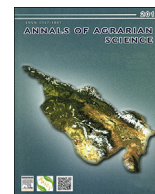




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Poverty, peasantry and agriculture in Ethiopia



Temesgen Gebeyehu Baye

Bahir Dar University, Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT

In Ethiopia, people have been dominantly agrarian society with subsistence way of living. They have mainly made their livelihood by tilling and herding. Mixed agriculture has been dominant economic activity. Food production has been the most important activity of the peasants. Agriculture has remained more or less static for centuries and people have been indifferent to material wealth. Little has been done to transform peasant agriculture of the country. The failure and static nature of the Ethiopian peasant agriculture could be associated with interlinked historical, natural, religious and cultural factors.

Though important it was, in the Ethiopian academics, peasant agriculture has never been recognized as an important development issue until the recent times. No attempt has been made to bring internal transformation in the thinking and working habit of the people. This contribution, based on desk reviews and unpublished sources, is concerned with the issues and history of essential features of the Ethiopian agriculture, including post-1974 rural policy and agricultural developments. The study also explored the effect of religion and culture on thinking and working habit of the people.

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Significance, questions and methodology of the study

This study has a number of paramount importances. It attempted to fill the existing research gap by examining and documenting the nature and features of Ethiopian Agriculture. Due to the variation of the nature of agriculture and farming methods, the study would help to examine working habits, social arrangements, agrarian policy and reforms, farming methods, trends and challenges of Ethiopian agriculture before and after the 1974 revolution. The study could also contribute to understand material and religion interconnections, traditional and local perceptions and views to saving and material culture of the society. All these contribute to learning by uncovering new knowledge and revising existing and accepted perceptions and views on the history and feature of Ethiopian agriculture.

To this end, specific questions have been developed: What farming methods and techniques have been used?; What was the contribution of religion and culture in the working and saving habit of the peasants?; what were major features and dynamics of Ethiopian agriculture? Do the historical and present accounts differ? If so, how and why?; What do I want to uncover about the

poverty, peasantry and agriculture in Ethiopia? This study, based on a qualitative methodological approach, answered these questions. Data was gathered using both primary and secondary sources. Primary data was collected from interviews, Ethiopian National Archives and Library Agency, institute of Ethiopian Studies of Addis Ababa University and traveler accounts. An attempt was made to the purposefully identification of information-rich informants both to the selection of twelve key informants and group interview participants.

General background

Ethiopia, the oldest state in sub-Saharan Africa, is located within the tropics and hence it has no significant variation in its local temperature. It has four agro-ecological zones: *wurch* (alpine), *dega* (highland of its altitude), *woyna-dega* (medium of its altitude) and *qola* (lowland). These different agro-climate zones have been important in the development of self-sufficient agriculture in the region. It is also the agro-climatic conditions, inter alia, that have influenced the pattern of settlement, mode of production, activities and life of the rural population. The systems of agriculture, the pattern of crop production and population distribution are highly dependent upon the climate, soil, land management and tenure system. Bernard writes:

E-mail address: teme_baye@yahoo.com.

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Dissected by deep and stupendous gorges, crowned by high and magnificent mountains, neck laced by a chain of lakes, watered by majestic rivers, studded with burning deserts and great escarpments that plunge down from its highlands, Ethiopia is a land of wonder and enchantment....Ethiopia, dissected through its middle by the scar of the Great Rift Valley, is as old as time itself. It is a land claiming a history that goes back to the Old Testament....It is a land that dwelt in limbo, forgotten by the world which it never forget [Selamta,Vol.28, No.3, Add].

Agriculture has been practiced for centuries in Ethiopia. It has been one of the oldest civilizations in Africa. It is an ox-drawn culture which allowed for the continuation of the essence and substance of the Ethiopian civilization [1]. The overall farming system is strongly oriented towards grain production as source of livelihood and way of life. This is expressed in ceremonies, poems and songs like, “The importance of farming lies in the fact that it enables one not to depend on others”(Interview with Ehabu Belew, 5/6/20150). Except coffee growing areas and Awash valley, where there is monoculture (plantation) since 1950s, Ethiopian peasant agriculture has polyculture (the traditional rotation of crops and livestock) character. This kind of agriculture continued for centuries and remains better for both the land and the people as it met the complete livelihood and nutritional needs and security of the community. Accordingly, though the sector has remained subsistent, a peasant can produce everything required for himself and his family. A peasant could produce a variety of crops. The proximity of areas of different altitude seems to have contributed for the multiplicity of crops. Farmers produced mainly food crops except few cash crops that would serve in the local market or barter system. Despite recent changes, they could also produce and dress their own home-made clothes. The continuous land division and fragmentation made peasants to have a number of fragmented parcels (See Table 1).

Tilling and herding are still the main activities and source of livelihood of the people. Livelihood has been characterized and motivated by the subsistence and basic need of the society. This has long established cultural and religious foundation. A Portuguese Jesuit traveler was highly impressed by the unshakable conservatism of the people to resort to ethnology for the source of their traditionalism: “So tenacious are men of ancient customs that they will rather be wrong in their own way than stand corrected by others” [NALA/62/1 (National Archives and Library Agency)], box number 62 and file number 1. Henceforth written as NALA]. A more recent and rather contentious observer wrote of the peasants, “....they appreciate improved medical services, and take to internal air transport like ducks to water, but for the rest, like their forbears, see the world come and go, while they themselves continue undisturbed in their own humble, but perhaps not unrewarding way. Their conservatism is a deeply rooted national trait, not mere peasant obstinacy.” The farmers, according to Rey, “in order to become really interested in the yield of his land must see the reason for it” [2]. This explanation may need further study as peasants

have had the awareness of their own material and social environment, and the need for improvement though they have been impeded by lack of capital, knowledge and the means to apply it.

