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MAKING A LIVING IN THE POSTSOCIALIST PERIPHERY: STRUGGLES BETWEEN FARMERS AND TRADERS IN KONSO, ETHIOPIA

Elizabeth E. Watson

In 2002, I spent some time in a small village called Gamole in Konso in south-west Ethiopia.¹ The people there, like many others in the south of the country, were generally enthusiastic about the changes that had been introduced since a new government came to power in 1991. Under the post-1991 federalization programme, each ethnic group (or nationality as they are called in Ethiopia) gained the right 'to self-determination up to secession', and most Konso people felt that for the first time they had some influence and role in their own governance. Under previous state regimes – the Imperial state from 1898 to 1974 (with a brief interlude under Italian rule, 1935–41), and the military Marxist-Leninist *Derg* regime (1974–91) – the Konso were ruled by outsiders; as one elderly man put it, under these regimes 'we passed our time as slaves'.² For a century, the state had played a large part in people's lives in Konso, but it had always previously been seen as an external colonizing force. In contrast, in the post-1991 regime, the government offices were based in the locality and staffed mainly by Konso people. The local language, *Afa Xarati*, became the official language and was used in these offices (Watson 2002). Now, the government was closer to the people: in a small community, almost everyone knew, or was related to, someone in office. At the same time, as in other parts of Africa and the rest of the world, this post-1991 period coincided with a new emphasis on democracy and, to some extent, an opening up of markets.

In Gamole, however, any positive developments have been overshadowed by fighting that started in 1994 and which has continued intermittently at least until 2002. Gamole, like other Konso villages, is walled and densely populated, and the people live in close proximity to each other. In this closely packed living environment, an enforced intimacy exists between neighbours, and a premium is placed on co-operation. Quarrelling and fighting are highly disapproved of, and are thought to result in drought, sickness and other misfortunes (Hallpike 1972). Despite this, and despite the small population of the village (an estimated 427 households), fighting has become entrenched: in 2001,

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¹ I spent seven weeks in Konso in 2002, following eighteen months in 1995–6, and made two short visits in between.

² Elder, Olanta Village, 1996. The quotes in this paper were originally in *Afa Xarati* (Konso language) and were translated by the author with help from Ongaye Oda (translator and assistant, 1995–6) and Garro Kussiya (translator and assistant, 1995 and 2002).

a man was stabbed in the stomach as he returned home at night; intimidation is widespread and commonplace; stones are frequently thrown at night on to houses with tin roofs; and there is a *de facto* curfew. One man, for example, complained to me of the opposite faction: 'even they want to kill us now. So we always go home before dark, as they follow us and harass us.'³

This localized dispute may seem a petty concern, as it exists only in one village some 500 km from the capital of Addis Ababa. It is worth considering, however, for various reasons: despite its small and localized nature, it has had a devastating effect on those who live there. Although many villages in Konso do not have any problems with conflict, similar small-scale conflicts are taking place in other villages (and also in other parts of Ethiopia and beyond), even if the protagonists in each case are different. A better understanding of these conflicts may ultimately help to resolve the disputes before they escalate. This small, localized conflict is also, as I will show, connected to some of the changes that have taken place at wider national and international scales. As such, it is a case through which the nature and impact of these wider changes can be examined in more depth. More particularly, the way in which local people appropriate, subvert, adopt or adapt elements of these wider processes can be observed (Hannerz 1987; Burawoy and Verdery 1999). In this way, what postsocialism is in Ethiopia – if indeed it can be called this at all – can be seen in terms of the way in which it is produced and reproduced in a particular place, rather than in an abstract or generalized fashion. An appreciation of some of the 'unintended consequences' of the broader structural changes can also be gained (Burawoy and Verdery 1991: 1).

In this article, I first set the scene by reviewing the history and policies of the socialist regime (1974–91). I then look at some of the policies of the post-1991 government, and highlight those that might be considered postsocialist. Then I return to Gamole and explore in more depth the conflict that has taken place. I hope to show that the conflict has arisen partly as a result of new opportunities that have been created by the post-1991 regime. The new emphasis on democracy and self-determination has created spaces for expression in which old orders and hierarchies have been challenged; but this has also taken place in a changing economic climate, in which certain forms of livelihood have fared better than others. As old social and economic hierarchies are contested in the post-1991 period, different groups are also drawing on the older forms of organization, from within and without the region, which materially and symbolically help to justify difference and mobilize action.

ETHIOPIA – A POSTSOCIALIST ERA?

The regime which was in power in Ethiopia from 1974 to 1991 exhibited many classic socialist features and principles. The regime known as the

³ Kalebo, September 2002.

