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ETHIOPIA'S UNACKNOWLEDGED PROBLEM: THE OROMO

P. T. W. BAXTER

THE FRONTIERS OF ETHIOPIA have been restored, or are being restored, to their old Imperial limits, and ethnic minorities in Eritrea and the Ogaden which were seeking to break away are either cowed or on the defensive, at any rate for the present. The difficulties that Ethiopia has been enduring in the Horn have received fairly full news coverage, because the fighting zones have been accessible to reporters and the interests of the Great Powers and their satellites have been involved. Memories of European perfidy to Ethiopia in the 1930s perhaps still tugs a little at the consciences of the elderly, while the young question why it is that, whereas the technology of the rich nations could only be tardily organized to alleviate the famine which toppled Haile Selassie, it can quickly be organized to airlift tanks to Jigjiga and to distribute machine guns to penniless peasants. But the efflorescence of feelings of common nationhood and of aspirations for self-determination among the cluster of peoples who speak Oromo has not been much commented upon. Yet the problem of the Oromo people has been a major and central one in the Ethiopian Empire ever since it was created by Minilik in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. If the Oromo people only obtain a portion of the freedoms which they seek then the balance of political power in Ethiopia will be completely altered. If the Oromo act with unity they must necessarily constitute a powerful force. What is left of the Ethiopian regular army and the militia depends amongst other things on Oromo officers and other ranks. If an honest and free election was held (an unlikely event) and the people voted by ethnic blocs, as experience of elections elsewhere in Africa suggests that they well might do, then around half the votes would be cast by Oromo for Oromo and only about one-third for Amhara.

'Amhara' is the name of the tribal group from the north western corner of Ethiopia which is coincident with the old kingdom of Abyssinia. During the Scramble for Africa the Amhara conquered, or acquired by the default of the other colonial powers, the territory which became the Ethiopian Empire of Minilik and of Haile Selassie. Amhara have provided almost all the holders of government offices and appear to dominate the present military junta. The absolute political domination and cultural dominance of the Amhara has resulted in the public presentation of Ethiopia as a state with a much more unitary

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culture than, in fact, it has. Even scholars have come to accept Ethiopia at the evaluation of its own sophisticated and charming elite.

Much of the history of Ethiopia can be viewed as a struggle between the Amhara and the Oromo, compared to which the chronicles of the dynastic struggles of the petty northern chiefdoms, which have so preoccupied historians, represent a *1066 and All That* sort of diversionary tale. For the last 90 years or so the Amhara have been dominant, but their grip upon Ethiopia has been loosening since at least the 1960s. The horrible events of the last few years are much more an awful and bloody stage in the process of decolonization than they are of a class war; more primordial passions than those of class have been unleashed by the collapse of Haile Selassie's government.

Until recently the Oromo have been better known outside Ethiopia as 'the Galla', but that is a name which none use of themselves and which they resent. They are made up of a number of tribes, of which the best known are the Raya, Wollo, Karaiyu, Kotu, Leka, Mecha, Tulama, Guji, Arssi and Boran, but there are several others. I have worked among Arssi and Boran. Some Oromo are Muslim, some Monophysite Christians and others maintain their traditional religion. There are great ecological variations in Oromo lands, and hence great variations in mode of life and modes of production from pastoral nomadism to itinerant trading to hoe agriculture.

The cradleland of the Oromo was probably in the cool grasslands of southern Ethiopia where they lived as pastoral stockmen. In the early sixteenth century, triggered by demographic and ecological changes which we do not yet understand and possibly also by the introduction of the saddled horse, there was a population upsurge and Oromo spread rapidly. They took over most of the territory which they still farm or graze. They absorbed the peoples they overran, and drove out the garrisons and religious houses from those parts of the south of Ethiopia which the Amhara had colonized during the previous century. The expansion of the Oromo was approximately coincident in time with (and indeed in part may have been a consequence of) the *jihād* led by Ahmed Gran which, to contemporaries at any rate, appeared likely to destroy the Christian Abyssinian state.

The different Oromo tribal groups evolved quite different political systems, which varied from small acephalous clusters of agnatically connected neighbours to quite complex kingdoms. Oromo have never yet been politically united and, in the past, have possibly expended as much blood and energy fighting each other as they have in fighting and resisting Amhara. But most Oromo have maintained, at least in their values and ritual observances, elements of their famous *gada* or *luuba* system of age- and generation-grading.

