 20 February 1997, and others. However the Catholic priest in Sobeya asserted in an interview on 19 February 1997 that the average age of marriage for non-Catholics 'is nine to eleven in the rest of this area'. The divergence is inexplicable except in terms of the mutual, if covert, antagonism between the Catholic and Orthodox Church, at least in this village. Although I could not do a complete survey, that pessimism was not borne out by my interviews in the state school where one girl was married at thirteen, but most were married at seventeen or eighteen.

[51] Abba (father) Tesfamichael Seyoum, officiating priest in the Catholic Mission in Sobeya, interviewed 19 and 24 February 1997.

The practice of dowry, so discouraged by the TPLF during the war as a contributory factor to both poverty and early marriage, also seems to have returned. The groom also gives presents to the bride, usually jewellery or clothes. The bride for her part, especially in the countryside, prepares three traditional objects as a 'trousseau': a special embroidered pillow (*mekede*), a decorated mat (*mentsaf*), and a 'table' made of basketwork for serving injera (*gofala*), which are all carried in line by young girls in the bride's family. Her family often also provide a vessel for pouring water and washing hands before a meal (*desti kuskusti*). In addition the bride gives evidence of her domestic skills by making a range of fine, decorated baskets which will hang on the walls of the new home. Her friends also make baskets and give them to her as a gift. The standard of all these things depends on the resources of the family, but they are usually seen as essential to maintain the domestic reputation of the bride.[52]

The dowry is agreed between the two families (although in towns, where the marriage age is usually later, the bride and groom tend to play a more significant role in the decision-making), but it is usually kept confidential until the wedding day, when it is publicly exchanged at a particular point in the celebrations. The terms of the dowry are announced, for example the number of oxen and other property in kind, but money and valuables are given by the bride's father to a representative of the groom's family and counted in front of the assembled guests. 'If the dowry is very small, even the groom's friends start murmuring. A representative of the bride's family who is good at talking, talks them through the reasons. "Our village is in problem. The hail destroyed our crops. We hope in future to make it up to a greater sum" and so on.'[53] Such public show of (apparent) wealth has in the past been an integral part of the culture of status honour and the pressures such

[52] Gedeon Kiros, in a conversation in Sobeya, 15 April 1997.

customs put on poor families to overreach themselves are obvious. The TPLF has been consistently agitating against such practices since the late 1970s and, as with the recent lowering of the marriage age, are confident that education for girls and the chances of employment it brings will eventually overtake and replace the giving of dowries.

The education effect

The confidence of *wereda* authorities in Edaga Arbi (Endachiwa) and Zalambessa (Sobeya) that later marriage was only a matter of time was based on the increasing availability of education.

> To make people afraid by punishment and so on, this is not the main way. The main way is to change the mind of the people. To change the mind of the people may take time… If you compare town and village there is a difference. Why don't the town people get married early? Because they have know-how, education and so on. If education changes in the village the mentality will change. So this is the preferable way, to change the attitude of the people.[54]

Education is a new culture for village communities, where households have traditionally relied on child labour for their survival. For this reason it is not yet possible to make education compulsory in Ethiopia, but the take-up in Tigray of 43.2% in 1996 of the potential school population has been higher than in any other region and is outstripping the capacity of the regional government to provide either schools or equipment.[55] This take-up also reflects a higher participation of girls than elsewhere in Ethiopia.[56]

> At the lower primary level [grades one to four] … it's possible that Tigray could even attain parity of the sexes within five years, but the number of girls

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[53] Ibid.
[54] Murutz Tsehaiye, Chairperson of Gulumakeda *Wereda*, taped interview in Zalambessa, 2 April 1997.
[55] Adhana Haile Adhana, head of Tigray Education Bureau, taped interview in Mekele, 6 May 1997.
[56] Ibid.

> declines from grade five onwards, through marriage. You have higher cases of failures, because our society or household still makes a much heavier demand on girls than on boys. So, particularly in the rural areas (it's also the case in the urban areas by the way) girls are at a disadvantage still, so you see a higher attrition rate through failures. Still it's very significant when you look at the figures, that even at the upper primary, that is the second cycle from grade five to grade eight, the representation of girls in Tigray is relatively very high.[57]

Any discussion of the education of girls thus has to take into account the current transitional status of girls from a past when child marriage was everywhere prevalent to a future when, it is hoped, marriage at a reasonable age will be one of a range of options available to young women. It is clear from the above extract that early marriage, although later than in the past, is still considered one of the main reasons for girls to drop out of school. Yet if we look at the attendance of pupils at Endachiwa and Sobeya schools, not only is the number of girls dropping out a small minority, but there is a drop-out rate for boys also.

Attendance at Endachiwa School 1996-7

	Males	**Females**	**Total**
October 1996	461	343	804
January 1997	435	303	738
Decrease	26	40	66
% Decrease	5.6	11.3	8.3

Table 5. Source: Director, Endachiwa School

[57] Ibid.

Attendance at Sobeya School 1996-7

	Males	Females	Total
October 1996	547	417	964
April 1997	499	399	898
Decrease	48	18	66
% Decrease	8.8	4.3	6.8

Table 6. Source: Director, Sobeya School

In Endachiwa and Sobeya schools the tables reveal an overall drop-out rate of 8.3% and 6.8% respectively, including both males and females. In Endachiwa, where the average marriage age was lower than Sobeya, the female drop-out rate is twice that of males; in Sobeya, where the average marriage age was higher, it is less than half the male drop-out rate. This supports the conclusion that early marriage is a factor in a small minority of girls leaving school before they have completed primary education. However it is important not to conclude that marriage or pregnancy is the sole reason for female absence from school. (In both villages the school directors considered pregnancy a stronger incentive to leave than marriage.) It is important to note that the overwhelming majority of females who register stay on. Further, the female drop-out rate should not be ascribed only to marriage or pregnancy, but should be examined in the context of factors that could be determinants of the overall drop-out rate. In Endachiwa only four girl students out of the forty absentees had married since September and had left the school. Some married students had left because of pregnancy and 'some think their future is only as a housewife'.[58] Nevertheless

[58] Adhana Haile Adhana, 6 May 1997

the later January figure in Endachiwa included 37 girls who were married and still at school.[59]

Numbers of married females in relation to class grade

Class grades	Married females
1	3
2	5
3	3
4	5
5	9
6	12
Total	37

Table 7. Source: Attendance records, Endachiwa School

The married students were distributed through the grades in the above manner. As one would expect, numbers are concentrated in the higher grades. In the countryside, where education has only recently and gradually become available, the level of grade does not reflect the age of the pupil, as it does in larger towns where schools have existed for longer. At Endachiwa School the youngest pupil was seven and the oldest twenty five. It seems reasonable to assume that the January figures for female absentees would include female students who were absent for reasons other than marriage or pregnancy. In order to keep in perspective the marriage factor, it is important not to see these girls in isolation from male absentees and drop-outs in the context of a community under pressure from poverty and the necessity of finding work in order to survive. Thus the cycles of the agricultural year, such as harvesting in November and December, ploughing in March and April and sewing and planting from June onwards are all times when household members are expected to work intensively on the land.[60] The crops in Zerabera *kushet*, where I was

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[59] Tekiye Abadi, Director Endachiwa School, from the school records, 27 January 1997

[60] It is perhaps salutary to remember that it was common for village schools in England up to the first half of the twentieth century to record and even to collude with high absenteeism of pupils during harvest time or

living, had been severely damaged by a freak hailstorm in August and unseasonable rain in November caused reaped crops to sprout in the stack. These vagaries of the weather caused even more of a food crisis than usual in a poor village. Fortunately, it coincided with the first phase of construction of a microdam under a food for work programme, which the community in Endachiwa regarded as an alternative food opportunity and in which they were engaged from January onwards. As some *kushets* had had a bad harvest there was pressure in many households to engage every able-bodied member to work in the dam, despite constant agitation from the *baito* members to keep their children in school. Babies were carried on their mothers' backs, although children too young for physical labour were often drafted to look after toddlers. In Sobeya, on the other hand, young men were tempted out of school by the need for labour on the family's land and by the possibilities of paid work in construction in bigger towns or in Saudi Arabia.

> Absenteeism from school is not only because of agricultural problems, but also some students travel to other parts for jobs. Therefore it is associated with poverty and need of families. In fact we feel sorry, but when we see these reasons, we can't do anything. We try to encourage them to make up classes. The parents do respect the *wereda* regulations, but if the farm work is beyond their capacity they need the help.[61]

Education is a long term self-help strategy, but sometimes the urgency of farmers' short-term needs have to take priority.

However, there is reason for optimism that so many parents decided to send their children to school in the first place, especially female children; that the majority of the female students complete sixth grade before marriage; and that a growing number are staying on at school after marriage. Of course, as the take-up of the new educational opportunities is still

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times of agricultural crisis. As an example, see school records for Kirtlington, Oxfordshire, in Victoria County History, Bodleian Library, Oxford.

[61] Desta Berhe, Director of Catholic Mission School, 20 February 1997.

below 50%, those who are opposed to liberalisation of the marriage customs would be less likely to be sending their daughters to school in any case. Some families express suspicion of schools and education, which they have always associated with towns, first as a place where their daughters come into contact with young males, and second as a possible channel of contamination by urban ways. My observation, confirmed by interviewees, was that teenage girls and boys do not mix freely in school, but keep to their own sex in distinct spaces. The unmarried girls interviewed in Endachiwa were all from fifth and sixth grades, between fourteen and sixteen, and declared their intention of completing their education before marriage, and some intended continuing to twelfth grade in the almost completed secondary school in Edaga Arbi. Several interviewees gave as their reason for postponing marriage likely resistance from husbands to wives taking time out from domestic duties for education. The following opinion was typical in response to a question about the attitude of most husbands to education for their wives: 'If you get married, your husband will not be happy. He wants you to stay at home. Most husbands have this character in the village.'[62] However it was becoming increasingly common for parents to insist, perhaps prompted by their daughters, on writing into marriage agreements that their daughters should be allowed to complete their education up to an agreed level. There are also economic pressures for change. The farming communities are facing a difficult future. They understand very well the problems of shortage of land and know their children will have to diversify into different occupations to survive economically. Those who send their children to school, girls as well as boys, have realised that education, at least to the lower primary level, is the only means to future employment.

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[62] Tsega Ghirmai, aged sixteen, Zerabera Kushet, sixth grade at Endachiwa School, interviewed 29 January

Two Sobeya brides

These two examples of young married women in Sobeya were interviewed in the state school, which they were still attending.

1. Desta Hagos, aged twenty, was in seventh grade. She was married at eighteen, two years before, although 'my parents tried to force me to get married before that and I refused for two years.'[63] Her husband had left two years earlier, soon after the wedding, to work in Saudi Arabia. Desta was still living with her parents.

> If he comes back I am happy; if he doesn't I don't care … Even if he comes home, no one will stop me [continuing at school] because we have a signed agreement for me to continue my education. It was my uncle's idea. My parents wanted it too. I hope the agreement will last until 12th grade and if possible to continue after that. I would like to be a health worker.[64]

It is common for young men from the area to try to find work in Saudi Arabia, many of them as illegal migrants who run the risk of eventual deportation. Nevertheless tales of well-paid employment opportunities by Tigray standards lure young Agame men to try their luck. The promise of this relative wealth enables them to command a handsome dowry from among the few families who can afford such a one, who see it as an investment. Desta's dowry was five thousand *birr* and four cattle, which may well have enabled the groom's Saudi project. He gave her forty grams of gold. A proportion of these migrants do not return and, if they do, according to the judge of the sub-*wereda* court, some of them do not return to their wives.

> Most cases we see are about disagreements between husband and wife, most of the problems coming from the man because the men go off to Saudi and when they come back from the good life, from seeing beautiful women, they make dispute with their wives, saying, 'I don't want to live with her'. Some women also come and apply to the court: 'I have a problem. My husband is in Saudi

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1997.

[63] In imperial times such a refusal would have been out of the question.

[64] Desta Hagos, interviewed at Sobeya School, 8 April 1997.

> Arabia for three years. No letter or money has arrived from him, so I want a divorce'. These are the cases we are seeing.[65]

2. Abeba Nguse, aged eighteen years and also in seventh grade, demonstrates the current transitional nature of marriage arrangements. She was only thirteen when she was married, six years earlier.

> I didn't want to be married but my parents forced me. I didn't know him. I saw him for the first time on my wedding day. I think they wanted me to marry because they are fools. I divorced last year. I divorced him because I hated him, because I was unwilling to be married. I raised the question of divorce.[66]

From a less affluent family than Desta, Nguse's dowry was four hundred *birr* and one ox. Her husband had given her a silver necklace and two dresses. Some of these details demonstrate customary practice, unchanged since feudal times: forced marriage, parental choice of groom, first meeting on the wedding day, dowry. Only the age of the bride is later than in most of feudal Tigray. However, it would not have been possible in the past for a young woman to take responsibility for initiating a divorce in this way. Other details in the interview also illustrate the transitional nature of women's position in relation to marriage. The outcome of the marriage had made her parents regret their action and they 'now advise other parents not to marry off their children early'. Nguse gives her opinion that over twenty is a good age to be married and twenty five to have babies ('because if you have babies as a kid it's not good for you – too much boring work'), but, above all, she asserts her right to continue her education, until twelfth grade if possible. Thus there is at work a fundamental process of changing attitudes towards marriage. There is no longer one set of customs with minor variations dictating the pattern of modern marriage. A dialogue between alternatives has been set up and young women are increasingly having a voice in

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[65] Tekelu Tesemma, judge of Sobeya sub-*wereda* court, interviewed in Sobeya, 4 March 1997.

that dialogue and expressing their sense of their own future. Education is the most important factor in the difficult evolution of a new sense of identity for girls and young women.

Women's weakness in participating

The Women's Association of Tigray has been concerned that decreasing levels of participation in WA and *baito* meetings will affect the opportunities available to the mass of women, rather than the elite few. They inherited from the war years the TPLF maxims that change can only be brought about by the participation and struggle of the people, that women should struggle and claim their rights for themselves and that advantages granted, not fought for, are unlikely to result in attitudinal change. Hence WAT's concern that the site of political organisation of women's struggle, the WA meetings so effective during the war, no longer seemed respected by women as relevant to the immediate issues of their lives.

Both Muslim and Christian women in Endachiwa and Edaga Arbi *wereda* town were in agreement that 'male domination' of women appeared to be rising again, causing a regression in male attitudes to women's non-domestic interests.

> We believe we are equal now, but still there is domination by men in the home. For myself, if I stay all day in meetings, my husband will criticise me, 'What use is this meeting? What have you gained from this meeting?' We have gained our rights to decide on political and social affairs of the people, but our weakness is we are not participating because of our husbands' domination and our own lack of resistance. You know there are many husbands who discourage their wives. I think the best way is to evaluate these people, but the problem is that if I evaluate my husband there will be no peace in my house.[67]

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[66] Abeba Nguse, interviewed at the school, 8 April 1997.
[67] Tsehai, Vice-Chairperson of Endachiwa Women's Association and Coordinator of Zerabera *kushet*, interviewed in Endachiwa, 13 January 1997.

In Sobeya too it was the explanation most commonly offered for women's low attendance at meetings of all kinds.

> There is a change. [Male domination] exists again. If his wife always goes to the meetings and evaluations, he says, 'If you go on doing this I will divorce you'. Because of this the women prefer to stay at home. If she divorces she will be lonely; she will not be happy; she feels a dependant of her husband.[68]

Non-participation, whatever the reason, was usually referred to as 'weakness' and acknowledged to be a major problem by *tabia* and *wereda* WA executives, by *tabia* and *wereda* administrations and by WAT central coordinators in Mekele. At the annual evaluation of the WAs of the *wereda* in Edaga Arbi, it was the main topic for discussion, particularly the reasons for it, whether 'weakness comes from [the members'] weakness or the executives'.[69] However although a problem all over Tigray, not all village WAs were as weak as each other. Several villages were selected for special praise, although the Endachiwa association was evaluated as among the worst in the *wereda* and its executives, particularly the chairperson, became the main focus of critical attention.

The decline of women's participation during the 1990s has been as steady in Sobeya as in Endachiwa and many other villages in Tigray. Coincidentally, Sobeya was also ranked at the bottom of the *wereda* league table in the *tabias* (not just in terms of women's activism, but across the whole range of performance criteria, particularly in development activities). Male domination was not the only reason given for 'weakness'.

> There was very good attendance during the struggle, very good for the women's movement. Every woman participated. Now it's not so good. Women were in good emotions, more than now. The problem is there is an opinion expressed by women now: 'Why meetings now? Why? We got peace through our struggle. There is no need of more meetings.' When I say that it's weaker

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[68] Murutz Tsehaiye, 2 April 1997.
[69] Atsede Gebremedhin, chairperson of the *wereda* Women's Association, WA annual evaluation, 22 January 1997.

> than before, I don't mean there is no activity, but there's less than before. If the executives work hard to coordinate the people, I think they will be willing. The struggle is not completed. It is not the struggle with bullets, but to develop and to improve our lives, to get different facilities and infrastructures. There is some activity. More than 50% of women became members of our association this year.[70]

The range of explanations offered for women's non-participation in meetings was similar in both villages: 'relaxation' after the long struggle in the belief that the main aims had been achieved; the absence of the catalysing effect of a common enemy; that women were pursuing private rather than collective advantage; that the elected officers 'were careless and didn't bother to agitate the women';[71] the waiving of the fine previously imposed for non-attendance; demoralisation of activists; and of course male opposition. Probably all these factors made a contribution to widespread indifference to organising collectively for common objectives, especially by contrast to the intense activism of the war years.

The Edaga Arbi *gemgam* attributed the failings of the Endachiwa WA to weakness on the part of the executives. According to *wereda* and WA authorities in Zalambessa, evaluations there at about the same time came to similar conclusions about the failings of the Sobeya executives. This view that it is always the executives, but never 'the people', who are responsible for poor performance is so widespread in Tigray among officials and cadres as expressed in *gemgams*, that it amounts to an orthodoxy, making it difficult to admit the existence of the part played by other factors and possibly therefore leading to their underestimation. However it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that commitment on the part of coordinators does play a large part in the success or failure of women's associations. Despite evidence of the resurgence during the 1990s of male discouragement of women's extra-domestic activities, the fact remains that during the war women

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[70] Geday Welde Selassie, chairperson of Sobeya Women's Association, interviewed in Sobeya, 19 March

succeeded in overturning by collective action and sheer force of determination much greater resistance to their participation in public affairs. Moreover the previous year's evaluation had declared Endachiwa the model village for all the *wereda*, so successful had been its performance by all the relevant criteria. In the Sobeya area other villages had achieved much more. What seemed to be the variable was the commitment of the *tabia* leadership. Perhaps the Western concept of 'burn-out' would be applicable. In the evaluation of the Endachiwa WA, their obligations in the year currently being evaluated included: calling weekly executives' meetings and monthly members' meetings; attendance at a monthly meeting for *tabia* executives in Edaga Arbi; registration and monitoring of women's attendance in the literacy campaign; organising the collection of the monthly payment; overseeing the Cooperative Work Association; and monitoring women's participation in the Global 2000 agricultural extension campaign. To every question on these criteria the chairperson gave a negative reply (that is, she had not investigated or didn't know the answer), but after an initially defensive response she accepted the criticisms. This may have been the result of her experience, as I have observed that within the *gemgam* culture resistance to criticism prolongs and intensifies negative scrutiny and can earn a harder punishment. In this case, Letehauria's record was taken into account and she received a 'simple warning', although her fellow executive member, Zadkan, having already been given a simple warning the previous year, received a hard warning.

That the WAT leadership in Mekele were well aware of the problem was indicated by their planning a series of capacity-building training courses for WA executives throughout Tigray. The courses started on 6 April 1996 for forty one *wereda* WA leaders. The training

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1997.

concentrated on management and organisational skills, including the writing of reports and ways of managing finance. The main objective was to improve the movement's capacity and make the organisation more effective.[72] A year later training continued for *tabia* level leaders all over Tigray, including Endachiwa, but by that time I was living in Sobeya and the Sobeya WA executives attended the course during the first two weeks of April 1997 in Zalambessa, the *wereda* town.

Conclusion

Women's increasing resistance in peacetime to organising politically by attending WA and other meetings does not mean they have not participated fully in other aspects of village life. The most important aspect of women's participation is in development activities. Although Terehas Gebremariam, the chairperson of the *wereda* WA, was quick to assert that, judging by their attendance, women 'hate meetings', she was equally ready to admit their willing participation in village development projects, such as soil and water conservation, checkdam repairs and dam construction.[73] This suggests that women's burden of work forces them to be very discriminating in how they spend their time, that they judge development work in their immediate locality to have a direct bearing on the well-being and economic security of the community, whereas meetings, often without immediate practical effects, are much lower in their scale of priorities. Other commentators have also observed that those women who do attend meetings usually bring portable work with them in order to make best use of the time.

