

3. REBELLION AND FAMINE IN THE NORTH UNDER HAILE SELASSIE

Northern Marginalization under Shewan Rule

The northern provinces of Gonder, Gojjam, Wollo and Tigray are the heartland of the "core" culture of Ethiopia -- the Ethiopian Orthodox church, the Amharic language and script, plow-based agriculture, and many elements of the social system of the country derive from this historic region. Most of the Emperors also came from here.

At the end of the 19th century, the center of power in Ethiopia decisively shifted from the north to Shewa, with the assumption of the title of Emperor by Menelik, King of Shewa. Menelik was an Amhara, from the dynasty that ruled Manz, at the northern tip of the modern province of Shewa. The majority of the inhabitants of the rest of Shewa were Oromo -- as is the case today. In terms of descent, the group that became politically dominant in Shewa (and subsequently in Ethiopia) was a mixture of Amhara and Oromo; in terms of language, religion and cultural practices, it was Amhara. The northern Amhara regarded the Shewans as "Galla" (the pejorative term for Oromo),¹ and together with the Tigrayans and some of the Agau and Oromo people in Wollo, resisted the new Shewan domination, which led to their economic and political marginalization.

Revolt in Wollo

Between 1928 and 1930 there was a rebellion -- or a series of rebellions -- in northern Wollo against Shewan domination. The specific political cause was support for Ras Gugsa Wale, a northern Amhara lord with a strong claim on the throne, against the Shewan Ras Teferi (who crowned himself the Emperor Haile Selassie after defeating the revolt). The government suppression of the revolt led to quartering soldiers with local people, interrupting the salt trade, and involved massive looting and confiscation of cattle. Combined with drought and locusts, the result was famine.² Haile Selassie ordered the importation of grain from India to supply Addis Ababa, but there was no relief for north Wollo. Political measures were taken after the revolt, including the replacement of much of the administration, which formerly had local roots, with appointees from Shewa; and the joining of the rebellious districts to the province of

¹ Gerry Salole, "Who are the Shoans?" *Horn of Africa*, 2, (1978), pp. 20-9.

² James McCann, *From Poverty to Famine in Northeast Ethiopia: A Rural History, 1900-1935*, Philadelphia, 1987.

southern Wollo, which was ruled with harshness and venality by the crown prince. These helped to contribute to the further marginalization of the area, and the series of famines which plagued the area up to the fall of the Emperor.

The cumulative impact of imperial misrule and the petty tyrannies of local landlords created an atmosphere in which development was extremely difficult, as described by two consultants investigating the possibility of starting livestock projects:

Wollo is virtually impossible ... there is such an obscuring weight of disbelief, suspected innuendo and antagonisms; such a mess of mis-government at petty levels, and such a lading of landlords that there is almost nothing to start with and nowhere to start that will not go wrong or sour ... [there is] the smothering welter of the weeds of an entrenched and stagnant society.³

The Weyane in Tigray

Following the restoration of Haile Selassie after the defeat of the Italians in 1941, there was a revolt in Tigray. Known as the Weyane, this was the most serious internal threat that Haile Selassie faced. An alliance of the Oromo semi-pastoralists of Raya Azebo, disgruntled peasants, and some local feudal lords, under the military leadership of a famous shifita, Haile Mariam Redda, the rebels nearly succeeded in overrunning the whole province.⁴ British aircraft had to be called in from Aden in order to bomb the rebels to ensure their defeat. While some of the aristocratic leaders, such as Ras Seyoum Mengesha, were treated gently and ultimately allowed to return and administer the recalcitrant province, there were reprisals against the ordinary people. Most notably, the Raya and Azebo Oromo were subjected to wholesale land alienation, and much of their territory was transferred to the province of Wollo. This area was badly hit in subsequent famines, partly as a consequence.

Tax Revolts in Gojjam

Gojjam treasured its independence for centuries, and did not submit willingly to Shewan rule. The issue around which opposition repeatedly coalesced was any attempt by the central government to measure land and tax it. Taxation was not only resented as the imposition of unjust exactions by government, but was feared as the means whereby the traditional land tenure

³ Noel J. Cossins and Bekele Yemeron, "Still Sleep the Highlands: A Study of Farm and Livestock Systems in the Central Highlands of Ethiopia," Addis Ababa, 1973, p. 2.10.

