

The Concept of Land in Ethiopian Tradition: Land, Power, and Famine

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INTRODUCTION

Since time immemorial, land has been the only resource for the people and the state of Ethiopia and remains to be so to this day. The sense of land provides the connection and the bond between the present, past, and future generations. In the traditional Ethiopia, the sense of “honor” defines a gentleman. For an Ethiopian gentleman, land is not a disposable object; rather, it is the embodiment or the concrete manifestation of the sacrifices of countless generations for the honor and dignity of the MOTHERLAND. The land-holding is called *rist* or *atsme-rist*. The term *atsme-rist* (*atasm*) is a Ge’ez word meaning bone. *Atsme-rist* is land that is sanctified by sacrifice and signifies the blood and bones of those that gave their lives for the honor and dignity of all future generations of Ethiopians and for the Motherland.

A term that is almost always used with a wrong meaning, *ghebbbar*, provides the connection between the state and the citizen. The citizen, the rightful owner of the land, of *rist*, pays tribute to the state. This tribute is called *ghibir* and so *ghebbbar* means one who pays tribute, which means *one who owns land*. Those who interpret *ghebbbar* as landless fall into a deep social pit which clouds the understanding of Ethiopian society. The *ghebbbar* as a

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land owner was under obligation to mobilize whenever there was the need to defend the country against invaders. The right of land ownership imposes an obligation to fight for the country whenever called upon to do so.

Because the land is sanctified by the blood and bones of those who died defending it from intruders, no foreigner was allowed to own land in Ethiopia until late in Haile Selassie's reign. It is true that some Europeans were privileged to own land because they had served the *Niguse Neghest* (King of Kings) or the country. It is evident that the only way a foreigner could acquire a piece of land in Ethiopia was by serving the country or by marrying an Ethiopian.

The sanctification of land also precluded it from the market; land was not a commodity, it was inseparably associated with the blood and bones of the forefathers. To sell land was to dishonor the sacrifices made by these forefathers. Since land was not a commodity, it could neither be sold nor bought. Ethiopian culture bestowed the highest value on land: LIFE or the PROMISE of LIFE to protect the MOTHERLAND with one's life. This, I believe, is incomprehensible to the materialistic and commercial Western culture. In general, it may be said that the Western mind knows no value greater than that of cash; conversely, for the traditional Ethiopian, nothing has greater value than land.

This material, social and psychological bond between the peasant and the land was so strong that the peasant generally remained in his village community until death. To detach himself from the land, which was the source of all his rights as a respectable human being, would require an absolutely certain guarantee not only for his continued sustenance but also for his respectability. This guarantee often came when peasants became rifle carrying attendants of some Ras or Dejzmach. In such case, the rifle provided the means of extorting his provision from peasants, and the servile association with Ras or Dejzmach or some dignitary gave him some aura of respectability.¹

One of the most important factors, if not the only factor, in cementing and solidifying patriotism is land. In most parts of the world, land is some physical object or possession or commodity. For Ethiopians land is not simply a physical object: it is part and parcel of one's being, the manifestation of one's right as a human being, of one's identity as a social member of the society, and of one's mark of honor and respectability. Every human being, except those that were excluded by division of labor, had a right to a piece of land, no matter how poor and unproductive. The piece of land

provided at once a concrete proof for the individual's right as an authentic and legal member and as an obligation to defend that birthright.

Realizing the large-scale dispossession of land in the country and the general discontent in rural Ethiopia, Atse Haile Selassie issued a proclamation on November 14, 1952 (Hidar 5, 1945 Ethiopian Calendar). The proclamation pertaining to land had the following four points:

1. Every Ethiopian is entitled to one-half of one *Gasha*, which is approximately 20 hectares.
2. For those who will be farming new land there will be a five-year tax-free period.
3. Ethiopians who operate *maderia*² land will convert one-third of one *gasha* to *rist*.
4. Patriots and wounded veterans will be entitled to one *gasha*.

It was certainly not a realistic proclamation because it did not take into account the dynamic nature of the population and the size of available cultivable land. But it certainly served a political purpose and endeared Haile Selassie by the peasantry which is accustomed to live in empty hope. Haile Selassie's proclamation demonstrates that the land was the basis for the power of the state.

The land is the mainstay of the individual citizen, especially the peasants, as it is the foundation for the power of the state. It is the symbol of the collective national body politic. Quite rightly, it was impossible to separate the people from the land on which they lived. Consequently, the state, too, depended on land. Land was and is the basis of state and society.

The utilization of this singular resource is much to be desired both for the peasants and from the officials of the regime. Neither the peasants nor the regime is aware of population dynamics and the static nature of land. In fact, the land in Ethiopia is far from static: the productive land is decreasing both physically and qualitatively. Urbanization, roads, and factories are eating up the best agricultural land in the country, as in Ada, south-east of Addis Ababa.