Other travelers during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were unanimous in their praise of the country. Blondeel, as Pankhurst quoted, declared the country endowed with natural resources than the Middle East areas he had visited. He found Ethiopia well cultivated and rich in pastures [3]. Pearce also observed that the land could be cultivated with great ease and gave two crops a year. Nature was kind to farmer [4]. Vavilov, who visited Ethiopia, argued that Ethiopia is possibly one of the independent centers of the world's most important cultivated plants and crops. It is quoted in Huffnagel as:

The country is primarily a land of field crops, which exist in an amazing diversity of varieties. It is surprising that diversity expresses itself under relatively uniform ecological condition, since the cultivated plants here is concentrated in high plateau regions of 1500–2500 m above sea level [5].

Method and components of farming

The methods and techniques of farming have been compatible with the socioeconomic level and consciousness of the people. Ethiopian farmers have practiced some modern agricultural methods such as the use of plow, leaving land fallow, crop rotation, terracing and irrigation for centuries. Such practices and methods have varied from locality to locality because of difference in settlement, soil, topography and climate [6]. Of all methods, ox-plow has been the dominant, simple but an adaptable farming system from time immemorial. It has a number of parts. The parts are simple. Boyes noted, “a distinct advance on the agricultural implements of many parts of the continents” [7]. Parts are cheap and locally made. *Maresha* is the most important tool. It can be adjusted in accordance with soil depth and type. In addition to its simplicity, *maresha* is well designed, flexible and adaptable. The farmers in Gojjam Province, for example, compared with farmers in Shewa Province, have used longer handles. Other components of ox-plow are *mofer* (beam), *maresha* (plowshare-which plows), *wegel* (sheath), *erf* (the stilt), *deger* (two wooden ears), *qenber* (that inserted into the plowing share's sheath, a yoke) and *mergecha* (a leather strap, which adjusts plowing depth). Important components have been used without significant changes for centuries. All parts of ox-plow are locally made materials. Except, *maresha* and *wegel*, which are made of iron, they are made of wood. In the past, *weyra* (olea Africana) was the most favourite raw material, but with the gradual disappearance of this indigenous tree in Ethiopia, other trees, eucalyptus tree in particular, have replaced it [Interview with Adamu Mulatu, 11/12/2014].

The other, but living components of the plow-complex are the farmer and oxen. They are the most important parts of the ox-plow culture. In the highland Ethiopia, where there is highest population

Table 1

Size of Holding and Number of Parcels in Percent on selected provinces/Governorate General, 1965 [Central Statistical Office, 1965].

Governorate General	Size of Holdings					Number of parcels					
	½ ha.	½ ha-1ha	1–2 ha.	2-3 ha.	3 + ha.	1	2	3	4	5	6&+
Gojjam	27	27	30	10	6	26	27	24	12	6	5
Wolega	29	36	24	7	4	26	21	20	13	10	10
Wolo	55	25	14	4	2	19	24	23	14	9	11
Shewa	23	22	27	13	15	32	23	17	12	6	10

density, oxen have been the scarcest property. The farmers obtain farm power from the oxen during land preparation [8,9]. The peasants depend almost totally on the labour of oxen for plowing. Most peasants owned at least a pair of oxen. The peasant that does not possess a pair of oxen would have to pay rent to use the oxen of others or he might get freely in the form of cooperation from his neighbours, friends and relatives [see Fig. 1]. Those peasants that have no oxen are the poorest. On the other hand, the peasants who own several pairs of oxen are the richest. McCann states if “rights of persons” (i.e. Slavery) was an economic engine of many West African rural economies suffering from a shortage of labour, oxen or “rights in oxen” dominated rural resource strategies in the Ethiopian highlands [10]. The couplet further illustrates this:

Oh! My dear ox, you and I, are without sin,
As you passing the night after a labours working day, and,
As I am a servant of others.

Such poems are common to hear in rural area while the farmers harvesting their crops and they are too many to discuss about. They need separate and further study. For instance, there is a saying:

yalebere menyadargal gebere.

Of what use is a farmer without having his oxen.

Further, the interdependence and traditional understanding of the interconnection between the peasant and the ox is well stated as:

A hardworking peasant knows that crop production cannot be expected without oxen so that he gives priority for them. His oxen know on their turn this and at the end of plowing, they could expect something from their master. The peasant takes the ox to the place where there is clean water and green herbs. The peasant by his toil and the ox by grass are mutually interdependent. Accordingly, their optimistic thinking and hope is synonymous [NALA/6/6].

Features and changes in tilling and herding

The farming system has been dynamic and flexible. Within the last hundred years, we have seen a great deal of change in the type and pattern of Ethiopian agriculture. A typical feature was *enset* culture. *Enset* (false banana) was the staple food of northwest in Ethiopia. James Bruce mentioned the cultivation of *enset* in northwestern Ethiopia, in general, and the kingdom of Gojjam, in particular [11]. Almedia also stated *enset* cultivation as “a tree peculiar to this country so like the Indian fig that they can be distinguished only from very near”. The author is referring northern and central Ethiopia as he did not know in person the area where *enset* is staple today. He also added that *enset* grew together thickly and when propagated thousands grow from the same one. He described the preparation of *enset* as when cooked it resembles the flesh of our turnips, so that they have come to call this plant “tree of the poor” even though wealthy people avail themselves of it as a delicacy, or “tree against hunger,” since anyone who has one of these trees is not fear of hunger” [12]. By the mid-nineteenth century, the culture and memories of *enset* as a diet of the people of northwestern Ethiopia had vanished. Lobo had observed the preparation and consumption of *enset* in Gojjam area in 1640 but in 1840, after two hundred years, Plowden wrote that northern and northwestern Ethiopia was essentially cereal consuming area. Today, *enset*, roots and tubers are the most important food sources in southern Ethiopia. *Enset* is a staple food of the Gurage people, south of Addis Ababa. It is rarely known among the rural people of northern and northwestern Ethiopia. It is replaced by *tef* culture.