⁴ Gebru Tareke, "Peasant Resistance in Ethiopia: The Case of Weyane," Journal of African History, 25, (1984), pp. 77-92.

system would be undermined, and the farmers' independence destroyed.

In the 1940s and '50s there was a series of attempts to measure land in Gojjam, prior to taxation. In the face of peasant resistance, including violence, all attempts failed. In the early 1960s, only 0.1 per cent of the land had been measured, and Gojjam, one of the richest and most populous provinces, paid less land tax than the poor and thinly populated province of Bale.⁵ In 1950/1 there was armed resistance, including a plot to assassinate Haile Selassie. However the most serious revolt occurred in 1968, in response to the most systematic attempt to levy an agricultural income tax to date.

In February 1968, in reaction to the arrival of parties of government officials accompanied by armed police, the peasants of Mota and Bichena districts resorted to armed resistance. After months of stalemate while much of the province remained out of government control, Haile Selassie sent troops to Gojjam in July and August. The air force bombed several villages; it burned houses but its main task was probably intimidating the resistance. Several hundred people died, according to contemporary accounts, but the Gojjamis remained defiant. Finally, in December, Haile Selassie backed down. He visited Gojjam in 1969, cancelled all tax arrears, and made no serious attempt to collect the new taxes.

Famines in Wollo and Tigray

In 1974, the Emperor Haile Selassie became notorious for his attempts to conceal the existence of the famine of 1972-3 in Wollo. This, however, was only one in a succession of such incidents. Prof. Mesfin Wolde Mariam of Addis Ababa University has documented how the famines of 1958 and 1966 in Tigray and Wollo were treated with official indifference, bordering on hostility towards the peasants who were considered sufficiently ungrateful for the divinely-sanctioned rule of Haile Selassie as to allow themselves to defame his reputation by dying of famine.

There was severe famine in Tigray in 1958 which went without significant government relief. In 1965/6, reports of famine from Were Ilu *awraja* in Wollo arrived at the Ministry of the Interior in November 1965, one month after the situation became clear to the local police, but no action was taken. The information took a further 302 days to reach the Emperor, who then requested the Ministry of the Interior to act -- which it did by asking officials in Wollo to send a list of the names of the people who had died.⁶ A small relief distribution was then authorized. The only consistent response to famine was to regard it as a security problem -- famine created

⁵ Peter Schwab, *Decision-Making in Ethiopia: A Study of the Political Process*, London, 1972, pp. 4, 159.

⁶ Mesfin Wolde Mariam, *Rural Vulnerability to Famine in Ethiopia - 1958-1977*, London, 1986, p. 106.

destitute migrants, who needed to be prevented from entering towns, particularly Addis Ababa.

Both the 1958 and 1965/6 famines killed tens of thousands of people.

The famine that struck Wollo during 1972-3 played a crucial role in Ethiopian history: the revelation of that famine by the British television journalist Jonathan Dimbleby played a key role in precipitating the downfall of the rule of Haile Selassie. Between 40,000 and 80,000 people died.⁷ The famine also led directly to the creation of the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC), the powerful government department mandated to prevent and ameliorate future famines, and to coordinate international assistance. The 1972-3 famine was the last one in which there were no functioning mechanisms for the delivery of large-scale humanitarian relief.

The Wollo famine was popularly blamed on drought, a backward and impoverished social system, and the cover-up attempted by the imperial government.⁸ These factors were all important -- though it must be remembered that specific actions by the government, especially after the Ras Gugsa and Weyane revolts, were instrumental in creating the absence of development. In addition, forcible alienation of resources and violence also played an important role.