Bahrey, an Abyssinian ecclesiastic who wrote *A History of the Galla* towards the end of the sixteenth century, selected *luuba* or *gada* as the organization which harnessed Oromo valour into an undefeatable force. It grouped men by age and genealogical generation into a combined ritual, political and military

organization which maintained a strongly democratic and egalitarian ethos and restrained the exploitation of office, wealth and power. Under the rules of *gada* no office holder, nor set of elders in office, could retain office for longer than a ritually prescribed period, usually of eight years. Some Oromo nationalists seek to reconstruct a form of *gada* as the political basis for the new Oromo state they seek to establish. *Gada* is unlikely to provide a practical working model which can deal with the complexities of a modern nation state, but it is an ideal mythical charter in which to enshrine Oromo values.¹ Oromo are brought up to resist authority based on wealth or political position. There are very few situations in which one Oromo can order another to do anything. Unlike the Amhara, who value deviousness and rank and pomp,² Oromo also do not expect possessors of brief authority to brag, boss and bully.

Disinterested nineteenth century travellers among the Oromo were impressed by their culture and its underlying unity. D'Abbadie wrote of 'les Oromos grande nation africaine',³ and the great missionary explorer Ludwig Krapf suggested that 'Providence has placed this nation in this part of Africa for very important reasons. It is the Germany of Africa'.⁴ Krapf, perhaps naively and certainly ethnocentrically, saw the Oromo as the dynamic nation which would, if only they accepted Christ, lead their less fortunate and less numerous neighbours militarily, economically, spiritually and culturally. But, in the event, it has taken the shared experiences of Amhara imperialism to create an Oromo national consciousness.

Their preservation of a subtle, literary and Christian cultural tradition in beleaguered isolation in the Ethiopian Highlands is an achievement in which Amhara take a very proper, if exaggerated, pride and one which one should not denigrate. The ruling elite never seems to have doubted the absolute superiority of its own culture and its duty to impose it on any who sought near equality with it. But, since the sixteenth century, fears of Islam and of the Oromo have dominated the political consciousness of the Amhara ruling elite, and the thought of the two in combination has been their recurring nightmare. Their policies have provoked, and thereby confirmed, those very responses which they feared. For example, the mass acceptance of Islam by the highland Arussi⁵ Province in the 1930s was, in part, a mass demonstration of anti-Amhara sentiment and rejection of all the values of their Amhara colonizers.

1. See articles by Baxter, Torry, Hinnant and Blackhurst in P. T. W. Baxter and Uri Almagor, editors, *Age, Generation and Time: Some Features of East African Age Organisations* (London: C. Hurst, forthcoming) for a full discussion of surviving Oromo *gada* systems.

2. See Donald N. Levine's *Wax and Gold: Tradition and Innovation in Ethiopian Culture* (Chicago University Press, 1965), and *Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of a Multi Ethnic Society* (Chicago University Press, 1974).

3. A. d'Abbadie, 'Les Oromos grande nation africaine', *Annales de la Société Scientifique de Bruxelles*, 1879, 2nd partie, pp. 167-192.

4. Quoted by Richard Pankhurst in 'The Beginnings of Oromo Studies in Europe', *Africa: Rivista trimestrale di studi documentazione dell'Istituto Italo-Africano*, XXXI, No. 2, 1976, pp. 171-206.

5. For note 5, see next page

It confirmed Amhara beliefs that Oromo were, basically, uncivilizable because they rejected Christianity so passionately.

In action the policies of northern administrators have veered between treating Oromo as pagans or as Muslims to be pillaged on the one tack, and as treating them as inferiors who might nevertheless be 'amharized' and incorporated into Ethiopia as full citizens on the other. The latter option was not so open to the black Negro (Shankilla) peoples of the south west.

Pre-revolutionary Ethiopia, to Oromo and other southerners under the harrow, was not, as it is described by the ruling military junta and their sycophants, a 'feudal state'. The term 'feudal' may have a limited applicability to the traditional northern Amhara and Tigrean states, but if it is applied to the south or to the Empire as a whole it only obscures analysis.⁶ Ethiopia was, and is now, a ramshackle, though rapidly changing and developing, Empire of which all the members were subjects rather than citizens, but in which almost all the Oromo were *colonial* subjects.