The shift from *enset* to *tef* and other crops as a staple and main food of the population could be seen of the remarkable changes in the Ethiopian agriculture. Today, *tef* is the main and important crop in Northern and central highlands of Ethiopia. *Tef* is the staple food for *woyna-dega* (medium of its altitude) and *qola* areas. It is the preferred, but not necessarily available, food grain in some parts of Ethiopia. For most areas of *Dega* (highland of its altitude) areas of Ethiopia, *tef* has not been a staple food. In the down of the twenty first century, however, there has been a change of orientation in the production of *tef*. *Tef* is becoming expensive and more of cash crop in character (Central Statistical Agency 2012; Ministry of Finance and Economic Development). 2008; Ethiopian Development



Fig. 1. Components of the plow—complex.
Source: Field Work, 3 January 2014

Research Institute Research Report 5 2006). Nowadays, *tef* is becoming an international crop. Its price becomes more than double of most of other food crops that peasants are producing. Accordingly, production of *tef* in most parts of rural Ethiopia is substantially directing to the urban market. Peasants are producing it for sale, not for consumption. This new trend, however, needs separate and further study.

Another feature of Ethiopian agriculture was the possibility of growing crops either combination in the same field or in small separate plots. A farmer might produce at one time in small plots 6 to 10 different crops. This diversification was based solely for the purpose of self-sufficiency and food security. The system had no consideration quality of the products. The market values of these crops and the suitability of the land for particular crops had been rarely calculated. In 1972, report of the Ministry of Land Reform and Administration on agricultural productivity and quality of governorate generals of the country contends that:

It is a pleasure to see different governorate generals where there is extensive agricultural activity. Yet, most peasantry does not make proper land preparation. There is poor quality of harvesting crops. Harvesting is done before removing of weeds and ripening of crops. Quality is low which in turn has made the crops of some governorate generals not to be liked by the consumers. As a result, it is widely known that, crops from some governorate generals has low price. Accordingly, in addition to wishing the peasantry to follow our advice in keeping his land clean and harvest crops properly, it is hoped that, as we are distributing selected seeds, after some time, the peasants will produce quality crops and then satisfy the consumers [NALA/19/08].

The poor quality had been accompanied by lack of special seed selection. Such practices and traditions had negatively affected both the quality and productivity of each crop. According to the 1965 estimate of the central statistical office, the yields for barley, maize, sorghum, *tef* and wheat was 8.1, 2, 8.1, 5.6 and 7.2 quintals per hectare, respectively. Even in African standard, these yields were very low. Such low yields affected the total agricultural production of the country. Despite some recent changes and improvements, this still remains a phenomenon and a challenge of the country.

Like the land, the number of livestock had economic and social significance in rural Ethiopia. The prestige of the individuals was tied to the number of livestock in his possession regardless to the productivity and quality. Productivity was low. The livestock population was low in productivity due to low-input and low-output system. Shortage of pasture, poor technology and lack of access to market were major problems. As population increases, more and more grazing land was coming under cultivation [13]. In some highland areas, it was a common practice to give cattle to the geographically remote relatives who keep reproducing, but would use the milk for their own purpose and share the offspring with the owner. This is called the *erbo* system. This is economic activity is now declining.

The Ethiopian livestock economy has a high potential to grow and develop. The country has the largest herd of livestock in Africa. Nevertheless, gains and benefits from livestock, compared with its number and the amount of land used to support it, are little. There has been little upgrading and poor technology. The report of Gojjam, one of fourteen Governorate Generals of Ethiopia (1942–91), could be taken as a case in point:

Gojjam Governorate General is the home of not only agriculture but also animal husbandry. There is huge livestock. Gojjam is one of the main butter suppliers in the country. Most animal herding population is found in Debre Markos, Motta, Bahir Dar and Metekel sub-provinces. As their life has nomad nature, both in winter and summer, they continuously move with their cattle. Though they spend night and day with their cattle, they don't have knowledge of the modern cattle breeding method except focusing on the number of cattle they have. We hope that Andasa Cattle Breeding Center will teach and distribute high-yielding and exotic breeds to the peasantry [NALA./19/09].

Having more land and cattle were parallel processes and developments. Before the 1974 revolution, the number of oxen that a peasant possessed limited the amount of land that a farmer could cultivate. For instance, two brothers might share a piece of land equally as they had birth right and yet there would be an element of inequality in the number of cattle one owned. The resultant was one would plow more land than the other. Hence, practically, the brother with more oxen would grow richer. He would become more influential politically and socially so that he would have an implicit power to deny his poor brother's right of access to an equal share of his family's land [Interview with Zelalem Asegu, Teme Bitaw and Addis Alamraw, 7/7/2014; See also Table 2].