Derg (from the Amharic word for committee) came to power in 1974, arresting the elderly emperor, Haile Selassie, and putting an end to the imperial government. The *Derg* was dominated by military men who were driven by practical and political frustrations. Their coup took place in the context of wider societal anger and privation: there had been hunger and famine in 1972; the imperial government was considered by many to be outdated, corrupt and inefficient; the inequality in land holdings country-wide was leading to conflict and tension. Students and academics at Addis Ababa University were also highly critical of the imperial regime and were increasingly influenced by Marxist ideas and theories. Some were involved in a movement calling for country-wide land reform, under the slogan 'land to the tiller'. This movement emerged first in the 1960s, and also played its part in ending the imperial government.

Those who have written on the 1974 revolution (for example, Ottaway and Ottaway 1978; Clapham 1992; Donham 1999) agree that the *Derg* was initially weak on ideology and political theory. The early part of their rule was characterized by internal power struggles that culminated in assassinations and later more widespread and violent suppression of what they viewed as political opposition. But the new regime had to develop a set of coherent ideas that could be translated into policies and practices on the ground. In this, according to Donham (1999), they adopted the ideas and practices of their main adversaries and rivals, the Addis Ababa University students and academics. Early in their time of office, the *Derg* leaders announced that they supported '*hebreteesebawinet*' – an Ethiopian socialism which means 'equality; self-reliance; the dignity of labour; the supremacy of the common good; and the indivisibility of Ethiopian unity' (Ottaway and Ottaway 1978: 63). But in order to avoid giving strength to their opponents or giving weight to their ideas, the socialist policies that they adopted were more radical than those being advocated by those who were referred to as the 'intellectuals'. In this way, the *Derg* attempted to eclipse their main rivals, and they came over time to espouse a form of Marxism-Leninism (Clapham 1992).

The main policies that followed from these ideas can be summarized as follows: in 1974, all banks and major industries were nationalized. In 1975, a land reform programme was implemented that was both 'thorough and radical' (Dessalegn Rahmato 1984): all land was declared the property of the state; those cultivating the land only had usufruct rights; land holdings of more than ten hectares were outlawed; and leasing, borrowing or mortgaging land were forbidden. Many of those who had served in the previous regime as intermediaries between the central state and the grassroots had been powerful landlords. They were either members of the indigenous elite or people who received administrative posts and land in return for their support of the empire. As the *Derg* took power, these intermediaries were stripped of their land and their authority, and many were arrested and tried for having previously 'exploited the people'. In their place, Peasant Associations were set up. These were committees elected from the residents of an

800-hectare area, who had responsibility for administering that area. The Peasant Associations were charged with implementing the land reform and developing communal activities such as collective farms. At the same time, 'students' – a category that included university and school teachers, university students and those in the last two years at school – were sent to the countryside to set up the Peasant Associations and to help administer the land reform. They also carried out literacy and basic development programmes, and taught the people the benefits of socialism. This programme, known as the *Zemecha* ('Development through Co-operation') programme, served the twin goals of filling the administrative vacuum in the countryside that had resulted from the arrest of the old landlords and administrators, and also dispersed the 'intellectuals' from the capital city, where they were seen as a threat (Ottaway and Ottaway 1978; Donham 1999).

In 1978–9, agricultural production quotas were introduced. From 1985, a villageization programme was implemented with such rigour that observers commented that the new villages resembled, to an astonishing degree, those out of a handbook (Scott 1998; Clapham 2002; Tadesse Berisso 2002). Resettlement programmes were also implemented throughout the country, most notably the disastrous and controversial programme in 1984 that took several hundred thousand people from the famine-stricken north to the south and west of the country (Pankhurst 1992, 2002).

The period under the *Derg* was also one of significant military activity, and, with Soviet support from 1977, the Ethiopian army expanded until, by the late 1980s, it was the largest army in Africa outside South Africa. Wars were fought with Somalia in 1977–8, and against insurgent movements in the north (who ultimately defeated the *Derg*). In the 1980s, taxation was increased in a campaign of 'Everything to the Warfront', and forced conscription was commonplace, so that young men stopped going to the marketplaces in rural areas for fear that they would be rounded up and taken off to fight (Africa Watch 1991). It was these latter experiences, and the failure of the *Derg* to realize its promises of development, that led many people to despise the regime and its *dirigiste* forms of government and administration (Clapham 1992).

It is tempting to equate a socialist–postsocialist transition with the fall of the *Derg* and the beginning of the post-1991 regime under the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), dominated by the former northern insurgency group, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). But the history is not so straightforward: first, Mengistu Haile Mariam, the supreme leader of the *Derg*, brought in many reforms and announced the end of socialism in Ethiopia in 1990, prior to the overthrow of the *Derg* regime. The change in regime was radical and fast: 'When in 1990 Mengistu announced the abandonment of socialism, the laboriously constructed co-operative farms disappeared virtually overnight' (Clapham 1992: 115).