The officers who administered Oromoland were hard-bitten, self-made men of very little formal education. Most of them had fought their way up the patronage-cum-bureaucracy ladder which was the Imperial Ethiopian administrative system. Few members of the cultivated Amhara aristocracy which so charmed European visitors ever served in the south except as, at lowest, provincial governor level. If policy was made by staff officers in Addis Ababa it was interpreted by made-up rankers in the field. Their behaviour moreover was hardly inhibited, as was that of colonial officials in other African Empires, by respect for a powerful metropole to which natives could appeal and in which principle could outweigh expediency. Provincial officials were poorly paid, and it was anticipated that they would supplement their salaries by using the opportunities offered by office. My guess is that if any of the officials in Kofele had lived on their official pay they would have been dismissed for not living at the level which their positions required. The university graduates and liberally orientated civil servants which Haile Selassie's educational programme had produced were seldom sent to the provinces: there was not one graduate employed in the administration of Arussi Province. What at the turn of the century had been presented as an Imperial duty to disseminate Amharic civilization along with the *Pax Amharica*, by the 1960s appeared simply as a brutal and oppressive anachronism.

5. There are no standard ways of spelling Ethiopian place or tribal names in roman script. I use Arussi for the province, which is the usual mode, and Arssi for the people, language and land which is near to the folk pronunciation. I am grateful to the SSRC for the grant which made my research in Ethiopia possible.

6. One might have hoped that E. M. Chilver's 'Feudalism in the inter-lacustrine Kingdoms' in *East African Chiefs*, ed. by A. I. Richards (London: Faber and Faber, 1960), pp. 378-93 had settled the matter, but the debate on the use of 'feudal' appears to be endless. For a succinct analysis of the use of the term generally and in relation to Ethiopia see Gene Ellis, 'The Feudal Paradigm as a Hindrance to Understanding Ethiopia', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 14, 2 (1976), pp. 275-295.

Officials were feared and usually loathed as were the Amhara settlers to whom much of the best land had been alienated. (Most officials were also settlers but most settlers were not officials.) Many Oromo, particularly those living in the more fertile areas, were transformed by conquest (or later on by government allocation of their land to landlords) from free farmers into poor share-cropping tenants. A major rallying cry of the Oromo Liberation Front is a call to get rid of the foreign settlers (*naftaanya*), many of whom are said to remain in Oromoland despite Proclamation No. 31 of 1973, 'To provide for the Public Ownership of Rural Lands'.⁷

Accurate population figures for Ethiopia are just not obtainable. Mesfin Wolde Mariam,⁸ for example, quotes an official estimate of the total population of Ethiopia, in 1968, as 26.4 million and John Markakis⁹ quotes another official estimate for 1970 as 24.3 million, with an annual growth rate of 2.5 per cent. But these gross indicators are near enough for our purposes. Estimates of Oromo population vary from Levine's, in 1974, of 7 million¹⁰ to that of the Oromo Liberation Front, in 1978, of 18 million.¹¹ The Imperial Government deliberately obfuscated the ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity of Ethiopia so that, as Markakis remarks, 'the relative strength of the major ethnic groups remains a matter of guess work. . . Such conjectures as have been advanced often are politically motivated and therefore of little value'.¹² The *Atlas of Ethiopia*, for example, which was prepared for student use, has an (inaccurate) map (No. 46) which shows the distribution of mules, and tables which list the most trivial manufactures, but it does not attempt to present accurate or comprehensive data on the populations of different tribal, linguistic or religious groupings of the Empire, and what little information it does give is presented in a prevaricating and misleading style. But almost certainly the Oromo are the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia and make up somewhere between a third and just over half of its population. A reasonable estimate would be ten million and fifteen million would not be wild. (In addition some hundred thousand Oromo are citizens of Kenya.) Certainly there are more Oromo than there are Cubans in Cuba or members of many of the minority nationalities of the USSR. There must also be as many Arssi and Guji Oromo as there are Somali in the Somali Republic.

There are many differences of pronunciation, vocabulary and syntax between the differing dialects of Oromo but an intelligent and eager natal speaker of one dialect can make himself understood in any other, and soon become fluently at ease in it. Oromo speakers in Ethiopia stretch, though not uninterruptedly,

7. *Negarit Gazeta*, No. 26, 29 April 1975; reprinted in 'Rural Development in Ethiopia', *Rural Africana*, No. 28 (Michigan, Fall, 1975), p. 145.

8. *An Atlas of Ethiopia*, Addis Ababa, 2nd ed., 1970, p. 73.

9. *Ethiopia: Anatomy of a Traditional Polity* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 51.

10. *op. cit.*, p. 38.