Poverty and peasantry

Though Ethiopian agriculture had been one of the oldest agricultural systems in Africa, it failed to feed the population of the country in the twenty century? A number of factors could be mentioned. One factor was the presence of an unproductive class. In the history of Ethiopia, it was common to the local nobilities and rulers and their soldier to move in mass during which they harassed and exploited the productive peasantry. The soldiers had forced the peasants to bring what they did not produce. Most of the sheep and goats of the peasants were consumed by the soldiers who had predatory nature during dynastic wars and conflicts. The nobility and their soldiers who had been non-productive class of the society extravagantly consumed what the peasants could have saved and accumulated for the future. There had never been payment to peasants for the provisions they had provided. In his book, "Emperor Menilik and Ethiopia," Baykedagn wrote:

In our country, it is shameful to earn your bread by the sweat of your brow. That is deemed unbecoming of a *chewa* (a person of respectable parentage). The highest prestige is attached to be called a soldier, carrying an old gun, and following a chief like a dog. Everyone here claims to be a soldier-the blind, the lame, the leper, the old man walking with a stick, the little boy who has yet to learn to have a clean nose, even women. They call themselves soldiers, but they spend their time loitering in the streets, living like parasites on the produce of the peasantry. In civilized societies, a soldier is someone who protects the peasant. In our country, however, we are nearer to the truth if we define the soldier as the sworn enemy of the peasant. Hence, our fertile land lies fallow. Hence our poverty [15].

Similarly, Cohen has the following to say:

Ethiopia is one of the least developed countries in the world, yet it has a natural endowment of adequate land mass fertile soils, sufficient rainfall, and a considerable variety of climates and elevations. This natural resource base and the existence of a

Table 2
Land allocation, 1961–1992 [14].

Year	Cultivated land in %	Permanent Pasture land in %	Land non-suitable for cultivation in %
1961–1974	21	79	57
1975–1991	23	77	56
Since 1992	32	68	69

large, hardworking peasantry indicate that Ethiopia has enormous agrarian potential, but unfortunately a potential far from realization [16].

Whereas Wolde-Maryam argues that Ethiopia is potentially rich but very poor people inhabit it. This may not make sense. He adds that:

Poverty had largely a cultural dimension. It had political, social and economic implications. The broken and dissected nature of most areas of the country made access and movement of the people impossible. This had an adverse effect on both internal and external trade. The rise of regional sentiments induced by the physical conditions made poor cooperation but promoted rivalry for political and military supremacy. The people submitted to this physical environment [17].

Nevertheless, this had not been a peculiar feature of Ethiopia and its people [18]. There had been peculiarities and similarities with other peoples and civilization. Perpillou wrote:

..... Communities have made rigid and lasting the suggestions of the environment by rendering impossible changes that the environment would not have resisted. Probably some environment has fostered in human communities which have chosen to live in them an inertia and indolence so strong that, despite the contacts of civilization and intercourse with other peoples, they have perpetuated a rigid form of structure and material civilization [19].

Natural factors were also among the causes for the underdevelopment of Ethiopian agriculture. During the 19th and 20th centuries, for example, there was natural catastrophe that reduced the cattle population in northern and central Ethiopia. The 1889–1892 famine, for instance, had almost consumed all cattle of northern Ethiopia [20–22]. The acute shortage of oxen led to the use of other animals, horses in particular. Horses and cows in some areas started to substitute for oxen [Interview with Adamu Mulatu and Asefa Belete, 5/9/2014]. Such changes, however, had been exceptional and rare considering the whole highland Ethiopia. The use of horses was mostly during a crisis. Otherwise, in most cases, economically stable household used oxen [23, See also Fig. 2].

Religious and cultural issues contributed in the making of Ethiopian peasantry poor and to be indifference to the material wealth. Orthodox Christianity to some extent had a role in discouraging the people from working hard and accumulating capital [Interview with Gebeyehu Baye, 3/8/2014]. People were told that their life was not their own and hence the saying, “God knows” This is because it is the past that master the present. There is also another saying, *aterut angate* (Do not hurry but hope strongly [speak to God]). A similar saying, *genzebna enkelf selefelegut aye-metam* (one never sleeps nor gets money because he wishes it) has made people to believe and rely on luck and fortune instead of working hard. There are still too many poems and proverbs that support such views and perceptions in rural Ethiopia. This may

show the extent of uncertainty in the daily life of the people. For example, the saying *temesgen amlake yehen atekuterbegn* (My Lord please does not tally the pleasant time I have spent and hence make my future pleasurable) may show the extent people have assumed that their daily fortune, life and activity in God's hands Change was not encouraged and preached; and hence the saying, “What a father leaves behind, goes with the child” [Interview with Mekonnen Bayyeh, 7/6/2015]. There are also other Amharic proverbs, like:

Do not play with a child,

He will poke you with a stick.

Child's ideas are two seeds,

One is raw and the other is cooked [Enciclopedia Etiopica, p.714].

In relation to the failure of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in adjusting itself to the changing world and social dynamics, Atseme condemned the clergy as the cause of the poverty of the peasantry. Zewde Translated and cited it as:

Nothing has changed from 1500 to 1900. The cause of all the blood that has watered the rivers of Ethiopia, all the destruction that has visited the country is one. The clergy have rendered this rich and ancient land ignorant and sterile. They are the source of all evil, the foundation of ignorance. Numerous are the rebels whom the clergy incited to rise in arms. No sooner had the country gained a breathing space from one war than they trigger religious disputes. They sow their toxic discourse among the nobility. They go to the palace before they go to church early in the morning [24].

Even still today, there are many Holy Days in a year. For the Christians, there are only a few working days. Most people of rural Ethiopia do not move or cross-rivers on Saturday and Sunday. Saturday is the weekly and the main market day in the country. Nevertheless, most of adult men do not go to market as market centers and towns in most cases could be accessed at least by crossing one or more rivers.