The second reason why the neat shift from socialism to postsocialism is compromised is because of the legacy of the political ideology of

the TPLF. When it was an insurgent movement based in the rocky mountain territories of the north, it also had a strong commitment to Marxism-Leninism, although its sympathies and inspirations lay more with the Albanian isolationist model of Marxism-Leninism (Clapham 1992). Since it came to power, the regime, under the leadership of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, has been highly pragmatic, and, like many other formerly socialist or socialist regimes, it has incorporated many dimensions of a global neo-liberal agenda: it has encouraged private investment and opened markets further. It has entered into debates and negotiations about development policies and reforms with Western governments, the IMF and the World Bank. It has met many reforms set out in the World Bank's Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper, known as the 'Sustainable Development and Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper' 'in deference to "local ownership"' of the reforms (EIU 2003: 8). The regime has placed great emphasis on democratization and on the decentralization of governance: the rights of each ethnic group (or 'nationality') to have a say in its own governance and to promote its own history and culture have been enshrined in the Constitution. For the first time in Ethiopia, civil society organizations are emerging; and, although this process has not been without its problems, it is a beginning.

When this government first came to power, there were fears that its abandonment of Albanian-style Marxism-Leninism was merely a 'cosmetic concession adopted in deference to prevailing external conditions' (Clapham 1992: 116). More than ten years later, the number and extent of the reforms make it hard to call the abandonment 'cosmetic', but there are still areas where the old ideas endure. Most obviously, the government has resisted powerful external and internal pressure to privatize land. The leasing, lending and mortgaging of land are now permitted in an attempt to meet calls for more secure land holdings, but private ownership and buying and selling of land are still forbidden on the grounds that they would lead to the concentration of land in the hands of a few, and to the dispossession of the poorest who rely on it for their livelihoods.

The policy of ethnic decentralization fits well with the rhetoric of 'participation' and 'empowerment' popular among development organizations and Western governments. But it has been argued that in Ethiopia its inspiration comes from a different source. Clapham (1992, 2002) argues that its roots lie in Marxist-Leninist or, more particularly, a Stalinist theory of nationality in the Soviet Union. It is therefore not possible to think about the 1974-91 regime and the post-1991 regime as existing on a linear trajectory that shifts from socialism to postsocialism, as their different policies are not totally unconnected and often exhibit a shared heritage and set of influences.

The continuities with the previous regime together with the new developments mean that the current regime is one of many contradictions that are continuing up to the time of writing. The decentralization of power to the regions and the grassroots, for example, is combined with a strong central state. It is therefore difficult at this

stage to generalize about these processes; but a study at the local level of Konso is able to shed light on the impact of the regime in more detail. This study, in time, may contribute to a clearer picture of the nature of this regime as a whole and the impacts of its various policies.

KONSO IN A POSTSOCIALIST PERIOD

Konso is the name given to a place and a people some five hundred kilometres south-west of Addis Ababa. The Konso people live on a small range of mountains in the Rift Valley, and they are particularly well known for their indigenous and intensive agriculture: for hundreds of years, they have terraced the Konso hillsides and implemented a wide range of low-tech soil and water conservation practices to obtain a living in an environment where rainfall is unpredictable.

The Konso are considered a minority people in Ethiopia, but they are not insignificant in number. Their population has grown dramatically over the years: in 1972, when Hallpike published his ethnography of Konso, their population was estimated at 55,000 to 60,000. The 1986 census estimated the total Konso population to be 125,000, and in 2002 the population was estimated at 215,000. The boundaries of Konso have been redrawn over the years, and new Peasant Associations have been added to the official definition of Konso. This makes it difficult to comment precisely on the level of population growth without further disaggregated data, but it seems that the population has grown significantly.

In 1994, Konso was considered large enough and ethnically distinct enough to be given the status of special '*wereda*'. The *wereda* is the administrative unit above the Peasant Association, but below the 'zone' and the 'regional state'. A special *wereda* is not attached to any zone, or joined together with other *wereadas* at this level of organization. Instead, it has a unique degree of independence and self-determination at the *wereda* level, and the Konso people have their own seats in the Houses of Representatives at the regional and federal level. The degree of independence extends to making its own policies, defining its own regulations and control over its own budget (Fullerton Joireman 1997). Thus the Konso people, previously marginalized from state decision-making processes, and with little administrative experience, now have responsibility for their own governance. I have written elsewhere on the nature and impact of this decentralization programme and the opportunities and challenges that it presented to Konso (Watson 2002). In this article, I concentrate on understanding the factors contributing to the conflict in Gamole village, and on tracing the connections between these factors and broader structural changes.

The conflict

The conflict in Gamole arose ostensibly between members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the rest of the village over a piece of land. The village had originally agreed to allow the Orthodox Church

members to build their church on a piece of land on the outskirts of the village. Later, this allocation was contested by a group of people who lived nearby and needed land for their new descendants. The population of the village had grown in recent decades, and this had led to the expansion of the village: customarily, new descendants built their homes on land on the outskirts near to the homestead from which they had descended. These people therefore believed that they had a prior claim to the land. At the same time, the contesting claims were exacerbated as the members of the Orthodox Church claimed that the land they had been allocated was not wide enough for their purposes. They built their church and then made claim to a larger area by cutting down all the trees on it and starting to use it as a cemetery.