> While men go to these meetings (mass, youth or farmers) without any household work, …[m]ost women (about 50%) were usually seen with their children, water pots/jerry cans, spices etc. and half of the time they were engaged with these tasks more than participating in the meetings/debates. It

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[71] Tariq Kidane, 27 October 1996
[72] Kidusan Nega, 6 April 1996
[73] Terehas Gebremariam, chairperson of the wereda WA, interviewed in Zalambessa, 13 March 1997.

> was obvious that the women adopted this kind of attitude because some of these meetings lasted nearly the whole day and often start two to four hours behind schedule (REST 1993:34).

In the past it was seen as fitting that only men attended meetings, spoke in public and made decisions and even for peasant men these opportunities were limited and non-political. It would be unreasonable to expect village women in a few decades to shake off the inequalities of centuries and play public roles in ways the mass of ordinary women still do not in Britain and the West. In the small towns and at *wereda*, zonal and national levels more and more women are playing a visible part in public life and decision-making. Village women who are exceptional enough to seize the new opportunities tend to be siphoned off to work outside the village. For the majority of women, for whom at present there are no alternatives to a life of domesticity and hard physical work within the village, there have been positive developments. Equal rights to land and property have brought women increased autonomy in the household; the distinction between sons and daughters is no longer so marked; the prohibitions on physical force in marriage are strictly enforced and young women and girls form almost half of those attending the new schools. Assistance through WAT training schemes and REST micro-bank funding for income-generating activities is targeting rural women. Infrastructural improvements are enabling developments to reach some at least of hitherto remote areas. The pace of change is slow, but the worst effects of women's subordination are showing steady erosion. It is the growing generation of girls who will test the claims of the revolution to have changed the lives of women.

Chapter 8

Micro-politics of the revolution in practice: reflections on the case of the Endachiwa dam

Introduction

The significance of the Tigray revolution is not only as an example of a militarily successful revolution. As we have seen, it was also an extraordinary achievement in the way the TPLF mobilised the mass support of the Tigrayan people, so that they became participants in determining their own future. However the very cohesiveness of the revolutionary effort and the continuation of this cohesion into the post war development drive can lead an observer to ignore or take for granted the processes which lie behind concepts such as 'participation' or 'development' and make unconscious assumptions that achieving such goals is as easy as describing them. The objective of this case study is to show that this is not the case by demonstrating the human processes and problems associated with getting a community development project under way. It will also serve as an appropriate conclusion to this narrative of revolution, although the revolutionary process in Tigray is far from over.

Context

These 'human processes' are of course rooted in the daily life of the rural people and therefore in the land itself. 'Land was everything to the farmers. Land was the source of their wealth; land was the base of their life, the source of their security, income and also the source of their dignity and self-respect.'[1] The maintenance, development and viability

[1] Teklewoine Assafa, head of the Relief Society of Tigray (REST), interviewed in Mekele in English on 10 May 1997.

of the larger concept of 'land', as well as the narrower one of 'production', have remained at the heart of the revolution since the earliest days of the revolutionary student movement. This emphasis on the social and economic well being of the people in its widest sense, and not just on political and military priorities, is one of the characteristics which differentiates the TPLF from many other revolutionary movements and, in my view, the one which comes closest to explaining their political and military success.

An important indicator of this commitment was their founding of the Relief Society of Tigray (REST) in 1978 as a separate organisation to take responsibility first for humanitarian concerns and later for development. The distinction between the two organisations was based on unity of principles and objectives and a genuine division of labour. The fight against underdevelopment and poverty was common to both, although the means were different. During the war, REST organised the cross-border convoy from the Sudan, the mass migration of famine refugees in 1984, and from 1988 initiated the soil and water conservation campaign to regenerate the eroded mountainsides and fields of the central highlands. Since the end of the war 'the struggle' has been devoted to rural development under its many aspects and a raft of state employees has been trained to assist the project. In Edaga Arbi, to take a familiar example, REST had its own representative. In Endachiwa, three agricultural agents from the Agriculture Bureau were employed to work closely with the villagers on both soil and water conservation (different kinds of terracing and reafforestation) and on the Global 2000 Campaign to increase production through access to inputs and selected seeds. Meanwhile the Agbe Training Centre, the first of several training centres for voluntary national service for hitherto unemployed school leavers to help with rural development projects, was sending out its first trainees. Endachiwa had two male trainees to work with the agricultural agents, and three female

trainees to work with women in the same way as Marta School graduates had worked in the villages during the war. In Sobeya 120 Agbe volunteers were working on the new road from Zalambessa to Alitena and three women trainees were working with village women. To help the income-generating projects of not only farmers, but also village women, REST sponsored the establishment of micro-credit and savings banks in every area.

> I am not carrying a gun now. I am carrying money, which has replaced the gun. So instead of a kalashnikov, I carry my credit and savings scheme. I carry my environmental rehabilitation and the agricultural programme. I carry my rural water supply. So what we have changed is the weapon.[2]

In 1996 yet another group of 'experts' had arrived in Endachiwa, to survey for a micro-dam. Not only must the local topography be suitable for a micro-dam, but there must also be an accessible local source of appropriate materials, such as specific kinds of stones and gravel in different sizes and selected, relatively impermeable clays for the core of the dam and lining the basin. The budget for dam construction depends on free and freely available local materials and cheap local labour for all possible tasks. When it proved a suitable site, an assembly of the villagers was called. The advantages of a water supply throughout the dry season were obvious, but the disadvantages, loss of land to those who farmed the valley floor and increased risks of malaria, also had to be confronted and discussed. There were precedents for villagers refusing micro-dam developments because of malaria and at least one village had torn down its dam wall altogether. The usefulness of such a case study as this is that it makes visible as an example the negotiations which lie on the other, private side of development projects.

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[2] Ibid.

The Endachiwa dam

At the same time as the need is clear for a case study to bridge the gap between a (possibly) idealised representation of revolutionary practice and the all too human practice itself, there are certain problems in presenting it. How do you communicate a process with the minimum of distortion when the narrative material consists of the minutiae of small exchanges diffused throughout countless everyday events? The importance of the dam narrative is in fact the relation between the 'minutiae' and the overarching objective of the dam construction, but more than that it signals the microcosmic significance of the relation between this collective venture and, at the wider level, the slow collective construction of the Tigray revolution itself. The dam becomes a potent symbol, built by the community for the community, catching and channelling the people's energy as a major resource at the same time as conserving for the future the most important resource for their survival, water.

The proposed reservoir area in Endachiwa was twenty-three hectares with a capacity of 1.8 million cubic metres and a life expectancy, assessed on an annual rate of silting if undredged, of twenty-five years. The dam was intended as a supplementary water supply for low rainfall years, but in average rainfall years as a means of dry season irrigation for eighty hectares of land. The construction started on 1 November 1996 and was due to be completed in February 1998, taking therefore two dry seasons. In the early stages, about two hundred and fifty people were employed from Endachiwa to construct buildings and start to select and carry stones. Then, in order to clear the site, up to three and a half thousand people were required daily and workers also came from other villages. The labour force was organised into work groups (*gujele*) of twenty-five to thirty people. As it

was a REST project, REST organised donor funding for wages in kind in a 'food for work' programme. Depending on the kind of work, payment could be three kilos of grain per person per day, or the same amount 'on contract' of completion of a measurable amount of work per group, supposedly working out as a day's work for each individual. At the stone collecting stage, the stones were formed into 'metric cubes' (platforms of stones 5m x 5m x1m) as they were collected by the *gujele* members. The construction of one metric cube was calculated to be a day's work for the whole group. The construction engineer, who directed operations on the site, was in favour of 'contract', not daily, payment, because a day rate was 'a disincentive to work hard and it obscures the uneven capacity of the workforce.'[3] Each work group selected a leader and the groups were distributed between the ten foremen supervising their work.

This factual presentation, if it were left at that, would be a gross misrepresentation of the Endachiwa dam project, through omission rather than commission. It leaves out the human factor, the series of problems and solutions which presumably characterise all development ventures. However it also provides a practical demonstration of the ways in which the different practices and effects of the revolution, described in earlier chapters, interweave in practice with the daily activities of villagers, such as assemblies and meetings, *baito* executives, agitation, collective effort, confidence and assertiveness, and so on.

One of the initial difficulties in recruiting a large enough workforce was that the beginning of the project overlapped with threshing. The number of feast days had already put some farmers under pressure. The destructive impacts of a hailstorm in September and unseasonable rain in November made farmers extra cautious about their remaining harvest.

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[3] Ephrem Tameru, construction engineer for Endachiwa dam, interviewed 23 October 1996.

Our nearest neighbour had pursued labouring opportunities in Humera in the west, neglecting his own harvest in Endachiwa and losing thereby a proportion of his crop. He and several other farmers could be heard through the night commanding the oxen at the *audi* (threshing floor). Even before the formal start of the dam project problems had begun to emerge. They did so of course in a very untidy way, but for clarity I have divided them into two categories, grievances of the workforce and problems for officials. Another problem which ought to be mentioned, although it remained unsolved, was that I was not always in possession of all the facts. Although I was granted exceptional access to meetings of all kinds, which gave me considerable insight into village politics, there were a few occasions when the doors closed and I was allowed to know no more.

Grievances of the workforce

At the end of a village meeting in October 1996 a foreman was accused by members in the assembly of having stolen grain from REST grain stocks reserved for workers' wages.[4] The villagers were concerned because they were convinced, as the stores were too closely audited to allow any margin, that he was spreading the shortfall by short-changing the workforce. The complaint was presented in a typically 'winding' fashion, with a slow start directed to a side issue ('three kilos for one day's work is not enough') and only gradually working up to the allegation of theft.[5] As the interventions grew more vociferous, the most effective spokesmen for the villagers were a priest, who was a *baito* executive member heading the Social Committee, and an agricultural cadre from Zerabera *kushet*. The young foreman first denied the charge and then blamed 'some others, who ordered me to give

[4] The meeting, on Sunday 20 October 1996, was a preparatory meeting for the annual three day *tabia gemgam* starting the following Friday, when all the executives of village administrations in the *wereda* gathered in separate classrooms in the local school to evaluate the performance of the previous year. Present were the executives and leading members of each *kushet*.

Villagers working at the Endachiwa dam site

these crops to other people', at one point trying to incriminate at least one executive member. The chairman resolved to investigate the whole matter and at this point the assembly was disbanded to allow the *baito* executive members, the militia and the *kushet* coordinators to hold their own meeting to evaluate Kidane, the foreman, and decide what was to be done. I was excluded from this meeting and never told its proceedings, except that eventually Kidane was fired. Two days later was the feast of St Michael when we were invited to a *maheber*. Most of the day passed in jokes, pleasantries and a great deal of *sewa*, but when the *maheber* members retired together for prayers and readings, the invited guests were left to chat. The conversation passed to 'trouble at dam' and two of the young men present acknowledged that they 'had advantage' from the crops in the food for work programme 'because they were related with the *baito*'. They were laughing. 'Why are they laughing?' I asked Gedeon, my research assistant. 'Because they do not want to expose them,' he said, 'or perhaps they are afraid to say.' In fact he asked them for the names of the *baito* members allegedly implicated and wrote them down.

Villagers also grumbled about the payment of three kilos a day, the issue brought up at the assembly. Responsibility for agitating the villagers to work in the dam rested with the *baito* executives who in every village meeting explained that the context of the payment was the advantages of the dam to the community, so that working at the dam was working for themselves. Dissatisfaction was not helped by the logistical problems of REST, whose officers as payment times approached were not always able to organise the delivery of sufficient grain to the local depots to pay them at the right time.[6]

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[5] There is a saying in Tigray '*lebi Tigray tewutwai*' ('Winding is the heart of a Tigrayan') which does not seem to be used in a pejorative way, suggesting deviousness, so much as 'tortuous' in the sense of seeking out subtleties, ramifications, inferences and best interests.

Dissatisfaction with payment became confused with other sources of discontent about the nature of the work and the ways it was allocated. The decision to pay by 'contract', that is according to the fulfilment of a 'metric cube' or other unit of work, produced inequalities and consequent complaints from the workforce. Each worker was supposed to be able to move a metric cube (1m x 1m x 1m) of soil or stones and take it elsewhere in a day. This was a theoretical concept only and in practice, the expression 'metric cube' applied to the sum of work performed by a work group of twenty five people, a platform of selected stones or soil (5m x 5m x 1m) brought from a distance, or an excavation, for the dam abutments for example, and removal of the excavated contents to some designated place. The group leader allocated tasks within the *gujele* according to capacity. Women and youngsters tended to do the carrying, men the harder labour. However not only the capacity of group members varied, but also geological differences and distances travelled to bring the right kinds of stone made for a variety of inequalities.

Geological variations provided a focus for discontent which came to a head on Tuesday, November 19. When we arrived at the dam site, there was already a large crowd of men (women left disputation to the men) gathered at the side of the site. The crowd was angry because the soil on one side of the dam barrier was virtually impenetrable and on the other side was soft, which amounted to a lowering of the wage rate for those who were excavating trenches for the foundations of one end of the dam barrier.[7] Some workers from other villages had already left the site in disgust and there was a rumour flying from person to person that REST had been paying five kilos a day at other dam sites.[8] The crowd was

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[6] This item was brought up at the weekly dam evaluation meeting on 31 January 1997 by Keshi Yibrah in the form of a criticism of the 'weakness' of REST.

[7] I went to investigate the nature of the 'soil', which those on pickaxe detail were only too pleased to demonstrate. I also tested it with tools and found it to be almost solid rock.

[8] According to REST, this rumour had no foundation whatsoever, although it was persistent and difficult to eradicate.

addressed by two *baito* executives, the priest, Keshi Yibrah, and the executive responsible for security, and by two dam officials. The administration representatives assured the crowd their case would be discussed by the executives at the regular dam evaluation the following Friday and a solution would be found; meanwhile they urged them back to work.

> We are your representatives. We know the problems of the people. I am sure we'll solve all this by discussion with the *wereda baito* members and others. Until we've done that, everybody should continue working. If you don't want to work here, we'll have to report that Endachiwa people aren't interested in doing this work and we'll give the chance to other *tabias*.[9]

A few minutes later he added that, if they did not want to work, they could leave until Friday, which some of them subsequently did, enfuriating the site manager. There were several spokesmen from the crowd, mostly recommending continuing work until Friday 'but don't forget the problem of the land. It's very, very hard.' The two professional construction engineers gave contradictory signals. On the one hand they insisted they were discussing 'with higher officials' an improvement in the rates by reducing the size of the metric cube. On the other, they came across as much more 'managerial' and hostile to the crowd than the *baito* officials. One of them, Mulu Gesesse, provoked an angry murmur from the crowd by asserting that 'there are trouble-makers in this crowd. You must expose them.' The tone of the site manager was consistently confrontational. He contradicted the *baito* chairman's remark at the recent village assembly that 'nothing can pass the eye of the people', an observation confirmed by this very dispute, by emphasising their laziness and their tendency to complain. In contradistinction to the long confidence-building approach of the TPLF, he continuously downgraded the people's opinions, asserting the superiority of the judgement of 'experts'.

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[9] Keshi Yibrah, priest, head of Social Committee in Endachiwa *tabia* administration, addressing the crowd at dam site, 19 November 1996.

> You have wasted time today, so you will have to continue today's quota tomorrow, but you won't get paid twice. We can't discuss the problem of the land here; the decision has to come from the experts and the baito officials.[10]

In fact the people, many of whom had lost their harvest to freak hailstorms, needed to work, wanted to work and were not, in my view, making unnecessary difficulties. The solution that emerged from subsequent discussions was to rotate job allocations daily so that inequalities evened out. This was accepted by the workforce and grumbling on this issue ceased.

However, as the workforce increased to three and a half thousand it became clear that a minority of 'trouble-makers' were exploiting their fellow workers. They were of two kinds. Complaints began to arise from workers who turned up for work in the morning to discover that their metric cubes, completed the afternoon before, had been robbed in the night by those who wanted to assemble their own metric cubes with less effort. This was solved by additional security guards whenever the work force was absent, at night and on holy days. More serious was the discovery of corruption in some group leaders, who had allowed their groups to decrease in numbers from twenty-five to twenty or even sixteen, while they were continuing to draw the grain payments of twenty-five workers. Instead of distributing the fake workers' wages among the villagers whose additional labour they had exploited, they were pocketing the difference themselves.[11] The huge numbers of people, all doing different tasks and continuously on the move, for a time prevented the malpractice from coming to light. Such cheating was never completely solved in the time I was in Endachiwa, but it was relatively better controlled by the executives, who began to

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[10] Ephrem Tameru, construction engineer and site manager, addressing the crowd at dam site, 19 November 1996

[11] Mulu Gesesse, construction engineer, interviewed 28 January 1997.

record in writing membership of groups and to monitor their performance more effectively. They also began working more closely with REST officials in Edaga Arbi and Mai Kinetal, the small towns where the monthly pay-outs of grain took place.

Problems for officials

All the causes of discontent among the villagers described above became the problems of the dam and *baito* officials as a matter of course because they had to find the solutions. The coordination of a relatively unskilled workforce of over three thousand people also presented considerable logistical problems which had to be solved on a routine basis.

These problems, some of which were only to be expected, were not helped by tensions between the officials themselves, particularly between the dam construction professionals and the *baito* executives. The two groups of officials had to collaborate on a daily basis, but they had very different attitudes to the villagers. The two dam officials, as 'experts' and professionals, were constantly critical and contemptuous of the villagers. Even the more lowly foremen, who had some education but were from a local rural background, emphasised their higher status by assuming urban modes of dress (white shirts, leather jackets) and attitudes of superiority. This was particularly true of the head foreman who attended all the evaluation meetings. The *baito* executives, on the other hand, were villagers themselves, elected to positions of responsibility. They were able to identify and identify with villagers' genuine problems and distinguish them from the activities of a minority of trouble-makers who made life difficult for everyone. That the problem came from the top, the site manager and engineer, was clear from his conduct in meetings in the November and December. On 22 November, three days after the angry crowd had gathered at the dam to protest that the management were not taking into account variations in the

soil, the Friday evaluation became acrimonious. Instead of taking responsibility for solving a genuine problem, Ephrem blamed the dissatisfactions and consequent departures of the workforce on the executives themselves.

> I can say that this is the weakness of the executives because you have the responsibility of agitating people and convincing the people for this dam work. So the agitation is weak and there is weakness in you executive members. People have not enough knowledge about this dam construction. They only come here to get crops. That's why eight hundred people left the work and went home.[12]

The chairman of the executives acknowledged some weaknesses in the Dam Committee, primarily irregular attendance at the site and unpunctuality at meetings, but denied their responsibility for all the problems. In fact the agitation work was the responsibility of the head of the Propaganda Committee, Asmelesh, who had been present every day at the dam with Keshi Yibrah, another executive. Keshi Yibrah pointed out Ephrem's own weakness: 'If any trouble happens, you have to try to solve the problem instead of expecting the executives to do everything.' Tsegai, the chairman, distinguished between technical and agitational responsibility and said, moreover, that, although all executives had not been present all the time, some had been present all the time. Ephrem continued to alienate the rest of the committee by recommending that executives who were absent from the site should be charged in the Community Court and punished. Even Mulu, his second in command, disagreed. The chairman delivered a calm, but robust, defence of the executives:

> What you have to know is that we executives have many problems. As you know, we are not civil servants; we are the people's representatives. We harvest our crops ourselves, we plough ourselves, we thresh ourselves, we solve the problems of the community ourselves with the people, we have many meetings in different places. So we work all day long for ourselves and for public service. I believe that everybody should not be absent from this meeting, but since we have many problems and little time, you don't have to say that every absentee should be sent to the court.[13]

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[12] Ephrem Tameru, dam evaluation meeting , 22 November 1996.
[13] Tsegai Weldemichael, chairman of Endachiwa tabia administration, addressing the dam evaluation meeting, 22 November 1996

Ephrem's disregard for public relations was not helped by the fact that he was an Amhara and could not speak Tigrigna well. This gave some people a hook on which to hang their suspicion of someone who they believed was ignoring their just complaints. At the same evaluation meeting he made clear that it rankled that he had heard 'one person from the workers say, "This Ephrem is no good".' By the time I returned from a Christmas break, Ephrem was no longer there, apparently ill with malaria in Addis Ababa. Whether this was an excuse or not, he was never seen at the dam site again. After his departure, Mulu Gessesse assumed control. He appeared to grow both in competence and in sympathy for the villagers, and relationships with the workers and between the committee members improved.

It was decided that the militia on the Security Committee should have a much stronger daily presence at the dam site to keep order and defuse disputes. Youngsters had to be deterred from stealing stones from metric cubes. Some had already been arrested and charged. There were occasional fights between youths and one boy was arrested for agitating people not to work in the dam at all. Furthermore, as the site clearance proceeded towards the end of February, the executives expressed anxieties for the safety of workers. At a sister dam at Ruba Gered, which had been scheduled two years ahead of Endachiwa to facilitate the sharing of heavy machinery, five workers had recently been killed by an earth fall while excavating in soft soil. It was felt that the militias' role could be extended to include the monitoring of public safety. For this to work, Tsegai insisted that the militia should also receive payment in kind.