The group that suffered most from the famine were the Afar pastoral nomads of the Danakil desert. Famine had already gripped them in early 1972. The Afar inhabit an arid semi-wilderness, utilizing pastures over a large area to support their herds. In times of drought, they are forced to move to areas which they do not normally exploit. Traditional drought reserves included the Tcheffa Valley, on the rift valley escarpment, and pastures along the inland delta of the Awash river where the waters dissipate into the desert. In the 1960s the Tcheffa Valley became the location of commercial sorghum farms, and small farmers from nearby also began to use much of the land. Meanwhile, large cotton plantations were developed along the Awash. By 1972, 50,000 hectares of irrigated land had displaced 20,000 Afar pastoralists.⁹

During the years of good rainfall, the loss of the drought reserves was not noticed by the Afar, but when repeated drought struck, they found that a necessary resource they had utilized sporadically for generations had been alienated, without compensation. Famine among the Afar

⁷ John Seaman and Julius Holt, "The Ethiopian Famine of 1973-4: I. Wollo Province," *Proceedings of the Nutrition Society*, 34, 1975, p. 114A. The Ethiopian Nutrition Institute calculated a figure of 200,000 deaths but this appears to have been based on over-pessimistic assumptions about the size of the famine-affected population.

⁸ Failure to relieve a famine already under way can scarcely be called a *cause* of that famine, but popular coverage of "the politics of famine" continues to focus on the politics of famine *relief*, failing to draw the necessary distinction between the two.

⁹ Maknun Gamaledin, "State policy and famine in the Awash Valley of Ethiopia," in D. Anderson and R. Grove (eds.), *Conservation in Africa*, Cambridge, 1987, p. 335.

was certainly caused by drought -- but by drought acting on a society that had been deprived of the means of responding to that threat.

Official indifference to the plight of the Afar is illustrated by an incident in 1974, when the flood waters of the Awash river were directed to the Dubti valley in order to irrigate cotton plantations. The resident Afar population was not informed, and 3,000 lost their homes, while 100 were "missing."¹⁰

Mobility is crucial to survival among the Afar. Nomadic in normal times, the ability to move freely over large distances becomes a vital concern when resources are short. In the early 1970s, the Afar's mobility was further restricted by the flow of weaponry to their nomadic neighbors and competitors, the Issa (who are ethnic Somali). The Issa themselves were suffering from the alienation of much of their pasture and restrictions on their movement. The result was an attempt by the Afar to appropriate wells formerly used by the Issa. This led to widespread armed clashes, especially in 1972. One Afar reported "Many people die. Disease is the first cause but the Issa are the second."¹¹ Meanwhile, a survey done among the Issa reported that homicide by the Afar was a major cause of death.¹² The famine also resulted in large-scale armed clashes between the Afar and their Oromo neighbors in Wollo.

The second group which suffered severely from the famine included farmers in a narrow strip of middle-altitude areas of northern and central Wollo. Those who suffered most were tenants. The Raya and Azebo Oromo had been reduced to that state by massive land alienation after they participated in the Weyane revolt against Haile Selassie in 1943. Others were forced to mortgage or sell their land by the stresses of repeated harvest failures in the early 1970s. Landlords took advantage of their tenants' penury by insisting on the payment of large rents, often in kind. This demand could be backed up by force, as most influential landlords had a retinue of armed guards. The enforcement of crippling tenancy contracts in time of shortage had the effect of taking food from the hungry. Thus, during 1973, the famine area exported grain to the provincial capital, Dessie, and to Addis Ababa.

The famine was much less severe in Tigray province, despite the drought affecting both provinces. The difference can be largely accounted for by the different modes of land tenure -- in Tigray, most farmers owned their own land; in middle-land Wollo, most were tenants.¹³

¹⁰ RRC, "Food Shortage Report on Wello, 1979; Annex: A Profile of Disasters in Wello," Addis Ababa, 1979, p. 53.

¹¹ Quoted in: Noel J. Cossins, "No Way to Live: A Study of the Afar Clans of the North-East Rangelands," Addis Ababa, Livestock and Meat Board, 1972, p. 51.

¹² J. Seaman, J. Holt and J. Rivers, "The Effects of Drought on Human Nutrition in an Ethiopian Province," International Journal of Epidemiology, 7, 1978, p. 37.

¹³ K. J. Lundstrom, North-East Ethiopia: Society in Famine, Uppsala, 1976.