Religion and culture did allow little room for individual life. People were preached to engage in socially approved activities which had more religious and cultural implications than material life and wealth. Attending religious ceremonies were obligatory. Such religious and cultural orders had state and ideological support. There was interdependence between the church and the state. Emperor Menelik, for instance, made the following proclamation (secular law):

Before, there were many proclamation-forbidding people to work on the Sabbath and other Holy Days excluded from working days under pain of Excommunication. But now we realize that the wrath of God has not abated due to yours indulgence in working on the Holy Days especially on the Sabbath in spite of the threat of excommunication and the proclamation. Now observe the Sabbath and the other Holy Days. Do not work on these days. Any person found working on these days



Fig. 2. Paired horse-ox drawn plow.
Source: Field Work, 21 January 2015

forbidden by both proclamation and threats of excommunication should be punished [NALA/ 09/09].

Most Holy Days have festivity nature. In most rural areas, for example, on average, each farm-family should attend two or more religious festivals in a month. Such festivals have different names like *Mikael*, *Maryam*, *Senbete*, *Mahber* and so on. Some of them are gender based while most of them are open to both (wife and husband). In such occasions, many people might use up all what they have produced and saved [25,26]. In such festivals, the host is so generous that he tries to show his love to the guest by persuading him to eat more by using appealing expressions like, won't you take just this piece as though I were to go on wood, i.e., were going to have a leg cut and walk with a cane, or were going to become a cripple; I shall not give you any more (i.e., I shall not come again); "as though I became dust, as though I became mud" (i.e., were I going to die) [Interview with Zelalem Asegu and Baye Ewnete, 7/7/2014; NALA/09/08].

The whole processes of poverty have also been aggravated by environmental degradation, fragmentation, deforestation and demographic factors. This was a steady process of over three thousand years of history that weighed heavily upon the people over its entire geography. In this regard, in the "New History of Habessine", Published in 1682 AD, Ethiopia is described as, "A region so mountainous, and so like Switzerland, may be looked upon as a most rude and unhusbanded country. But they that consider the benefit which the Habessines receive thereby will be drawn to an admiring contemplation of Divine providence" [NALA1/2/06]. Likewise, Bent emphatically elaborated:

The poor Abyssinian peasants have not a chance of improving their condition. Every generation adds to the tract of once-cultivated country which is becoming desert; every generation sees villages and churches abandoned, and no others taking their places. If this condition of affairs continues very much

longer, the Ethiopian will be, like his elephant, a thing of the past [27].

Since the last two millennia, there have been continuous demographic increments, but limited resources. During the second half of the twentieth century of Ethiopia, in particular, the rural setting and landscape has been radically changed. It became eroded, barren and broken. Hancock wrote:

.....The Abyssinian high plateau, known to the Greek as a "cool celestial island," is rapidly turning to dust, merging wearily into the barren and stony deserts that surround it. As it does so, the human populations that it has supported for so long are blowing away too. Having slaughtered their draught oxen and eaten their seed grain, the people leaving forever their eroded fields and terrace [28].

The process of deforestation and devastation of Ethiopia proceeded unhindered over three millennia. The saying, "*Meder Bewoledech Nededech* (the earth has been devastated for giving birth to [man])," well expresses the deforestation and destruction speed and intensity of natural resources in the postwar period. According to the report of Bossardt, Forestry Adviser in 1956-59, for instance, Ethiopia had been in an advanced state of devastation in the 1960s. Bossardt added:

... Its once great forests stripped from its beautiful landscapes of mountain and valley, its fertile topsoil washed away to fatten the fields of Egypt, its people without firewood, obliged to gather the cattle dung from the mineral soils hungry for it so that they might cook their food; its pastures impoverished, its cattle, sheep and crops diminished, and its women obliged to carry heavy ewers of water every day for many kilometers to their villages and homes [NALA/2/6/].

In such a way, Ethiopia that had been mentioned by the sixteenth-century Portuguese traveler, Alvares, as "... there is not so populous a country, and so abundant in corn, and herds of innumerable cattle" [29] became a region where people starved and died in the twentieth century when in most parts of the world food was not considered as an issue.

Though the continuity of Ethiopian state and culture have largely depended on agriculture and land used, it is a rare case when the land is used for crops for which it was most suitable and under which it could give maximum yield. Prior to the 1974 revolution, inequitable land tenure patterns, tenure insecurity and exorbitant rent were major problems with agrarian productivity [30]. Presence of excess land in the hands of some *rist* holders made most peasants to work less [31]. This was aggravated by civil strife, drought and poor development strategic plans of the imperial period. Absence of cadastral works, unclear ownership and tenancy rights and undefined landlord-tenant relationship had also a cumulative tenure insecurity effect in most areas of the country [32].

In addition, poor market infrastructure hampered agricultural production and efficiency. There was no motivation and pressure to alter and transform the system. For instance, there was no an adequate road system which caused high cost of transporting agrarian output to market centers and towns [33]. The country had been historically isolated from the international community and markets for centuries, between 16th and 19th centuries, in particular, when the country chose closed door policy. The government failed to commit itself to create conducive environment and conditions that promote agricultural transformation and its international interconnection. The country had been affected very little by external factors like market, new inventions and techniques. The implication of this for poverty was obvious. Annual per capita income was too low. In 1975, Harbeson sums up the situation:

....The 90% of the people who struggle for a subsistence income in the rural areas employ an agricultural technology reminiscent of medieval Europe. Daily laborers on agricultural estates and in the cities live on a daily wage of between \$1.50 and \$2.00. Nobody denies that such abysmal depths of poverty are indefensible in a world of modernity in which even Ethiopia's relative poor third world neighbors have participated to a far greater degree [34].