One of the problems for the executives, which Mulu was the first to draw attention to, was that the executives were unpaid.[14] Ephrem had demanded full-time commitment from the executives on a par with his own full-time job, despite their other responsibilities. He and the other dam officials received salaries; the village workers were paid in grain. Only the executives were expected to add the responsibilities of the dam to their considerable workload without any recompense or salary. From the end of January it was agreed that village militia and executives who were members of the Security Committee or the Dam Committee should from then on receive three kilos a day payment for their services.

In a move reminiscent of the wartime days of *kefli hezbi*, the *wereda* administration appointed their representative to work with the Dam Committee in solving problems as they emerged.[15] He was in fact an ex-fighter who had worked in *kefli hezbi* and was experienced in communicating and working with rural communities. His assessment of the situation included rebuking the executives for not taking prompt action against trouble-makers and-some recommendations for controlling the recalcitrant problem of group leaders cheating their members.

> To solve the problem of these group coordinators, first we have to arrange weekly programmes for discussion and evaluation in each group. We should show the problems of the coordinators to the people. We should expose those trouble-makers in those groups and they should be publicly evaluated. We have struggled a long time against thieves and problem-makers, so those people should be exposed and subject to the decisions of the people in the court.[16]

His suggestions were typical of TPLF principles and training, in that they relied on the people's ability to sort out the problems for themselves, if they were given the right information and encouragement.

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[14] Mulu Gesesse, 28 January 1997.
[15] Kidane Desta was mentioned earlier in Chapter Six.
[16] Kidane Desta, addressing the weekly dam evaluation meeting, 31 January 1997.

Building a 'metric cube'

Women collecting selected soils

A proportion of the three and a half thousand workers at the dam had been drawn from other villages by the lure of grain payments. By Christmas even the late harvests were in the stack and increasing numbers of Endachiwa villagers were turning up to work, creating an issue of how to balance the interests of incoming and resident workers. The issue was discussed in a Friday Dam Committee meeting at the end of January when it looked as if a three and a half thousand workforce, the maximum number that REST's grain stocks could pay, would be exceeded. However the numbers had been swelled by needy families withdrawing their children from school for dam work and for one week, when the school was closed, many of the children had also attended for work. An agitational campaign had followed to warn villagers against taking their children out of school. There was no intimation at meetings that workers from outside the village were unwelcome and at one meeting the executives' chairman suggested that representatives from other villages involved in the work should be invited to attend the evaluation meetings. His suggestion was accepted.

There was a striking contrast between Dam Committee meetings in November and in January. In place of the provocative and confrontational arguments between dam officials and *baito* executives, there was a harmonious and friendly mood in the meetings in which continuing problems were reported and possible solutions discussed. The working atmosphere on the site itself was also more equable. Changes in personnel were a possible factor. The abrasive Ephrem had departed; the more placatory Mulu had taken his place; the rational, resourceful Kidane had arrived. It was the most ambitious project ever to be undertaken by the village. It took a few months for the workforce and the Dam Committee to become more familiar with each other, with the project and its routine problems.

> Step-by-step the problems have been resolved. This has been the hard work of the executives and the dam workers. The role of the executive members in campaigning with the people was positive, so the work is going well now. When we see the groups, there was a problem before, but now things have improved.[17]

The general impression gained from this study of the early months of constructing Endachiwa earth dam is that the long years of patient confidence building in rural communities by the TPLF have borne fruit. Although some villagers were members of the party and many loved to talk about their glorious revolutionary past, there was no TPLF presence in the village, unless we choose to so designate the ex-fighter Kidane, the trouble-shooter from the *wereda*. Years before, the TPLF leadership had defined the goals of their political education as equipping the peasants to understand and protect their own interests.[18] The villagers engaged in the dam construction in Endachiwa, whether labourers or executives, showed themselves to be vigilant and eloquent in this respect. This case study is typical in general terms of any project in the development process in that it presents a number of problems for solution. From the early years of the TPLF the problem/solution relationship has demonstrated the principles of the TPLF's revolutionary practice, the people's participation, discussion rather than dictat, but most of all that the rural people should speak out in defence of their interests.

Concluding comments

This thesis has considered the social construction of revolutionary change in Tigray. It has been concerned to make visible the record of the relationship between the liberation front

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[17] Tsegai Weldemichael, chairman of Endachiwa baito, opening a Dam Committee meeting, 31 January 1997

[18] Meles Zenawi, before he became chairman of TPLF, formulated the Front's goals in politicising the rural people: 'They need to be supported in formulating their interests in clear and concise forms. So our political education is directed to educating the people how to defend their interests and to precisely and clearly present their interests. This is the target of our political education.' Dejena Command Post, 5 January 1987.

and the farming communities during and after the civil war. Any outsider must have a restricted view and restricted access. As a *ferenji* outsider, I could never be privy to the subtle workings of village politics any more than the inner workings of the TPLF leadership, but I was given extensive help and most of the time I met with unexpected openness.

The urgencies and exigencies of the military struggle in Tigray created a cultural space in which people were separated in some degree from established norms and became more open to accepting change and difference, thus enabling the transformations in civilian life which they were encouraged to accommodate by the TPLF. 'Transformation' was the emphasis, suggesting an evolutionary approach to changes that were grounded in the past or were developments of historical practices, even though eventual forms, like the *baito*, bore little or no resemblance to former practices. Such an approach, encouraging a dialogue with the past, but discouraging an oppositional analysis dependent on an essentialised notion of feudalism, has been justified by my research findings. Tigray's feudal past was less uniform than was proposed in the propaganda of its main liberation movement, but closer acquaintance with the propagandists showed them to be less uniform in their views than their propaganda suggested. In fact if that past had been a closed, internally coherent system, incapable of change, how could the movement's founders, not to mention the numerous other dissenting groups of the time, have made any impression on the people they were seeking to mobilise? Investigation revealed the ideological fissures and dissenting elements in Tigrayan society before 1974, the strands of resentment and occasional resistance, the ripeness for outright rebellion, which were nevertheless concealed from the investigating eyes of contemporary researchers in the early 1970s, such as the anthropologist, Dan Bauer (1973), or the lawyer, John Bruce (1976). Moreover

sustaining revolutionary motivation has been no simple matter. The revolutionary present of the post-war years, as an anthropologist would expect, has been interpenetrated in multiple ways by the cultural residues of dictatorial pasts. The post-war elected authorities have to exercise constant vigilance, not only to maintain the momentum of large-scale revolutionary change, but also to counter the mundane subversions of self-interest, petty rivalry, and endemic lack of punctuality to preserve and extend the gains that have been made.

The village communities are still distrustful of outsiders, especially from the town. It is ironic that the early TPLF fighters, Marxist-inspired and politically sympathetic, urbanised, educated and relatively privileged, have in the longer term facilitated the penetration of modernity to the Tigrayan countryside. For all their respect for rural people and village cultures, the Front brought with them more open political systems, modern health care and education. Their vision was a culturally discriminatory one, not between categories of human beings, but between categories of human behaviour, between 'positive' and negative' cultures. They won the confidence of the people in order to encourage them not only to reject exploitation of themselves, but to become aware of the hierarchy of subordination and of their own complicity in oppressing women, members of minority religions and nationalities, to reject the world of spirit possession and healing and welcome modernity.

The aim of this thesis has been to examine the revolutionary process itself, by bringing into the open the day to day practice involved in negotiating a revolution through the cultural reorientation of a population. Few anthropological studies have been directly useful for this project, although the theoretical and investigative methods of the Comaroff's work in

South Africa have been invaluable. Some studies have touched on aspects of TPLF's record (Africa Watch 1991; Young 1997; Barnabas 1997(a); Hendrie 1999). *Guns and Rain* (Lan:1985), exploring a side issue of the Zimbabwean revolution of a conventionally anthropological kind, does not address the construction of revolution. It is a truism of resistance studies that peasants are hard won to outright rebellion and resistance is a long way from revolution, although analyses of cargo cults (Worsley 1957) or Jean Comaroff's study of Tshidi Zionism (1985) have demonstrated that resistance to oppression among the powerless can take subtle and circuitous forms and studies by Scott (1985) and Gledhill (2000) are relevant to the decades of incipient Tigrayan protest earlier in the century.

John Young's and Barbara Hendrie's studies of the Tigray revolution from differing perspectives have provided valuable insights. Young's analysis concentrates on the political and military aspects of revolution, but in his concern to weigh the relative contributions of leaders and peasants he puts too much emphasis on the role of leadership. By contrast, my investigations have shown that the TPLF from their earliest days have asserted that 'the people' were of greater political importance to the armed struggle than the leadership. Was this just Marxist orthodoxy? After all, the peasantry had to be mobilised, guided and politically educated in order to assume a participatory role. In fact, there is little to be gained from polarising the contribution of leaders and peasants. My research points more towards the importance of the long term *relationship* between the two and to a continuous process of negotiation and mutual learning which has modified both 'sides'. Furthermore, a simple either/or polarity fails to convey the complexity of the relationship. The peasant communities had too perspicacious a critique of feudal domination to allow themselves to be exploited by revolutionary masters. They saw themselves as partners in a revolutionary enterprise, even as since the war ended they have

seen themselves as partners in a development enterprise. Without their participation and support no revolution would have been possible. Since the end of the war no project, whether of microbanks or microdams, malaria control or vaccination, can succeed without observing the procedures of consultation, assessment and approval of the villages involved, as laid down under the *baito* and the *serit* in the civil war.

I agree with Hendrie's emphasis on the importance of land reform as the first step to a system of rural administration weighted for the first time to the majority of poorer peasants (1999:82), and Young suggests this as the most enduring achievement of the TPLF (1997:185). My own conclusions, echoing Barnabas and Zwi (1997:42) and Barnabas (1997:70), slightly change the emphasis to the *baito* as the key institution introducing political participation and accountability to the rural areas, and later to the main towns, and constituting the implementing body for the process of revolutionary change.

These local administrative structures have had far-reaching effects. The rural imperatives of status honour described by Bauer (1993) have largely disappeared, except in the most superficial social rituals like coffee-drinking. Previous studies have drawn attention to the characteristic social structures of feudal relations, vertical ties between individuals and lack of corporate identity in village communities (Bauer 1993; Hendrie 1999:249). Compared with the imperial period the economic gap between rich and poor, although not eliminated, has narrowed. It is no longer possible to acquire wealth through political authority or the reverse (Hendrie 1999:267), although the Endachiwa dam story suggests a possibility that *baito* executives might have been implicated in the grain store thefts. However it was equally clear that the executives were for a time the most financially disadvantaged of all those involved in the project, despite long hours of work and inadequate time for farming.

With the ending of the unequal, divisive and litigious *risti* land tenure, an obstacle was removed to villages forming communities capable of solving their common problems. Furthermore, the *baitos'* function during the war 'as institutions of social support ...[in which] local governments would get together to repair or build anew the villages destroyed' (Barnabas 1999: 69) and their post-war role in organising development activities suggest that villages are evolving towards greater corporate identity, based on mutually beneficial collective activities rather than kinship links. These developments are further encouraged by the *baito* as the point of articulation between village interests and the development priorities of *wereda* and state.

The important legacy of the revolution is not its character as a 'noble cause', although this was an effective mobilising tool, but its structures of administration in elected councils and local courts, of participation in the assemblies and mass associations, and of accountability in evaluation procedures. Transcripts of *gemgams* and analyses of the local politics of projects such as the Endachiwa dam demonstrate the peasants' practical life as a series of negotiations between competing imperatives and the need for assertiveness in defending their interests. Political and administrative structures provide a framework of checks and balances which offer some protection against future exploitative or corrupting influences. Rural support for the Front and now the regional government is not based on shared solidarity in a romanticised past, although they can sometimes give this impression, but on the peasants' assessment of material and political benefits which have accrued from struggle and continue in the present in the form of schools, clinics, roads, agricultural support and political participation. Once alerted to their rights the peasants have been vigilant in protecting them. In 1992 they withheld support through frustration at the

unexpected time it took for benefits to materialise after the war. It will be interesting to see how peasant constituents respond to news of divisions within TPLF in 2001.

Since 1975 the TPLF leadership mobilised the Tigrayan people for war and in exchange established political structures in which they would be able to exert genuine collective power. Ironically, this power was demonstrated in March 2001 against an element in the TPLF leadership itself. The regional council of representatives from the *weredas*, elected by rural constituents, met in Mekele in response to news of allegedly undemocratic procedures through which a faction in TPLF's Central Committee had registered their dissent from the majority. The group included Gebru Asrat, the president of Tigray and eleven other highly placed long term leaders of the TPLF. The assembly voted to demote them from positions of responsibility, although as elected members they could not be deprived of their representative status except by their constituents.

Tigray is thŭs a rare example, to return to the Comaroffs, of a non-capitalist order that has 'demonstrate[d] its internal capacity for transformation' (1992:24). Since 1975 participating peasants and cadres have moved from a condition of powerlessness to one of relative power, mostly in the routine contexts of village life, but if the occasion demands they can now influence through the elective administrative structures affairs closer to the centres of power. The TPLF through the long process of revolution-building in civil society established a hegemonic relation to the rural majority (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992: 29) but it has proved the hegemony of an organisation and of structural principles rather than of personalities or individuals. This claim for peasant power is a large one and at the same time provisional in that it has yet to be confirmed by future events.

Chapter 9

A comparative analysis

Theoretical influences

The context for this study of political mobilisation and organisation in a rural-based liberation struggle has been the body of ideas developed over the last thirty to forty years, often tracing their genesis to thinkers long before that, to the foundational texts of Marx, Freud and Saussure, for example. There is nothing exceptional about this of course; it is the intellectual climate in which our contemporaries produce their ideas and pursue their investigations. However, this study has been influenced in particular by two clusters of ideas. The first concerns the construction of the subject and discourse theory, and the second is an aspect of post-colonial theory, the problem of representation.

The construction of the revolutionary subject

If there is anything that is particular or extraordinary about the conduct of the revolution in Tigray, it is in the attention given to the construction of the revolutionary subject. Althusser, Foucault and Bourdieu, and their commentators like Raymond Williams and Terry Eagleton, have been important in developing awareness in this respect. In their different ways, they have brought to our attention in the second half of the twentieth century the ways in which the social subject is constructed in discourse unconsciously to know and accept his or her place in society, how, in other words, subjects collude with the structures of their oppression. Williams refers to the depths of the 'saturation of the whole process of living by which domination and subordination are enacted' (1977: 110-11). Bourdieu expresses it as the

'orchestration of the habitus' in the production of 'a commonsense world endowed with the *objectivity* secured by consensus on the meaning of practices and the world, in other words the harmonization of agents' experiences and the continuous reinforcement that each of them receives' (Bourdieu 1977: 80). This body of ideas on the one hand explains the toleration of desperate conditions by subjected populations and, on the other, suggest the necessity for a prolonged process of counter construction of 'revolutionary subjects' who, perceiving for the first time the nature of their subordination, might be motivated to change it. Althusser's exposition of the ideological interpellation of the subject through a range of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) is another way of describing the construction through discourse of the feudal subject in Tigray, suggesting at the same time the formidable nature of the task of both gaining power and effecting transformation of the people's sense of themselves (Althusser 1995: 298). Gramsci's concept of 'active consent' (in the context of bourgeois hegemony) (Gramsci 1971: 352) and the Comaroffs' discussion of hegemony (in the context of domination in South Africa) have been helpful in developing an understanding of the useful distinction between ideology and hegemony which underlies Chapter 4. Clarifying the concept of hegemony, they write:

> This is why its power seems to be independent of human agency, to lie in what it silences, what it puts beyond the limits of the thinkable. It follows that it is seldom contested openly. Indeed, the moment that any set of values, meanings and material forms comes to be explicitly negotiable, its hegemony is threatened; at that moment it becomes the subject of ideology or counterideology (1992: 28-9).

The TPLF had to replace the hegemony of feudalism with an alternative hegemony. Foucault provides some analytical tools to understand that process. He was concerned with the exercise or mechanics of power rather than with the fact. Power, like ideas, is dispersed and sedimented through ideology. It is 'not to be located in a central point, a unique source of sovreignty' (Mercer 1980: 123):

> Power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society … Power is not something that is acquired, seized or shared … Power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations (Foucault 1979: 93).

Foucault is describing here the operation of power through the 'dispersal' necessary for hegemony. He replaces his earlier, negative identification of power solely with repression (cf. Althusser's ISAs), with an idea of power 'as a productive network that runs through the whole social body' (1995: 70). Yet he also emphasises 'the strictly relational character of power relationships':

> Their existence depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance … where there is power there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority to power (1979: 95).

Foucault was thus exploring the idea that power generates what it would most seek to suppress, forms of resistance that are as multiple as forms of power.[1] Colin Mercer suggests a radically new strategic perspective emerging from the intersection of Gramsci's and Foucault's ideas: 'A necessary regionalisation and democratisation of theory and strategy and the coordination of points of resistance to meet the multiple relations and their diffusion which characterize hegemony, becomes a prerequisite for any democratic strategy' (1980: 124). We can recognise the force of such an analysis in that it can be applied not only to more neutral as well as oppressive forms of Derg power, but also to the patient construction of the revolutionary subject through the TPLF's multiple strategies for replacing 'feudal sentiments' with political consciousness and active consent. It displaces the Marxist preoccupation with whether hegemony should be established before or after the seizure of power, because the 'seizure' of power is a process that takes place in people's heads and not in the taking of

Addis Ababa. That these were familiar concepts to the TPLF, whether or not their reading had gone beyond the classic Marxist-Leninist, Maoist and other revolutionary texts or not, is suggested by the stress they laid on the diffusion of principles through multiple learning programmes and the time they were prepared to take over it. They did not need to read Foucault and Gramsci. On the other hand, this model of prolonged process in the construction of hegemony casts doubt on TPLF's confidence in 1991 that the success of their strategy in Tigray would somehow enable the rest of Ethiopia to absorb the principles and thought processes of revolutionary change much more quickly and easily.

The crisis of representation

What has been referred to as the 'crisis of representation' has penetrated so many sectors of the humanities and the social sciences as one of the most important aspects of post-colonial theory, that it is hardly worth attributing it to individual writers and thinkers. Edward Said drew attention to institutionalised racism and ethnocentrism as a heritage of empire in representations of the 'orient' (1978). It has permeated academic departments over the Western world with a routine anxiety about the pervasive yet subtle ways in which individual practitioners can betray their ethocentrism and neo-colonial arrogance. Clifford and Marcus (1986) is the most commonly available anthropological text which represents these anxieties and possible solutions. It is impossible for any anthropologist embarking on fieldwork now not to be considering strategies for avoiding the pitfalls that lie ahead, especially for those embarking on qualitative research.

That 'the process of 'cultural translation' is inevitably enmeshed in conditions of power – professional, national, international'(Talal Asad 1986 163) is now generally accepted and

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[1] Foucault was long interested in the idea that prohibition and repression produce that which is prohibited. He

some important guiding principles have emerged. Most of them relate to the problem of authority, or rather to the presumptions in the past of the authority and expertise of the ethnographer and therefore of the authority and completeness of the text. Ethnographic texts are now seen to be constructs : 'serious, true fictions [or] systems, or economies, of truth. Power and history work through them in ways their authors cannot fully control. Ethnographic truths are thus inherently partial – committed and incomplete' (Clifford 1986: 7). These texts, stripped of their masquerade as objectivity, have now come full circle, enabling, even encouraging, ethnographers to declare openly their subjectivity. However there is a contradiction at the heart of the debate about representation. The actual practice of ethnography in the academy has not caught up, for the naïve conventions of 'objectivity' are still alive and well. The sin of sympathy (judged by conventional standards) for the objects or causes under investigation stands in opposition to the sin of omniscient detachment posing as objective analysis and perceived as ethnocentric or cynical (judged by the tenets of post-structuralism). Yet acknowledging personal subjectivity has advantages in releasing the ethnographer from the (largely cosmetic) conventions of academic 'objectivity', and concentrating attention on the professional presentation of balanced evidence and argument, thus allowing ethnographers to reveal, within limits, their partiality for causes or cultures under investigation, as I have done in this thesis.

So how have these critical approaches affected this representation of the Tigrayan revolution? My partial solution has been to 'disperse or share out ethnographic authority' (Rabinow 1986: 245), by including as far as possible the accounts of participants in their own words, still subject of course to the limitations of translation. In fact Bakhtin, who is generally credited with originating the idea of *heteroglossia*, has shown that 'dialogical processes proliferate in

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explores these ideas in *Discipline and Punish* (1977) and in *Truth and Power* (1980), using as an example the

any complexly represented discursive space [like] that of an ethnography' (Clifford 1986: 15). Norma Kriger (1992) would disagree and her study on peasant organisation in the Zimbabwean liberation struggle points out the absence of 'peasant voices' in most of the studies of revolutionary war.