It is difficult to know the number and extent of violent incidents that have occurred since the conflict began. As described above, one man was stabbed in the stomach as he was returning home in 2001. In the same year, a group of men of the Orthodox Christian group attacked the Peasant Association (PA) committee's office, stole tools and papers, and threatened the lives of the PA committee members. In 2002, those involved had been arrested but had been released and returned to the village while they waited to be tried in court. All those I met in Gamole complained about feeling insecure in their own village, and there was a pervasive climate of fear. The community had become polarized into two groups who engaged in mutual accusations: those who were members of the Orthodox Church, and those who supported the PA committee members. The two groups refused to cooperate with each other, and this had serious repercussions. For example, the Orthodox Christian group refused to accept any decision that was made by the PA committee, saying that it was not representative of all people living in the village. When food relief was distributed on a food-for-work basis, the members of the Orthodox Church complained that they did not receive their share. When the PA committee members were asked about this, they complained that the Orthodox Church members had failed to carry out the work needed to qualify for the food. It was impossible, without directly witnessing what had happened, to tell whose claims were true or false. These disputes overshadowed all life in the village and were seriously disruptive. Despite the attempts of the government, of village elders and of elders from other areas of Konso, the dispute could not be resolved.

At first glance, this dispute looks like a religious conflict. One group of protagonists is made up of members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. They are fighting against either those who follow what can be described here as the traditional Konso belief system, with its rituals for bringing peace in times of social disharmony and ensuring rain will fall, or those who are members of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekana Yesus (EECMY). This Protestant church is the main Protestant Christian organization in Konso and has existed in various forms since a mission was set up in the area in the 1950s. As these

groups fight each other, the conflict appears to take a religious form, but this religious conflict is also connected to changes that are taking place in the relative status and fortunes of different occupational groups in Konso. The changing status of these groups has challenged the existing power relations and indigenous village authorities. These changes are, in turn, related to some of the changes that have been brought about at national level.

The background

In order to understand this conflict, it is necessary first to understand what I referred to in the introduction as the 'old order' – the structure of power relations in Konso in the pre-socialist period. In particular, it is important to understand the organization and status of different occupational groups, and the social and political institutions of authority. Reviewing these aspects also provides important background information for understanding the impact of socialism and, from there, the postsocialist period. Only brief details can be given here, and the intention is not to imply that the situation described refers to an unchanging pre-socialist period.⁴

Historically, Konso people have been divided into two occupational groups: a majority of farmers (*etenta*) and a minority of artisanal traders (*xawuda*). The artisanal traders include blacksmiths, butchers, tanners, potters, weavers and traders, and are referred to here as 'traders'. The farmers and the traders live together in the same village, and they rely on each other for access to each other's produce and goods. The traders also play an important role at the centre of several of the farmers' rituals. Despite their mutual dependence and cooperation, the difference between the two groups is clearly defined. In the past, the two groups did not intermarry, and the relation between the groups is still not equal. The difference between the groups is not only economic. It is also political and symbolic, as each group peddles negative stereotypes about the other. The traders, for example, make fun of the farmers for their 'weed-pulling'. The farmers are even more derogatory about the traders: they make fun of them by saying that 'they stink like the skins that they cure' or that they are untrustworthy because they are always trying to cheat someone in the market in order to secure a more advantageous deal.⁵

The inequality between these two groups has to be understood more broadly within the context of the structure of power and authority in Konso. In this intensively cultivated environment, power and authority are connected to control over land. Within a lineage, for example, clan leaders, who derive authority and power partly from their claims to be the most senior descendant of the founder of the lineage, tend to hold more land than other lineage members. Inheritance of land

⁴ More detailed information can be found in Watson (1998, 2002, 2003).

⁵ Many African societies have similar differentiation between farmers and craftspeople. For a review of the cases in Ethiopia, see Freeman and Pankhurst (2003).

is also unequal: the eldest son receives the largest share. At the level of the household, therefore, eldest sons have more land than others, and they also have more power and authority. The positions of elder brothers and clan leaders mirror each other at different scales. They have certain responsibilities, for example in decision-making, giving advice, providing some support and carrying out some rituals. In return, they receive political support and some access to the labour and/or tribute of those considered junior to them. They are in positions of power and authority, and their power is based in part, at least, on their relative wealth in control over land. Several of the main clan leaders acted as intermediaries in the empire, and some may have benefited from this position.

By comparison, the traders, who do not own any land, have little power and authority in this form of social, economic and political organization. This junior position is reflected in the way in which traders are sometimes described as 'younger brothers' or 'sisters', as, like women in Konso, they have no land. These descriptions are acknowledged and sometimes used also by traders themselves.