The whole process, as Cohen, Goldsmith and Mellor correctly mentioned, had been complicated by the "inability of local government institutions to generate change because of the power of provincial elites, supported by elites at the national center, to maintain the status quo; and the negative effect of all these factors on those development oriented ministries and field agents attempting to bring about rural change" [35].

The case of artisans

The other problem of the Ethiopian agriculture could be associated with failure to transform Ethiopian artisanship and local technology. In most parts of Ethiopia, productive work had been highly stigmatized. Potters, blacksmiths, tanners and weavers together with their necessary and useful skills were condemned to subhuman status. Artisanship had been viewed as inferior activity that was not favoured. The occupational minorities were found cutting across religious and ethnic distinctions. Hallpike writes:

The artisans most commonly despised are weavers, smiths, potters and tanners....Weavers tend to be the least and tanners the most frequently despised.... We frequently find that

despised classes are forbidden to own land, or have anything to do with agricultural activities, or with cattle. Commensality and marriage with their superiors seem also to be generally forbidden them [36].

The occupational minorities were named by various names like *buda*, *tebib*, *faki*, *shemene* and so on. They were social constructs of those who discriminated against them. Though not successful, attempts were made to change such attitudes. For instance, Emperor Tewodros (r.1855–68), the first modern Ethiopian ruler, made the first attempt. Emperor Menilik continued what emperor Tewodros started. He attempted to give artisans the dignity they deserved. He made a proclamation in 1908. A section of it reads:

Those of you who insult people because of their occupations had better discontinue that practice. So far you have called the blacksmith *teyb*; the one who made the *shema*, *shemane*; the literate, *tenquay*; the one who served the Church, *debtera*; the one who cultivated the land, *gebere*; and the merchant who brought gold and merchandise, *yegetaba atabi lej*. You have insulted every one of them because of their respective occupation. Unless this is stopped, everybody will be idle; there is no government and country. You insult the workers so much that there is a danger of destroying the country and turning it empty through the absence of people who can make agriculture possible. From now on, however, anyone who insults these workers has insulted me, and not them. The punishment for such an offense shall be one-year imprisonment [37].

True, in Ethiopia, art and technology has long history. Introduction of Christianity made a landmark in the growth of the arts and crafts. The ruling class and the nobility has still continuously encouraged and supported religious art. Nevertheless, secular crafts and technical skills were not given such patronage and appreciation in the ways that could transform Ethiopian agriculture and rural life [38]. The profession had been regarded as the sole activity of occupational groups and minorities [39]. Norberg states that, "The fact that a large part of the population was reluctant or unable to engage in occupations such as trade and handicraft work created a kind of vacuum" [40].

As they had no access to land, artisans had a sort of mobility and migratory nature. The revolution, however, changed the artisans situation in Ethiopia. Despite variations in size, for example, they gained access to land and other sources. However, most artisans did not get an equal share of land when it was redistributed, inter alia, on the grounds that they had other sources of income, or because they had no representation in the Peasants' Associations. For instance, there were cases where some artisans had gained access to land but their holdings were smaller, infertile or in unfavourable locations. Those who had no ox were forced to rent to others the land they had been given [see Fig. 3].

Post-1974 policies and reforms

In 1974, a new government, The Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC), also known as the *Derg*, came to power and introduced new policies in Ethiopian agriculture and land use policy. A number of state farms were established until their bankruptcy and collapse in 1990s. In addition, the *Derg*, ended the old system and transferred basic resources from private ownership to public ownership so that it distributed land to rural households. The peasants had only usufruct rights over the land. The reform contributed towards a more equal distribution of wealth and land.



Fig. 3. In highland Ethiopia, blacksmiths are mostly local decent and Christians.
Source: Field work, 2015

The *Derg* also introduced new institutions into the countryside such as Peasant Associations and Producer and Service Cooperatives [41]. Proclamation no 71/1975, Article 2 empowered peasants to organize under peasant association and service cooperative [Negarit Gazeta, Proclamation No.71/1975]. Accordingly, peasants were made to organize themselves to peasant associations and cooperatives which soon became unpopular and unproductive [42]. The agricultural policy of the *Derg*, together with forced military recruitment and the civil war in the north, were among the main factors for the fall of the regime in 1991.

In 1991, a new regime, Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), came to power. Like the *Derg*, the new regime made land to the property of the state and the people. During post-1991, in the field of agriculture, three important things happened: Privatization of farm collectives; dissolution of large state farms; and emergence of large scale farms by foreign companies. Regarding its policy on agriculture, the government seems to have two assumptions and policies. In the presence of fertile and plain lands along the Ethio-Sudan borderlands, in particular, the state wants Ethiopian private sector to involve in big mechanized and commercial farms. Yet, in the absence of adequate capital and technology, Ethiopian companies have rarely engaged in mechanized agricultural activities. Together with other factors, the government has changed its stance and allowed foreign companies to acquire big farm lands in the country.

Accordingly, a number of companies have acquired large tract of lands in Benishangul and Gambela National Regional States. "About 406 commercial land investment projects covering 1.19 million hectares were approved in Ethiopia between 2004 and 2009. A more recent analysis in the International Land Coalition's Land Matrix reveals that at least 56 land investments in Ethiopia of 200 ha or more, covering a total of slightly more than 2.4 million hectares between 2000 and 2011" have been given to transnational companies [43].