In this respect, this thesis can best be seen as a development, although not necessarily a progress, in relation to two other monographs I have produced, in which I have tried various ways of sharing authority. The first (1990) was entirely based on testimonies of Tigrayan women, with short 'objective' introductions to each section. Although it could be represented as the women telling their own story (which they were), there was no avoiding my authority as interviewer or interventions as editor. The rationale of the second text (1999) was that I should be honest about the subjective experiences, feelings and shortcomings which lay behind the production of texts from Tigrayan people, that is, the body of interviews, conversations and recorded events that I had accumulated. This resembles travel writing in some respects, except that my antipathy to travel writing and my anxiety not to displace the Tigrayan record of revolution, has limited the subjective input to being a pair of eyes and to experiences, like malaria, which illuminate their problems, thus avoiding the traveller's emphasis on personal and narcissistic odyssey. All the many conversations were taken from recordings or from detailed notes, and in addition each chapter contains interpellated, discrete testimonies which are very different in tone and content and stand in a dialogic relation to the experiential context. As Clifford notes, 'To say that an ethnography is composed of different discourses and that its different components are dialogically related is not to say that its textual form should be that of a literal dialogue' (1983: 135). Finally, the present study, more obedient to the conventions of academic writing, excludes discrete testimonies, but gives

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18th century crusade against masturbation (1995: 71).

emphasis to voices, particularly peasant voices, wherever possible. One cannot deny the right of Tigrayan people to participate in the account of the revolution they have helped to construct.

Introduction to revolution

In Terence Ranger's study of guerrilla war in Zimbabwe, he argues for 'the special character of the Zimbabwean experience and in particular for the special character of the Zimbabwean peasant experience. But this distinct Zimbabwean experience can only be established and illuminated and limited by comparison with the experience of other African rural societies' (1985: 9). My study of Tigray has argued for the special character of the Tigrayan experience of revolutionary war, but in doing so it also raises questions of comparison, which I shall endeavour to answer in this chapter, comparisons with other states where resistance to colonial power, authoritarian governments or unjust internal systems have led to armed struggle. The transformational processes of political and social change at the village level, which have been the focus of this study, were enabled and protected by the TPLF's military war, although the military war itself has on the whole been out of sight. The emphasis here has been on the perspective from the village and the voices of villagers. By contrast, most studies of revolutionary war have concentrated on different perspectives, such as the guerrillas (Clapham 1998; Chaliand 1982; Paret 1986), the aims and interests of the revolutionary leadership (Davidson 1981; Mamdami 1995) and the historical and economic forces behind insurgencies (Ranger 1985; Wolf 1973).

Although guerrilla strategies are not a new phenomenon, the emergence of superpowers, the Cold War and nuclear arsenals have made them the primary form of armed combat since the Second World War and the appropriate mode of struggle adopted by the weak against more

powerful or authoritarian states. According to Shy and Collier, since the 1940s revolutionary war has emerged as a distinct branch of military thought and 'the basic text for ideas about revolutionary war is in the writings of Mao Tse-Tung' (1986: 838-9). Referring to the widespread influence of Maoist ideas and strategies on African nationalist movements including the TPLF, Clapham was able to describe Maoism in Africa as 'a 'kit', which, with appropriate allowance for local variations, insurgent leaders can take over and apply to their own situations' (1998: 8). Mao made a fundamental distinction between revolutionary and guerrilla warfare, a distinction frequently ignored by modern commentators. 'Guerrilla war is a military tactic aimed at harassing an adversary, whereas revolutionary war is a military means whereby to overthrow a political regime' (Chaliand 1982: 7). TPLF would go further and argue that, while guerrilla operations are only one way of conducting a revolutionary war, a revolutionary war is itself only the military aspect of a revolutionary struggle for long-term political and social change. The most important contribution made by Mao to the theory of revolutionary war was the extension of Lenin's theory of the vanguard party to the peasantry. His experiences in Hunan province in the 1920s had convinced him of the revolutionary potential of a peasantry whose living conditions were so desperate that they had nothing left to lose.[2] The mobilisation of popular support was a political task and Mao's theories of revolutionary war, based on experience, emphasised the primacy of political over military activities. However he minimised the gap between the two by asserting not only the politicising effect of military action, but also that the Army should be involved in politicising the peasants.[3] Time and space also assumed important military values, in rejection of the Western military tradition centred on speed and capture of territory.

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[2] After the Northern expedition had passed through Hunan, Mao studied the peasants' response to their plight and in 1927 wrote a report for a local Communist Party journal, detailing their power and political consciousness in their relations with the gentry (Spence 1999: 338)

[3] *Red Book* 25 and 24, quoted by Shy and Collier p840.

> Space and time became weapons rather than goals. 'Protracted struggle' promised to exhaust the enemy, if not militarily then at least politically … Similarly trying to hold territory could be suicidal for guerrilla forces, but by operating in vast or difficult terrain, better known to them than to their enemy, they could entice, mislead, and wear him down, creating damaging surprise attacks. These were key Maoist ideas centring on politics, time and space (Shy and Collier 1982: 839).

Investigators of revolutionary wars will recognise these key features as common factors in guerrilla wars with divergent aims in many different countries, including Tigray. Yet, although the TPLF acknowledged the influence of Maoist ideas, particularly in their early years, in the 1980s they denied that they were a 'Maoist movement', preferring, like the anti-colonial insurgencies in Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau, the label 'revolutionary democratic'. Mao's writings also placed emphasis on the army's reliance on the people, on the primacy of practice over theory (indeed the absence of a dichotomy between theory and practice) and, above all, on the importance of assigning greater intellectual effort to the *application* of theory. 'Studying, listening, learning, thinking, evaluating, and reevaluating – these are the keys to Maoist victory' (Shy and Collier 1982: 845). This formula played a strategic role in many liberation movements, including Vietnam, Tigray, Eritrea, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau.

However the theoretical base of Latin-American insurgencies was very different. Encouraged by Cuban success and by the writings of Che Guevara and Regis Debray, they adopted the theory of *focoism*, which rejected the notion that prolonged political preparation of the rural constituency was an essential for revolutionary success, in favour of the idea that a small revolutionary force using violence (the idea of a mobile point of insurrection or *foco*) can itself be the catalyst for popular support. Studies by Shy and Collier and Chaliand reject *focoism* as ineffective elsewhere than Cuba and in some cases disastrous (Shy and Collier 1982: 850-1; Chaliand 1982: 26). I disagree with Pascal Ngoga, who argues in his study of the

National Resistance Army (NRA) that the term '*foco*' can properly be applied to the early activities of the NRA in Uganda, any more than to the TPLF (Ngoga 1998: 106). Both movements, with very few members, launched spectacular attacks in their early months (the NRA on a barracks and the TPLF on the Axum Bank) in order to publicise their existence and recruit fighters. The leadership of neither movement adhered to *focoism* as a revolutionary theory and both immediately withdrew to embark on systematic programmes of political mobilisation and organisation.

The legacy of pre-revolutionary society

The dangers of a comparative study are the generalisations encouraged by comparison itself. Mao was able to adapt the theories of Marx and Lenin to the Chinese case because he insisted on its specificity and the importance of practice. Revolutions are specific. They grow out of particular social situations and political systems which fail to serve the needs of large sections of their populations, and studies seeking to understand why they took place at one time rather than another, why in one place rather than another and why they followed a particular course, have to explore the unique historical and cultural determinants in each society long before the revolutionary impetus began. This chapter will focus mainly on East African liberation movements, because they provide the most fruitful basis for comparison with Tigray.

Some preliminary and obvious generalisations can be made, however. The colonising experience and its aftermath were common factors to most African insurgencies. The armed uprisings in the Portuguese colonies of Mozambique, Angola, and Guinea-Bissau and in the settler states of Zimbabwe, Namibia and South Africa were struggles of liberation against oppressive colonial governments, but in Southern Sudan, Somalia and Eritrea it was post-colonial political or religious fissures that ignited separatist movements, whereas in Uganda

or Zaire the inadequacies or atrocities of indigenous post-colonial governments provided the incentives for armed struggle. Although Ethiopia was never colonised except in the most superficial sense, yet Amhara domination and repression of the non-Amhara nationalities resembled colonisation and were resented all over Ethiopia, not only in Tigray. Nationalist goals and the need for land were the twin incentives to take to arms in many African states. In Tigray (Chapter Two) land shortages were associated with class: members of the aristocracy, officialdom or the rich peasantry monopolised the most fertile land. In Mozambique, Kenya, Guinea-Bissau and Zimbabwe peasant grievances were focused on land monopolies by white settlers, granted the most fertile land, or colonial plantations on which semi-proletarianised peasants laboured for European markets.

Once beyond the self-evident assertion that insurgencies are rooted in pre-revolutionary society, analysts are widely divergent in their premises and conclusions. Ranger's study of guerrilla war in Zimbabwe raises several important issues for comparative analysis. His rejection of arguments relying on either a 'Mozambican' or a 'Kenyan' model exposes the risks of analysing one country or movement in terms of another, thus denying the specificity of each (1985: Introduction). He not only differentiates conditions in Zimbabwe, Kenya and Mozambique from one another, but also demonstrates *within* each state that pre-revolutionary society was never a homogeneous or consistent entity, thus subverting some widely-held stereotypical views, for example the view, expressed by Palmer (1977: 243-4) that discrimination in favour of white farmers uniformly put pressure on African peasants. These later studies demonstrate not so much the neglect as the intensification of African farming in the 1920s and 1930s through coercive policies aimed at increasing peasant production to serve the interests of the metropolitan country, thus encouraging differentiated classes which had implications for later revolutionary developments. In northern Mozambique African

subsistence cultivators were forcibly turned into a cash-cropping peasantry producing cotton. In Kenya and Rhodesia similar policies encouraging increased peasant production gradually established a class of peasant entrepreneurs in the Reserve areas, who were able to sell large harvests from expanding landholdings even during the depression of the 1930s. In both countries their success unnerved administrations fearful of the divisive consequences of increasing class polarities.

The point of these examples is that administrative decisions taken in each case had consequences for the eventual success and failure of their respective insurgencies.

> In Kenya whatever reservations administrators had and expressed about the social undesirability of the developing differentiation, the sale of land etc., no effective action was taken to prevent them. The new landowners within the Kenyan Reserves emerged as loyalist allies of the state in the emergency of the 1950s and their presence *in situ* in the Kikuyu Reserve was one of the factors that made it impossible for Mau Mau fighters to operate from *within* an African peasant society as guerrillas did in Zimbabwe in the 1970s (Ranger 1985: 68).

The Kenyan administration thus made allies of an elite in the heart of Kikuyuland. The Rhodesian authorities on the other hand took effective action against entrepreneurs, driving them out of the Reserves. From the end of the 1930s a series of misguided government interventions in Rhodesian agriculture led to a decline in African production, to protests, and a gradual accumulation of peasant grievances which led directly to the outbreak of rebellion in the1950s. In Mozambique the peasant organisation of resistance to forced cotton production established FRELIMO's peasant base, although the class of rich peasant producers, created as a spin-off of forced cotton production, but supporting the liberation struggle, caused problems for FRELIMO which was initially open to all social classes. Poorer peasants took the lead in campaigning for their removal in order 'to prevent an internal bourgeoisie from dominating the movement'(Isaacman 1982; 27). Like FRELIMO, the TPLF

pursued a deliberate policy of mobilising as broad a support base as possible and this continued throughout the war. Since land reform, the wealth of rich peasants was in livestock, particularly oxen, which they hired out to poor peasants without plough animals. To some extent severe droughts and TPLF schemes for purchase or sharing of plough oxen were equalising factors, but class tensions remained and the *baito* was the forum where these struggles were played out. However they did not, or were not allowed to, divert the cause and the course of the war in Tigray.

> On the question of agrarian reform you have quite an intense struggle between the rich peasants and the poor peasants, a question of political power and a question of trade policies … Most of the peasants consider the rich peasants are not quite as revolutionary as they are. In contributions to the organisation … sometimes they contribute less than the poor peasant. Sometimes the poor peasants reject their contributions, "We don't want this contribution. Our organisation is not a beggar organisation. We replace your contribution. You can take your contribution."[4]

In Chapter One I argued that the incipient political consciousness that made Tigrayan peasants responsive to the revolutionary agitation of a small elite after 1975 had been gradually constructed since the nineteenth century by their cumulative experience of political, social and economic repression. Yet this experience was not identical in form or equal in intensity over the decades of the twentieth century or in every part of Tigray. Experiences differed in different areas and at different times. Ranger makes a similar case for the connection between consciousness and experience in his argument that the diverse experiences of the peasantries in Mozambique, Kenya and Zimbabwe made them into different kinds of peasants. This in turn influenced the development of consciousness and therefore affected the guerrilla wars in their respective countries in fundamentally different ways. Despite common factors, the divergent nature of pre-revolutionary society in each country led to differing revolutionary processes, problems and outcomes. A weakness in Ranger's argument is his

failure to define 'consciousness' satisfactorily. Sometimes it seems to refer to nationalist consciousness, sometimes to class differentiation and sometimes to peasants' awareness of their exploitation and misery.

Ranger also challenges generalisations about conditions within African states which deny their multinational character. On the one hand, the colonial states themselves were made up of different ethnic groups each with its own language, history and culture; on the other, cultural and historical differences were compounded by the differing characteristics and interventions of colonial governments. Divergent responses *within* states in areas of different ethnic settlement, to coercion, to revolutionary opportunities and solutions, and to possibilities of unity or competition with other nationality groups, complicated the course of revolutionary war. Ranger details the special characteristics of the Kikuyu and the agrarian character of Kikuyu land, which distinguished them from other groups in Kenya and which accounted for the Mau Mau rebellion (1985: Ch.3). The Mau Mau rebellion was a Kikuyu rebellion and the specific connections with Kikuyu religious practice made it clear that outsiders were not welcome. In northern Mozambique the productive value of the land put the peasants on a collision course with white farmers; in central areas the concentration of sugar plantations forced the peasants into a semi-proletarianized relationship with white landowners, whereas in the south there was little development of productive forces. These variations were all factors in the differing development of revolutionary consciousness.

In Zimbabwe the effects of class differentiation, according to Ranger, were even less clear-cut than in either Kenya or Mozambique (1985: 227) and should be explored in their regional context. The different experiences of pre-revolutionary Matabeleland and the Shona-speaking

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[4] Meles Zenawi, interviewed in Dejena, 6 February 1987

areas of Zimbabwe affected the uneven development of peasant consciousness. When local authorities could no longer delay implementation of the Land Apportionment Act in Matabeleland, where there was already a strong tradition of protest, the wholesale evictions of Africans from white land to distant, arid Reserves triggered a rural crisis in the 1940s. In 1948 there was a general strike and although there was no equivalent to Mau Mau at that time, the foundation was being laid for later peasant nationalism and the guerrilla war. The differing forces which constructed nationalist consciousness in Nedebele and Shona-speaking areas produced two mutually antagonistic guerrilla organisations, ZAPU and ZANU, each with their own armies.

Tigray also was far from a homogeneous community and earlier chapters have illustrated the strategic importance to the TPLF of unifying a ruptured state as a preliminary to an effective revolutionary war. Before the 1990s redrawing of internal Ethiopian borders as part of federal reconstruction, Tigray was home to four minority nationalities in addition to the majority Tigrigna-speakers. The Agew, Kunama and Irob peoples aligned their interests with the majority in support of the revolution, but the TPLF never managed to integrate more than a handful of the Afar people into the revolutionary project, primarily because the lure of land reform, their major mobilising strategy, could not appeal to those who were primarily pastoralists. Moreover the civil war was not waged throughout Ethiopia. Tigray was only one small province of Ethiopia and except for limited activities by the Amhara liberation front (EPDM) in Wello, the attempt to extend revolutionary activity southwards had scarcely started before the end of the war. Since 1991 the EPRDF has sought to minimise the problems of a multinational state by recognising rather than trying to erase difference by granting semi-autonomy to the major nationalities within a federal state and to the minority nationalities as local-governing zones or *weredas*. The inter-ethnic tensions affecting the course and conduct

of revolutionary wars in other African states have only begun to be expressed and worked out in Ethiopia since the end of the civil war as a concomitant of extending the revolution to the post-revolutionary state as a whole.

Mobilising strategies

It would be a common assumption that successful revolution is dependent on mobilising widespread popular support and this was indeed one of the basic principles of the revolution in Tigray. However this is so far from being generally accepted that it has been the focus of intense debate. On the one hand are the *focoist* groups whose revolutionary theory depends on the catalysing activities of a small vanguard; on the other the mass of widely differentiated movements who seem at the very least to share a common belief in the importance of mobilising a constituency. At one end of the second spectrum is Liberia, in which factions led by warlords vied for power in the late 1980s and 90s through particularly brutal forms of guerrilla warfare. The long history in Liberia of identification with a leader rather than with ethnic identity or ideology produced faction leaders, like Samuel Doe, Prince Johnson and Charles Taylor, who further encouraged the cult of leader in their own interests (Ellis 1998: 157). Private armies were attracted by the personal power of the different warlords, from whom they hoped for opportunities to increase their own standing and personal wealth through loot and plunder. This isolated soldiers from the general population, who, far from being supporters, became victims of terror. Important factors were the absence of any ideology or vision of the future beyond individual power and the internationalisation of the conflict as Liberia 'became the field of competition of rival cross-border alliances' (Ellis 1998: 156). This kind of revolution is so far removed from the case of Tigray that, interesting though it may be, it will not be discussed further here, although it will be mentioned briefly in the section on religion.

At the other end of the spectrum were the revolutionary groups who, following Lenin and Mao, believed effective armed struggle depended on widespread popular support as a fundamental principle. These included the African party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC) led by Amilcar Cabral, the Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO) under Samora Machel; the National Resistance Army (NRA) of Uganda under Yoweri Museveni; the Eritrean People's Liberation Front under Isaias Afewerki and the TPLF/EPRDF. These movements were led by educated and relatively privileged small groups of petty bourgeoisie.[5] Emphasising political rather than merely military objectives, these leaders supported the tenet of 'a protracted war [which] would involve the masses of the people, and thus make it possible to construct a viable political base for resistance. This strategy would allow time to educate the people, organise them, and develop structures during the course of the struggle with which to replace the regime' (Ngoga 1998:94). Ngoga's description of NRA strategy could as well be applied to the other movements whose leadership had in common a vision of a future society characterised by self-determination, freedom from occupation or dictatorial domination, fair land distribution and accessible justice.

In her study of peasant mobilisation in the liberation war in Zimbabwe, Norma Kriger examines the arguments of a number of studies which take different positions in a debate on the relevance of peasant support to the success of guerrilla warfare. At the two poles of the debate, as she represents it, are 'voluntarists', represented by Joel Migdal (1977) and Samuel Popkin (1979), whose studies are based on 'the premise that human agency determines revolutions', and 'structuralists', represented by Theda Skocpol (1979), Barrington Moore (1973)and Eric Wolf (1973) , who 'reject the voluntarist approach that emphasizes the values, beliefs, intentions and

[5] In a speech in Cuba in January 1966, Cabral elaborated an argument for the petty bourgeois leadership of the

goals of actors, chiefly on theoretical grounds: structures can best explain the causes, processes, and outcomes of revolutions' (Kriger 1992: 6) A third category, which includes James Scott (1985) and Chalmers Johnson (1963), resists inclusion in either categorisation. The arguments are too long and detailed to reproduce here, but Kriger takes from both sides in arriving at her own conclusion: on the one hand 'that a revolution's success is independent of whether or not it enjoys popular support is consistent with studies that assume that revolutionary success is determined by impersonal, objective structures', that 'popular support is an irrelevant issue'; yet, on the other, she 'repudiates the structuralist assumption that individual attitudes and behaviour cannot have a determinative influence on revolutions' (Kriger 1992: 7-8).