11. Union of Oromo Students in Europe, Press Release, 17 January 1978.

12. Markakis, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

from Wollo in the north (approximately 13°N) to the southern frontier and from past Harar in the east to past Dembi Dollo in the west. The distance between the most northerly Oromo in Ethiopia and the most southerly in Kenya is about 1,200 kilometres. Oromo is also very widely spoken as a second language and is probably as widely spoken as Amharic even in towns. For example in Kofele, where I lived for a year, the only Ethiopian residents I can recall who claimed not to be able to speak any Oromo were the Police Officer and the telephone operator: I was assured that both of them were fibbing because they thought it demeaning to speak Oromo to a foreigner. Oromo must have been less studied and have less printed material available in it than any language which has a comparable number of native speakers.

The criterion of language is important in defining who is an Amhara and who is an Oromo. Amhara society is, at its fringes, fairly open and, in the past, certainly many Oromo have become Amhara or 'passed as Amhara'. It is commonly said that the late Emperor Haile Selassie was by pedigree or 'blood', as much Oromo as Amhara, but no one would ever have classified him as an Oromo. The crucial criteria are cultural. One may pass as an Amhara by adopting the observances of the Coptic Church, an Amharic name and life-style and, particularly, by using the Amharic language as one's first tongue.

The Amharic language, particularly when written in Amharic script, is a symbol of national identity as well as the language of political power. Fluent Amharinya and an Amharic way of life were almost prerequisites for entry to government employment; and government was almost the only employer of schooled labour. For most officials to civilize was 'to amharize'. Indeed Imperial officials used to fabricate the census figures to show that Amharinya was driving out the other languages of the Empire, and particularly Oromo, by a sort of inverted linguistic Gresham's Law!

Until the final days of the Empire Oromo was denied any official status and it was not permissible to publish, preach, teach or broadcast in any Oromo dialect. In court or before an official an Oromo had to speak Amharinya or use an interpreter. Even a case between two Oromo before an Oromo speaking magistrate had to be heard in Amharinya. I sat through a mission church service at which the preacher and all the congregation were Oromo but at which the sermon, as well as the service, was given first in Amharinya, which few of the congregation understood at all, and then translated into Oromo. The farce had to be played out in case a Judas informed and the district officer fined or imprisoned the preacher. Every Oromo child, like every child in Ethiopia, had to start his primary school studies in Amharinya, which is a Semitic not a Cushitic language like Oromo. Every child who sought higher education had to pass an examination in Amharinya even though he would be instructed in English. It is as if every English child had to use Russian in primary school and switch to Turkish for his secondary schooling. But many Oromo were inspired by the very difficulties which confronted them and, like

Ewe or Welshmen, sought through education an entry into salaried employment.

During the fake dawn which followed the fall of Haile Selassie's government one edition of an Oromo newspaper (*Bariisu*; Dawn) did appear written in Amharic script. I understand that few further issues appeared although some underground papers have appeared in Oromo. Educated Oromo bitterly resent being deprived of the use of their native language for anything but domestic purposes, and particularly so when it is the first language of a nation of some ten million or so people.

Official ethnic affiliation then has, to some extent, been optional for the educated, ambitious and mobile, except that few Muslims could contemplate changing their religion. (There are a few Muslim Amhara.)

From an Oromo viewpoint an Amhara is anyone who is either born into Amhara society and culture or anyone who chooses to enter them, by speaking Amharic in domestic situations, by adopting an Amharic lifestyle and by acting in public situations in support of Amharic values, in particular by following the fasting rules of the Coptic Church. In rural Arussi the maintenance of different fasts and rules about slaughtering and feeding and alcohol consumption is a major marker of ethnic differences. It is extremely difficult for Christians and Muslims to be convivial together.

An Amhara is one who, all in all, assumes that Amharic culture is so obviously superior to the other cultures of Ethiopia that all Ethiopians should seek to acquire that culture. I do not suggest for a moment that these criteria are the ones which Amhara themselves, or students of Amharic culture, would always use. Clearly they are partisan, but I am only endeavouring to present here the view point of an Oromo sympathizer; and it is time Arssi rather than Amhara had some partisan backing! To Arssi, at any rate, 'Amhara' and 'self-satisfied dominant elite' have become convergent categories. That Amhara peasants in their own homelands were also abused and exploited by government, and that there were a number of migrants from the north who lived in poverty, were not facts which impinged much on Arssi consciousness: just as the presence of poor white trash in the old American South or whites living on social relief payments in South Africa do little to diminish black awareness of white dominance. What Arssi experienced were the slights and hardships and exactions which were imposed on them by a foreign ruling elite. An elite, moreover, which appeared to look down on them and to discriminate against them as cultural and political inferiors.