SUBSISTENCE FARMING

It is subsistence production that ties more than 85 percent of Ethiopians to the land. Without land they are nothing. Without land they have nothing. Most of the Ethiopian people are peasants who live by cultivating their small

piece of land or by raising livestock. They are subsistence producers. Subsistence production is almost always on the precipice of famine. It is under the influence of two merciless forces: dictatorship of man and nature.

We may identify subsistence production with the following five characteristics: (i) small and often fragmented farm land, (ii) primitive tools and implements, (iii) production geared to personal needs rather than to market, (iv) lack of alternative or seasonal employment opportunities, and (v) almost total absence of reserves of either grain or cash.³

Peasant farms are too small, often much less than one hectare which is hardly sufficient to produce the requirements to meet the annual needs of the peasant and his family. According to the Ethiopian Statistical Authority more than 61 percent of peasants operate on farms that are less than one hectare and about two-thirds of all farms are less than one hectare. When we consider the total annual production of the peasant it is important to remember that what the peasant produces has multiple ownership, among which, the peasant comes last. The regime's tax collectors, local petty officials, contributions for doubtful projects, and money-lenders who extract enormous interest in kind descend on the peasants at harvest time. What is left after all these obligations is paid and is what the peasant and his family are supposed to subsist on till the next harvest. Of course they do not make it without falling into debt again.

Why should subsistence producers pay taxes, much less than other contributions? Although the irresponsible and irresponsive official pays no attention, peasants cry out their pain:

If land tax we must pay
 So must the monkey;
 For is it not the same land
 That it scratches with its hand?⁴

I have been advocating for tax exemption for subsistence producers for the last 40 years. It is the cash obligations such as taxes, debts, and contributions that impoverish peasants permanently. They never have reserves of grain or cash. That is why they remain vulnerable to famine. With the slightest negative change of natural factors, the peasant populations slide down to the agony of famine. Once this stage is reached, only timely and massive assistance could stop it from turning into a mass killer.

For the last 25 years, there was hardly a year without food assistance from the USA. This has certainly prevented the development of full-scale famine. But food assistance does not reduce food insecurity, malnutrition, and undernourishment, which eventually turn into famine. It may be useful to highlight some of the serious problems associated with both forces that negatively affect subsistence production. The vagaries of nature, especially that of climate, and the persistent oppressive and exploitative forces of tyranny, together with the increasing population and impoverishment of the land, tend to keep the peasants at a low level of living. The land and the peasantry are the backbone of the state. Yet, both the land and the peasantry are constantly under the irrational force of dictatorial rule that impoverishes them. Famine is a consequence of this irrational force with occasional assistance from natural factors.

Attempts to change the peasant by external forces will certainly be counterproductive as DERG government found out in the 1970s and 1980s. But, as I indicated in a conference organized by the Planning Office of the *DERG* in 1986:

The changing of peasant attitudes deserves prior attention. First and foremost, the problem of subsistence mentality must be tackled. During my recent field work in northern Shewa and southern Wello, I came back totally convinced that one of the most formidable psychological problems for agricultural development is the solidified subsistence mentality of the peasants.⁵

Furthermore

[The] extremely low purchasing power of the peasants is both the symptom and the economic malaise of peasant agriculture. As a concrete manifestation of their abject poverty it is a symptom. But as proof of their disability or of their economic paralysis it is the malaise itself. This condition of peasant life is certainly created by various forms of institutional forces. It cannot be said, however, that the peasants themselves have no responsibility for their own condition of life. At least they are responsible for their subsistence mentality and for not daring to take calculated risks in their farming activities and for their fossilized attitudes towards production and consumption.

Whatever its causes may be, it seems to be a very difficult task to bring about significant transformation in agricultural production without solving the deeply ingrained subsistence mentality of the peasants. This will require high-powered development administrators who can win the genuine affection, respect, and confidence of peasants. It is only by planning and working

with them rather than for them that it may be possible to weaken the subsistence mentality and to open the psychological vistas for new and greater possibilities.⁶

This is an area that is yet to be explored. The current government, because of its obvious mental shortcomings, cannot see the problem. Because of its tight control and infringement on academic freedom, research academicians do not venture to study the problem.