The importance of Kriger's study is that she challenges us to examine an assumption that has for too long been uncritically accepted, and that she publicises the existence of the debate and surveys the arguments of its main participants. One of the most important aspects of her work is the stress she places on 'peasant voices', a code phrase for her claim that direct consultation of the peasants is essential for a proper understanding of revolutionary mobilisation and support. The weakness of her study is the essentialism of her generalisation from a study of a small area of Zimbabwe to the whole field of revolutionary theory. Moreover her argument is contradictory. On the basis of peasant interviews, she equates their fear and dislike of the coercive measures used by the guerrillas to obtain support, with absence of support. Yet Kriger is not talking of a leadership without fighters or followers, but of a population of peasants who believed in the overall aims of the struggle and in the benefits that would accrue from the destruction of the colonial state, but who felt squeezed between the coercive policies of the government and the coercive practices of the guerrillas. Her definitions of both 'support' and 'popular' are open to question. Support may be enthusiastic, self-interested, reluctant, coerced; it

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revolution, as the only leadership available, as long as it was capable of 'committing suicide as a class in order to

covers a multitude of activities which assisted the military struggle and the eventual replacement of the white minority regime, often in despite of antipathy. Support does not necessarily entail the close identification between leading organisation and the mass of the population which the TPLF worked to achieve. Whether or not the peasantry in the ZANU-controlled areas, which are the focus of Kriger's research, were coerced into toiling for the guerrillas or not, she agrees that they were motivated to assist the struggle to remove the white minority government, not least because they sought to manipulate opportunities provided by the insurgency and their contacts with guerrillas to change unsatisfactory administrative systems in their villages. Kriger confuses the practice of revolution with the practice of theorising about it by non-practitioners, arguing that 'theories of revolution' locate the motivating grievances at a distance from the daily lives of the peasantry and 'fail to capture the potentially powerful role that peasants' dissatisfaction with internal village structures can play in motivating them to join in revolutions' (Kriger 1992: 8-9). This may be true of Western theorists, but many revolutionary practitioners, outside Zimbabwe, have paid great attention to local grievances of villagers, including the TPLF.

The liberation war in Zimbabwe diverged sharply in its mobilising strategies from movements like the TPLF, EPLF and Frelimo. In their separate areas, ZAPU and ZANU mobilised followers whose experiences of colonial exploitation and manipulation had already developed their awareness and desire for change (Ranger 1985). Like the other movements under discussion, the guerrilla forces used this pre-revolutionary experience to motivate the peasants to join or support the armed struggle and the repressive reaction by government to early signs of discontent became an additional mobilising factor. Peasant aspirations focused on recovery of land lost to white settlement and upon exclusion from communal areas established by administrative coercion. The Zimbabwean guerrillas built on existing resentments. Like the TPLF, they approached village

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be reborn as revolutionary workers' (Cabral 1980:123).

communities by focusing on their problems and representing the guerrilla war as the solution, but, unlike the TPLF, they did not seek to go further and transform consciousness through political education. They mobilised through history not politics. Ranger quotes a guerrilla fighter saying that during the war 'we did not talk to the peasants about socialism' and contrasts this with another fighter's experience in Mozambique where political education had been the most important part of his training: 'They taught us politics first. They showed us things we didn't have in our minds' (Ranger 1985: 178). In the Zimbabwean armed struggle, trained cadres such as this one were the exception and most fighters did not receive political education themselves, let alone pass it on to the peasant communities. No doubt the separation of the fighters from the exiled leadership of both nationalist parties, directing the war from Mozambique, at least partly accounted for this approach.

We can deduce from Kriger's study the absence in Zimbabwe of those mobilising theories and principles shared by the TPLF and certain other movements, which not only focused on the necessity of gaining the support of the people, but also on the suggestion that the leadership must earn or deserve that support. Two crucial differences between the Zimbabwean and the Tigrayan struggles which emerge from Kriger's research are: the inability of the Zimbabwean guerrillas to win lasting control over any area from the military forces of the state and therefore the absence of liberated areas or zones in which to rehearse, on the Tigrayan model, alternative political structures; and, secondly, as a concomitant of the last point, their inability 'to offer utilitarian appeals (e.g. land redistribution, alternative marketing systems)' and hence their reliance on nationalist appeals and coercion (1992: 11). These 'utilitarian benefits' did more to bind the people to the TPLF than any expressions of intent or nationalist exhortation. Moreover, in Zimbabwe efforts to unify ethnic divisions were temporary and ineffective and further counteracted by the divisive policies of the post-colonial state, represented at their most extreme

by the atrocities of the ZANLA-government-sponsored 5th Brigade against ex-ZIPRA 'dissidents' (Ranger 2000: 188-192; Ch.9).

Kriger's conclusions also raise the issue of the definition of 'success' in Zimbabwe. The insurgency was only one factor in the British government's fear of UDI (Unilateral declaration of Independence) under white minority rule and willingness to negotiate a settlement and capitulate to demands for elections. It was promises of land restoration, 'people's power' and desire for peace that won the 1980 elections for ZANU/PF, but, taking the longer view in the light of recent events in Zimbabwe, it could be argued that the weaknesses of guerrilla leadership in making promises it could not fulfil on the one hand and inadequacy of independence settlements with the British Government on the other, laid down the patterns of 21st century political fissures and economic breakdown even as they were celebrating victory. Equally, it cannot be asserted, at least until more time has passed, that a revolution based on genuine popular support in one nationality area within a large state is necessarily more effective or 'successful', in the long term. The most difficult task for the EPRDF, having won the war, is establishing democratic means as the way forward for political disagreements in Ethiopia as a whole, rather than subversion, sabotage and, in some areas, a return to armed struggle.

Kriger's findings contradict the body of theory and practice, accumulated by Mao, Machel, Cabral, Fanon and others, including the TPLF. Revolutionary practice in the Portuguese colonies and in Eritrea and Tigray was based on the conviction that the support of the population was essential for success, but also had to be systematically achieved and perceived to be merited. That is not to say that they did not resort to coercive practices of one kind and another. The EPLF practised forced recruitment to the army; the TPLF applied strong psychological pressure through the *baitos* for recruitment; and they both suppressed all information on casualties or the

individual identities of traumatised or dead fighters until after the war, within a generalised propaganda of heroic martyrdom and nationalist sacrifice. All the African liberation movements took strong punitive measures against those they deemed spies and traitors.

Mobilisation campaigns had two methods: first, to appeal to the people through their interests and aspirations on the basis of the consciousness they had already formed of their poverty and exploitation; secondly, to educate the people politically in order to deepen their knowledge and understanding of the processes of exploitation, of alternative social and political systems and strategies of achieving liberation. The TPLF added a third aspect: education to increase the capacity of the people to defend their interests and take responsibility themselves for furthering political and social developments. Past experience of the peasantry would not only play a large part in the first, but also be an important part of the second, political education. However there is a distinction between the nature of the pre-revolutionary state and the deliberate manipulation or even rewriting of history as a mobilising tool. The TPLF and the EPLF used these strategies particularly effectively. As we saw in Chapter 1, the TPLF reinforced through selection and emphasis an interpretation of history since the accession of Menelik which gave coherence not only to the longevity of oppression but also to a tradition of resistance. They did not invent this history, but they did seek through their political education programmes to extend its regional or local significance to their whole constituency, creating a single history out of multiple strands. The First *Weyane* thus became a precursor of the Tigray-wide revolution instead of a part of the history of Enderta. To be the *second* revolution, to be perceived as walking in the footprints of their forefathers, thus gave weight and legitimacy to the revolutionary enterprise of a small, young and untried group of people. The EPLF went further than TPLF in reshaping the past in order to counter the causes of past nationalist failures. The earlier efforts of Eritrean resistance to the Ethiopian government had

been continuously undermined by ethnicity and sectarianism. Through the language of class and imperialism they sought to unify a divided province by 'portraying nationalism as having been betrayed by a small minority which duped and oppressed the masses' (Pool 1998: 20-21).

The different political leaders in this group echoed each other in their insistence that political education was essential to persuade the people that a better future was an achievable objective and to fight for it. Davidson summarises Machel's emphasis on the importance to this kind of revolutionary war of developing the struggle on the basis of people's real needs and interests, developing their political consciousness at their own pace, and encouraging political participation and military experience (Davidson 1981: 115). Cabral asserted the political and economic nature of the liberation struggle: 'Always bear in mind that the people are not fighting for ideas, for the things in anyone's head. They are fighting for material benefits, to live better and in peace, to see their lives go forward, to guarantee the future of their children' (1980: 123) Samora Machel's emphasis, quoted by Davidson, on the importance of practice and of encouraging in the people self-reliance and the confidence to create the revolution for themselves could have come from the lips of the TPLF leadership in the 1980s.

> Ideas come from practice. When we set out, all those years ago, we wanted to liberate our people, and we found that people have to liberate themselves if the thing is to be real. We found that the people could not liberate themselves unless they were active participants in the process of liberation. And so little by little we applied a revolutionary practice in the wartime zones that we controlled and protected from colonial power, which enabled this indispensable participation, this mass participation, to begin and grow and develop itself. (1981: 122)

In fact this is unlikely to be coincidental. Not only were these African revolutionaries well-read in Marx, Lenin, Mao, Le Duan and Giap, but they closely followed events in other countries, especially in Africa, read each others writings, and in some cases visited each

other's camps and gave each other mutual support. Cabral visited Cuba and spent time in Mozambique. Yoweri Museveni of Uganda was deeply influenced by his experience in Mozambique of witnessing the success of political education for the peasants (Museveni 1972: 14-21). As one would expect, the resistance movements in the Portuguese colonies of Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau gained from mutual interaction and a common analysis of the political and economic weakness of the Portuguese dictatorship. Their success not only swept away the Portuguese colonial system, but also the Portuguese dictatorship itself (Davidson 1981: 121). The EPLF and TPLF were familiar with the mobilising strategies of the Portuguese anti-colonial movements and also, despite their own ideological and strategic differences, gave each other at different times logistical and military support.

The TPLF were not the only movement to base their political work on trained cadres within liberated areas. In Eritrea, Guinea and Mozambique they also trained peasant cadres to carry the message of the revolution to the villages. The PAIGC had a systematic political education programme, conducting their propaganda through cadres, leaflets and a radio station (Chaliand 1982: 196-199). Cabral's exhortations in his recorded speeches constitute advice and remonstrance which give insights into routine problems encountered in their relations with the peasants, some of which recall the principles which guided TPLF's *kefli hezbi* cadres in their relations with peasant communities. Cabral emphasised the importance of avoiding splits or dissension between the fighters and the population; he encouraged the opening of schools in the rural area, but warned that they would be 'worth nothing if they changed nothing'. For example, it would be useless to establish schools for girls if education were followed by forced marriage. He reiterated the importance of hard work but counselled the cadres 'to give direction … not to force anybody to do anything'. They were not to 'steal labour' as 'not only whites steal labour' (Cabral 1980: 124).

An important contrast between the TPLF and other movements was the absence of a cult of personality. It is significant that in the initial list of liberation movements that began this section, all the movements except the TPLF could be associated with a charismatic leader, whose name itself was also an important mobilising force in the movement. Only Cabral is on record as deploring the cult of personality surrounding him, declaring himself neither a chief nor any different from 'the people' (Chaliand 1982: 196). The avoidance of personality cults was TPLF policy from the beginning and some personal history will illustrate the point. In 1987 on my first visit, I did not meet and never discovered the identity of the TPLF chairman. I interviewed members of Central Committee in relation to their roles in the movement, according to my interests, for example responsibility for health or education, baito development, propaganda and so on. It became evident that it was a movement based on consensus and discussion. I was reproved when I tried to discover the identities of the founder fighters. Everybody's contribution was valuable, I was told. Self-importance of any kind was also frowned on. This could be irritating and inconvenient, as I occasionally discovered that I had shared a Toyota or a meal or a rest stop with diffident persons of considerable responsibility without discovering their identity until too late. Dead fighters, the martyrs, on the other hand, were very important indeed. Even after he was elected to the chairmanship, Meles Zenawi, was given little overt, public attention. The people, to repeat what I have said earlier, expressed pride and loyalty to their *organisation* and, apart from this to individual local and *kefli hezbi* cadres who had earned their admiration. For this reason it seems more accurate with reference to the civil war to refer to 'the leadership' to denote corporate policies rather than to any individual. Meles Zenawi has only been singled out as 'the leader' on the Western model, since the end of the war threw him into prominence as President of the Transitional Government and after 1995 as Prime Minister. It has always seemed

a distortion of the ways in which the TPLF/EPRDF run their affairs to assume his power as an individual rather than as the front man for a group.

The role of religion in mobilisation

Religion and patterns of religious belief have, inevitably, influenced the conduct of insurgencies and the responses of populations to them, although in widely differing ways. African states are not only multi-ethnic, but also multi-religious. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church, tracing its origins back to the fourth century, has made Ethiopia, including Eritrea, one of the earliest examples of Christianised countries,[6] thus distinguishing it from other African countries where Christianity was introduced by European missionaries as a part of the pre-colonial or colonising process. Yet in colonial states the absorption of aspects of Christian belief into indigenous religious beliefs, encouraged the evolution of new syncretic patterns of belief and practice, so that Mission-Christianity became only one of several religious possibilities available to the population.

Both Tigray and Eritrea had large Muslim minorities. The TPLF and EPLF leadership each took different steps to nullify the potential of religious belief to subvert or divide the liberation struggle. The fundamental mobilising strategy of the TPLF, underpinning the entire pattern of their relations with the rural population of Tigray, was to win their hearts and minds, using persuasion not coercion so that the people could support them with enthusiasm. Despite the Derg's declared antagonism to the EOC and confiscation of church land, the upper echelons of the Church hierarchy continued to condemn the TPLF from the relative safety of Derg towns. This gave particular force to displays by TPLF fighters of respect for religious belief and practice, whether Christian or Muslim. Although the Marxist-Leninist

influences on the founding fighters made unlikely their own adherence to religious belief, the recruits who later flooded from the villages to TPLF training camps with the blessing of their parents were enabled to do so in large part by the fact that TPLF strategy won the approval and even support of poor priests, thus legitimising their mobilising activities in the eyes of villagers and avoiding religious dilemmas for either recruits or their parents. Land reform persuaded Muslims, so long discriminated against in land as in everything else, to throw in their lot with TPLF. Laws on freedom of religious belief and worship were included in the *serits* during the war and passed into the Ethiopian constitution in 1994.

A similar need for unification in a divided province pushed the EPLF to neutralise the impact of religion in Eritrea in order to mobilise for the independence war both from Christian highlands and Muslim lowlands. Unlike in Tigray, antagonism between Muslims and Christians had already been manifested in the mainly Muslim base of the ELF, particularly in a massacre by an ELF commander in the early 1970s of new Christian recruits. These experiences influenced the adoption of an anti-sectarian stand by the EPLF, who in the cause of unity emphasised nationality, and not religion, as the basis of healthy diversity and so worked to disconnect religion from politics (Pool 1998: 24). As in the TPLF, the leadership of the EPLF included both Christians and Muslims throughout the armed struggle and this continued into government after the end of the civil war (Cliffe and Davidson 1988: 95).

In nationalist insurgencies in colonial states, missions inevitably became the focus of hostility or conflict. At different times there were resemblances in people's attitudes to mission-Christianity in Kenya and Zimbabwe, although, as Ranger points out repeatedly, what could be said to be true at one time or in one place, could well be contradicted by another. In times

[6] After the founding of Islam, northern Ethiopia gave refuge to persecuted Muslim refugees from Yemen and so

of economic pressure, as in Makoni in Zimbabwe during the 1930s depression, peasants withdrew from the missions, identifying them with an 'entrepreneurial ethic and government policies' (Ranger 1985: 90). In Kikuyuland institutionalised Christianity as represented by the missions was rejected in favour of 'a reaffirmation of the old religion's merits and the credibility of its professional practitioners' (Barnett and Njama 1982: 155-6). Ranger emphasised in 1985 the differences between the religious atmosphere in contemporary Zimbabwe and in post-independence Kenya and Mozambique. In Mozambique the Catholic church was associated with white colonialist oppression and 'manifestations of 'traditional' religious ideas [were] judged to be 'obscurantist', even when connected to popular traditions of anti-colonial resistance', whereas in certain areas of Zimbabwe, there were close relations between Catholic priests and guerrillas and Catholic educational institutions were encouraged to open or expand (Ranger 1985: 339). In post-independence Matabeleland, Catholic priests joined local authorities, police and doctors in seeking to protect and shelter the victims of the genocidal atrocities of the 5th Brigade (Alexander, McGregor and Ranger 2000: 219).

Indigenous religious beliefs in different areas have also had an influence on the development of insurgencies. Belief in ancestral spirits is a powerful force in at least two thirds of Zimbabwe, whereas it is characteristic of only a small area of Mozambique. The power of spirit mediums and their support for the guerrillas not only helped to legitimate the Zimbabwean war, especially in Shona areas, but was widely and publicly thought to account for its success. Their political authority was accepted not only during the war, but also afterwards. The system of chiefs, co-opted for social control by the white minority government, had been brought into disrepute. The village committees set up to support the ZANU guerrillas during the war continued afterwards as a network of elected committees

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secured a respected place in later Islamic history among surrounding Arab states.

with political authority in the local area. These post-independence committees were also supported and legitimised by spirit mediums who were believed to be revealing the will of the ancestral spirits of the village. In Dande, according to David Lan, the mediums even articulated political grievances, including peasants' dissatisfaction at delays in implementing government promises of economic aid to the region (Lan 1985: Ch.8).

In its deep commitment to land the Zimbabwe liberation struggle was similar to the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya. However, in other ways the two were crucially different and the role religion played in each insurgency was closely associated with the success of one and failure of the other. Class divisions within the Kikuyu peasantry contributed to the perceived need for unity and to the emphasis on the grievances of poor peasants and on the dominance of European settlers. However the fact that these grievances (in a country in which only 7% of the land, albeit the best land, was alienated to white settlers) were specific only to certain sectors of the Kikuyu peasantry (the poor and landless), was exacerbated by religious rituals and practices which were also specific to Kikuyu culture. Oath-taking and blood rituals to symbolise solidarity, ritual curses incurred by betrayal, and beliefs in the magical support of animals, served both to unify the armed movement yet to isolate them from support from outside Kikuyuland (Barnett and Njama 1982: 143-150; Ranger 1985: 183). Even Davidson, on the whole characteristically positive about the Mau Mau uprising, saw the role played by seers, the *mundo mogo*, as locking the insurgents into the past and thus differentiating them from 'progressive insurgencies'. The key variable, as Ranger asserts, summarizing Davidson, was in the nature of the leadership.

> 'Can the movement in question rise … above the bedrock of rural culture, above Utopian or Messianic hopes, above magic and corresponding superstition?' What is necessary is 'a modernizing elite' that can stay 'close to the movement of rebellion'. Mau Mau 'never possessed any modernizing leadership save what they could produce out of their own ranks.' In Lusophone Africa, on the other hand, a

> modernizing elite did emerge, stayed close to the peasants, and through the processes of a people's war, helped to carry them from superstition to rationality (Ranger 1985: 184).

Thus, whereas in Zimbabwe spirit mediums became a unifying and cohering influence on the liberation struggle, in Kenya religious belief and practice was ultimately a divisive influence and contributed to the failure of the Mau Mau rebellion.

In Uganda and Liberia the effects on religious belief and practice of populations subjected to prolonged violence over a long period offer few grounds for comparison with Tigray. Stephen Ellis's subtle study of the reciprocal distorting influence of the warlord insurgency in Liberia and indigenous belief systems, raises questions about the effects on and responses of a people collectively traumatised by the total breakdown of civil order, and presents us with a contrasting model for the Tigrayan revolution.[7] Ellis presents the view that the breakdown of the social and political order in Liberia was reflected in the distortion and abuse of ' known repertoires of religious symbols' (1999: 22-3) The emergence of Alice Lakwena's Holy Spirit Movement (HSM) in the mid-1980s was also in response to years of violence and disorder in northern Uganda, following the brutalities of successive regimes. The spirit, Lakwena, who took possession of Alice Aum, 'ordered her to build up the HSMF, in order to bring down the government, purify the world of sin, and build up a new world in which humans and nature could be reconciled' (Behrend 1998: 108-9). The HSM exemplified for its adherents a restoration not only of civil order, but also moral order.

These insurgencies are different in every way from the liberation movements in Tigray, Eritrea, Zimbabwe and the Portuguese colonies, yet they raise the question, rarely asked, of

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[7] The retreat into extreme forms of religious or ideological belief following periods of prolonged victimisation and violence, as in Cambodia under Pol Pot, Afghanistan under the Taliban, Liberia's warlord insurgency or the

post-war rehabilitation in states which have been the site of armed struggle. Rehabilitation rituals were common to both post-war Liberia and the HSM in Uganda. Central to the HSM were rituals of cleansing and purification which offered an opportunity to Acholi soldiers for rehabilitation from their former brutalising experiences through purification and cleansing rituals (Bherend 1999). According to HSM Safety Precautions, they abjured theft, looting, lying, killing, sex, smoking and alcohol, and believed themselves to be protected from wounding and death. Paradoxically, they were commanded to continuously test their purity in battles in which wounding or death were seen as indicators of sin, but the HSM taught that both the ill-effects on themselves and the pollution of killing others could be cleansed by renewed purification rituals. There are parallels with Liberia where, according to Ellis, pluralism in religious belief, integrating strands of Christianity or Islam into beliefs inherited from indigenous practices, facilitated a measure of healing in cases of post-war psychological breakdown in individuals haunted by personal involvement in a range of atrocities. 'The Christian belief that the Holy Spirit is universal in nature and can enter anybody to provide instant transformation' coupled with the possibility of projecting all evil as the work of the devil, have enabled ex-soldiers to claim they have been 'born again' in Christ (Ellis 1999:268).

