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Policy

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# *Peasant Poetics and State Discourse in Ethiopia: Amharic Oral Poetry as a Response to the 1996-97 Land Redistribution Policy*<sup>1</sup>

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## *Introduction*

This article deals with the role and meaning of Amharic oral poetry of the peasants of East Gojjam in response to the 1996-97 rural land redistribution policy and its implementation in the Amhara National Regional State (ANRS). By focusing on how the relations between peasants, local officials, and the state were expressed in light of their social, political, and administrative context, I trace peasant responses to, and views and attitudes about, the land policy, which was carried out exclusively in the ANRS. I also outline the role of oral poetry in contemporary rural politics, in an area where the majority of the population is illiterate and where writing is not a significant medium of expression. By employing various genres of Amharic oral poetry, the peasants of Gojjam voice their impressions, grievances, protest, or support towards the state's agrarian policies, the local officials, the "categorization" of peasants (see below), and local conflicts.

In his authoritative book, *Wax and Gold*, Donald Levine (1965:269) wrote that the genius of Ethiopian peasants is visible in the stories, songs, verses, proverbs, etc., that make up their rich oral literature. Within the oral tradition, a good deal of original expression and personalized commentary are found, especially in verse. In my study about contemporary politics and local administration in East Gojjam, the peasants' poems and songs comprise a wide variety of forms that differ according to subject, occasion, and context. Whenever local conflicts between peasants and officials arise, the peasants compose their

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*qārārto* (war chants) and recite and improvise their *fukkära* (heroic or patriotic recitals). Historically, peasants aroused male courage during campaigns and before battles by reciting *qārārto* and *fukkära*. They also articulated their grievances, feelings of sorrow and discontent, and encouraged uprisings and revolts<sup>1</sup> against invaders, enemies, and local officials. Usually, when the peasants performed *qārārto* and *fukkära* recitals, they accompanied this with their favorite stick, or any other traditional weapon, so as to display their “manhood.” Indeed, performers of *qārārto* and *fukkära* appear aggressive and war-like and are full of praise for the glorious deeds of the past. These genres are very much respected by the peasants.

It seems evident that the Amharic poems and songs play a significant role in reflecting serious contemporary issues and problems of rural society, besides their function as entertainment and instruction in the daily lives of the peasants. Indeed, local poems and songs can be used for reporting and commenting on current affairs, for political pressure, for propaganda, and to reflect and influence public opinion. Composing, chanting, and reciting poetry is a widely known and deeply rooted form among most Amharas, and is the favorite form of the peasants of East Gojjam<sup>2</sup>. One of my informants in Dejj Mariam described how poetry and songs are woven deeply into the lives of the rural people as follows:

Poetry exists together with our lives. Here in the countryside, regardless of age and sex, every one composes a variety of poems and songs, or recites and improvises others' poems. We sing songs and recite poems in the agricultural fields, on our journeys, in the bush, on holidays, at weddings and funerals. We also sing songs when we feel lonely, helpless, and during impositions and injustices imposed on us by the state and its local agents. In general, we express our happiness and sadness in our poems and songs.<sup>3</sup>

The study and classification of Amharic oral poetry is an important field of research both for Ethiopian and foreign scholars, but it has not been systematically investigated owing to the following reasons. First, its close relationship with Ge'ez *qəne*, which has a long history and tradition in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, probably had a very strong influence upon the treatment and

consideration of Amharic oral poetry as a distinct field of research.<sup>5</sup> Second, until very recently, detailed and systematic research was not carried out specifically on the various genres of Amharic oral poetry that was handed down through the generations in the Amharic-speaking rural regions<sup>6</sup> of Gondar, Wollo, Gojjam, and Northern Shoa. Third, as a result we only have a disjointed medley of works<sup>7</sup> by European scholars and a handful of Ethiopian amateur compilations. This area of inquiry therefore needs further research: systematic collection, documentation, classification, and analysis of not only the various genres of Amharic oral poetry, but also the different forms of Ethiopian oral literature among the diverse languages and nationalities of the country.

Many scholars of African oral literature, among them, Finnegan (1970, 1992), Okpewho (1992), Furniss (1995, 1996), Kaschula (1993) Fekade (1998), Olatunji (1987), Andrzejewski (1985), Johnson (1995), and Seifu (1986), have pointed out that the special role of oral poetry in most African rural communities is worth considering, especially during times of social and political change. The analysis of the context of Amharic poems and songs in this article was supplemented by detailed interviews and discussions conducted with men, women, priests, adults, and children on different social, cultural, and religious occasions. During my fieldwork in 1997-98, I recorded the poems and songs from two peasant communities at six major contexts of performance: agricultural work parties, public gatherings, funeral ceremonies, weddings, cattle herding routines, and annual religious feasts.

### ***Background to the 1996-97 Rural Land Redistribution Policy***

In Ethiopia, the land question has always been a fundamental issue. Unfortunately, it has not been properly addressed by successive regimes, including the present one. While the question of land ownership<sup>8</sup> remains one of the major problems affecting the lives of millions of rural peasants and their families, the latter have never been seriously consulted in the drafting or endorsing of rural policies or in the subsequent implementation of land redistribution.<sup>9</sup>

The 1996-97 rural land redistribution carried out in the ANRS was, in many ways, similar to that of the 1975 land reform policy undertaken by the former military regime. As endorsed in the 1995 Constitution of the Federal Democratic

Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE), “the right to ownership of rural and urban land as well as all natural resources is exclusively vested in the state and in the peoples of Ethiopia.” This official document also states that “Land is a common property of the Nations, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia and shall not be subject to sale, or other means of exchange.”<sup>10</sup> Additionally, article 40, sub-article 4, declares that “Ethiopian peasants have the right to obtain land without payment and the protection against eviction from their possession.”<sup>11</sup>

In November 1996, the Regional Council of the ANRS in Bahir Dar issued a proclamation for “the implementation of *yāmāret yəzota šəggəššəg* (reallotment of land possession).”<sup>12</sup> The reasons given for the declaration of such a policy by the regional state were stated in the preamble. Economically, by avoiding unemployment and uncertainty about land holding rights, the reform policy was believed to provide peasants with incentives for increasing food production and improving resource management practices. Politically, the regional council argued that the reform policy responded to the land question that “millions of farmers have been raising and fighting for, and it aims to overcome the weaknesses of the 1975 land reform.” Socially, the Council maintained that the reform policy would ensure justice and stability in rural communities by granting peasants their constitutional rights to a free allotment of land and not to be evicted therefrom.<sup>13</sup>

Scholars of agrarian reform have argued that the prime motive of the 1996-97 land redistribution policy was political; that is, the policy was intended to categorize<sup>14</sup> the peasantry into different classes, such as *qərīt fīyudal*, “remnant feudal,” and *birokrat*, “bureaucrats,” hitherto unknown to the local people. In the process of implementing this policy, various committees from political organizations, including those from the ruling party, the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), and from governmental institutions were set up at the regional, zonal, district, and *käbāle*<sup>15</sup> administration (KA) levels. Though the guidelines and important decisions were made by the regional state’s political cadres and party members, four committees were to be set up at the *käbāle* administration level to implement the redistribution policy “fairly and justly.” These were: 1) *yāmāret yəzota attari komite*, land-possession verifying committee, 2) *yäbetäsäb b əzat attari komite*, family-size verifying committee, 3) *māret dälday komite*, land-allotment committee, and 4) *qərreta sämi komite*, grievance-hearing committee.