Positions of authority in the village are also connected to this distribution of power: the main authority responsible for decision-making and maintaining order is the *apa timba* (literally 'father of the drum', where the drum is the symbol of order and truth) or, in some villages, the *apa baleta* (literally 'father of the village'). The right to hold these positions rotates between particular families which tend to be those of clan leaders who also have significant land holdings. The *apa timba* or *apa baleta* has the capacity to fine someone for disturbing the village. Decisions to fine or to take other action at a village level are generally arrived at through discussion in which all men may take part, although some men may have more influence and power than others.

The traders are excluded from these positions. They are also generally excluded from the public discussions that accompany decision-making concerning the village. If a discussion concerns a trader directly, and he has to contribute or give evidence in a public discussion, then he can only enter the forum where the discussion is taking place with a farmer who acts as a sponsor; and throughout the procedure the trader keeps one hand on the shoulder of the farmer. In this arrangement he is described as being 'as if he were a farmer'. Nowhere else is the marginal position and relative powerlessness of traders so clearly demonstrated.

The traders are not without their own institutions, but these are not village-based. The traders are members of a network known as the *fuld'o*, which connects them to traders all over Konso and further afield. This network helps to secure safe passage for its members. It provides support for traders in times of misfortune: for example, if a person is sick or is robbed when travelling, then members of the network will care for him or provide compensation. The network also has a 'code of practice', and it sanctions or fines those who break this code. Traders are fond of boasting that members of the network stretch from Omorate near the Kenyan border in the south to Addis Ababa in the north (Tadesse Wolde 2002); if a trader transgresses the *fuld'o* code, then the number

of people who will do business with that person is severely reduced. According to Amborn (forthcoming), this network became stronger in the 1950s as the trading side of the work of craftspeople developed.

Impact of socialism

Under the socialist period in Konso, there was some villageization and some resettlement of people into the lowlands, but the majority of people were not relocated, as they already lived in concentrated settlements. Land was declared the property of the state; land holdings of more than ten hectares were outlawed; and those who cultivated a piece of land were given usufruct rights to it. In practice, there was no, or very little, reallocation of land. Large land holdings, even those of more than ten hectares, were not affected except in one way. Land-holding elites often lent a significant portion of their land to others as a form of assistance that was given in return for political and other forms of support, for example, labour (Watson 1998, 2003). Many lost claims to land that they had lent to others, as such arrangements were outlawed. In this way, the land-based power of some of these indigenous elites was undermined.

The power of these land-based elites was also undermined in other ways. After the revolution, many of those who had served in the empire as intermediaries, especially the most important, were arrested and charged with having ‘exploited the people’. Many indigenous forms of institution were also seen as problematic, as they were considered to be mired in tradition and superstition, and thus the opposite of the society that the modernizing revolutionaries wished to engender (Donham 1999). No doubt many of these institutions were also seen as alternatives and therefore threats to the establishment of the regime’s new grassroots institutions, the Peasant Associations. For example, the *apa timba* and the *apa baleta* institutions were targeted and their signs of office (for example, the drums) captured and confiscated. As a result, many of these institutions ceased to function, or went underground and continued to function only at reduced capacity. The generation-grade system (that organized Konso society into groups classified by generation, each of which had particular responsibilities and status) was also halted: it was targeted partly as an alternative form of political organization, but mostly because this generation-grade system contained within it a control over the fertility of the youngest generation-grade, and this was considered backward and oppressive.⁶ The dissolution of the generation-grade is possibly one of the reasons for the high levels of population growth in recent decades. These changes brought pressures to bear on the ‘old order’, in which elites who controlled large amounts of land held social and political positions of

⁶ This control over fertility was very strong, and women who became pregnant while they or their husbands were in the youngest generation-grade (*farayta*) either had an abortion or had to leave for ‘another country’ (an area usually defined as outside the boundaries of the village land) until time passed and they entered the next generation-grade.

authority. Agricultural livelihoods also started to come under pressure in general at this time as a result of population growth.

As the *Derg* progressed, however, its power and influence waned. Many people had initially been convinced and excited by its promises that it would emancipate the people and deliver modernity and development. But over time these promises failed to materialize, and instead more young men were conscripted and sent to the war front, and serious resentment developed against the regime. In this context, some of the agricultural elites managed to reassert their claims to land that they had lent to others, and some of the indigenous institutions and authorities began to function again. All of these developments and practices took place ‘underground’, however, and this limited their strength and efficiency.

While the power of the *Derg* waned, however, another set of influences grew: the actions of the Protestant Church in Konso, the EECMY, were somewhat restricted under this regime, but the church still continued to attract followers. This church also preached against traditional ways of life and targeted some of the indigenous institutions. In this way, it shared some of the interests and objectives of the *Derg* regime, as did Protestant Christian movements in other parts of the south (see Donham 1999). The overall impact of the two movements was profound.