A cheery middle-aged official whom I got to know fairly well will serve as an example. He had over thirty years in government service as a clerk and as a district magistrate. He had acquired an extensive knowledge of Ethiopian law in action, as it were, and his bribery tariff was considered more moderate than that of most of his opposite numbers. He enjoyed his vocation and was ready to tell me what the laws of Ethiopia were. But he did not pursue his subject in a learned way; he did not own, or have access to, a single law book

nor even to a copy of the laws of Ethiopia. As the laws were very readily bent in favour of the rich, powerful or open handed, this was not actually very much of a disability. Arssi did not bring cases to him so most of the few cases he heard were between Amhara or between Amhara and Arssi. He did not let his prejudices hamper his self-interest, and any Arssi who was substantially richer than the Amhara with whom he was in dispute had a good chance of winning his case.

The magistrate told me he was an Amhara. Arssi classified him as such but also said that he came of Christian Oromo stock from Shoa (I do not know if that was so). But he had used his various government positions to acquire land and stock and used Amharic as his domestic tongue and spent a lot of his leisure time drinking Scotch with Amhara. Certainly, he perceived Arssi culture to be totally inferior to Amharic culture. His response to my research was similar to reactions I had experienced among the more insensitive Europeans in other parts of colonial Africa. He assured me that I was just wasting my time studying Arssi culture, because they had none and were 'uncivilized' (in support of which he instanced that those Arssi who owned wellington boots continued to wear them into the dry season!)

Up until the Italian invasion there were sporadic, local outbreaks of rebellion against particularly harsh governors or landlords but nothing that hinted of concerted action. When Haile Selassie returned to Ethiopia during the Second World War he was able to strengthen his grip on the country remarkably. The first Oromo rebellion which had national reverberations was that of Arssi patriot-cum-brigands in Bale in the 1960s. With some Somali support they pinned down substantial units of the regular Army and demonstrated that determined Oromo could wage effective guerilla warfare against the Addis Ababa authorities. But, probably more important for the development of Oromo national consciousness were the unanticipated consequences of the Imperial Government's own creation of a strong, centralized administration which ignored local differences of custom and culture coupled with the imposition of Amharic culture. Both of these increased resentment and developed by reaction positive feelings of nationality. As more Oromo became civil servants, Army officers and NCO's and more Oromo school boys became undergraduates, and as more Oromo MPs managed to get elected, each group found that, in addition to sharing humiliating experiences, each shared a common language and similar values. The new pan-Oromo consciousness was generated in the army, the University and the Parliament itself. For example, when I was looking for one of the Members from Chilalo constituency in the lounge of Parliament I was directed, by an usher, to the corner where 'the Oromo members usually sit together'.

Those who achieved success in the national arena, and hence were opinion-formers at home, discovered just how numerous, extensive and similar the Oromo peoples were. The most conspicuous manifestation of this conscious-

ness was the Mecha Oromo Self Help Association which was founded in 1967 by an Oromo civil servant, and immediately attracted an enthusiastic membership. I met some of its leaders in the club house in 1967 and it was clear that the movement was flourishing. It even attracted and persuaded an amharized general, Tadessu Biru, to renounce his elite status and become its active patron. It was impossible to measure precisely the support the association gathered but it so alarmed the government that, using a bomb explosion in a cinema as a pretext, it imprisoned the general and the association's key members and dissolved the association.¹³ As elsewhere in Africa, as for example among the Ibo, Akan, Somali or Kalenjin, increased education, trade and mobility has fostered wider ethnic sentiments and affiliations; whereas wider national and narrower class consciousness have more frequently been subjects for political rhetoric rather than realized aspirations.

Each of the Oromo peoples has a distinctive history but all have shared comparable experiences. Perhaps I may select a few observed by myself in Arussi to illustrate some common types of Oromo experience.

The Arssi people extend far beyond the boundaries of Arussi Province, which takes their name, into Bale and Sidamo. They were finally subjugated by Shoan gunpower in 1887 after six different annual campaigns which R. H. Kofi Darkwa, the Ghanaian historian of Minilik's reign, summarizes as 'perhaps the most sustained and the most bloody which Menilek undertook'.¹⁴

Arssi in the 1960s spoke of their conquest by Amhara as the commencement of an era of miseries, since which life has not run as God intended it but out of true. Boran likewise divided their history into two eras, 'before' and 'after', the first of which was good and the second bad and which were divided by their colonization. John Hinnant reports Guji as tending 'to blame all social problems on their incorporation into Ethiopia'.¹⁵ It is an example of the unthinking colonial arrogance of Amhara that the only secondary school in Arussi Province was named after Ras Darge, who was the Butcher Cumberland of the Arussi Highlands, and whose name is still reviled there.