In East Gojjam,<sup>16</sup> specifically, in Dejj Mariam and Gedeb Giorgis,<sup>17</sup> peasants told me that they were not well informed by the government or the local committees on these matters, and their ideas and wishes were not solicited in advance. One or two days of orientation were conducted by local officials,<sup>18</sup> cadres, militia men, corps members and executive committees of the *käbäle* administration. Theoretically, the rural *käbäle* administration and residents of each *käbäle* were responsible for the overall implementation of the policy. However, peasants recalled that all the plans, guidelines and orders, including the proclamation itself, were secretly prepared and disseminated throughout the current administrative hierarchy without the knowledge and active participation of the majority of the peasants.<sup>19</sup> Before implementing the actual land redistribution process, peasants were requested to register the size of their landholdings, the size of their household, their family (class) background during the reign of the imperial monarchy, and their participation of leadership in the former *Derg* regime. These questions naturally generated suspicion, fear, tension, and uncertainty among the local population, especially since they were already answered when the 1975 popular agrarian reform was implemented throughout the countryside. The regional authorities and state-owned media reported that the issue of land redistribution was, from its inception to its accomplishment, “demanded and decided by the people through their active participation.” However, the peasants explained that the policy was imposed upon them, and they were puzzled by this official claim.

The remainder of this article will provide a detailed description of the views and attitudes of the rural peasantry as expressed in their poetry, which both protested and supported the policy. Obviously, those who benefited from the redistribution policy, such as the *təqqun* (“oppressed”) and *dəha arso addär* (“poor farmers”), expressed their indebtedness to and praised the EPRDF. On other hand, the losers, whose plots were confiscated (categorized as *birokrat*, “bureaucrat” and *qərrit fiyudal*, “remnant feudal”), expressed their opposition and grievances in their protest poems. Other major issues surfaced repeatedly in the poems and songs of the peasantry, such as injustice; corrupt and abusive state agents and local officials; conflicts resulting from the unfair and unbalanced land redistribution; personal differences; political instability in the rural areas; and out-migration and the displacement of families.

### ***Peasants' Attitudes to the Land Redistribution Policy***

In March 1990, the then President Mengistu Haile Mariam officially announced the failure of Socialism and introduced the so-called “mixed economic” policy, which would be “without state controls or restrictions.”<sup>20</sup> This move was appreciated by the peasants of Gojjam, who enjoyed even greater relief from government intervention after the fall of the Derg in 1991. Thus, in the period between 1990 and 1996 the peasants made all their own decisions about the land use and land holding system, and there was a wide range of options, agreements and inheritance rights.<sup>21</sup>

With the proclamation of the 1996-97 rural land redistribution policy, however, the peasants of East Gojjam experienced the unexpected interference of government propaganda in local affairs, in particular with regard to private ownership of land. Since the reform policy had not been publicized openly or discussed freely by local people in the meetings of the *käbäles*, they were surprised by its secretive nature. The peasants had been told about the benefits of land redistribution, such as the promise to give land to all persons above the age of 20. After all the necessary procedures and preparation had been made in secret meetings of cadres, militia-men, corps members and a few *käbäle* executive committees, the peasants were instructed to gather and to voice their support for this land redistribution. When they were told that all the land would be measured and family size and private possessions would be verified, they were convinced that the plan was in fact a conspiracy between the state and local officials to control them. The reform was, nevertheless, welcomed by a minority of land-needy youth and by divorced and widowed women, who were automatically categorized as *ṣṣqqun* (“exploited”). They immediately showed their strong support for the implementation of the reform. These two groups of supporters soon began to expose peasants who “possessed much and fertile land,” and those who served in various committees under the *Derg* regime.

For the majority of the rural peasantry, however, the reshuffling and confiscating of private plots created serious conflicts. In the following poem, peasants in Gedeb Giorgis predicted such problems, warning state agents and local officials “not to touch the peasantry.” The poem refers directly to the regional authorities and local government officials, who secretly planned and implemented the rural land redistribution policy against the wishes and demands of

the peasants of East Gojjam. It is not only a negative response to the reform policy, but it is also a serious warning to government officials and the current administration not to interfere in the affairs of the peasantry.

ገዢን አትገኙት አቢይዎ ይቀመጥ  
ጭብጥን አትገኙት አቢይዎ ይቀመጥ  
ጥቂት ጉዳይ ይመጣል ሲገለበጥ።

Do not harass the peasantry, let them stay there,  
Do not harass the exploited, let them stay there,  
Disaster will be seen when things are upset (overturned).

### *Land Study Committees and Re-distributors*

In East Gojjam, the land redistribution policy was implemented after several committees were set up. These were composed of some drop-out students, local development agents, and young (poor) farmers who were nominated by local state agents. Before serving on committees, they were given two days of theoretical and half-a-day of practical training by *wäräda* officials at Debre Worq, the district capital. These peasant land re-distributors recalled later that they were not permitted to meet their families when measuring, registering, and verifying holding sizes of the *käbäle* residents. The *dälday* and land study committee<sup>22</sup> were busy with registering land claimants, mostly women and youth above the age of 20. It was also announced that land would be allocated through a lottery system, primarily for eligible land-needy farmers. The *dälday* and land study committee were also ordered to record the peasants' additional sources of income, the number of their oxen and other domestic animals; plants and trees under private use, etc., and to identify the poor and the wealthy. Additionally, the peasants were told that if they did not accept *yämängäst tǝ'ezaz* (the government's order), they would be punished with imprisonment.