Not a great deal is known about how the traders fared under the *Derg*. The student revolutionaries and the missionaries preached against all forms of discrimination and argued that the minority traders should be given equal status to the farmers. Despite this, difference and prejudice remained, although there was some intermarriage, mainly among those who had converted to Protestant Christianity. The *fuld’o* network continued to operate in parallel to the state system. It is likely that it followed a pattern similar to that described for the impact of change on the *fuld’o* network in Hor, approximately 120 km to the south-west of Konso.⁷ Tadesse Wolde describes how, in the *Derg* times, ‘institutions such as the *fund’o* [*sic*] went underground when governments were tough on them and became potent when governments became weak’ (Tadesse Wolde 2002: 50).

The postsocialist period

The situation described above helps in understanding the postsocialist period in Konso and, more specifically, the conflict in Gamole. In this post-1991 period, one of the major influences has been the emphasis on the individual’s right to live as he or she chooses. Over the period that I have been working in Konso (1996–2002), I have increasingly heard the rhetoric of democratic rights and equality invoked by the people

⁷ The *fuld’o* network is centred on Konso and is dominated by Konso traders. In Hor, the *fuld’o* – termed ‘*fund’o*’ by Tadesse – is strong because there are a number of Konso living in Hor, and also because there is a strong alliance between Konso traders and certain Hor individuals (see Tadesse Wolde 2002).

themselves, and words like 'democracy' have become commonplace in the local language (as '*democracy*'). At the same time, many of the villages have attempted to reinstate the indigenous institutions and practices that 'went underground' in the socialist period. In some villages, for example, the drums have been taken out from their hiding places, and the institution of *apa timba* has begun to function again.

The state still owns all land on behalf of the peoples of Ethiopia, but now leasing and mortgaging are permitted. In this new legal context, some clan leaders and other large land-holders have tried to reassert their claims to land that they had originally lent to others but subsequently lost through the land reform. Some have tried to use their moral authority as old political, ritual and clan leaders to get others to acknowledge that land they cultivate was originally lent to them by the clan leaders. These actions have led to struggles and tensions among farmers in which the lasting impact of the socialist regime weakened the moral authority of the clan leaders. The situation varies from village to village, and from leader to leader, but in Gamole it is possible to see a pattern: those who have acceded to the clan leaders' claims to land either have little choice or can see advantages in cultivating links with someone they hope will prove an influential and generous patron in the future. At the same time, since 1991 there have been recurrent droughts. Agricultural livelihoods have become difficult, and food distributions have taken place frequently. The position of land-rich clan leaders, which has historically been based on agricultural production, has therefore suffered.

While agriculture has suffered, however, the fortunes of the traders have improved. The *fuld'o* network has strengthened post-1991 and has formed alliances with several powerful northern traders who live in Konso or in other nearby towns. Konso itself is well placed between the lowland pastoralist areas and the north of the country and on major routes to Kenya. The Konso traders have taken every advantage of their position to play a part in the development of trade in the region. The goods they trade from Konso include skins and hides, grain or pulses, coffee, cotton, cotton cloth woven in Konso, *qat* (a mild narcotic), tobacco and honey.⁸ The traders also buy products from the surrounding pastoralists, including livestock, hides and skins, butter and incense, and sell them at a profit to the north. The Konso traders vary in the scale of their operations: some have become so successful that they have trucks and transport many goods (and people) between Konso and the nearest major town, Arba Minch. Other individuals simply carry a few goods by hand or balanced on their heads. The goods that traders bring to Konso vary: iron tools, clothes (new and second-hand), shoes, manufactured wool and ribbons (ribbons made

⁸ The price of coffee has fallen dramatically over the last decade, but in 2003 it was still Ethiopia's main export. Livestock and livestock products were the second most valuable export, and hides and skins made up 95 per cent of these products. It is predicted that the contribution that hides and skins make to the Ethiopian economy will increase (EIU 2003).

from the Ethiopian colours are particularly popular), salt, sugar, grain and pulses, soap, kerosene, exercise books and pens, padlocks and plastic goods. All these things can be found in the Konso markets, and some may have come over the border from Kenya illegally (Ayelew Gebre 1992). Many of these imported goods also replace those that were traditionally produced by the artisanal traders themselves, and this increases the pressure for these artisans to develop their trading networks rather than relying on their craft-making skills. In addition, the establishment of Konso as a special *wereda* has meant that new offices have opened, and new schools, health posts and health centres have been built. The main town (Karate) has grown in size, and there are many ready consumers of the imported goods.

Land purchasing and selling is still forbidden under government policy, but this has not effectively prevented it from taking place in the past, and it continues today. Those in government offices appear to have little idea of who owns land, or where. Even if these people are local, there is no coherent collection of information on the matter. Land purchasing and selling is, therefore, commonplace and difficult to prevent.⁹ Those who have made good profits from trading have often invested in land, which they cultivate with their own household labour or with labour that they have hired.