After their conquest much of the best Arssi grazing lands were promptly given as booty to the soldiers and clients of Ras Darge. Where, as in the Rift Valley or on the better agricultural land, they had acquired most of the land and were sufficient in numbers to give each other mutual support, and had a protective garrison town nearby, the settlers stayed and expanded. Those however who had been allocated land in areas best suited only to grazing, which also tended to be furthest from the garrisons, were often unable to withstand

13. See Patrick Gilkes, *The Dying Lion. Feudalism and Modernization in Ethiopia* (London: Julian Friedmann, 1974), Ch. 7 for a fuller account of Oromo national movements.

14. *Shewa, Menilek and the Ethiopian Empire* (London, Heinemann: 1975), p. 105-6.

15. In 'Gada as a Ritual System: the Guji' in Uri Almagor and P. T. W. Baxter, *Age, Generation and Time: Some Features of East African Age Organisations* (London: C. Hurst, forthcoming).

the implacable hostility of their Arssi tenants and exchanged their lands with them for stock which they then took back to Shoa. In these areas many landlords were also killed or driven out during the Italian occupation.

Indeed many Arssi elders in Kofele and Gedeb districts reminisced nostalgically about the brief period of Italian rule as a time during which they had been free to kill Amhara, been free of exploitative and apparently random impositions by officials, had been encouraged in the practices of Islam and had been able to earn money. It was not that they had enjoyed Italian rule but that they had found it a much less oppressive yoke than that of the Amhara. Moreover, the Italians had broken the power of local Amhara landlords so that they had never been able to completely re-establish themselves as rifle-armed autocrats over their tenants. I several times heard elders tell younger men that however harsh the Amhara appeared to be, their rule was much more moderate than it had formerly been.

I worked in Kofele District which had the smallest proportion of Amhara settlers and landlords in Arussi Province, and even there it was difficult to see anything at all that the population had gained from their incorporation in the Ethiopian Empire. To the people it seemed that all they got in return for taxes and exactions were yet more officials to extract more taxes and exactions and bribes. The people of Kofele did not appear to be as totally 'pauperized' as their fellow tribesmen of the Rift Valley floor,¹⁶ but they were mostly extremely poor though they farmed and grazed their cows on well watered hills.¹⁷ Critical Population Density,¹⁸ for people and stock, appeared to have been passed and the grazing was degrading and barley yields had dropped, in many places to a level at which it did not justify ploughing and sowing. The agricultural crisis was masked by the increased cultivation of that hardy carbohydrate producer, the false banana (*Ensete edulis*). Many children had kwashiorkor, yet a large proportion of the butter that was churned was bought and exported from the district by traders from the north. Cash was extremely short and opportunities for wage-labour were negligible. Migrant labour did not create social problems simply because there was no work to which young men could migrate.

There was a chasm between the 'Amharized' and the Arssi which only a handful of young, schooled and determined young men sought to cross. Even the handful of wealthy Arssi landlords or headmen (*balabbats*) only maintained courteous and formal (or 'joking') relations, but never easy or intimate ones, with local Amhara. Almost all the school places above Primary III in the Province were filled by the children of settlers, officials and migrants. Only 4

16. Karl E. Knutsson, 'Dichotomization and Integration: Aspects of inter-ethnic relations in Southern Ethiopia', in *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, ed. F. Barth (London: Allen & Unwin, 1969), pp. 86-100.

17. See Yilma Kebede, 'Chilalo Awraja', *Ethiopian Geographical Journal*, 5, 1 (June 1967), pp. 25-36.

18. See W. Allen, *The African Husbandman* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1964).

out of the 57 senior officials listed in the official handbook of Arussi Province were not classified by Arssi as Amhara. I don't think even a single Arssi was employed in an equivalent post outside the Province. Only about 5 of the 30 or so low-level government employees in Kofele District were Arssi. The *Kadi*, who only ever dealt with disputes or religious affairs between Muslim Arssi, was even allotted a Christian Amhara clerk.