When the land study committee was working in the *käbäle*, great fear and suspicion spread among the local people, in particular among those who were suspected of possessing land illegally. Some peasants attempted to resist the process by methods that included selling their oxen or buying hand-guns to protect their families and properties. However, these efforts were largely restricted,



as local officials closely monitored “questionable individuals.” In fact, prior to the proclamation of land redistribution policy, some peasants were accused of possessing handguns illegally and were forced to surrender their arms to the government. The “bureaucrats” and “remnant feudals” were the main victims of the policy, as they were allowed only four *təmmad* (one hectare) of land while other peasants were entitled up to twelve *təmmad*. This fundamental discrimination and categorization of the peasants resulted in “class analysis.”<sup>23</sup> In accomplishing the land redistribution policy, the committees and local officials gained what they called a “decisive victory” over “remnant feudals” and “bureaucrats.” In this context several poems and songs were composed against or in favor of the policy implementers, local officials, beneficiaries and land losers. Let us first consider poems referring to local officials and authorities.

### ***Local Officials***

Since the EPRDF took power in 1991, three new categories of local officials were introduced in rural Gojjam, in addition to the *käbäle* leadership. These were: 1) the so-called *kadre*, cadre, a vanguard political group whose duty is “to guide and lead the local people”; 2) the militia or guards, locally known as *tattaqi*, gun-men, who are armed by the government and responsible for controlling conflicts and local security such as thefts, bandits, and outlaws; and 3) *yäkor abalat*, “corps members,” EPRDF members who are responsible for communicating state orders and for mobilizing and administering the local people. They are all involved in local affairs, including land redistribution, redrawing of local boundaries, controlling of local elections, etc. The three groups<sup>24</sup> are directly or indirectly armed in order to serve the current government. None of these local officials is salaried. However, they are materially supported by the ruling party in getting priority for agricultural assistance, credits, selected seeds, and fertilizers. They are also frequently ordered to attend seminars, meetings, conferences, training sessions and workshops, for which they receive per diems. Most of them are between the ages of 25 and 35 and are inexperienced in administration. The three main criteria for the selection of these groups of peasants were set up by the current government: first, they must be trustworthy and loyal

to the state; second, they must have some schooling; and third, they should not have been involved in any activities of the previous government. By virtue of their job, they are not popular among the peasant population.

During the implementation of the 1996-97 land redistribution, the third group of local officials, namely *yäkor abalat*, was strongly criticized for confiscating private plots of lands. For example, in the following poem, a peasant compares the current and former Ethiopian governments with regard to the land-holding system, referring to the different systems of land tax and tribute as well as other rural contributions. He raises the form of rural land tribute during the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie (1930-1974), which was known as *asrat* (tithe) and the forceful extraction of grain, known as *kota* (quota), during the Derg regime (1974-1991). The peasant-poet expresses his grievance against the local state representatives or officials of *yäkor abalat*, who “confiscated” his land after measuring it with a “thong.” The local officials are also described as worse and more fearsome looters than those of the previous regimes:

አሥራት ቀረ ብዬ አርፈኩ ስተኛ  
ክታ ቀረ ብዬ አርፈኩ ስተኛ  
የካር አባል መጣ የባሰው ቀማኛ  
መሬቴን ወሰደው ስፍሮ ስመጣኛ።

While resting and sleeping well now that *asrat*<sup>25</sup> was gone,  
While resting and sleeping well now that *kota*<sup>26</sup> was gone,  
There come, the corps members, the worst looters,  
They took my land measuring it with a thong.

In the following *qäräto* (war song) the peasants of East Gojjam also express their feelings of bitter sorrow against *yäkor abalat*. The poem avers that the unqualified corps members and their poor administration have led to the disintegration of local communities. This recent damage is contrasted with historical periods of foreign invasion, when East Gojjam was, unlike today, not subjected to such difficulties. This poem was recited to me in Dejj Mariam peasants' *käbäle* administration; it was originally composed during the redrawing of local community, village and district boundaries in 1995.

ጫፍን አልመጡት ተኩስ አልተተከሰ  
ወይ ወራሪ አልሙጣ ችግር አልፈለገ  
ባኩር የተነሳ እግሩ ፈረሰ።

Neither did the Italians come nor did shooting break out,  
Neither did invaders come nor did we face hardship;  
But since the corps members came the country is destroyed.

Contrary to the above two poems, in the following couplet a young Muslim farmer praises the *dälday* (re-distributors), the local officials who were responsible for implementing the land redistribution policy, together with corps members, militia men, cadres and executive committee members of the *käbäle* administration. The singer, considered equal with Christians, is a beneficiary of the land redistribution policy:

ሸንሸና ሸንሸና አከፋፈለው  
እርሶ ሰግዘለን ለእስላም ለእግራው።

Having measured out and measured out, they redistributed the land,  
To anyone, who can plough and live, be it a Muslim or an Amhara.<sup>27</sup>

### ***Categorization of the Peasants: birokrat, qərrit fiyudal, ሿጃጃጃጃ***

The 1996-97 rural land redistribution policy created three new categories of peasants in the rural areas of East Gojjam. This seems to be a purposely cynical and political categorization. The peasants were first stratified into five categories: *qərrit fiyudal* (remnant feudal and their descendants), *birokrat* (bureaucrats), *habtam* (rich), *mākakkäläñña* (middle), and *dəha* (poor) farmers. The first two were totally unknown to the peasants, and there were no clear definitions at least from the peasants' point of view. These groups were defined as "oppressors" and "class enemies of the poor" and as *ṣəqqun* ("oppressed") farmers. The local officials and poor farmers also accused "remnant feudal" and "bureaucrats" of "possessing illegal land at the expense of the poor." This categorization was planned and decided upon by the ruling party, the ANDM (a part of EPRDF), and by the Council of the ANRS, without the

knowledge of peasants. It was announced to the local people during the first two weeks of the redistribution.

Peasants expressed that there were no remnant feudals any more, though the term was sometimes employed in political condemnations of propaganda campaigns, and they added that almost every peasant served the Derg regime at least once. Newspapers and magazines carried headlines like *yägäbäre birokrat gojjamaw yätäfättärä* (“the peasant bureaucrat has been created in Gojjam”). In reality, “there were no feudals since the 1975 radical agrarian reform; they were either dead or too old.”<sup>28</sup> Several scholars have come to similar conclusions. For example, Svein Ege wrote:

The current [land] redistribution must be seen in a political context. It is not easy to see any economic motive for the reform, and not even concern with inequality can explain the design of the reform. The apparent motive, the only one that can explain the facts presented in this report, seems to be a political project of establishing a class basis for the current regime, and to enter a new period in Ethiopian history. There is no indication that those identified as *birokrasi* were particularly hostile to the government, or that those identified as *čəqqun* were particularly strong supporters of the government before the reform (1997:124).

Similarly, Yigremew Adal observed that “Max Weber’s bureaucrats have been created in the Ethiopian poor rural villages; there is also a propaganda that the previous [1975] land redistribution has created modern feudalism” (1997:10).