Pure agriculture-based livelihoods are therefore becoming more difficult, and traders' lives are becoming more successful and the traders are investing their profits in land. This final development has impressed many farmers and led them to take up the very trading activities that they used to eschew. One old man, for example, explained with irony:

Before there was no marriage between farmers and traders. Now farmers are not only farming, but to get money they are trading . . . Traders are now making all the profit and so they will buy fields from the farmers. Farmers, when they see this, they become conscious of the need to raise money. So now traders are becoming better farmers, and farmers are becoming better traders!¹⁰

At the same time, the network of traders has developed a stronger sense of itself as a group with its own identity. Part of this, no doubt, has been due to the popularity of Orthodox Christianity among traders. In 1996, when I first began my research, the Orthodox Church members were in the minority, but by 2002 the number of converts was many and growing.¹¹ Conversion to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is meaningful

⁹ Accusations of land-selling often come to court, but cases are brought when the person selling land is breaking an accepted moral code. It is not infrequent, for example, for a husband to be accused in court by his wife of selling land. In these cases, the problem in the minds of Konso people is not usually that the land is being sold, but probably that the husband is selling it at a low price, or without thought of how to provide in future for his family. In this case, the wife, with the support of other elders, may take court action in order to prevent it.

¹⁰ Kes Beyene, 2002.

¹¹ In contrast, the EECMY has lost many members due mainly to internal disputes and divisions that have sprung up in the church. There does not seem to be much direct conversion

and is followed by a life governed by periods of fasting and ritual. But becoming an Orthodox Christian also cements an individual's good relations with a strong social, religious and economic network, in Konso and further afield. The prominence of Orthodox Christianity among traders comes in part from the influence of the northern traders, who have made good links with the *fuld'o* network. Here, membership of the Orthodox Church can be viewed as a powerful form of 'social capital': it helps to build trust and make good business contacts. A trader who had recently converted explained:

When traders go on the road and trading, the people ask 'what is your religion?' When you say 'I am Orthodox', then you are treated very well. In Moyale, Arba Minch and other places, there are Orthodox churches. If you have any problems, you can say 'I am Orthodox' and they will accept you in everything.¹²

The conflict between the members of the Orthodox Church and the rest of the community must be understood in the context of these developments. The conflict may be fuelled by religious ideas and passions, but its origin comes from the more radical changes taking place in power relations and livelihoods. A group of people that was previously economically disadvantaged and politically marginalized has become more powerful and is now flexing its new muscles. Their claim to the piece of land on which they have built their church is a manifestation of their challenge to the old agriculture-dominated order. Their challenge was also reflected in rumours that those supporting the Orthodox Church group stole a sacred stone which was a symbol of the traditional order and authority of the village. There was also talk that the new group would break away from the rest of the village and set up alone – a very radical move in a village that values cooperation and cohesiveness highly. Although the validity of these rumours cannot be established, the fact that rumours of this kind developed reflects broader perceptions and concerns: the Orthodox Christian group, made up largely of traders, were challenging the village's established order.

The traditional authorities, the *apa timba* or *apa baleta*, and the clan leaders, whose power and authority is based in agriculture, have failed to respond to the challenge. Even in alliance with the Peasant Association, they have not been able to do anything except lament that this is the result of democracy. As the Chairperson of the Peasant Association explained to me, 'You know this democracy? In this democracy, everyone has rights. But this leads people not to obey.'¹³

The post-1991 situation was one in which agricultural livelihoods, once dominant in Konso, were undermined. In contrast, market-based

from Protestantism to Orthodox Christianity however. Instead, people move to and from, as they say in Konso, practising the 'culture'.

¹² Qaarta A, 2002.

¹³ Kalsho Kalebo, 2002.

livelihoods have prospered. The new government's emphasis on self-determination and democracy was understood locally as providing space in which previously marginalized groups could challenge the old order.

CONCLUSION

Religious conflicts have been on the increase in Africa and elsewhere since the 1990s (Turton 1997), but this study shows that, though religious in outward form, they have other contributing factors which cause and exacerbate them. In Konso, the Orthodox Church may be bringing a new sense of purpose and a new coherence to the traders. The uniting power of the Orthodox Church might lie particularly in its newness to the Konso people,¹⁴ but its symbols and practices are from an old and respected tradition from another part of the country, and are not wholly unknown. In Konso, where there has been a premium on cooperation and on maintaining social harmony, it is possible that the religion also serves to disguise and make acceptable some of the changes and challenges to the traditional order that are taking place. For example, contrary to what I expected, many traders do not feel either ready, or that it would be right, to challenge the more powerful position of the farmers directly. When I asked one prominent trader in the Orthodox Church group if their actions were an attempt to make traders more important and powerful than farmers, he denied it, saying sternly, 'in Konso, the neck cannot come over the head'.¹⁵ Despite this, in his next breath he continued celebrating the new positions and prosperity that many traders enjoy.