Indeed the Muslim religion was denigrated in large and small ways. The Provincial Handbook, for example, listed 216 Churches but only 59 mosques in an area in which almost every settlement had a hut reserved as a mosque. The churches and priests had land and tenants granted to them and received donations from the state; mosques did not. Every seller in Kofele market, almost every one of whom was Muslim Arssi, paid a toll. Almost all of the revenue was absorbed in the wages of the Christian Amhara clerks but the small surplus was used to pave a drive to the Church, while the market remained a foul quagmire throughout the rains. Only I was amazed at this decision. The officials assumed that no better use could be found for the money and Arssi assumed that market tolls were just another exaction from them to benefit their rulers. Later, during the cholera epidemic, the great annual pilgrimage to the tomb of Shekh Hussien was banned because it would spread infection, but that to the Christian shrine at Koluubi was allowed because the prayers of Christian pilgrims should diminish the epidemic! To add insult to injury the church at Koluubi itself (an Oromo name meaning 'wild garlic') had been deliberately erected on the site of a traditional Oromo site of blessing and pilgrimage in order to Christianize it.

I could heap up incidents of arrogance but brief versions of two others must suffice.

One Friday afternoon a Police Land-rover brought an Arssi prisoner to Kofele to be hanged in the market place on the next day. It was the only police vehicle to visit the district during the twelve months I lived in it. The condemned man had been under sentence for over ten years, for participating in the shooting and killing of the adult son of his landlord. There had been a violent quarrel over the calculation of the share of crops due to the landlord. One of those sentenced with the prisoner had escaped from prison and the other had died in prison. The landlord had refused to accept compensation and hence have the death sentence commuted, so the sentence was to be carried out. The prisoner, who had been provided with clean clothes for the event, told me that he had been sent for execution because the prison in Asella was so overcrowded.

What looked like a rugged set of football goal posts had been erected in the market place. The policemen who had accompanied the prisoner put the noose around the prisoner's neck, threw the loose end over the crossbar, tied it to the front bumper, reversed sharply and jerked the man up. They then untied the rope from the bumper, hitched it to a stout peg and left the corpse

dangling. They drove back directly to Asella but left instructions that the corpse was not to be removed before dusk. The late Ato Saddo, an Arssi mission convert and teacher and a most gentle man, had the body cut down and buried at his own expense. The gibbet was still standing months afterwards.

The reasons for the delay in carrying out the sentence and the crudeness of its performance could tell us a lot about the mixture of humanity and Old Testament harshness which compose Amhara Law, but that is not our present concern.

The Arssi were numbed and outraged. Those who had heard the news waited by the paths to inform those coming to market; the women turned back wailing as they do at a mourning and the men were silent and angry; the market was completely boycotted on that day, and on the following Saturday, except by curious children and northern settlers and migrants.

Arssi, rightly or wrongly, were convinced that if it had been an Amhara who had shot an Arssi, then the most that could have happened was that the killer would have been ordered to hand over some compensation, and the kin of the victim ordered to accept it. Again and again, as if it was a refrain, I was told: 'This is the way the Amhara destroy us. Are we like bush animals?'

At the Parliamentary Elections of 1969 the two-seat constituency of which Kofele District formed a part returned two Arssi members. Arssi made up the overwhelming majority of the electorate, but this was the first time that two Arssi had been returned; and that was simply because more Arssi had been persuaded to register and to vote. The Governor however regarded the result as subversion of the proper political order and had one of the candidates disallowed (the other was thought to be protected by Swedish Aid patrons) and ordered a fresh poll. During the second poll Arssi voters were threatened, some imprisoned and the majority prevented from voting so that a Christian northerner was declared elected.¹⁹

Most Arssi in the District had demonstrated only the slightest interest in the Election up to the time of the Governor's intervention. They tried to avoid any contacts at all with government agencies which all, in their experience, existed only to hold them back; they regarded Parliament, not entirely justly, as another Amhara trick. But the Governor's crude cheating roused passionate Arssi, if not Oromo, feelings. They were angry not just because Arssi were repressed, they were familiar enough with that, but because they were so openly humiliated. Protests such as 'The Amhara are trying to kill us': 'The Amhara are trying to destroy the Arssi': 'It is better to live like Tigre' (i.e. in open revolt as in Eritrea): or 'It would be better to follow Waako' (the leader of a

19. A reliable informant, who for obvious reasons wishes to remain anonymous, has told me that a similar incident to that which I describe occurred in Deder in Harerghe Province. The Governor, with the agreement of the Ministry of the Interior, merely disallowed one of the Oromo candidates and declared an Amhara elected in his place. Nevertheless Oromo overall representation in Parliament increased in 1969. The allocation of seats was nonetheless heavily skewed to favour Amhara areas.