Nevertheless, some agreements and projects are not successful. For example, Karuturi Global, an India-based agricultural company, had taken out on 100,000 acres of farmland in 2010. The company sought to invest in palm oil and food crop production in Benishangul National Regional State. It promised jobs, technology transfer and new infrastructure to the local communities. However, these promises were reported to have gone largely unfulfilled. The company was under capacity and had no adequate capital. Hence, it failed to meet the agreement. It paid a low rental rate to the government for the lands used, and many of the peasants that occupied the land were not compensated for the land they lost. Karuturi developed only 1200 acres of land and hence the Ethiopian government canceled its agreement [URL: <http://farmlandgrab.org/25681>; Karuturi Global 2011]. Likewise, in 2016, in Gambella National Regional State, the license of three foreign companies is cancelled. The federal government is arguing that the investors utilized only 30pc to 35pc of the land they leased [Fortune News Paper, 29 February 2016; Financial Times 6 March 2009].

Second, using the Chinese experience, there is a believe to bring rural and agricultural transformation within a small land holding system. To this end, thousands of extension workers have been trained and sent to rural Ethiopia. Modern agricultural packages have been introduced and distributed. For instance, 2 December 2014 FAO honours the achievements of Ethiopia in combating undernourishment and reaching international targets ahead of 2015 deadline. In a ceremony in Rome, FAO Director-General, José Graziano da Silva, states that Ethiopia is one of the thirteen countries of the world who has overcome challenges of agriculture in difficult global economic conditions and policy environments. He also mentions the improvement in the quality and efficiency of food systems and "promote rural development, increase productivity, raise rural incomes, improve access to food, and strengthen social protection" [FAO 2014].

Still, however, the rural and agrarian transformation has yet to become. Agriculture constitutes the lion's share of the country GDP. The economy has not undergone structural and fundamental change. Production constraints and challenges of the past are still exerting similar influence on today's overall agricultural and GDP growth of the country. In this regard, a number of factors could be raised. With very few exceptions, land has not put to maximum use in term of being devoted to the most suitable crop. Land has been made to produce only one crop a year when it is possible to have at least two if there has been irrigation. Irrigation is not the main part and pattern of the Ethiopian agricultural system and development [Report of Governorate General to the Ministry of Interior on 30 January 1974; Interview with Abate Bogale and Demle Tegegn, 20/7/2014].

Like the past, the tenure system is another of problem to bring agrarian transformation. The government argues that public and state ownership of land does not have negative impact on land management and development among the peasantry. For the government, farmers feel they own the land they cultivate and thus the policy does not have negative implications for farmers to put long-term investment and development in their current land holding as the system allows the owner both use right and enjoyment. For others, absence of land ownership is a problem for proper land management and investment [44]. Hoben states:

..... Current land policy does not give farmers secure rights over the land they use, does not maintain equitable access to land over time, does not provide incentives for investment in improvements or conservation, and does not encourage farmers' entrepreneurial and experimental efforts to better their lot. From a policy perspective, it does not foster agricultural intensification, improved environmental management, accretion capital formation, or rural development [45].

There is a general believe that a more secure tenure system provides the necessary incentives for farmers to manage their land more efficiently and effectively. For many Ethiopian farmers, issues of security of tenure are more important than those of plot size or land availability [46]. Better land management could be seen and evaluated in relation to crop rotation, terracing, fallowing, and tree planting. In this regard, changes are appearing in some areas recently. In recent times, the government is giving due attention for environmental protection and management. Every year, during the months of February and March, there is mass mobilization for terracing works programmes.

In similar development, Rahmato mentions that Ethiopian agriculture is being gradually converted from small-scale agriculture to micro-agriculture in which the tenure system cannot reduce the poverty of the farmers. This is, however, not uniform throughout the country. It differs from region to region due to variation in land fertility, population size, farming type and other factors [47,48]. The highly populated highland regions of Amhara and SNNPR (South Nation Nationalities and People Region) have an average holding of about one-third of a hectare whereas Oromia has an average holding of 0.40 ha [49–51]. Given such small size of holdings, it seems important to rule out land redistribution as a policy option and priority by the current government. It is advisable to apply other non-farm economic activities and strategies that would bring rapid growth and transformation in rural Ethiopia [the Ethiopian Economic Association working paper series, No. 5, 2002].

The land policy has also arrested the poor and the young not to migrate to urban areas. This is because, inter alia, though there is continuous refinement of land law and new provisions are made in

Table 3

Comparison of sectoral growth rates (1992–1998).

Year	AGR	MAN	SER	GDP
1992	6.064631	36.06622	17.40195	11.99951
1993	3.65075	8.864426	8.098864	1.700187
1994	3.389273	8.954231	7.229856	5.375314
1995	14.67537	7.583344	6.956627	10.6198
1996	3.437318	5.879682	7.065382	5.167619
1997	–10.2886	5.799743	10.36199	–0.53637
1998	4.20667	4.944777	8.180074	6.301688

Source: Ministry of Economic Development and Planning, 2009

some regional states recently, the law denied access to land to those who are sustainable absent from rural areas [Rural Land Administration and Use Proclamation. Proclamation No. 89/1997; Rural Land Administration and Use Proclamation No.456/2005 and The Federal Negarit Gazeta No.44 2005; 52]. According to Rahmato, "... the greater mobility of peasants out of agriculture will stimulate the greater mobility of land. Land will be able to move freely from those who cannot use it efficiently to those who can" [53]. Below, we can see agricultural productivity between 1992 and 1998 in comparison with industry and service sectors.