Finally, the Emperor Haile Selassie considered that the peasants and nomads of Wollo were shaming His reputation by starving, and resolved to ignore them. Reports of famine were consistently ignored or denied. In response to a report by UNICEF documenting famine conditions in July 1973, the Vice-Minister of Planning retorted: "If we have to describe the situation in the way you have in order to generate international assistance, then we don't want that assistance. The embarrassment to the government isn't worth it. Is that perfectly clear?"¹⁴

Though the governor of Wollo, Crown Prince Asfa Wossen, was both greedy and incompetent (at the time of the famine he forced the closure of commercial sorghum farms in the Tcheffa Valley by engaging in litigation, claiming their ownership), Haile Selassie was never in ignorance of the conditions in Wollo. A UN official visited him in early 1973 and found him well-informed -- his attitude was that peasants always starve and nothing can be done, and that in any case it was not the Shewan Amhara who were dying.¹⁵ On belatedly visiting the province in November 1973, his one remedial action was to announce that all who had sold or mortgaged their land in the previous year could return and plow it during the coming season, only leaving it to their creditors afterwards.¹⁶ Even this minimal and tardy gesture was not enforced.

The 1975 Northern Rebellions

The Wollo famine contributed to the downfall of Haile Selassie, not because the hungry peasants and nomads revolted and forced him out, but because the issue gained political currency among the students and middle classes of Addis Ababa. However, that is not to say that the famine, and more generally the eight decades of political marginalization and economic stagnation that preceded it, did not have serious consequences at the time of the 1974 revolution and the years following.

In the early 1970s, "peasant risings in various provinces [were] an even more closely guarded secret than the famine".¹⁷ These revolts intensified in during the revolution, with a series of rebellions led by feudal leaders in each of the northern provinces. In Wollo, there was a revolt by a feudal lord, Dejazmatch Berhane Maskal. In March 1975, he destroyed an

¹⁴ Quoted in: Paul H. Brietzke, *Law, Development and the Ethiopian Revolution*, Lewisburg, 1982, p. 127.

¹⁵ Brietzke, 1982, pp. 126-7.

¹⁶ Lundstrom, 1976, pp. 52-3.

¹⁷ Lionel Cliffe, "Capitalism or Feudalism? The Famine in Ethiopia," *Review of African Political Economy*, 1, 1974, pp. 34-40.

Ethiopian airlines DC3 at Lalibella. In October, he rallied supporters after a spree of killings of former landlords by peasants and government security officers. Dej. Berhane's ill-armed force of 5,000 was defeated by government militia and air force attacks near Woldiya in December 1975, but he continued to cause problems for the government for years. Another feudal leader, Gugsu Ambow, had brief military successes in northern Wollo, before the army foiled an attempt to capture Korem in mid-1976, reportedly causing 1,200 fatalities among Gugsu's peasant army and local villagers.¹⁸ Other smaller revolts occurred in Gojjam and Shewa.

The most significant rebellion started in Tigray. This was an insurrection led by the former governor, Ras Mengesha Seyoum (son of the governor at the time of the 1943 Weyane). Ras Mengesha fled to the hills with about 600 followers in November 1984, when the Dergue executed 60 officials of the previous regime. Ras Mengesha combined with other members of the aristocracy, notably General Negga Tegegne (former governor of Gonder) and formed the Ethiopian Democratic Union (EDU) in 1976. They obtained encouragement from western countries. With Sudanese military assistance, the EDU occupied the towns of Metema, Humera and Dabat (all in Gonder province) between February and April 1977,¹⁹ but was defeated by the militia force sent to the province in June-July.

The EDU remained active in Tigray, where two other rebel groups were also operational. The Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) was set up in February 1975 by a group of left-wing students and peasants, incorporating the Tigray National Organization, created three years earlier. Prominent among its early leaders was Berihu Aregawi; later the front was headed by Meles Zenawi. In 1978, the TPLF set up the Relief Society of Tigray (REST), headed by Abadi Zemo. It espoused a mix of Tigrayan nationalism and socialist transformation. The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), after defeat in the urban Red Terror (see chapter 6), retreated to a base in rural eastern Tigray in mid-1977.

The EDU was rent by divisions between its leaders, and its aristocratic leaders failed to gain popular support among their erstwhile tenants. Crucially, it suffered defeat at the hands of the TPLF.²⁰ The EPRP was also defeated by the TPLF and driven into Gonder, creating lasting bitterness between the two organizations.