The following poem was composed by poor farmers, who supported the land redistribution policy against “remnant feudals” (*qəryit fiyudal*). The poem was composed in response to the opposition and resistance of *qərrit fiyudal*, who bemoaned the loss of their “best and fertile” land that was confiscated and given to the poor and the oppressed farmers.

ፈጽላ ጥቅሊልና ላንቃህ አሉቲከፈት  
ተለንግጧህ እይገኛ አሻልግ ሙራት።

Feudal, even if you prattle until your throat is sore,  
Henceforth, you will no longer possess the *ataləma*<sup>29</sup> land.

የራሱን ገዢ እንደገና ይገኛል  
 መሬት ዝግጅት ይገኛል እውነት ይገኛል

The rumors of the feudal disappeared like mist,  
 The land redistribution has become realized.

However, the strongest class-based criticism was directed at the newly categorized *birokrats*. In actuality, there were some peasants who were involved in committee and party members, peasants' associations and producers' cooperatives, cadres and rural militia-men during the military regime of 1974-1991. On the other hand, there were also others who served the Derg government primarily to help their fellow country-men in various committees, such as for the literacy campaigns, forestation, environment, road construction, education, health and cleaning of rivers and springs. After the fall of the *Derg* regime in 1991, they were first identified as *komite* (committee member), *parti* (party member) and *isäpa* (WPE), and in all public gatherings they were always referred as *nəkkəkki* ("contaminated") with the corruption and abuses of power under the military regime. Finally, they were categorized as *birokrats*, a word unfamiliar to most of the peasants.

In its April 1997 issue (*Mägabit* 25 - *Miyazia* 1, 1989), *Mahətot*, the Amharic weekly organ of the ANDM in Bahir Dar, defined *birokrat* and *qərriṭ fiyudal*. *Birokrat* is described as "the one who had power under the Derg bureaucracy and who misappropriated land from the poor, or one who had used his power during the land redistribution [1975-] to exclude someone from getting land, or one who was responsible for such land redistribution." Similarly, *qərriṭ fiyudal* was said be to "those who had *rəst* land and those who have made others pay tribute or tax."<sup>30</sup> Further definitions were given to rich, middle and poor peasants.

### ***Poems Composed against Birokrat ("Bureaucrats")***

My informants explained that during the land redistribution *birokrats* were highly criticized, discriminated against and were given the following restrictions in each rural *käbäle*. First, after their land was confiscated they were prohibited

from renting and plowing others' lands. Second, they were isolated and segregated from society, for example, not being allowed to attend social and religious services such as *mahābār* or *sānbāte* (socio-religious associations) or *addār* (burial society). Third, they were not allowed to attend governmental or political meetings and discussions. In one of the *kābāle* meetings I attended in Gedeb Giorgis, the district envoy and local officials were repeatedly campaigning and provoking the local people to isolate (*maglāl*) the *birokrats*, make them lower their neck (*angāt masdäffat*) and confront them face to face (*fit läfit mäggaḥāt*). Owing to these social discriminations and political pressures, some of the *birokrats* became angry, a few fell seriously sick, others migrated elsewhere and some committed suicide. The following two poems were composed by the supporters of the reform policy to warn the *birokrats* to remain isolated and humble; otherwise, as the second poem shows, they might be executed.

ሆኖንዎን ግራት ሲነጥቁ እግዳብ  
አንገታቸውን ደፍተው አርፈው ይቀመጡ።

Those who will attempt to grab the land that we received,  
They better remain seated lowering their neck down.

አንተ ቢርክራት አታለፍ በደጀ  
እንደ ቀትር እፃቅ ትጠፋለህ በእጅ።

Don't pass by my gate, you bureaucrats,  
You will disappear in my hand like a mid-day fire.

The following poem insults and downgrades the *birokrats*, indicating the peasants' reaction to losing their lands. In the first line of the verse, the *birokrats* are given the traditional title known as *balambāras*,<sup>31</sup> in reference to the ruling elite during Emperor Haile Selassie's reign and earlier. The second line scorns them as "stinking like a woman in child-bed."<sup>32</sup> The poem was recited by the supporters of the reform and those who received land.

አረ! ቢሮክራት አረ! ባላምባራስ  
ሜሬቱ ቢለክ ሽተተ አራስ ላራስ።

Oh! the bureaucrat Oh! the *balambäras*,  
When the land was measured, they smelled like a woman in child-bed.

Similarly, the next poem criticizes not only the predominantly male *birokrats*, but ridicules their wives and children too. In the poem, the children are supposed “to eat grass like oxen” because their land had been confiscated and given to poor farmers.

የቢሮክራት ልጅ ባር ብላ እንደ ቤ  
ሜሬትህ ተሰጥቷል ለድሃው ገበሬ።

The bureaucrat’s children graze the grass like oxen,  
Your land is already given to the poor peasants.

## ***Poems Composed in Support of the Land Redistribution Policy***

As described above, the 1996-97 rural land redistribution favored only a certain section of the rural population namely, the youth, widows and single women, and the poor, identified as the *čəqqun* and *dəha arso addär*. The only criteria for classifying farmers into rich and poor was based on the number of oxen they had.<sup>33</sup> Strictly speaking, however, the majority of the peasants of East Gojjam are poor. Their cash income is very low, there is no clean water and no electricity, there are no clinics or paved roads. Clearly, the land redistribution policy was proclaimed only for political purposes, and it succeeded also in aggravating divisions among the peasant population.

Therefore, as beneficiaries of the plan, the *čəqqun* and *dəha arso addär* showed their support not only by composing praise poems and songs but also by staging rallies and demonstrations. These farmers carried banners and chanted slogans during the demonstrations organized by local officials. The following are only some of them: *yämäret šəggəsəgun polisiwočč ənnasfässəmalän* (we

will implement the land redistribution policy), *bätəḡəl yagäññänāwən märet bätəḡəl ənnətäbb qallän* (we will fight for the land that we have obtained through struggle), *yämäret šaggəššəḡun polisiwox əndəḡəfallän* (we support the land redistribution policies), *yämäret šaggəššəḡu yesetoččən ənnə yäč qunoččən mäbt yarrägaggätä näw* (the land redistribution has assured the rights of women and the oppressed), *käbirokratoč yagäññänāwən märet bätəḡəl ənnətäbbəqallän* (we will keep through struggle the land that we got from the bureaucrats) and *märetaččənnən linättəqu yämmiqattu arfäw y əqämттätu* (those who attempt to snatch our land would better remain seated). In addition to the demonstrations, the peasants were requested to perform and improvise *qärärto* (war songs) and *fukkära* (heroic recitals) and to show that they were victorious and the redistribution policy was successfully accomplished. In Gedeb Giorgis, peasants were asked to sing praise songs after a big feast was prepared by the local officials. The following poem, praising the current government was composed by a peasant in Dejj Mariam. In the poem, the government is described as trustful and as father to the oppressed. The poet is indebted to the government for redistributing land to the women and the youth “justly and fairly.”