The contradictions of Alice Lakwena's HSM, an armed resistance struggle against the government, yet suggesting a popular protest against continuous and inexplicable violence and moral disorder, have more in common with protest movements characterised by the 'weapons of the weak' (Scott 1985) than with the 'rationalist', Marxist struggles led by TPLF/EPRDF, Frelimo and PAIGC. There are parallels between Tshidi Zionism in South Africa (Jean Comaroff 1985: 191), the HSM and post-war emphases on healing in Liberia in

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Holy Spirit Movements in Uganda, raises questions which I am not qualified to answer, but which would repay

their focus on 'ritual construction of the body' through 'rites of symbolic healing and purification' (Jean Comaroff 1985: 167-8). In post-independence Matabeleland, the people took their own initiatives to address the legacies of violence and persecution. The search by guerrillas and dissidents for healing rituals led to revivals of older traditions of spiritual absolution, focusing on Mmali shrines (Alexander, McGregor, Ranger 2000: 252). So what about post-war Tigray? It could be argued that Tigray was not subject to the lawlessness and casually extreme violence that characterised Liberia and Uganda and that the discipline of fighters and the role of the church protected the people from the worst extremes of violence that were endured in Liberia and Uganda. Nevertheless interview evidence convinces me that battlefield experiences and Derg atrocities contributed to considerable psychological trauma in fighters and civilians. Whereas there were rehabilitation programmes for the physically disabled, local communities and the family were expected to absorb individuals suffering from traumatic illness.

Organisation

Mobilisation strategies and revolutionary organisation are overlapping categories, at least in the case of the TPLF, because the perceived gains by the people of self-determining power in their localities, and even farther afield, were achieved through the organised transfer of decision-making power. In the mass associations and the *baito* assemblies the people learned the value of elections, discussion, voting and evaluation. Together with land reform, these were Kriger's 'utilitarian benefits' so lacking in the Zimbabwean revolution (1992: 11, 23). In Eritrea the EPLF organisation was similar to that in liberated Tigray. Political education was compulsory for all EPLF members and there was much stronger centralised control with less emphasis on

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greater research.

democracy at the higher levels of decision-making.[8] Nevertheless Richard Leonard describes a system of people's assemblies and elected committees at the local level which resemble the Tigrayan system. One of the precepts of Mao, that combatants and non-combatants should be given equal importance (Chaliand 1982: 7), was taken to heart by both EPLF and TPLF. It should be remembered that Isaias Afewerki received training in China.

Other revolutionary movements were also anxious to create structures which would bind peasant communities more surely to support the revolution. Cabral saw the secret of a successful revolution as lying 'in clearing liberated areas and inside them building new structures of everyday life' (Davidson 1981: 162-3). In the liberated regions of Portuguese Guinea PAIGC established local elective democracy in stages. Elections were held in each village for a *tabanca* or Party committee. Three men and three women were elected by village assemblies of the adult population. Their tasks included local administration and the facilitating of political education in the villages. Although they were party committees, the party was instructed not to intervene on the grounds that they could only learn from their mistakes if they were allowed to make their decisions freely, providing a parallel with TPLF policy. Cabral was an important influence on the early development of ideas in TPLF. He defined the revolution in terms of 'revolutionary democracy' based on hard work and mutual respect, but also dependent on a hierarchy of formal assemblies of elected delegates.

> In the liberated areas, do everything possible to normalise the political life of the people. Section committees of the Party (*tabanca* committees), zonal committees, regional committees, must be consolidated and function normally. Frequent meetings must be held to explain to the population what is happening in the struggle, what the Party is endeavouring to do at any given moment, and what the criminal intentions of the enemy may be (Cabral 1980: 124).

[8] These differences have become more evident since 1991. In Eritrea the constitution has not been ratified at the time of writing and the governing party has never subjected itself to elections.

The *tabanca* Party committees seem not to have been so wide-ranging in their functions as the Tigrayan *baitos*. An important distinction was that the *baitos*, as long term democratic administrative structures, had no formal links with the Party. FRELIMO also encouraged systems of education and participation in the liberated areas in Mozambique. 'In our development strategy,' said Samora Machel, 'we must attach special value to what is our chief strength, the mobilization and organisation of the people' Like Cabral he emphasised the role played by liberated areas in which the population could be organised 'outside colonial society and its vices, defects and corrosive influence'(1980: 132). In Zimbabwe, according to Kriger, the villagers, at least in Shona-speaking areas, had their own organisational agenda. They saw the breakdown of law and order as an 'unprecedented opportunity' to transform village structures (Kriger 1992: 8). Ranger also records the emergence of a network of village ZANU/PF committees, linked at district level but with no effective link to central party structure or discipline, which the peasantry used 'to bring about a conservative revolution'. David Lan sees spirit mediums as having played a vital role in this restructuring of village relations, as rural power passed from the chiefs 'through the mediums through the guerrillas to the committees' (Ranger 1985: 291). Without carrying out primary research into this Zimbabwean version of participatory democracy, I cannot assess their nature and effectiveness in comparison with the *baitos* in Tigray, but David Lan, writing in 1985, considered 'the establishment of these committees [to be] the most important outcome of the liberation struggle' (1985: 209-11).

Uganda has shown the most convincing parallels to organisational practice in Tigray. Mahmood Mamdani gives an interesting analysis not only of NRA structural reforms based on the rights of the peasantry, but also of a precursor in the, probably unconnected, Ruwenzururu armed struggle on the Uganda/Zaire border in the 1960s and 70s (1995: 197,

201). The two important points about this movement were the reformed state structure initiated by its leader, Isaah Mkirani, and, secondly, that the main participants in the armed struggle were the poor peasantry. Administrative and executive authority remained with the chief, but legislative and judicial powers were transferred to a tiered system of elected popular assemblies, to which the chief was accountable. The NRA went further, by replacing the chiefship altogether with a system of resistance councils and committees. Mamdani defines the Resistance Council (RC) as a 'gathering of all adults living in a designated area … [which] had legislative and judicial powers' and which elected a nine-person executive committee. Like the *ruwenzururu* system and *baito* assemblies in Tigray, the RC system was multi-tiered and institutionalised the principle of accountability of representatives and committee members to the council. However, it is not clear from Mamdani's account of the RCs in Uganda how the system worked in practice and therefore how closely it resembles the Tigrayan system. We recall that in Tigray each tier was composed of elected representatives from the one below. During the war the primary legislative tier was the TPLF assembly of representatives (after 1991 the state parliament). There were also assemblies of delegates at the *wereda* level, and at the zone level as occasion demanded. Thus in Tigray the only gathering of adults living within a designated area was the lowest tier or village assembly, which had local administrative power, but the legislative power lay with the higher tiers, to which the villages sent delegates, although even the lowest level tier was able to ratify and even refuse or amend decisions. If Mamdani is correct and the RC of the local population does have the powers he ascribes to them, one is left to speculate about the relationship between the tiers and the consistency of legislative decision-making beyond the local area. Nevertheless the conception of a revolution as a site of social and political transformation through participatory forms of democracy, in addition to liberation from oppressive power, makes a close comparison with Tigray.

The role of women

The records and writings of Mao Tse-Tung had shown a continuing awareness of the economic and family pressures that worked against any chance of equality for women. As early as 1919, he wrote an article arguing against the conditions of arranged marriages for women (Spence 1999: 294), but in 1930 he did more than preach when he was able to promulgate in the Jiangxi Soviet a new marriage law forbidding arranged marriages, encouraging free choice of spouse and granting divorce on the request of either partner (1999: 391). The constitutional structure laid out in the 1949 Common Program for China promised equal rights to women and an end to their life of bondage and the following year a new marriage law brought women benefits from land reform when unmarried, divorced or widowed women gained the right to hold land in their own names (1999: 490-1). It is difficult to know whether the more progressive revolutionary movements familiar with Mao's thought owed their avowed commitment to women's equality to the Chinese example or not, but certainly women played an important role as fighters and supporters in Vietnam, Nicaragua, Guinea-Bissau, Tigray, Eritrea, Mozambique and Zimbabwe. Samora Machel saw women's participation in work normally conceived as exclusively male as 'a profoundly mobilising factor' and decisive in establishing women's equality in practice. That the formation of the Women's Detachment enabled women's participation in the Mozambique People's Liberation Forces (MPLF) therefore constituted a marker in 'the fight to involve women in the revolutionary process' (Machel 1980: 132). However there is a long line of precedents warning against overestimation of the effects of women's employment in wartime roles by assuming their continued emancipation in peacetime. Machel's definition of the struggle for women's equality, not only as an 'ideological battle against ideas which stem from decadent traditions' but also as 'an organisational one, a fight to establish structure among the least

organised and most oppressed, humiliated and exploited women', suggests a challenge to the precedents of their relegation after the war.

The position of women in African societies has been politically and economically weak. Women in northern Ethiopia, where plough cultivation was practised, had been debarred from ploughing and control of land and therefore were even weaker economically than women in other African countries, where, using hoe cultivation, they had long been responsible farmers in their own right, producing food for domestic consumption. I disagree with Young's conclusion that it was TPLF's capitulation to rural paternalism that directed their decisions to reduce the numbers of women fighters in Tigray and to halt the programme for teaching women how to plough (Young 1998: 42). As I argued in Chapter 7, these decisions emerged out of extensive discussions, involving women themselves, about how best to serve the long term cause of women's equality. That is not to conclude that recruitment of women to the army is without value. In Tigray, and no doubt in Mozambique and elsewhere, the sight of women as soldiers carrying guns had shock value and kick-started a new way of perceiving women's potential contribution. Indeed, many thousands of women continued as fighters in Tigray until the end of the war. In Eritrea, the army remains an important indicator of the EPLF's commitment to the emancipation of women. In a sense the war has never been over in Eritrea. The government continued their policy of compulsory military training for both sexes after independence and the army remained in a state of readiness until the invasion of Tigray in 1998, and it remains so still. When a war is over, however, demobilised women soldiers, without skills and separated forever from their rural background, may be less equal participants in society than their peasant sisters. Thus in Ethiopia after the war the EPRDF initiated a wide range of retraining programmes for demobilised women fighters, although I

do not know whether any research has been done into their effectiveness or whether similar facilities have been available for women fighters after other revolutionary wars.

Statements of intent by leaders are only as good as their implementation. Army recruitment figures in wartime do not provide a basis for a convincing argument that combat experience changes conditions for the mass of women in the long term. In Africa the more important factors for women have been access to land in their own right, accessible education and participation in public affairs. We have already noted the presence of equal numbers of women in the *tabanca* committees in Guinea-Bissau. In Mozambique, which provides the closest comparison to revolutionary practice in Tigray, there was no quick way to change a society where polygyny, bride-price and child marriage were continuing practices. Expressed aims were similar to Tigray but implemented differently. There was no redistribution of land specifically in favour of women. The communal villages so emphasised by Machel as a solution to land distribution problems, proved unsatisfactory in many respects, except for those who were accommodated from flood plains, and the state farms, organised from abandoned settler farms, were 'acknowledged to be a grave, far-reaching failure of the development strategy' (Urdang 1989: 26). The objective of the Organisation of Mozambican Women (OMM) was to integrate women into the process of national reconstruction and political life, but Urdang raises the issue of whether OMM 'as a mass organization of the party, follows party direction of women's issues rather than initiating, intervening, and pushing the party in its formulation of policy toward women' (1989: 26).

> The very stress on women entering production, moreover, is a contradiction … Women are already heavily engaged in production – agricultural production; it is the women who are, to a vast degree, the family farmers. For women to play their part in production (aside from family farming) the basis for their production needs to be transformed. Clearly such transformation can only take place if women participate fully in the planning process … The gap between theory and practice is

> seen most clearly in the absence of such proposals in the plans of action worked out each year by the women's organisation, OMM' (Urdang 1089:25-6)

Irrespective of similar objectives and differing strategies, both Mozambique and Tigray have discovered that post-war reconstruction in favour of women has presented many more difficulties than anticipated. However one area of success in Mozambique has been the massive literacy programme organised through OMM in Portuguese, which has been retained as the common language. This contrasts with Tigray where, although Amharic was retained as the national language after 1991, primary education and literacy were encouraged in local languages. Another positive indicator in Mozambique was that in 1980 nearly thirty per cent of the representatives voted onto the people's assemblies were women, although this fell to twelve per cent at the national level (Walt & Melamed 1984: 9). This level of representation is similar to Tigray during the civil war and better than Tigray's post-war figures, which fell in the 1995 elections to about twenty per cent.

Conclusion

My aim in this chapter has been to situate the revolution in Tigray historically, with the emergence of revolutionary theory in the twentieth century; comparatively, with the objectives and practices of other revolutions, especially in Africa; and to indicate some of the key debates of contemporary commentaries. Some of the findings are predictable: that there is a range of models, that the contradictions and problems of late colonialism were important factors, that distinctive features trace back to distinctive histories and so on. However the value of the exercise has been to enable a more precise individuation of the Tigrayan revolution. On the one hand, it shares a number of features, such as forms of participatory democracy, with other revolutions, especially with those in Eritrea, Uganda, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau, with which it had more in common ideologically, and shows interesting

contrasts with the Zimbabwean struggle. On the other, the Tigray revolutionary project is exceptional in the degree and depth of its effort to reconstruct Tigrayan subjects in new ways of thinking, being and acting, to become revolutionary subjects not only in the sense of supporting a war, but also in participating in and sharing responsibility for changed processes of civil life. It is a long process, the success of which will be revealed over more than one generation, but 'success' does not lie in the attainment of some utopia or the absence of problems, but the endurance and adaptability of structures through which problems, particularly of poverty and underdevelopment, can be handled and prevented from becoming intractable.

The TPLF went further than other African movements in making the people beneficiaries of struggle from early on in the revolutionary process, when the armed struggle was still in its infancy and it seemed impossible to the peasants that their *wedeb* could ever be victorious. The appeal of the TPLF was essentially a moral appeal and moral ideas, as Ellis remarks, are made in the imagination (1999: 299). He goes on to point out that religious institutions have been far more effective than the state in propagating new moral ideas, which takes us back to that unusual conjuncture in TPLF mobilising strategies of the materialist and the religious, or at least the quasi-religious. If there is a difficulty in communicating exactly in what the mobilising success of the TPLF lay, it is in this power of appealing to the imagination of their constituents, a quality difficult to pin down, but caught by Sartre in his discussion of revolution, quoted by Bourdieu:

> … it is not the harshness of a situation or the sufferings it imposes that lead people to conceive of another state of affairs in which things would be better for everybody. It is on the day that we are able to conceive of another state of affairs, that a new light is cast on our trouble and our suffering and we *decide* that they are unbearable. (Original emphasis, Sartre 1957: 434-5; Bourdieu 1977: 74)

The TPLF leadership were able to conceive of another state of affairs and communicate it, first to fighters and cadres and then to the peasant communities.

It is important to note that this comparative exercise has not been a contest of equals in the sense that on one side of the scales is a study of Tigray, confronted firsthand in all its complex and incoherent detail; on the other are secondary representations of liberation struggles and guerrilla wars which distance and filter information and make it difficult to assess them. There are very few studies, ethnographic or otherwise, devoted to Tigray and even fewer focusing on recent events. No one study can represent the 'truth' or give a complete picture, but it is important to establish an ethnographic record with which others can engage as the foundation for a debate. From such a debate something closer to 'the truth' may emerge. In other post-colonial African states which have been the site of insurgencies such a debate is already taking place.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Types of feudal tax[1]

1. ***Asrat*** or 'tenth. Every peasant producer had to pay one tenth of his produce in kind. This payment was supervised by two feudal agents at the time of threshing, the *dembegna* and the *feresegna*. They instructed the amount of *asrat* to go to the government granary before the peasants had taken their grain from the threshing field. The *dembegna* received a salary of one fifth of a quintal from each farmer irrespective of the crop. 'In addition we had to feed him well, with meat or chicken, *injera*, *sewa* [local beer] and *mes* [mead]. If you do this you can negotiate with the *dembegna* - he might write down your crop was less if you handle him very well.' The *feresegna* was paid by the granary, but had to be fed in the same way.

2. ***Nai maar*** 'for honey': a nickname of the people. This tax was for the feudals, paid in cash annually according to the wealth of the peasant.

3. ***Nai meskel*** 'for the cross': a tax in kind and cash in every village to feed the feudals on the Feast of the Cross in September.

4. ***Feses***: a tax paid in cash to the government, based on a total sum for the administrative area 'which was divided up between the different districts and villages, right down to individuals'.[2]

5. ***Himusho*** (one fifth): Tenant farmers had to pay the landlord or the claimant, in case of dispute, a proportion of the harvest, the amount depending on whether he

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[1] This information was given by a group of Mekele elders, for whom the spokesman was KirosAberra, 78. They were interviewed in Mekele, 11/12 February 1991

[2] See Chapter 2, the second poem accusing Seyoum of over-taxing the people, in which *feses* is the specific tax mentioned.

had also to rent from him the means of production: plough, plough animals and seed.

6. ***Kudad*:** Corvee labour on feudal land. 'In the old days the feudals had vast farmlands, so the peasants were obliged to work his land, plough, sow, reap, thresh, without payment. This had to be done before their own land was tilled.'

7. **Building work**: The peasants had to provide building materials and labour if a feudal needed a house for any member of his family. Kyros Aberra provided examples: 'Near here we have a big house of Ras Gugsa in the village of Mai Lehan. That Abraha-Asbaha Hotel was also built by the peasants for a feudal. Even the palace of Emperor Yohannes was built completely by the peasants. The engineers were foreign.'

Appendix 2 : A note on banditry

Shifta and *weyane*

The peasants compared the `feudal robbers' to 'bandits' *(shifta)*[3]; the government troops called the peasants they looted 'bandits' (*weyane*);[4] the authorities called peasants who complained 'bandits' (*shifta* or *weyane*).[5] Meanwhile there were gangs of criminal *shifta* (or bandits) terrorising villagers in different areas, against whom the peasants wanted protection. Blatta Hailemariam, a well-known *shifta* according to written histories (Gebru Tareke 1984: 87), was popular with certain villages, because he protected them against the pillaging of *shifta.* There is great confusion about these terms, not least because the Derg continued to call TPLF and EPRDF 'bandits' (usually *weyane)* throughout the civil war. As Fernyhough has noted, not only the definition, but the role of banditry has been a shifting analytical target (1986, 1997; Levine 1972:243).

The term *shifta* means either 'rebel' or 'bandit' from the verb *shaffatta*, 'to rebel'and the nature of a *shifta* was similarly ambiguous (Fernyhough 1986). *Weyane* originated in the 1943 uprising. The terms *weyane* and *shifta* both refer to outlaws and outlaw bands who lived in and off the countryside to escape the law. However peasants, speaking of the First *Weyane*, insist on a fundamental distinction between the two.

> *Shifta* and *weyane* are two opposite words. *Shifta* is a robber, not allowed by law, an outlaw; *weyane*, someone against an existing system which oppresses the people, especially a number of people gathered together to discuss injustice and oppression, who arrive at resolutions to resist.[6]

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[3] Gebrehiwot Kiros, 24 February 1991
[4] Fitsum Aregai, 67, Adi Gudom, 24 February 1991
[5] Mulaw Wores, and Desta Abuy, 10 February 1991
[6] Tadesse Ayele, 24 February 1991

Banditry was frequently a response to the violence of the state (cf. Crummey 1986:1) and the confusion of terms represents the lawlessness of a period when the private armies through which feudal individuals and authorities imposed their will resembled bandit gangs. Whereas a *shifta* referred either to a criminal or to someone who had fallen foul of an unjust system, a *weyane* was a rebel or a dissident, forced to live in the bush by a system which criminalised dissent.[7] Both were used by the authorities as terms of abuse for unruly peasants; however, although Tigrayan peasants would use '*shifta*' as an insult or to describe the undisciplined predations of the *akeytot* or government troops, they would never use *weyane* in this way, because the *weyenti* (rebels) were participants in the *weyane,* or `first revolution', a justified uprising against intolerable repression. Both the scourge of banditry and the distinction of terms are evident in one of the resolutions of the *Weyane*:

> At that time there was much lawlessness and banditry. Any *shifta* who is robbing and stealing must give his hand to the *weyane,* otherwise the *weyane* will take measures against the *shiftas*.[8]

Mulaw Wores in Quiha points out the irony when he describes the wide representation in the meetings to organise the uprising:

> So, essentially, <u>all</u> the people were outlaws because they were against the laws of Haile Selassie because they had declared against the rule of the *meslene* [district governors] because they were fed up with the maladministration, bribes, troops, taxes.[9]

Although banditry could be a form of peasant protest (Crummey 1986; Fernyhough 1997), peasant protest, as in the first *Weyane*, was not always banditry.

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[7] Donald Crummey (1986:140) discusses the use made of banditry by members of the nobility to advance their ambitions, Notable examples were Emperors Teweodros as Kassa Hailu, and Yohannes IVas Kassa Mercha.