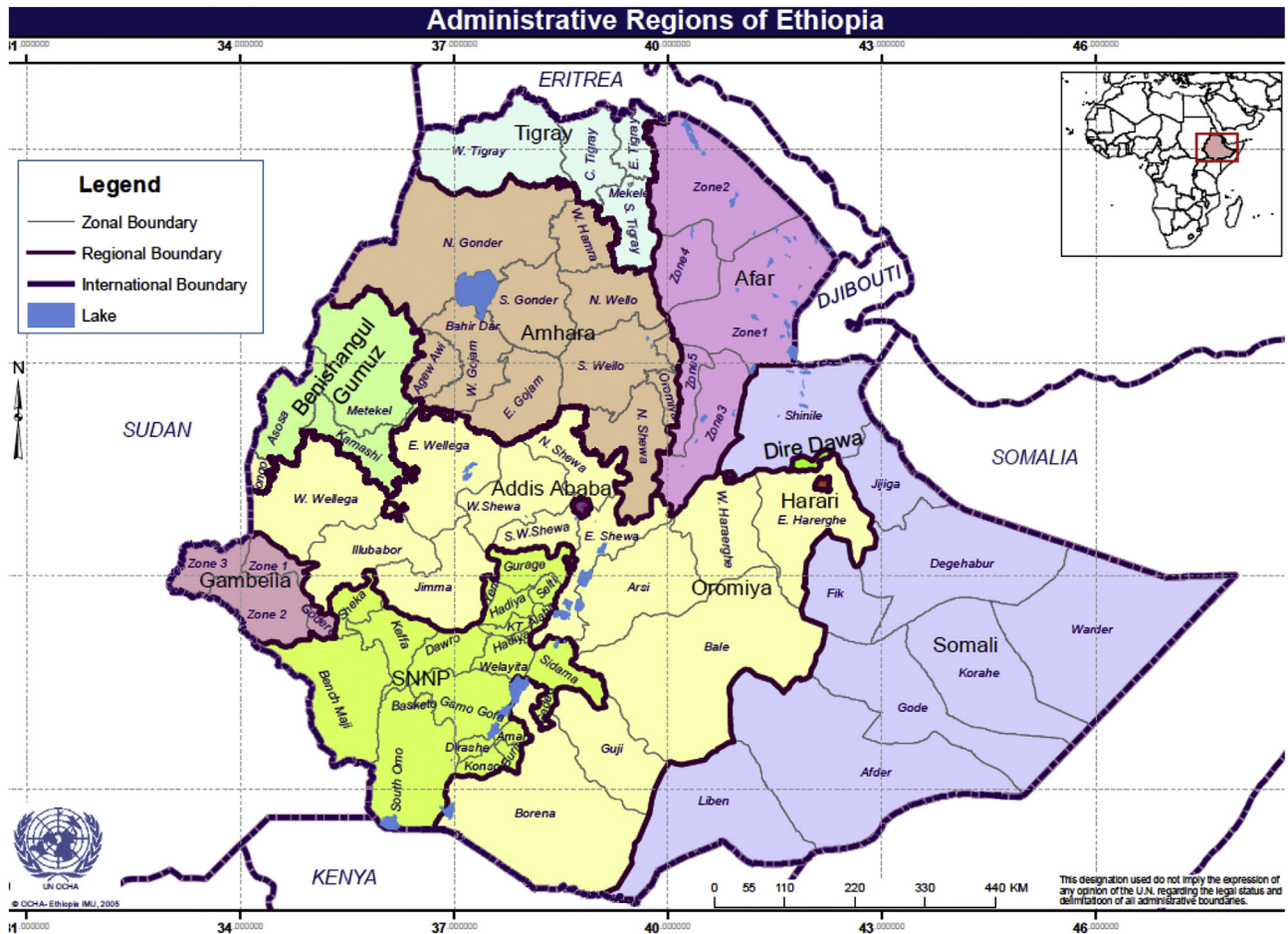
In the stated period, agricultural growth was about 0.62 percentage while industrial and service sector growth was 5.38 and 5.78 percentage, respectively. The implication is that GDP growth has mostly been the result of the growth in the non-agricultural sector. Growth in the agricultural sector was the lowest and it was not also stable compared to the manufacturing and service sectors [Table 3]. During drought years, for example, (1973/74, 1983/1984, 1993/1994, and 1997/1998) agricultural production declined by 1.2, 17, 4, and 10%, respectively.

Summing up, given the high rural population and small size of land holdings, there is a need to have comprehensive land policy that would transform Ethiopian agriculture from a wider and long-term perspective.

Conclusion

Ethiopia is mainly characterized by low output rain-fed mixed farming with traditional technologies. The country, both the past and the present, has subsistence farming in which food production is the most important activity of the peasants. Agriculture is by and large dependent on the use of oxen-drawn mode of farming. People have made their livelihood by tilling and herding. The sector has remained more or less static for centuries. People have remained poor. There were different but interwoven constraints. The presence of an unproductive class, lack of capital, poor infrastructure, absence of access to markets, a shortage of skilled manpower, land degradation, population pressure, religion, culture, deforestation, tenure regimes and policies, poor land management practices and varied but interrelated natural factors could be mentioned as important factors of rural poverty. Further, for centuries, the country had been affected very little by external factors like market, new inventions and techniques. There was no specialization of production as farming has never been considered as a business enterprise. Little has been done to mechanize and commercialize and transform Ethiopian peasant agriculture. Hard work was made not to have lasting positive impact in the life of rural Ethiopia. Recently, in addition to agricultural extension package, the government is trying to introduce initiate an appropriate agricultural policy that would transform Ethiopian rural economy and thereby reduce rural poverty.

Annex: map of Ethiopia



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