የታሪክ ሕዝብ የቀረበው ጥንቃቄ  
 በሀገሪቱ እንዲፈርስ ስሜት ለጭቅ  
 ጭቅ አካል እጣ የማውጣት።

The trustful government, father of the oppressed,  
 Measuring fairly for the women and the youth  
 [He] distributed the land by drawing the lots.

In the following poem, a young farmer rejoices for having received land and praises the EPRDF. The peasant, a resident of Gedeb Giorgis, calls for his fellow friends who live in the vicinity of Gedeb, Somma, Fenterge, and Eneggena to beg God for a long life for the EPRDF government. In other words, the poet is grateful to the local officials and the EPRDF and its administration.



ገደብና ዶማ መግት ተፅብሰሱ  
 ፈንጠርጌ እንገና ጭቁን ተፅብሰሱ  
 ጌታን ለእሃዲን እድሜ እገልጻለሁ  
 ለአራቅ ድርብ ጓፓ፤ ለአምሰት ድርብ እቶር  
 ለታሰት ድርብ ጤፍ ማዘሪያ እሜሰጥ ማንው?  
 እረ፤ እሃዲንን ዝንታለም ያኑረው።

The youths of Gedeb and Somma<sup>34</sup> meet together,  
 The oppressed of Fenterge, and Ennegena meet together,  
 Let us beg the Lord for a long life for the EPRDF,

Who is going to give land for sowing chickpeas, vetch, and *teff*?  
 May he [God] give the EPRDF a long life [age] for ever.

In the next poem the peasant expresses his indebtedness to God for the plot of land he received. In fact, God has a special place in the lives of the rural peasants. In their every day prayers, activities and conversations they refer to his miracles. They seek his mercy at times of extreme trouble. They also consult him for a better harvest season. They need his intercession for a peaceful coexistence. They complain to him in times of natural disaster such as epidemics, drought, famine, and the like.

ምን ይክፈለዋል ለእግዚአብሔር ውሳኔ  
 ማፈት በማግኘቴ እገኘሁ እፎይታ።

What reward shall be paid to God,  
 By my getting land I have gained relief.

Similarly, another young farmer expresses his happiness at finally getting fertile land to cultivate. He refers to the equality of human beings, who all are equally-born sons and daughters of Adam and Eve. The poet also describes the type of land he received as *dabbäl*,<sup>35</sup> the best and fertile land previously owned by others.

ሁሉም ያደኑ ልጅ ከወ ሁሉም የሂዋት  
ተደበሉ ሙራት እኩል ደረሰን።

All are children of Adam, all are children of Eve,  
We received equally from the *dabbäl* land.

## Poems Composed against the Land Redistribution Policy

In rural East Gojjam, disagreements, opposition and conflict arose as a result of abuse, corruption and discrimination by local officials in the process of implementing state policies. Many poor farmers in Dejj Mariam and Gedeb Giorgis were forced to leave their home-land and migrate to other places. The only way for them to express their grievances, protests and feelings of bitter sorrows was through *angurguro* (lamentations), *qärärto* (war songs) and *fukkära* (heroic recitals). To begin with, the first opposition came from those peasants who were categorized as *birokrats* and *qärriṭ fiyudals* and lost their private and patrimonial in Enarj Enawga. The *birokrats* and *qärriṭ fiyudals* expressed their opposition against committee members, local officials and, particularly, the land re-distributors and state agents. One of my informants, who used to be a self-sufficient peasant before the land reform policy, explained to me how some peasants showed their opposition to the policy. He noted that they began to express their protest when it was decided that each peasant had to register the size of his/her land and household with the local officials and with the *käbäle* leadership without the prior consent of elders or the local population. The opposition increased when local officials and EPRDF cadres started to implement state policies soon after the election of new land study committees and re-distributors in their respective localities. The following poem ridicules a group of local officials or “thieves,” attributing the unjust rural land redistribution in Enarj Enawga to the absence of elderly or knowledgeable men, who traditionally mediate local disputes over land.

፪፻፹፱ ጠፍቶ ገደብ ጊዮርጊስ ላይ  
 ሰባት ልዐች ታገሙ አብረው ጣድ ላይ  
 ነጥ ጠፍ አገደ አረር የሚሳቅበትን  
 አበልኩት በገሙድ አጥሞ ርስታችንን።

Elders could not be found in Gedeb Giorgis,  
 Being seven thieves [the officials], acted as one,  
 They had measured our *rəst*<sup>36</sup> patrimony with ropes,  
 The land which was so fertile,  
 Where *näčč teff*<sup>37</sup> used to be harvested as plentifully as soil.

The poem also refers to the peasants' *rəst* land which used to produce plenty of *näčč teff* (white *teff*, which is of high quality) and was measured with *gämäd* (rope)<sup>38</sup> during the parceling of plots before redistribution to others. The seven local officials are referred to as “thieves” owing to the corruption and illegal nature of their unfair and unjust implementation of the rural land redistribution policy. The peasants eventually understood that even the overall EPRDF administration of the Federal Government and the Amhara National Regional State collaborated and conspired with local officials, cadres, militia-men, corps members and *kübäle* administrators.<sup>39</sup>

In March 1997, angry peasants went to Addis Ababa to protest being driven off their land at gun-point by the EPRDF rural militia and local administrative personnel. The central government offered the peasants no relief on the grounds that under the FDRE's system of federalism,<sup>40</sup> decisions regarding land redistribution should be made at the regional level. The protesting peasants were told to return to their homes or face being charged with organizing and participating in an illegal protest.<sup>41</sup> They then began composing poems to express their bitter feelings against the policy and state agents and local officials. In the following poem, the peasants of Enarj Enawga voice their grievances and appeal to their country-men who live in other districts of East Gojjam to be their witnesses and for their prayers.

ይታይህ ማጽከል ይሰማህ ጎጃም፣  
ይታይህ በርንታ ይሰማህ ጥላተግን  
እግዚዖ በል እነሱ ጎንገሩ ሳር ምድር  
እግዚዖ በል አዋቅል እግዚዖ በል አነደድ  
እንዴት ይወሳዳል መሬታችን በግድ?

Be our witness, the people of Machakel<sup>42</sup> and listen the people of Gozamin,  
Be our witness, the people of Berenta and listen the people of Tilatgen,  
Appeal to God, the people of Enessie, Goncha and Sar Midir,  
Appeal to God, the people of Awabel and Anedded,  
How can our farmland be taken away by force?