VULNERABILITY TO FAMINE

Following the Second World War Ethiopia's subsistence farmers had some surplus for export, as seen in the Table 9.1 below:

It has already been indicated that vulnerability to famine is a consequence of the twin assault of persistent and extremely bad governance, on one hand, and occasional aberrations of nature, on the other. Oppression and exploitation impoverish the peasants so much that most of them store away nothing for bad days. In fact, successive regimes have considered peasants an always ready source of cash, albeit their small size. It has been proved sufficiently that subsistence farmers are the most vulnerable population. Paradoxically, these are the people that are primarily engaged in food production.⁷

The persistent claim on the produce of the peasant has at least three major effects. First, the peasants are kept permanently at a level of, or below, subsistence, meeting the claims of outsiders before they satisfy their own basic needs. Second, the peasants' capacity to save becomes, in such

Table 9.1 Exports and imports of food in metric tons: 1945–84

<i>Years</i>	<i>Export (T)</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Import (T)</i>	<i>%</i>
1945–49	435,780	28.7	58	0
1950–54	373,808	24.6	2421	0.1
1955–59	262,570	17.3	77,179	4.6
1960–64	298,098	19.6	83,334	5
1965–69	14,763	1.0	165,732	9.8
1970–74	30,455	2.0	163,833	9.7
1975–79	3576	0.2	140,609	8.4
1980–84	99,434	6.6	1,048,964	62.4
Total	1,518,484	100	1,682,130	100

Source: Compiled from CSA

circumstances of marginal living, unthinkable. Third, and most important, the persistent demand of outsiders renders the peasants incapable of commercializing their farms.⁸

FAMINE: THE SCOURGE OF SUBSISTENCE FARMERS

Many confuse famine with ordinary hunger. Others confuse it with malnutrition or undernourishment. But it is different from all these.

Famine is a visible horror. The fortunate part of mankind may have only heard or read about famine. They may have even seen it on the screen. None of this second-hand learning can match the reality of famine, the actual sight of emaciated human beings struggling against premature death . . . can we really talk of a society under circumstances in which periodic mass death by starvation is the lot of the majority?

Nothing else manifests man's inhumanity to man more than famine. Nothing else expresses the hypocrisy of cultural and religious values. Nothing else reveals social, economic and political anarchy more than famine . . . when, under extremely adverse circumstances, the masses of peasants starve to death, the mechanism of the common good that normally serves to rationalize exploitation of the masses of poor peasant's breaks down totally and leaves them in helpless disarray.⁹

To put it bluntly:

Famine is the most negative state of food consumption under which people, unable to replace even the energy they lose in basal metabolism, consume whatever is stored in their bodies; that means they literally consume themselves to death.¹⁰

The various perceptions of famine, and there are many, are described elsewhere in detail.¹¹ Nevertheless, one very important fact needs to be that the peasant does not sell their land. Equally important is the fact that the peasant does not sell their livestock in times of stress. Both land and livestock are part and parcel of a peasant's life. It is not enough to describe them as assets. The lives of the peasant and the pastoralist are empty without land and livestock.

At the height of the famine period in Wello in 1974, the average number of peasants

that sold or abandoned land in the six Awrajas of wello is only about 15.3 percent. The highest proportion was 27.5 percent in Ambassel, and no land was sold in Lasta. The proportion of families that mortgaged their land is even less, the average being only 2.6 percent.¹²

The short-term view of survival from famine seems to suggest that the peasant sells their land and the pastoralist their livestock to negotiate through the difficult times. But the practical wisdom of both the peasant and the pastoralist makes it abundantly clear that without land for the peasant, and without livestock for the pastoralist, there is no secure future. Therefore, the choice is between short-term expediency and long-term security. The peasant and the pastoralist choose the latter. Not many people know that famine is not a one-time affair. One year of famine dislocates farmers and pastoralists and reduces their numbers. With sick and exhausted labor, with reduced and emaciated livestock, and without seeds, it is difficult to regain normal production and to continue normal life immediately after the famine year. It takes at least three to four years to recover fully and start production. Therefore, there is no single year of famine.

Recovery for one year of famine may take three or four years and, therefore, will require elaborate planning to rebuild the lives of the peasants. This, obviously, does not mean reinstating them to where they were before the occurrence of famine; it means looking further ahead and putting policies in place that ensure that the society is completely secure from famine. This is not as easy as the initial fire brigade work or what is called the emergency assistance.

LAND: ETHIOPIA'S CONTRIBUTION TO GLOBALIZATION

The whole world has heard with sadness of what is now known as the land grab in Ethiopia. The fact that a killer famine is raging in most parts of Ethiopia today is the proof that the country is suffering from a very serious malaise of food security. If nothing else this malaise indicates that the only resource of the country, the land, is underutilized, misutilized, or not utilized. The Central Statistical Authority of Ethiopia could not hide the fact that nearly 90 percent of the farms are operated by very small-scale peasant subsistence producers. Pushing out subsistence producers from their farms will turn them from subsistence producers to subsistence laborers.