This small case study cannot be considered representative of the postsocialist period in Ethiopia, but it does lead to some general conclusions about the processes that have taken place over the last decade. Returning to Tadesse Wolde's comment that the *fuld'o* network becomes strong when the state is weak, this case study combines with other observations to suggest that, in the new decentralized Ethiopia, the state is indeed very weak, at least at the local level where these processes have been unfolding. The last ten years have been a time of massive changes and transformations. Extending the changes that were brought in by the socialist period, agriculture has continued to be undermined, and traditional livelihoods have suffered. Those who have managed to engage in trade have done better, which suggests that those commentators who complain about the only limited opening up of markets in Ethiopia should pay more attention to the situation on the ground. Here, in the margins at least, the markets are very open, and further research would be valuable to clarify the nature and extent of trading in the region. But we must not forget that the

¹⁴ Although there were some forced conversions when Konso was under imperial rule, this is the first time there has been large-scale voluntary conversion to the religion.

¹⁵ Qaarta A, 2002.

market-led prosperity has not benefited everyone, nor can everyone become a trader.

Finally, the violence and conflict that have accompanied these processes show that Konso is not unlike many other parts of Africa in the post-Cold War situation. Local processes have combined with national and international developments in unfortunate ways. There, local changes in power relations and local grievances have combined with the opening up of markets, the decline in the state, and new access to weapons to produce new levels and new kinds of conflict (Turton 1997; Le Billon 2000; Fairhead 2000). In 2002, the levels of conflict were low and localized. However, the situation appears subsequently to have deteriorated: in March 2004, unconfirmed reports came in of an 'unknown number of people killed and injured in a month of civil strife in Karate, Konso', the area in which Gamole is situated.¹⁶

The conflict that is continuing in Konso has been produced by many factors and processes that have combined together. First, the legacy of the socialist period undermined existing power relations and certain forms of livelihoods. Second, the economic context has changed in the post-1991 period, and some livelihoods have done better than others. Third, there are powerful new convictions and forms of alliance, in this case the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, which have helped people to mobilize and take up the new opportunities that have been made available. Fourth, the emphasis on democracy and self-determination has been embraced by people at the local level and understood as providing the right to challenge old orders and power relations. At present, this emphasis on democracy has not been translated into democratic decision-making processes or into transparent democratic elections which are considered legitimate by all. It remains to be seen whether this will take place in the next few years, or whether the struggles for power will continue to find expression in the use of force and intimidation.

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¹⁶ News item in *Tabbia* (Amharic-language weekly newspaper, Ethiopia), *Megabit* 2, 1996 (Ethiopian calendar), 12 March 2004 (European calendar).

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the experience of one village in Ethiopia since the overthrow of the Marxist-Leninist *Derg* regime in 1991. The new government introduced policies that have much in common with those dominating the international geopolitical scene in the 1990s and 2000s. These include an emphasis on democracy, grassroots participation and, to some extent, market liberalization. I report here on the manifestations of these policy shifts in Gamole village, in the district of Konso, once remote from the political centre in Addis Ababa but now expressing its identity through new federal political structures. Traditional power relations between traders and farmers in Gamole have been transformed since 1991 as the traders have exploited opportunities to extend trade links, obtain land and build regional alliances through participation in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. They have appropriated the discourse of democracy to challenge their traditional position of subordination to the farmers – and this, in turn, has led to conflict. While these changes reflect the postsocialist transition, they can also be seen as part of a continuing process of change brought about by policies of reform in land tenure, the church and the state, introduced during the *Derg* period. These observations at a local level in Ethiopia provide insights into the experiences of other states in postsocialist transition.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article examine l'expérience d'un village en Éthiopie depuis le renversement du régime marxiste-léniniste *Derg* en 1991. Le nouveau gouvernement a introduit des politiques qui ont beaucoup en commun avec celles qui ont dominé la scène géographique internationale dans les années 1990 et 2000. Parmi elles figurent l'importance accordée à la démocratie, à la participation populaire et, dans une certaine mesure, à la libéralisation du marché. L'article traite des manifestations de ces changements de politique dans le village de Gamole, dans le district de Konso, autrefois éloigné du centre politique d'Addis Ababa mais exprimant aujourd'hui son identité à travers de nouvelles structures politiques fédérales. Les relations traditionnelles de pouvoir entre commerçants et paysans à Gamole ont évolué depuis 1991, les commerçants ayant exploité des opportunités pour étendre leur réseau de relations commerciales, obtenir des terres et former des alliances régionales à travers leur participation dans l'Église orthodoxe éthiopienne. Ils se sont appropriés le discours de la démocratie pour remettre en cause leur position traditionnelle de subordination aux paysans, ce qui a, à son tour, entraîné un conflit. Même si ces changements reflètent la transition postsocialiste, on peut aussi les considérer comme faisant partie d'un processus de changement continu amené par les politiques de réforme agraire, de l'Église et de l'État, introduites durant la période du *Derg*. Ces observations au niveau local en Éthiopie permettent de mieux comprendre les expériences d'autres États en transition postsocialiste.