Similarly, another peasant expresses his sorrow and grievance against local authorities who confiscated his land in Gedeb Giorgis in January 1997. It is a typical example of *qärarto* (war song), which is mostly recited by the poor and powerless peasants who have become disappointed with the present local administration. In the first line of the poem, the singer refers to the poor condition of peasant existence that made him till the land, a job that he inherited from his fore-fathers who used to be not only *gäbäre* (farmers) but also *gäbbar* (tenants, serfs, or forced tax-payers) for years. In the second line of the poem, he complains that he will no longer be able to plow, as his farmland was measured and confiscated by local officials.

እኔል አርበ ንበር የገበሬው የገገሩ ልጅ  
መሬቴን ቢወሳዱት ቢሰኩት ነው እንጅ።

I, the son of the tenant, the peasant, would have plowed,  
Had they not measured and taken away my land.

Additionally, the following extended lamentation song was sung to me by an old peasant in Dejj Mariam. The farmland he had inherited from his ancestors was also measured and confiscated by local officials. In the song, the peasant bitterly expresses his deep sorrow<sup>43</sup> for the loss of land on which he had paid tribute for years and on which his existence was based. He also identifies himself with the land that he formerly farmed, harvested and resided on in the “good old days.”

However, now it no longer belongs to him, and in his own words “I have nowhere to go at this time of my old age.” Such personal emotions and remorse emerge from grief and deep sorrow. The peasant presents this lamentation in the form of traditional appeal to his country and his fellow countrymen, the people and the region of Gojjam:

ወይ አገሬ! ሸረ አገሬ ገዥሽ  
 ወሰኔት መሬቴን እርሰትና ቅልቴን  
 የራሽ መከላከያ ልብስና ቀለቤን  
 የወጣህባትን የጣህባትን  
 እያቴ ቅማቴ እስተምንጅላቴ  
 ንብረ ቀቅዬ የኖርሁበት አገር  
 ወሰላት መሬቴን ሰፍረው ባገመዱ  
 እንግዲህ ደካማው እንግዲህ አሮጌው  
 ሸረ ወዲት ልግዬ ሸረ የት ልሂድ?

Oh ! my country, oh! my country Gojjam,  
 They took my land: my *rust* and my *gult*,<sup>44</sup>  
 That protected me against starvation and that was my food and my shelter,  
 That I inherited from my grandfathers and,  
 My great grand fathers as far back as my ancestors,  
 And through which I came out and came in,  
 The land for which I paid tax and debts for years,  
 They took measuring it with a rope,  
 Henceforth, I, the weak and the old,  
 Oh! where shall I shelter, where shall I go?

In the following couplet, owing to the confiscation of his ancestors' land by local officials, another peasant sings a lament touching the heart, as if he were dead and his corpse were being buried. It is important to note that he uses the word *baddamma* (ancestors' land) in his poem. According to the peasants in Gojjam, losing one's *baddamma* is usually associated with the death of a person.<sup>45</sup> They told me that the land was given to the peasants who were once involved in adversarial disputes and blood-feuds, but now support the current government and the land redistribution policy.

አልሞት ምስሉታል እሬባው አልጦግ  
ያባቱን ባይግ ሲካፈሉት በእጁ፡

He thinks he is not yet dead, and his corpse not yet taken to the [grave],  
Though they divided his fathers' land by share among themselves.

### *Corruption and Injustice of Local Officials*

In the process of implementing the land redistribution policy, the land re-distributors and local officials frequently favored relatives and friends and practiced corruption, injustice and mischief. During the land redistribution, officials were invited to local feasts and celebrations where sheep and chicken were slaughtered, and *tälla* and *aräqi*<sup>46</sup> drinks were served. The peasants who could afford to host these lavish gatherings received “good” and “fertile” land, while those who could not were excluded from getting the best land. The following poem depicts the corruption of local officials who accepted *gubbo* (a bribe) either in cash or in the form of invitations to feasts. The singer, a resident of Dejj Mariam, told me that he was unable to influence committee members and therefore could not get fertile land during the rural land redistribution. He expressed his bitter feelings and deep grievances in *qärärto* (war song) as follows:

ለኢቀመንበሩ አንድ ባጡንድ አጥቶ  
ለኮሚቴዎቹ አገድ ጠርጦሉ አጥፎ  
ተማዘረዎልኝ ሙረት ቀሪሁ ጥላይቼ፡፡

For want of a *bawund*<sup>47</sup> for the chairman,  
For want of a bottle of *aräqi* for the committee members,  
I remained excluded from the *mazoriya*<sup>48</sup> land.

The following poem recited by another poor farmer shows even more clearly how committee members and local EPRDF officials made the peasants suffer. The singer laments that he is poor and unable to give the amount of money demanded by the corrupt committee members and local officials, as a result of which he is not provided with good land. The first line of the poem is composed

metaphorically in a powerful style. In the poem, “the committee demanded a hand” means: the committee asked openly for *gubbo*, which was usually given either in cash or in kind, as indicated in the above poem.

ኮማቴዎ እጅ አለ እኔም እጅ አጣረኝ  
እድካካቡ መሬት አምዘዋዘዋ ጣለኝ።

The Committee demanded a hand,<sup>49</sup> but I have my hands tied;  
[Hence] they threw me down on the barren land.

As far as the redistribution of 1996-97 rural land and its implementation in East Gojjam is concerned, the majority of the peasants were helpless against abuse and there was no one to hear their problems and grievances. Discrimination, corruption, and favoring relatives and friends were the order of the day. Finally, the majority of the rural peasantry understood that land was measured and distributed only to those who could bribe or invite local state agents and committee members for food and local alcoholic drinks. These peasants were well aware of this, and the only way left for them to express their grievance was through poems and songs, like the following one:

ጥቁን ቁርጥ እጦቂ ድዮ ቁርጥ እጦቂ  
መሬት ተሰፈረኝ በጠርሙስ አረቂ።

Know well you the exploited, know well you the poor  
That the land has been measured with a bottle of *aräqi*.

እኔ ተኮሚቴ አባልጅ ብናለ  
ይሰጠኝ ነባረ ከድባሉ ማለ።

Had I god-parent<sup>50</sup> relationship with the committee,  
I would have received farmland from the *däbbäl*.<sup>51</sup>

ከግሳት ኮሚቴ አባልጅ አጥኛ  
እሳ በቀሉ እሸት ከረሙ ልጆቼ።

Having no godson from among the committee of seven,  
My children spent the rainy season without eating ripened maize.<sup>52</sup>

## Condemning Zāmān (the Times)

As can be seen from the above discussion and analysis, the majority of the poems and songs directly criticized the local officials, committee members and the current government administration at large. As there was no one to listen to their complaints and problems, the helpless peasants began to express their bitterness against the overall political administration of the EPRDF. In the following poem, for example, a peasant condemns the era of the EPRDF since he no longer has land to plow and feed his children.