guerilla force in Bale), were reiterated again and again. Men re-told nostalgic stories of Italian times when they had had the freedom to kill Amhara. The defeated candidate was transformed from a traditionalist and Government time-server into a tribal martyr. A consequence, which surely the Governor could not have wished, was that poor peasants and wealthy pastoralists learned that Parliament must have some importance if the Governor was so anxious to cheat Arssi out of a representative. A small group of schoolboys and primary school teachers had always been embarrassingly eager to discuss national affairs with me, but the great mass of the rural population had been quite unconcerned. But after that incident I was constantly asked, even by elderly women, about how elections, etc., were carried out in Europe. This particular act of Amhara arrogance struck just at the time it could set off a reverberating chord.

The collapse, with hardly a shove, of Haile Selassie's autarchy has obviously released a variety of repressed forces throughout the Ethiopian Empire. Certainly among the Oromo many of what were local, sullen resentments have been converted into national aspirations and a national struggle, which has now been temporarily diverted by the intervention of foreign forces. The breech-loading rifle helped subjugate and hold down the Oromo, as it did many other African peoples in other Empires. It is yet to be seen what will be the repressive concomitants of the Kalashnicov.

It is not possible to assess accurately either the extent or the depth of pan-Oromo fervour nor to estimate the effectiveness of pan-Oromo organization and resistance in Ethiopia, but clearly both are growing and the Oromo peoples, as distinct from a handful of Oromo individuals, will certainly become an increasingly influential component in Ethiopian politics. A nationalism which is rooted in a common language and shared modes of thought and feeling, and which has been nurtured in shared colonial-style oppression can only be repressed by an extremely ruthless, strong and efficient state, such as the Republic of South Africa. There is no reason to think that Ethiopia will suddenly become efficient, however more and more ruthless its rulers may become in the short term.

Even a wealthy, secure and benevolent government would find it difficult to woo the Oromo successfully. The present ruling junta has shown none of those characteristics. It is, moreover, a miniscule fraction of a misinformed Marxist minority of a ruling group recruited from what is the Shoan segment of an ethnic minority, and it is propped up by both terror and foreign support. It must remain dependent on the fire-power of its foreign allies unless it can find some more permanent appeal to base itself upon than the Somali bogey. If it does not, the Russians could well find themselves with their own mini-Vietnam in the Horn; in which case, once again, poor blacks will provide an undue share of the poor and bloodied infantry.

Oromoland encompasses Shoa, which is the very heartland of the Ethiopian state and includes the capital Addis Ababa (Finefine in Oromo). The soil in

the north has been degraded by generations of poor farming and most of its forests destroyed. The most productive farming land of Ethiopia is in the south and much of it is farmed by Oromo. The south has been the granary of the north and its supplier of meat, butter, sugar, honey (used to make the national drink, mead), and of coffee and even, until the 1930s, of slaves. Addis Ababa and the new towns of Shoa could not be fed without food provided by rural Oromo land and labour. The south also provides almost all the principal exports of coffee, gold, timber and hides and skins. If the Ogaden and Eritrea were detached Ethiopia would merely be diminished, but if the Oromo were to detach themselves, then it is not just that the centre could not hold, the centre would be part of the detached Oromo land. The Empire, which Minilik stuck together and Haile Selassie held together, would just fall apart. The Amhara would then be forced back to their barren and remote hills.

On the one hand their numbers, geographical position and natural resources give the Oromo a strong base from which to bargain or to act but, on the other, the crucial dependence of Ethiopia on the Oromo inclines the central, and Amhara dominated, government to strike out at any manifestation of Oromo consciousness. If Ethiopia is not to disintegrate, or be held together merely by foreign garrisons, its government must clearly find some way of countering the alienation of the Oromo, but it is difficult to see at present any way that they would follow in order to do so because, essentially, they still see Ethiopia through Shoan eyes. The junta appears to have taken over Haile Selassie's conviction, though justified by quite different dogmas, that any other cultures must be stamped on and that to grant any devolution is a sign of weakness. Yet, to an outsider who is deeply attached to Ethiopia, some form of devolution seems the only humane way. The slogan of the Oromo Liberation Front is 'Let Oromo freedom flower today!' (*Addi bilisumma Oromo Ha'dararuu!*). This may be a very over-optimistic hope but, if not today, the time of flowering and of fruiting cannot be delayed forever.