Already irrational decisions by Ethiopian officials and their Chinese advisors have reduced and damaged the agricultural land of Ethiopia. Horticulture has become the new cash-making industry and is taking a large amount of land (some 766,000 hectares) in various parts of the country. Khat (the traditional herbal stimulant native to the horn of Africa and Arabian Peninsula) is also occupying much of the former agricultural land. Moreover, the poorly planned, if at all it is planned, urbanization is taking away some of the best agricultural land of the country. For some odd reason roads and factories choose prime agricultural land, as in Ada, south-east of Addis Ababa. If this diminution and degradation of the country's agricultural potential is not dangerous enough, the government has given some 1,546,266 hectares of land to so called investors, including Ethiopians in exile. It has already been pointed out that two-thirds of Ethiopian farmers have an average farm of less than one hectare.

The Ethiopian population, according to a more reliable source, is almost 102 million in 2016.¹³ So far, Ethiopia does not have any other resource, besides its land and the people. Young Ethiopians are languishing in jails in many countries or suffering indignities in many Arab countries, and the most unfortunate ones sinking into the Red Sea and the Mediterranean. Who can make an autocratic government intoxicated by power understand that to reduce the available agricultural land in the face of a growing population is to invite disaster? The current famine in Ethiopia is only a warning of the downward trend facing the people. But, autocrats can only learn from disaster, and then the learning is too late to be useful.

CONCLUSION

It is enervating to realize that over 40 years of research and talks about the problem of Ethiopian peasants and agriculture have simply fallen on deaf ears of three consecutive regimes. This is a clear manifestation of how incongruous the regimes and the people are. One can imagine what the fate of the Ethiopian people would be if there were no emergency food assistance. Emergency food assistance on its part has become an international institution that *promotes* food shortage and famine. Persons who have become professionals in emergency food assistance have made it a lucrative career. The emergency food assistance is not a small business, as

Table 9.2 Total contributions of emergency food assistance to Ethiopia

<i>Fiscal year</i>	<i>Metric tons</i>	<i>US dollars (in millions)</i>
2015	158,500	109.9
2014	271,120	218.1
2013	274,770	235.7
2012	365,400	306.6
2011	371,599	313.3

Source: USAID—Food Assistance Factsheet 2016

shown in Table 9.2. Note that once dependency is established, assistance decreases!

As shown in Table 9.2 above, once the dependency is established, assistance decreases. Thus, it is not only the regimes that profit from famine and emergency food assistance. What can be more backward than repeating what was said in 1991:

Individual liberty is the source of human intellectual and spiritual energy. To stifle individual liberty, will in the long run harm the society at large, more than it harms the stifled individual . . . as John Stuart Mill¹⁴ wrote in his book “On Liberty” in 1859, “whatever crushes individuality is despotism, by whatever name it may be called, and whether it professes to be enforcing the will of God or the injunctions of men.”

The demand for freedom must not be considered a form of imitation. It must be seen as a confirmation of human ideals, indeed, even of humanity . . . it is only under conditions of freedom that the best in man is brought out—both for his own benefit and for the benefit of society.

If the same indicators were used to rank all the states in the world in terms of what is called development and also in terms of the freedom of citizens to participate in the political process by making real choices, there would probably be a very high correlation between development and freedom. This correlation will not be accidental or mere chance. Freedom is the condition that allows the release of the physical, mental and spiritual energies of individuals and groups; it is freedom that allows new ideas to be generated; it is freedom that provides real choices for individuals and groups; it is in freedom and open debate that harmony is promoted and conflict mitigated. The greater the diversity of views, the greater is the energy and vitality. The role of leadership is not to stifle energy and vitality, but to encourage and channel them towards constructive social ends.¹⁵

In 2016 some people are paying as much as 10,000–40,000 Birr¹⁶ for their final resting place of approximately 1.5 square meters of land. Soon the poor in Ethiopia may not afford the cost of burial. A competitive cremation company may solve partly the pressure on the land.

NOTES

1. Wolde-Mariam (1986a).
2. *Maderia* is land that is made available in lieu of salary, or as pension, or as payment for services rendered to the government.
3. Wolde-Mariam (1986a).
4. Wolde-Mariam (1986a) . . . , op.cit., my own translation.
5. Wolde-Mariam (1986b), Ethiopia's Food Security: Problems and Projects (Presented at The National Workshop on Food Strategies for Ethiopia O.N.C.C.P., Alemaya, December 8–13, 1986).
6. Ibid.
7. The fact that subsistence farmers are the main victims of famine was first emphasized by Spitz (1978).
8. See Wolde-Mariam (1991).
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. www.Worldometers.info.
14. Mill (1859).
15. Wolde-Mariam (1991). In this connection, one is invited to examine Amartya Sen's *Development as Freedom* published in 1999. The difference between Sen's Development as Freedom and my concept summarized above is that for me it is freedom as development.
16. Birr is the currency of Ethiopia, with an average exchange rate of 23 Birr for 1US\$ in the year 2016.

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