ዘመን ወያኔ ዘመን አሃዲን  
ሜራቴ ተወሲዶ ልጅ ሰውን ሳሳድን?

The time of *wäyyane*,<sup>53</sup> the time of EPRDF,  
How can I raise my children with my land taken away?

ዋፈሩን ቀንበሩን ከተቱቱ ሰንታ  
እናርስታለን ቀን የወጣ ለታ።

Keep the yoke and the plowshare in the granary,  
We will plow with them when [good] days come.

Another peasant is worried about the possibility of exacerbated famine in the future because of the confiscation of land by local officials. He explains that there is no more land to be plowed.

ከዘንድሮው እራሽ የከሮኞው ይብላል  
ሜራቴ ተወሲዶ ምን ይታረሳል?

Next year's famine will be worse than this one,  
What can be plowed when the land is taken away?

## Conflicts between Peasants and Local Officials

As to conflicts between peasants and local officials, my informants explained that one of the EPRDF tactics to control the local population was to mobilize and provide fire-arms and hand guns for its supporters. Traditionally, the people of Gojjam are commonly identified in Ethiopia with hard work,



faithfulness, patriotism, national pride, warriorhood and the desire to possess fire-arms. For the peasants of East Gojjam, in particular, *mist* (wife), *märet* (land), *bäre* (oxen), *agär* (country), and *täbänja* (hand gun) were always the symbols of identity, manhood and heroism. Historically, Gojammes associated themselves with these symbols and related practices. In the following poem, a peasant sings for his relatives, who were imprisoned by the local EPRDF official when they refused to hand over their weapons. He expresses that it was on the pretext of local security that his relatives were imprisoned; that is, owing to the alleged suspicion that they were dangerous and could encourage others to strike or otherwise revolt against the current government.

ጥረት ዩደረጉ ሕጅ ላለመስጠት  
 ተረት ዓደረጉ ጥረት ላለመስጠት  
 ቃላቸው ተቀድሞ ገዙ ተጠቃጊ ቤት።

When they sought to avoid surrendering to [the local officials],  
 When they sought to avoid submitting their hand-guns,  
 Their statements were recorded and they were sent to prison.

Finally, owing to the land redistribution policy and its subsequent negative effects, the peasants of East Gojjam began to voice their protest against local officials. Some of the peasants decided to leave their homeland and became migrants elsewhere. As the following poem depicts, the peasant preferred to migrate to neighboring regions in search of seasonal labor rather than idly watch the intrigues of local officials, committee members and EPRDF cadres. He bitterly laments: ‘what comes next is being the victim of migration.’ A recent saddening phenomenon among the rural peasants of Gojjam is that they frequently migrate to the southern regions of Ethiopia for seasonal labor, leaving their families behind.

የኮሚቴን ደባ ከማይ ተቀምጧ  
 የወያኔን ደባ ከማይ ተቀምጧ  
 የካድሬን ደባ ከማይ ተቀምጧ  
 ስደት መሄድ ነው እገር አቋርጧ።

Rather than idly watching the intrigue of the committee,  
 Rather than idly watching the intrigue of the *wäyane*,  
 Rather than idly watching the intrigue of the cadre,  
 I have decided to migrate, crossing the country.<sup>54</sup>

Hence, as a result of corruption, misconduct, and unfair administration, some peasants were forced to leave their homeland and become *saddätännöč* (refugees). The following protest *qärärto* was composed by someone who lost his land against the local officials who confiscated his land in Dejj Mariam. Since his house was empty and his land was taken away, he chose to migrate, crossing the Blue Nile river. And as indicated in the second poem, the peasant has already decided to migrate, as he knows well the intrigue of local officials and the present government.

አባይ ባሕር ላይ ስለሚገኝ ግድብ  
 የሚሻገርበት ወገኔ ልጅ ተሳታ  
 ሙሉ ገቢዬ ቤቴ ትኑ ገደብ

Yonder I see the declivity of the Blue Nile [Abbay],  
 Where a brave man will cross when he gets angry,  
 His land being taken away and his house being empty.

አገሩን ስንድምስ አልግጥም?  
 የከሚቷን ደብ አያውቀው ይደረግ  
 የሙንግብቴን ደብ አያውቀው ሆኗል።

Yes, I should go, why should I not go?  
 When I know deep down the intrigue of the committee,  
 When I know deep down the intrigue of the government.

## Conclusion

The preceding discussion attempted to present and analyze the meaning of Amharic poems and songs composed, recited and sung by the peasants of East Gojjam in response to the recent land redistribution policy carried out in the

Amhara National Regional State during 1996-97. The policy was endorsed and implemented without the consent of the rural peasants. Rather, this highly political program was carried out by supporters and local officials of the current EPRDF government. The reform policy categorized the rural peasants of East Gojjam into three groups: *birokrat*, *qərrit fiyudal*, and *ṣəqqun* or *dəha arso addär*. This categorization of the peasants resulted in suspicion, conflict and insecurity, among the peasants on the one hand, and between peasants and state representatives and local officials, on the other. In their poems and songs, the peasants of East Gojjam express their critical views, attitudes and feelings either in the form of support or protest, toward the land redistribution policy and the various state policies and directives. But, as can be seen from the analysis, the majority of the poems were composed not only against the reform policy but also against the local officials and state-agents who supported the current government. Politically, the poems shed light on the peasants' understanding of and critical observations about the new agrarian politics. Culturally, the poems give evidence of the power and creative capability of the peasants' oral traditions. They should also be situated within a wider perspective, that of considering the function and role of oral poetry in agrarian and traditional societies where written traditions are almost non-existent. The peasants' poetic responses to diverse contemporary politics and to an often abusive local administration should be studied and be appropriately considered in the state's future agrarian policies and development projects, if, at least, the government intends to be sincere in its aim to bring about a fair administrative and political system that fosters peaceful coexistence among the rural peasantry.

## Notes

1. The fieldwork for this paper was conducted from 6 March to 30 June 1997 and from 29 November 1997 to 30 March 1998 among two peasants' communities in East Gojjam Administrative Region, Northwest Ethiopia. I am grateful to the German Academic Exchange Service, DAAD, for providing me with the necessary financial assistance for my field research in Ethiopia and for my Ph.D. study in Germany. I wish to thank my 32 informants who patiently helped me in conducting several hours of interviews and discussions as well as in reciting and singing more than 2,000 Amharic poems and songs that enabled me to get to know the process of social change, contemporary politics, and local administration among the Amhara peasants of Gojjam. An earlier version of this paper was presented to

the 5th Annual Midwest Graduate Student Conference in African Studies, organized by the African Studies Program, Indiana University, Bloomington, 3 March to May 2000. I am most grateful to Professor Bairu Tafla for his constant advice and scholarly help while translating the Amharic poems into English, as well as for many fruitful discussions. I thank Ato Dessalegn Rahmato, Bekalu Molla, and Yigremew Adal for the fruitful discussions that I had with them during my field research in Ethiopia. I wish also to thank the editors of *Northeast African Studies*, Dr. Jon Abbink and Tim Carmichael for reading and editing the manuscript and the critical comments they offered me.