[8] Mulaw Wores, 10 February 1991

[9] Ibid.

Appendix 3: Land tenure

Risti land tenure:

The aspects of *risti* land tenure which are relevant to Chapter 2 are its disadvantages. Like other land tenure systems, the theory of *risti* land was better than its practice. Anyone who could make a case for descent from the original ancestor was entitled to claim a share of the land and, because *risti* rights of inheritance were ambilineal, as family members became scattered land could be held and claims made in a number of different localities. Although a landholder could not legally deny a legitimate claimant his or her share of land, the size of the shares was a private matter. Equality of land shares was an option, not an obligation, on the landholder and in any case, with the passing of generations, large families led to land fragmentation, and disparities in family size to very unequal plots.

Perhaps the most significant characteristic of the *risti* system was its litigious nature. Claims were decided in the courts and many cases were taken to the higher courts in Mekele and Addis Ababa. The legal system was open to abuse and corruption (Bruce 1976). Wealthy and influential individuals were able to use their resources to manipulate the law to gain control over land. In some areas a few families were able to accumulate large tracts of the most fertile land. Civil servants in towns and rich peasants who could afford bribes were also able to use the legal system to substantiate false claims. John Bruce's case studies (1976:351) cover such situations and also exemplify the difficulties for poorer peasants, irrespective either of bribery or the rights of the case, in attending courts often more than a day's walk away in the larger towns, whereas wealthy opponents tended to have accommodation near at hand. The effect of continuous manipulation of the judicial system was the accumulation of large landholdings in the hands of absentee

landlords whose land an increasingly alienated peasantry farmed as tenants, obliged to give up a proportion of their production as rent. According to farmers, the standard rent was half the total production if the tenant also had to hire the means of production from the landlord, oxen, plough and seeds; if he owned his own means of production, his rent varied from a quarter to a third.[10]

In contrast to John Bruce's (1976: 40-41) observation that peasants anywhere in Tigray would define *risti* land as 'land to which rights are inherited', my informants in different areas, whose attitude to land and to *risti* had been transformed by the politicising process of Tigrayan revolution, defined it after its demise as 'land occupied by a minority'[11] or as 'a kind of greediness because the land is occupied by a few family members'.[12] One informant described *risti* as 'a policy of separating people', which he blamed on 'the feudals'.[13] This view, borne out by the volume of recorded litigation, the vast majority of which was about land, is given a more personal twist in the following analysis:

> We really oppose this *risti* because if you are outside this [extended] family you are not going to get land. If you don't get land that means you are going to be separated from the society. That means it has a big advantage in discriminating between people. If you are a member of that family that means you'll be respected and you'll be a good man. If you are out of that you are not a full man. So this was also the kind of exploitation. We never separate this *risti* and these feudals from each other, so it has a character of the feudal system.[14]

This passage makes clear the farmers' sense of identity as men and their status in the community were bound up with land, yet at the same time unequal and divisive land tenure systems could be an effective obstacle to a village becoming a *community*, in the sense of acting collectively to solve their problems. This helps to explain not only their helpless

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[10] Halefom Tekelu, Marwa, 5 April 1991
[11] Keshi Tareke, 6 December 1996
[12] Damana Gebrehiwot, Chairperson of Sobeya Baito Executive, 5 March 1997
[13] Gebretsadiq Abadi, Sobeya, 5 March 1997

resentment in the past at the power they perceived the privileged and wealthy exercising over their lives, but also their reception of TPLF, the movement's swift growth of support and the continuation of loyalty to *wedebna* up to the present.

Shehena land tenure in Sobeya

In Sobeya the land tenure system was exclusively *shehena* with the exception of lands set aside for the church. One of the theories for its origin is that the decision to adopt a communal land tenure was an effort to attract landholders to an area depopulated in 1889-90 by rinderpest epidemics and famine (Bruce 1976: 72).[15] Traditional taxation systems exacted a total figure from an area, to be shared out between the landholders. They were inflexible in that the total sum was not allowed to accommodate to reduced population levels or to low production levels in bad times, so in that context increased numbers of landholders would be an advantage. It has even been argued that Yohannes IV encouraged *shehena* because he was seeking additional sources of taxation income to finance his foreign wars. Certainly in Sobeya the elders ascribe the *shehena* tenure to Yohannes.[16]

The basis of the system was the redistribution of land owned communally by the village in a three-yearly lottery carried out in Sobeya by the *ckika shum* or headman, although in other villages it might be organised by village elders, the *ckika shum*, or a combination of the two. Whereas inheritance of *risti* rights was transferable through the male or female line, claims under *shehena* were restricted to adult men. The other criteria were marriage

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[14] Mebratu Adhanom, 5 March 1997

[15] For alternative theories about the origins of the shehena/desaa system in Eritrea, where it has been the prevalent system in the highlands, see Nadel S.F.,1946 pp.14 'Land Tenure on the Eritrean Plateau' and Tronvoll K. 1999 'Meret Shehena or 'Land of Borthers': S.F. Nadel's 'Land Tenure on the Eritrean Plateau Revisited'.

[16] Abadi Welde Kirkos, Sobeya farmer and elder, 21 April 1997

and residence.[17] The advantages of the system was that it was a more equitable form of land tenure than *risti*; that plots were supposedly more or less equal in size and a bad draw on one occasion could be balanced by the possibility of better luck next time. The disadvantages were that the three-yearly rotation was a disincentive to farmers for improving or developing the land, that plots were allotted irrespective of the size of households and that there could be considerable variation in fertility between plots.[18] According to local farmers, it was also open to abuse. Although it is likely that *shehena* displaced *risti* in some areas in order to serve community interests, and studies in Eritrea by Nadel in the 1940s and Tronvoll in the 1990s do not contradict this, communal land systems in other parts of Ethiopia, including Sobeya, evolved to be responsive to the interests of the rich.

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[17] In Eritrea and some parts of Tigray the residence requirements for claiming land under communal land tenures included an agnatic descent requirement to guard against uncontrolled settlement by outsiders. So important was the connection deemed to be between an individual and his village of origin , however, that claims were allowed in parts of Eritrea on the basis of residence of a paternal ancestor up to six generations earlier. Tronvoll (1999) records how increased pressure on the stock of land had led to the reduction of this criterion to three generations. I have uncovered no evidence that there was a formal descent requirement in Sobeya for *shehena*, although under TPLF land reform the rights of those who had been driven out of the village by poverty were explicitly recognized.

[18] In the areas of Eritrea researched by Nadel (1946) and Tronvoll (1999) fertility was taken into account in the allotment of land shares.

Appendix 4: Community Court Cases

Endachiwa Community Court cases, 4 February 1997

Case	Decision
1. 'A person came at night to my land and cut the trees'	Sent for investigation by the police, after which it will return to the Court.
2. Complaint that a charge in June was not heard because the accused refused to attend the Court.	Judge to write to the police to arrest the accused and bring him by force.
3. Complainant lent 150 birr to [named] person who has failed to return it on agreed date last October.	The signed agreement not attached. Date set for following week.
4. Two [named] persons stole both honey from the hive and a swarm of bees.	The value of the honey and the bees is not included in the statement; therefore case to be considered later.
5. Two disputants announce they have made peace and want to cancel the charge.	Judge commends their behaviour, but needs their signed agreement to be filed with the Court.
6. School Director and his accuser called, but have not brought evidence.	Fined 6 birr for repeatedly failing to appear. Date set for following week.

Table 8

Sobeya Community Court cases, 30 March 1997

Case	Decision
1. Three days absence from soil and water conservation work with no excuse	Fine: 10 x 3 + 2 for the court = 32 *birr* Advised of right of appeal
2. The accused ploughed land reserved for forestry and other community purposes.	Third hearing. Fined 32 birr and crops confiscated. Agreement signed.
3. Accused refused to return box left in his care in Saudi Arabia until his costs were repaid.	Judge rejects evidence of costs because written by accused. Criticises both sides for bad behaviour in the Court. New date set for hearing new evidence.
4. Absence from soil and water conservation for one day.	Investigation has proved his excuse valid, therefore he is released.
5. Accused by forest keeper of cutting a tree, which he denies and offers information.	Date set to hear new information
6. Eight people accused of cutting trees. Dis-agreement whether they were alive or dead.	Date set for Prosecutor to bring witness that second tree was alive.
7. Accuser was guarantor for unpaid 1060 *birr* loan, which accused has refused to pay back.	Accuser has to correct court application; accused agrees to repay.
8. Prosecutor charges accused of failing both to coordinate his soil and water conservation group or to evaluate their activities.	Judge rejects his excuse that he was sick and sets a new date for the decision

Table 9

Appendix 5

Election results 1994 and 1995, analysed by gender

Elections for the National Constituent Assembly 1994

	Male	%	Female	%	Total
Registered Voters	570,742	46.6	656,252	53.4	1,226,994
Votes Cast	534,412	46.5	612,057	53.4	1,146,469

Table 10. Tigray Electoral Board

Elections For the National Parliament 1995

	Male	%	Female	%	Total
Registered Voters	635,955	46.6	728,132	53.4	1,364,087
Votes Cast	625,302	46.6	716,548	53.4	1,341,850

Table 11. Tigray Electoral Board

Wereda Council Elections 1995

	Male	%	Female	%	Total
Registered Voters	580,386	45.4	697,168	54.5	1,277,554
Votes Cast	569,742	45.4	682,965	54.5	1,252,707

Table 12. Tigray Electoral Board

Election Candidates, analysed by gender

	Political Party Candidates			Independent Candidates*		
	Male	**Female**	**Total**	**Male**	**Female**	**Total**
National Parliament	35	3	38	27	-	27
Regional Council	126	26	152	69	1	70
Total	161	29	190	96	1	97

Table 13. Tigray Electoral Board

*No independent candidates were successful in these elections.

Successful candidates in Wereda Council Elections

Male	%	Female	%	Total
5,211	78.4	1,434	21.6	6,645

Table 14. Tigray Electoral Board

Appendix 6

Article 35: ***Rights of Women***

1. Women shall, in the enjoyment of rights and protections provided for by this Constitution, have equal rights with men.
2. Women have equal rights with men in marriage as prescribed by this Constitution.
3. The historical legacy of inequality and discrimination suffered by women in Ethiopia taken into account, women, in order to remedy this legacy, are entitled to affirmative measures. The purpose of such measures shall be to provide special attention to women so as to enable them to compete and participate on the basis of equality with men in political, social and economic life as well as in public and private institutions.
4. The State shall enforce the right of women to eliminate the influences of harmful customs. Laws, customs and practices that oppress or cause bodily or mental harm to women are prohibited.
5. a) Women have the right to maternity leave with full pay. The duration of maternity leave shall be determined by law taking in to account the nature of the work, the health of the mother and the well-being of the child and family.

   b) Maternity leave may, in accordance with the provisions of law, include prenatal leave with full pay.
6. Women have the right to full consultation in the formulation of national development policies, the designing and education of projects, and particularly in the case of projects affecting the interests of women.

7. Women have the right to acquire, administer, control, use and transfer property. In particular they have equal rights with men with respect to use, transfer, administration and control of land. They shall also enjoy equal treatment in the inheritance of property.
8. Women shall have a right to equality in employment, promotion, pay, and the transfer of pension entitlements.
9. To prevent harm arising from pregnancy and childbirth and in order to safeguard their health, women have the right of access to family planning education, information and capacity.

Source: Constitution of the Federal democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 1994, pp16

Appendix 7

The people's *serit* for Endabatsahma

The serit of Endachiwa

Law or *serit* has class content. The law which is constituted by reactionaries is based on dictating to people, but the *serit* of the progressives is based on increasing the struggle of the oppressed people and also the stand of anti-reactionaries and is also based on the necessity of the mass. The public *serit* is not based on personal stands and this *serit* can be developed and can be rejected by the people.

This *serit* is based on:

a) The study of the consciousness of the people

b) The economic level of the people

c) This serit should not be as hard as wood. It can also be changed.

I. Marriage

1. The engagement of a man should be at 21 and he should get married a 22. A woman should get engaged at 14 and should get married at 15.
2. Wedding by force should be stopped. It should be voluntary.
3. If the engaged persons want to delay the marriage after engagement, they may do so up to one year (according to agreement on both sides - clarified by Asmelesh).
4. Wedding by force is strictly forbidden.
5. The engagement agreement and the wedding agreement should be filed at the *baito* court (*ferdibaito*). This signed agreement should be taken to the *baito* by the two families.
6. If the engaged couple disagree before the wedding, they have the right to cancel the engagement.
7. The engagement and wedding ceremonies should be appropriate to their economic standard. [ie. competitive displays of wealth were customary under the feudal system - still are to some extent, especially in towns]
8. Any person can give different kinds of presents. These presents should not be thought of as loans.

9. During the beginning of marriage (*hadar*) the properties of married persons should be arranged according to their agreement by fathers of families.
10. *Gebe* should be voluntary.[19]
11. If the bride is not a virgin, the groom has a right to reject her, but if he wants he can accept her. The groom should not insult or demoralise her.
12. Since the agreement of marriage is filed in the *baito*, there is no need of witnesses.
13. The signed marriage agreement should be filed in the court in front of the groom, the father of the groom and the father of the bride. If the disagreement should arise between the married couple, the case should be heard in the place where the signed agreement was filed. If they change addresses they have to take their agreement to the place where they go.
14. If one of the persons to be married rejects the wedding programme after the preparations have begun or when they are ready, he/she should pay the value of the expenses of the wedding and also 50 birr for the labour.
15. The property acquired through the marriage by each of them should be divided equally.
16. If married persons want to separate they have to share their property equally.
17. Fathers should accept the request of their sons to get married. If the father rejects the request of his son to get married, then the son can bring a charge against him.
18. If a father gives an ox or other property to his son, then he should not ask him to return them.
19. Either the boy or the girl should register the property given by their families in the *baito* court. If they don't they cannot make any claim to the court.
20. During divorce of wife and husband, the divorce agreement should be filed in the *baito*.

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[19] *Gebe* is the custom of the new bride returning to her home. The wedding would usually take place in January and *gebe* one week after Ethiopian Easter. The groom's family prepare *hambasha* and kill a goat, if they can afford it.. They go to her house and bring her home to her parents, where there would be a day of feasting, drinking *sewa* and dancing. She would stay an indefinite time, maybe months. This is possibly based on the idea of her missing her mother, as before 1975 she would have usually been only a child, and also on the necessity of her mother's teaching her many important things about running a household and pleasing her husband. In Endachiwa it is still a common practice.

II. Divorce

1. Both wife and husband have the right of divorce.
2. The divorce agreement should be filed in the *baito* court.
3. If a pregnant woman becomes a trouble-maker in the marriage and if the man divorces her, the man should assist her with accommodation in his house and if she continues to make trouble, she should take the money and go elsewhere. The man should give the money according to her economic circumstances and take into account her pregnancy.
4. Both wife and husband should take equal responsibility for the upbringing of their children.
5. During divorce, the father of the child should give crops and money for the child. This should be completed within three years. During this time he should pay 50 *birr* and 128 kgs of crops (over 3 years). The payment can be:

   year 1: 20 *birr* and 50 kgs

   year 2: 20 *birr* and 50 kgs

   year 3: 10 *birr* and 28 kgs
6. If the woman gives birth to twins she should get 10 *birr* and 60 kgs of crops.
7. If a woman gets money from her husband to bring up the children, if she remarries and if she does not spend the money on her children, she should be fined 50 *birr*.
8. During the marriage the share of the child should be registered in the *baito*; during divorce, the equal division of the property should exclude the child's share.
9. A child born out of marriage has equal rights with a child born in marriage.
10. If there is a loan during marriage, wife and husband should pay equally.
11. During divorce the property of the married pair should be divided equally. The value of the property should be assessed by three mediators. After this, during division, there should be drawing of lots. If this falls to the husband, he should pay in money half the value to the wife.
12. If one of the married persons gets a child outside the marriage, that person should pay one third of his share to the marriage partner. If his property is below 50 birr, he should pay from 50 to 100 *birr*. After this, if they want to, they can continue the marriage. This process should be recorded at the *baito* court.

III. Rape

1. Rape means sexual intercourse without consent.
2. When the woman screams during rape and if it's proved that she has been raped, the man who did it should pay 500 *birr* and if she is single he should pay 200 *birr*. He should pay 100 *birr* for development [ie. to *baito*]. If a person rapes a married woman, he should give her 500 *birr* and give 100 *birr* for development. If the woman becomes pregnant by rape he should pay for the upbringing of the child.

IV. Rights of inheritance and the making of wills

1. A man who makes a will should be in a normal state of health
2. All wills should be deposited in the *baito* court
3. If a man did not make a will before death, his property should be shared equally between his children, both those born inside and outside marriage.
4. If a person dies childless, the person who is helping him should have the rights of inheritance, but if he does not then his property should be under the *baito*.
5. If one partner in a marriage dies, then the surviving partner has the right of inheritance without a will. If this person wants to remarry, he should divide the dead person's property between the children.
6. If both married partners die, whoever helped them [financially] to get married should have the right of inheritance (ie. parents).
7. These people should sign an agreement with the *baito*. If the family takes a child to their home without signing an agreement, they should pay 20 *birr*.
8. Any loan incurred by the dead person should be paid by the person who has the right of inheritance.
9. Old fathers should be looked after by their own children, for ploughing, harvesting etc. An old man also has the right to rent out his land. If he rents out his land, he should not ask his children for help.
10. An old man who is childless and helpless should be helped by his relatives. If he does not have relatives he should be helped by the villagers.
11. It is forbidden for a person to build a house and invite people to come and contribute to the building of the house, but if he has a problem he should ask permission from the *baito*.

12. A person has the right to be baptized in the church he prefers and he has also the right to be buried in the church he prefers.
13. The contribution to the priests should be stopped, but contributions can be given to the Church. All priests should give service to the church by rotation. Giving service by drawing lots should be stopped. All priests have a responsibility to give service to their religion. The payment for the church should be six *shehane* (a cup measuring about ½ litre).
14. A priest who is giving service to the church does not have to do security duty in the village on the days of his religious duties, but if there is a movement of the enemy around the village he may be allowed to do it.
15. During burials, it is forbidden for women to tear their hair, cry excessively or fire bullets. It is also forbidden to hold a second burial [ie. excessive mourning rituals in a home village by relatives who have already attended the funeral of a relative who has died elsewhere, to forbid excessive calling of villagers for seven days etc.]

V. Death ceremonies[20]: funerals, baptisms and *geleb*

1. Death ceremonies should be held on the12th and 40th days and one year after.
2. The families of the dead person should pay 34 ½ kg. This should be given voluntarily.
3. Children without parents can choose to live where they prefer among the relatives, but if they are unable to speak the case should be seen by the *baito*.
4. If a person wants to claim land as a part of a family, he has to be resident in a household six months before the division of land.
5. Those who went to be fighters should get land according to their age [ie. if they have reached the minimum age of marriage.]
6. Land will not be given for the administration of the church.
7. A person who has been a *netelebash* [armed man] of the Derg who comes to live in our village peacefully [ie. now opposing the Derg] can claim land.

[20] 'Funerals' is here used to denote not only the burial and attendant rituals, but also ceremonies and prayers at fixed intervals after the death. Therefore 'death ceremonies' is the better expression

Division of land

1. Land should be divided by rope, but in difficult places it can be divided by guesswork.
2. During the division of land, if land is very scarce in the *kushet*, land can be added from the neighbouring *kushet* ['jump to the next *kushet*'].
3. Before the division of land there should be registration of the population. There should also be registration of fertile and less fertile land. All reports should then be given to the *tabia.*
4. Wife and husband should get one portion of land for each of them, that is, they each have a half share of their land.
5. A family with one or two children can get one third; a family of three or four can get 2/3. A household of 5/6 'mulu' or 'full'
6. A married person should get land in the place where he gets married.
7. Weavers and other handicraft workers (like goldsmiths) have the right to claim land.
8. During the division of land, if there is any problem in measuring or other problems, people have the right to ask for it to be remeasured.
9. If a person wants to rent out his land, he may. The signed agreement for renting out his land should be deposited in the *baito*.
10. During the division of land or if the crops are rotating or fallowing, but is given to another person, the first owner of that land should get ½ the production.
11. From August to September 30, if the land is not ploughed, it should be regarded a fallow.
12. Whether the land is fallow or not, if a person protects his land with urea, compost or in other ways, it should be regarded as fallow and the owner should get ½ of the crops it produces for one year.
13. If a person sows chick peas and *selere* [a crop which becomes poisonous if mixed with milk] and barley, the land should be regarded as fallow land.
14. If a person did not look after his land and didn't fallow it, a quarter of his land should be taken away.
15. Disabled persons have the right to get land.
16. If land which is nearest to the river is damaged by erosion, people should make it good for cultivation before the next land distribution. Those who are unwilling to do this should be punished by the *baito.* The borderline between two neighbouring plots should stay for more than one year.