After the ill-fated Peasants' March of 1976, the government launched a series of five

¹⁸ Michael Dobbs, "A bloody farewell to feudalism," *The Guardian*, London, November 24, 1976.

¹⁹ Sudanese military support for the EDU was given in retaliation for the Ethiopian government's backing for the Sudanese opposition National Front, headed by Sadiq el Mahdi, which had staged an unsuccessful armed insurrection to overthrow the government of Jaafar Nimeiri in July 1976.

²⁰ The two organizations later fought in the refugee camps in Sudan, for example in May 1979 and July 1982. The latter attack, in which eleven refugees died, was instigated by the EDU. Ahmad Karadawi, "Refugee Policy in the Sudan, 1967-1984," DPhil thesis, Oxford, 1988, pp. 181, 193.

military offensives in Tigray: November 1976, June 1978, October-November 1978, March-April 1979 and May-June 1979. Small towns such as Abi Adi changed hands several times. By 1979, REST estimated that 50,000 people in Tigray were displaced on account of war. Refugees from Tigray and Gonder began to arrive in Sudan in early 1975. By May there were 34,000; by 1978 there were 70,000. In February 1979, the Ethiopian army invaded Sudanese territory at Jebel Ludgi, forcing the evacuation of the nearby refugee camp of Wad el Hileui.²¹

Fighting against the Afar

Another serious though short-lived rebellion occurred among the Afar. The Afar leader and Sultan of Awsa, Ali Mirrah, had been accorded a high degree of autonomy by Haile Selassie, and the well-armed Afar had never come fully under the administrative or military control of the government. Ali Mirrah was also a large landowner and feared the confiscation of his cotton plantations in the land reform. This brought him into conflict with the government, and on June 1, 1975, a military force was dispatched to arrest the Sultan at his headquarters. Ali Mirrah escaped to Djibouti, but his followers launched a coordinated series of attacks on military outposts on June 3, and claimed to have killed several hundred soldiers. Many unarmed Amhara laborers in the Awash cotton plantations were also massacred.

Government reprisals were swift. Starting at Assaita in the Awash valley on June 3, and expanding to an arc stretching from Mille in the west, passing through Awsa to Serdo in the east, the army attacked towns, agricultural schemes, and Afar nomads' encampments.

The cotton plantations had a large labor force, including Moslem Eritreans, local Afars and highland Amharas. The army selectively killed Eritreans and Afars. Refugees in Djibouti reported that 221 Afar workers were killed. Women and children were gunned down as they tried to flee on tractors. In one incident in mid-June, 18 men were shot dead on a bridge. The killing then spread to the towns. An estimated 300 died in Awsa and 100 in Assaita, including the Imam, killed in his mosque. The soldiers also spread out into the countryside and attacked small Afar villages and cattle camps. While many of the casualties were armed Afar men (the distinction between a civilian and combatant is a fine one among the Afar) women and children were also killed when tanks and artillery bombarded cattle camps and troops opened fire. The killing lasted six weeks. Estimates for the total number of civilian casualties amount to more than 1,000; some run as high as 4,000.

One of those killed was a young British social anthropologist, Glynn Flood, who was arrested by the army and detained. According to other people detained in the same prison, after

²¹ Karadawi, 1988, p. 117.

two weeks he was taken out by four soldiers, and then they heard a scream. It is assumed that he was bayoneted to death and his body thrown into the river Awash. Government officials had tried to stop Mr Flood from going to the area a week earlier, and it is probable that he was murdered in order to prevent him from producing evidence of the killings.

In exile, Ali Mirrah founded the Afar Liberation Front (ALF). His son, Hanafari conducted military operations and succeeded in closing the strategic Assab-Addis Ababa highway. The government responded by the twin tactics of another military campaign, and giving some leading Afar positions within the administration and a measure of autonomy. A faction led by Habib Mohamed Yahyo was given a large quantity of arms, and proved to be a loyal supporter of the government.²² These tactics prevented the ALF from posing a major military threat, though it was able to mount occasional attacks throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

²² There is a dispute over the Sultanate of Awsa between the families of Ali Mirrah and Habib Yahyo going back several generations.