17. If a retired person does not receive a state pension, he has the right to a share of land.
18. Before land division begins, land should be reserved for building houses.
19. A person who comes from another *kushet* by exchanging his house for another, and if he wants to renew his house or make a new house, the house to be renewed on the site, should be seen by the *baito* before building starts.
20. Land should be reserved for irrigation if it is favourably situated for that purpose.
21. During land division, if there are trees planted on the land to be divided, then the trees should be given to their owners.
22. The owner of cotton bushes should share the cotton crop with the new owner for three years and then release them, to the new owner.
23. The kushet should reserve a common pasture for cattle before land redistribution.
24. The big trees, grasses and wood found in the uncultivated forest, should belong to the mass (*hafash*).
25. Trees found in a compound of any person should be for that person.
26. It is forbidden to cut trees such as sagla, da'aro, owli, aaiye, gum trees, mulu'o, ch'a, kumel, ahwie etc. If anyone wants to cut those trees he must get permission from the chairman of the agricultural committee of the *baito*.
27. It is strictly forbidden to cut trees near the water or the river.
28. A person who cuts a tree for the purpose of making 'seregela' [big stanchions for barring entry to a peasants' cottage] should be given permission by the agricultural committee first.
29. Any person organised in an association should plant two trees within one year. A person who cuts trees for trade purposes should be punished by the baito.
30. Bees should belong to the person who gets the swarm. If bees swarm on the fence of a compound., the owner of the house has a right to take them. If the bees are in unowned ground they can be claimed by the one who gets them first.

VI. Punishment

Heading 12

1. Any signed agreement is invalid after two years unless it is renewed. Anyone who steals money from individuals or the administration should be questioned.

2. A person who refuses to keep the peace of the village by rotation [take turns at security] and a person who refuses to take a message from one place to another and also a person who cheats, all these should be evaluated by the people and punished.
3. If a person insults another by saying *budda*, *bharia* and *wata* [one who plays the *tchira*] and also the weavers, or by insults about heredity or religion or who discriminates between *kushets*, *tabias*, *weredas*, zones, or regions should be punished by being fined between 100 and 150 birr. If he does not improve his behaviour, he should be questioned by the responsible officials. [i.e. TPLF authorities]
4. If a person kills another person or if a person becomes a spy of the Derg, he should be taken to the responsible authorities.
5. A person who steals should return the stolen property and after that be punished by 10 to 30 days labour. If his behaviour does not improve he should be taken to the responsible place.
6. A person who allows his cattle to eat another person's crops, should repay the amount of crop eaten by the cattle.
7. All the people in the village, except disabled people, teenagers and old people, should take their turn in keeping the peace [ie. security and law and order]
8. If a person does not return all the equipment for peacekeeping [such as guns] after his turn he should be fined more than 1 *birr*.
9. If a person refuses his duty of security, he should be fined 5 *birr*. After that he should take his turn in maintaining village security.
10. If a person gets married under the specified ages, he or she will be fined 100 *birr* each.
11. If a person does not observe the proper boundaries of his neighbour's land, he should be fined 50 *birr*.
12. If anyone refuses the message and order of the village '*quadere*' [coordinator in the village for collecting food, *injera* and other necessities for fighter squadrons passing through] he should be fined 3 *birr* and after that he should work better.
13. During the division of land if someone who is measuring the land, measures in excess or reduced amounts he should be fined 50 *birr*.
14. If a person cuts the big trees of the uncultivated wilderness without permission, he should be fined 50 to 100 birr. After that, the wood should be owned by the *baito*.

15. If a person allows water to flow on another person's land during sowing, he should be fined 20 *birr* and he should pay compensation for the seed lost.
16. If a person has grenades and guns without permission, they should be confiscated by the *baito*.
17. If a person hits another person, he should take him to a place of treatment. After that he should be fined between 50 to 100 *birr*.
18. If a person burns the grasses of the wild places or who injures the legs [of animals], he should be fined 300 *birr* and should pay the value of what is destroyed.
19. If a person gets land in two different places, he should be fined 100 *birr* and give up one of the lands to the *baito*.
20. If a person gives shelter to animals, he should be taken to the responsible authorities.
21. If a person leaves the liberated area to go to the Derg-occupied areas without permission, he should be taken away to the responsible authorities.
22. If a person insults another person and if he is too talkative etc, he should be fined from 10 to 100 *birr*.
23. If a person gives or takes bribes he should be fined 100 to 500 *birr*.
24. If a person kills someone accidentally, he should be fined 500 up to 1000 *birr* and he should leave the area in which he lives. The case will be seen by the TPLF
25. If a person injures a donkey or a horse, he should be fined 30 *birr* and he should pay the value of the animal.
26. If a person injures a sheep he should be punished,
27. A person must return property he has borrowed.
28. If a person goes to the enemy's place he should be fined 200 *birr* and he should be exposed to the people and evaluated.
29. If a person holds funeral ceremonies, memorial ceremonies or wedding ceremonies out of the *serit*, he should be fined 500 *birr*.

The responsibilities of the chairman of the *tabia*

1. He leads the *baito* and the congress.
2. He controls daily activities.
3. He organizes the Administration Committee.
4. He controls the relationship between *tabias*.

5. He can make announcements in the name of the *baito*.

Responsibilities of the vice-chairman

1. He replaces the Chairman when he is absent.
2. He coordinates the militia and Security Committee. He has particular responsibility for the militia.

Responsibilities of the secretary

1. He controls the files of the *baito*.
2. He writes and records the agendas and decisions.
3. He coordinates the Economic Committee and he has responsibility for the Agriculture and Handicrafts Committees

Responsibilities of the vice-secretary

1. He represents the Secretary in his absence.
2. He coordinates the Social Committee. He also takes responsibility for the Education Committee.
3. He also coordinates the Relief Committee.

The duties of the chairman

1. He leads the public *baito* and he also leads the meetings and congresses.
2. He coordinates the activities of the *baito*.
3. He coordinates the Administration Committee.
4. He makes announcements on behalf of the public *baito*.
5. He represents the *Wereda* court Committee in its absence [when it is not sitting?]
6. He reports all activities to the higher level.

Law-keepers at *wereda* level

1. There should be one committee of the *baito* which is elected by the Congress.
2. This should be organized by the Chairman.
3. The decisions taken at *wereda* level should be safeguarded by this committee.
4. If any property is stolen from the *baito*, this committee should arrest the thief and take the person to the court.

Law-keepers at *wereda* level

1. These members should be elected by the congress from among the members of the *baito*. If a person has committed crimes out of the law of the *serit*, for example ploughing land which is reserved for forestry, and if a person has stolen *baito* property, this committee can see the cases on behalf of the *baito*.

The responsibilities of the zone court committee, militia and security

1. The *baito* court (*ferdibaito*) should have three members from the militia and one from Security.
2. This committee should be formed by members of the sub-zone administration.
3. The *baito* court should have a chairman, vice-chairman and secretary and they should safeguard the decisions made at the zone level.

The discipline of administrators

1. The TPLF should treat all administrators equally.
2. The judge should be elected by the people.
3. The judge should know the law of punishments.
4. The judge has the right to charge and be charged.
5. The judge has the right to get different materials for his work from the baito, such as papers, the book of law etc.
6. The judge must not be forced to act outside the law against the people's interests.
7. The judge has the right to get the principles of the law and political orientation.

Chapter 2. The duties of the judge

1. If he acts out of the law, he should be punished.
2. He should be punished by the law of the TPLF.
3. If a person refuses the call of the administrators, he should be forced to accept the call by the help of the militia. If it's his first mistake he should be fined.
4. Judges should practise the *serit* of the TPLF.
5. Any income should be deposited with the treasurer and this money should be useful for the people.

6. Half or more of the members of the administration should have the right of decision. The rest of the members should accept this decision.
7. Members of the administration should not be absent without permission and if any member leaves his village without permission he should be sent to the higher authorities.
8. No member of the administration should be partial or act in favour of his family.
9. Administrators should solve any problem which occurs in the village. If the problem is beyond their capacity they should report it to a higher level.
10. All people must accept the decision given by the judge. After that they have the right of appeal. The right of appeal should be given to the charged person and to the court.
11. If a person refuses the decision given by the administrators, he should be taken by the militia to the responsible authorities.
12. The security of the village should be maintained as a duty.
13. If a person makes contact secretly or underground with the enemy and if a person gives shelter to unknown persons or if a person spies, he should be sent to the higher authorities.
14. The programme and aims of the TPLF should be given to our brothers and sisters.
15. The judge should have good, brotherly communication with the people (*hezbi*). He should not force people to adopt servile behaviour.
16. It is forbidden to discriminate between different religions, ethnic or cultural background or place of birth (*awrajas)*.
17. It is forbidden to divide people from each other.
18. The judge must not appropriate for himself public property.
19. The judge should not give or take bribes.
20. He has to keep the secrets of TPLF (*wedeb*).
21. He should not discriminate against women.
22. The judge should protect the materials of TPLF [*gedli*, an early name for fighters; *tegedlo* meant 'struggle].
23. Judges should register and report the gum trees and mines found in their *kushet* and they should safeguard all these.
24. Judges have the right to do whatever is necessary for the people, for example a pasture for the cows.

25. Judges should solve the problems of the people, such as mediating disputes between people.
26. Judges should support the general activities of the TPLF.
27. Judges should give judgement on those who are anti-TPLF and also for those persons who commit crimes such as stealing, rape and so on.
28. If a fighter wants to travel from one place to another, he should have a paper stamped with the seal of the TPLF. If he does not he should be arresyed.
29. Judges should control people who do not take care of their land, by fertilizing it, ploughing properly etc.
30. The farmers should be registered.
31. Big trees should not be cut.

The administrators and judges of *kushets*

1. Problems between persons should be solved first by mediators. The signed agreement of the solutions should be filed with the court. These cases will not be seen again by the court.
2. If the problem is beyond the capacity of the mediators, it should be seen by the court or by the administrators.
3. Any charges should be seen in as short a time as possible.
4. A charge without any evidence should get a decision within two appointment times.
5. A charge becomes invalid after two years.
6. If the accused and the person bringing the charge are absent on the day appointed for the case, the charge will not be seen again.
7. (Incomplete)
8. If a *kushet* judge makes a mistake or commits a crime, his case should be seen by the fighters.
9. Decisions should be made by not less than two thirds of the judges.

Appeals and reviews of cases

1. Anyone who considers a decision of the *kushet* judges is not right has the right of appeal.

2. The Administrator should report the activities of the *tabia* administration and security to TPLF.
3. Serious cases, or if a problem is beyond the capacity of the judges, should be reported to TPLF (*wedeb*).
4. Any activity such as cooperating with enemies or sabotage should be reported to the TPLF.
5. If administrators, judges and Security do not work hard, this should be reported to the responsible authorities.
6. If a judge who has a right to hear appeal cases is absent, he should be charged and heard ['seen' in Tigrigna] by the TPLF, but if he is the regular court judge, he should be charged and heard by his own *baito* court.

Chairman

1. He coordinates the administrators of the *kushet*.
2. He calls people of that *kushet* to meetings and leads the meeting.
3. He reports the activities of the *kushet* once every two weeks and he clarifies all activities to the *tabia militia* and after that all this should be reported to TPLF.
4. The file of the *kushet* should be looked after by the chairman.

Secretary

1. He represents the chairman.
2. He receives letters from different places and writes replies to those letters.
3. He compiles all financial records.
4. He finances activities at the orders of the chairman.
5. He gives documents to the administrators as necessary.
6. He gives receipts to persons paying fines.

He should deposit all money received once a month with the treasurer. The treasurer should be elected by the people of the *tabia*. The general finances should be reported to *kefli hezbi* (Public Affairs Department). The Administration will receive money from this by discussing with the people. If this money is necessary for trade purposes, the money will be provided in cooperation with *kefli hezbi*. If anyone steals money he should be charged by the fighters and not allowed to continue with this work.

Chapter 3. Punishment

If any judge makes a mistake he should be punished according to the law.

Heading No 1. Fines

1. This is decided according to the circumstances of the crime.

Crimes punished by fines

1. Giving late decisions after more than three appointments without good reason.
2. Being absent without permission.
3. Becoming neglectful in solving the problems of the village.
4. Stealing the property of people or TPLF (*gedli)*

Heading No.2. Punishment by imprisonment

Imprisonment should be for one day, one week, one month or a year.

1. Repetition of crimes incurring fines.
2. Stealing public property.
3. Bribes.
4. Nepotism
5. Discrimination between people on the grounds of religion, *awaraja*, *wereda*.
6. Neglectful of reporting to the TPLF anti-TPLF movements, incursions of the enemy and neglect of the capture of enemies.
7. Stealing money collected from fines.

Heading No.3 Capital punishment

The crime should be proved before capital punishment is pronounced.

Crimes deserving capital punishment

1. Spying for the enemy.
2. Betraying the secrets of TPLF to the enemy
3. Murder.

Land administration

1. If the *tabia* is divided into *kushets*, one *kushet* should have three administrators.
2. If the *tabia* is divided into one, there should be three administrators.
3. They divide the land; they divide the grass and they reserve the grassland. They give land for building houses. For trees, see Chapter 2. They administer land and everything produced on the land according to the *serit*, which is drafted by the people and TPLF (*gedli*). If the *tabia* has more than two *kushets* and if the person dividing the land makes trouble in the division, he should be charged in the *tabia* and if it is one *kushet* he should be charged in the *baito* of his own *kushet*.

Glossary

adey weyanit	'Mother of the revolution', honour title given to long term older women supporters of the TPLF
Afars	Minority nationality of pastoralist Muslims living in the north-eastern lowlands of Ethiopia. Since 1993 they have had their own state under the federal structure of the FDRE
Agew	Minority nationality in Tigray and Wello, until their lands became part of the Amhara region under the federal structure introduced in 1993
akeytot	Feudal armies whose depredation brought misery to villagers
Amhara	The nationality which has been politically dominant in Ethiopia since the nineteenth century until the EPRDF victory forced them to share power in 1991
asrat	Tithe, or tax of a tenth, on agricultural production
Ato	Mr.
awraja	County, administrative sub-region under imperial regime
bharia	Slave, often used to denote people of a dark complexion
baito	Elected administrative council of the assemblies organized at *tabia*, *woreda* and zone levels under the TPLF in Tigray
Balambaras	Commander of a fortress, a lower feudal title
banda	Clandestine groups of Tigrayan mercenaries, trained by the Derg to infiltrate dissident areas and perpetrate acts of terror
birr	Unit of Ethiopian currency
Blatta	Title of respect given to lower official under imperial regime
chika shum	Village administrator and tax collector under imperial regime
chiguraf gwoses	Communal land tenure system formerly practised in parts of Tigray
Dejazmach	Commander of the gate, feudal title, abbreviated to Dejaz or Dej. Or Dj.
dembegna	Minor official responsible for gathering grain taxes in the villages
Derg	'Committee' in Amharic; the military committee which assumed power after the overthrow of the imperial government
Falasha	Ethiopian Jews
ferenji	(White) foreigner
First *Weyane*	Uprising of the peasants in 1943 in eastern Tigray

Fitaurari	Commander of the vanguard, feudal title
gareb	Term for meeting or council in the First *Weyane*
Ge'ez	Semitic ancient language of Ethiopia, ancestor of Tigrigna and Amharic, and still the liturgical language of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.
gemgam	Evaluation procedure, commonly practised in Tigray since the revolution
Grazmach	Commander of the left wing, feudal title
Gulti	Right to collect tribute, usually non-hereditary, within a prescribed area, bestowed on members of the nobility and clergy by the emperor
injera	Fermented grain pancake, the staple food of Ethiopia
keshi	Priest
kebelle	Derg urban association, retained after 1991 as smallest urban administrative unit
Kegnazmach	Commander of the right wing, feudal title
kushet	Hamlet, village sub-division
Lazarist	Mission formed by St. Vincent de Paul in 1624
maheber	Religious club meeting monthly in honour of a particular saint
Maria Teresa	Silver coin, currency introduced under the Italian occupation 1936-41
mase	Category of male poet singers in north-eastern Tigray
melkes	Funeral praise poem, often used as a vehicle for social criticism
melkesti	Poet-singers of *melkes* at funerals
mesfininet	Society organised under the nobility, feudalism
meslene	District governor
neftegna	Soldiers of Emperors Menelik and Haile Selassie (lit. gun owner), who were rewarded with grants of land in the south of Ethiopia
Ras	Commander of the army, higher feudal title often held by provincial rulers
risti	Land tenure system whereby descendants of the original settler of the land could claim a share of the land
shehena	Communal land tenure system practised in parts of north-eastern Tigray
shig weyanit	'Torch of the revolution', name given to village women activists under the TPLF
shifta	Bandit or rebel
sewa	Tigrigna word for locally brewed beer
tabia	Village, comprising several *kushets*, smallest administrative unit under an elected *baito*

teff/taff	Staple cereal cultivated in Ethiopia
tsemdi	Amount of land able to be ploughed by a pair of oxen working the whole day
Teranafit	Dissident feudal organisation active in Gondar and Tigray, later EDU
wedeb	Tigrigna for 'organisation', common popular name for TPLF in Tigray
wereda	Local administrative district, comprising a number of tabias, under an elected council or *baito*
weyane	Tigrigna for 'revolution' or 'revolt', also used by the Derg as a pejorative meaning 'bandits' or 'rebels' to refer to the TPLF
weyanai	Village militia man supporting TPLF
zemacha	'Campaign', used of the Derg's Development Through Cooperation Campaign, which sent students to the countryside in 1975 to initiate land reform
zoba	Zone, administrative region comprising several weredas and organising an occasional elected council

Abbreviations

ANDM	Amhara National Democratic Movement
CID	Central Intelligence Department
COPWE	Committee to establish the Workers Party of Ethiopia
DATW	Democratic Association of Tigrayan Women
EDORM	Ethiopian Democratic Officers' Revolutionary Movement
EDU	Ethiopian Democratic Union
EOC	Ethiopian Orthodox Church
ELF	Eritrean Liberation Front
EPDM	Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement
EPLF	Eritrean People's Liberation Front
EPRDF	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
EPRP	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party
FA	Farmers' Association
FDRE	Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
FRELIMO	Frente de Libertacao de Mozambique
HSIU	Haile Selassie I University
MA	Mass Association
MEISON	(Amharic acronym for) All Ethiopia Socialist Movement
MLLT	Marxist-Leninist League of Tigray; also called *Malalit*
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
NRA/M	National Resistance Army/Movement (of Uganda)
OPDO	Oromo Peoples' Democratic Organisation
PAIGC	African party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde
PMAC	Provisional Military Administrative Council, the 'Derg'

REST	Relief Society of Tigray
RRC	Relief and Rehabilitation Commission
TGE	Transitional Government of Ethiopia
TLF	Tigray Liberation Front
TNO	Tigray National Organisation
TPLF	Tigrayan People's Liberation Front
WA(T)	Women's Association (of Tigray)
WFAT	Women Fighters' Association of Tigray
WPE	Workers Party of Ethiopia
YA	Youth Association

Chronology of main events

1872-1889	Reign of Emperor Yohannes IV
1889-1913	Emperor Menelik II establishes the Ethiopian Empire
1896	Battle of Adua
1913-1916	Reign of Lij Iyassu
1916-1930	Reign of Empress Zauditu, regency of Ras Tefari
1930-1974	Reign of Emperor Haile Selassie
1936-1941	Italian invasion and occupation
1941	Restoration of Haile Selassie
1943	First *Weyane* uprising in Tigray
1962	Illegal annexation of Eritrea by Haile Selassie; armed struggle begins in Eritrea.
1972	Founding of Tigrayan National Organisation (TNO)
1974	Haile Selassie overthrown. Assumption of power by Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC), the 'Derg'.
1975	Founding of TPLF in Dedebit in western Tigray.
1975-6	*Zemacha* campaign: Derg strategy, using students, for rural education and land reform, criticised in Tigray for being a cover for dispersal of student opposition.
1977-78	The Red Terror, the Derg campaign of violence, torture and execution against opposition parties, especially students, in large towns throughout Ethiopia.
1984-5	Severe famine in Tigray, Eritrea and Wollo.
1988	The TPLF gain control of all Tigrayan towns except Mekele; Endaselassie and Adigrat are reoccupied by the Derg.

1989	TPLF forms united front with Welo-based Ethiopia Peoples Democratic Movement (EPDM), also joined by the new Oromo Peoples Democratic Organisation (OPDO) and Ethiopian Democratic Officers Revolutionary Movement (EDORM). The new coalition is called the Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). TPLF recapture Tigrayan towns. In February, Derg forces evacuate from Tigray.
May 1991	Mengistu Haile Mariam flees to Zimbabwe and EPRDF capture Addis Ababa.
1991-1995	Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE)
Dec. 1994	Ratification of new Ethiopian Constitution
June 1995	EPRDF elected to form a government
2000	EPRDF re-elected for a second term

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