2. On peasant revolts and protests against local officials and the state in Ethiopia, see Gebru Tareke (1991).
3. I have discussed this topic in my M.A thesis (1994: 4-8, 81-90, 109-116), and it is a theme treated in detail in my Ph.D. dissertation, on which I am presently working. However, it is appropriate to mention here that Donald Levine (1965) has interestingly described the poetic tradition and contributions of the Amhara people of Menz in Northern Shoa.
4. Interview with Ato Abiyu Fekadu, on 10 May 1997, in DejjMariam, East Gojjam, Ethiopia.
5. *Ge'ez qene* is a specialized field of religious poetry, a favorite form of verse, mainly among the Amhara people of Ethiopia comprising different forms and types. Historically *Ge'ezqene* was originated and developed in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church by the clergy, including priests, *däbtära*, and deacons.
6. To the best of my knowledge, the only research work carried out entirely on Amharic oral poetry of a specific region, so far, is the one undertaken by Marcel Cohen (1924). However, similar general works have been contributed by Enno Littmann (1914) and August Klingenberg (1959).
7. Regarding this point, I prepared a paper under the title *A Short Review of Europeans' Contributions to the Study of Amharic Oral Poetry* (Universität Hamburg, Institut für Afrikanistik und Äthiopistik, May 1996). Furthermore, a list of Ethiopian amateur collectors and compilers is found in Fekade Azeze's review and bibliography (1984: 21-23).
8. This problem has been thoroughly studied by several scholars of the peasantry, agrarian reform and rural development in Ethiopia. For instance, see Dessalegn Rahmato (1993, 1994, 1997), Fasil Gebre Kiros (1993), Svein Ege (1997), Siegfried Pausewang (1983, 1994), Stefan Brüne (1994), Tesfaye Tafesse (1995), Eva Poluha (1997), Solomon Gashaw (1987), Teferi Abate (1997a, 1997b), Yigremew Adal (1997), Hussien Jama (1997), and Ottfried Kirsch *et al.* (1987).
9. For example, Siegfried Pausewang (1997:187) wrote that "peasants do not feel free to express their needs and wishes. They experience that authorities decide important issues over their heads and against their will, defying their substantial experience and knowledge. They feel controlled from above, from the local representatives of the governing party and the authorities."
10. *Federal Negarit Gazeta*, Proclamation No. 1 (1995:14).
11. *Ibid.*

12. *Zikre Higg*, Proclamation No. 16 (1996:1).
13. For a full official justification of the rural land reform policy in the Amhara National Regional State see *Zikre Higg*, (*ibid*:1-2).
14. In the official policy documents, *qərriṭ fiyudal*, “remnant feudal”, is defined as “those peasants who held old titles and possess large and illegal land since the imperial regime; and the *birokrat*, “bureaucrats”, refers to “those who had power under the Derg regime and misappropriated land from the poor, or one who had used his power during land redistribution to exclude some from getting land, or one who was elected in the former PA leadership.” (ANRS Redistribution Plan 1996:4).
15. *Kābāle* administration (KA) is the lowest unit of political administration endorsed by the FDRE since August 1995 after the current political boundaries were restructured. The KA consists of a number of villages (*māndār*) and hamlets (*got*) and is defined by its territorial and local parish church. The name has been slightly changed; during the former Socialist regime (1974-1991) it was known as *kābāle* peasants’ association.
16. The implementation and effects of the 1996-97 rural land redistribution policy have been studied by researchers in only three of the eleven Administrative Zones of the ANRS; namely: West Gojjam, by Yigremew Adal (1997), North Shoa, by Svein Ege (1997), and South Wollo, by Teferi Abate (1997a, 1997b). However, none of these researchers attempted to analyze the views, attitudes and responses of the peasants in their poems and songs and the effects of the policy as articulated in the oral traditions of the rural society at large. I have attempted to analyze Amharic poems and songs composed, improvised and recited by the peasants of East Gojjam either in protest or in support of the land redistribution policy (Getie Gelaye 1998a, 1998b, 1999).
17. The actual land redistribution policy took place between January and March 1997, though in some rural *kābāle* it was started in December 1996. Since the first round of my fieldwork coincided with this period, I was fortunate to be able to interview peasants about the overall implementation of the policy. I witnessed land-receiving peasants demonstrating in *wārāda* (district) capitals ordered by the government in support of the land redistribution policy and for its successful implementation. I also saw hundreds of peasants whose plots were confiscated by local officials and who traveled to Addis Ababa to appeal their grievances and losses to the central government. However, no high-ranking official responded to their appeals. Rather, the Federal government explained to the peasants that “the land redistribution policy was proclaimed by the ANRS, a self-administering or autonomous region and thus, it was a matter to be solved by the regional state.”
18. See, Eva Poluha (1997:46-47).
19. Svein Ege (1997:4), wrote that “the decision to undertake the land redistribution [policy] came as a surprise, and the background for this decision is still very unclear.” Similarly, Yigremew Adal (1997:12) indicated that “the land [redistribution] policy and its implementation have been characterized by secrecy and lack of transparency, . . . it was highly centralized and politicized.”

20. Interview with Ato Abraham Assefa and Ato Aziz Ferede, on 16.05.97 in Dejj Mariam.
21. Svein Ege (1997:19).
22. Peasants recalled that the *dälday* and land study committees were assisted by local cadres, militia-men, corps members and the *käbäle* leadership during the registration, enumeration and reallocation of land.
23. See Teferi Abate (1997a: 12), Svein Ege (1997:92-95).
24. Peasants explained that there are three criteria for the peasants to be recruited as members in any of the three groups. First, they have to support the EPRDF and the current government; second, they must be nominated as a candidate (*ətu abal*) and studied by local state agents for a certain period of time; and third, they must be full members (*mulu abal*) of the party or any local organization.
25. During the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie I, *asrat* was a tax (literally, tithe), one of the post-war land taxes which used to be paid in cash. See Shiferaw Bekele (1995:89), Teshale Tibebu (1995:73-78), Allan Hobben (1973:49), among others.
26. During the former *Derg* regime, *kota* (quota) was forceful grain or crop extraction by the state whereby every peasant household was supposed to deliver a set quantity to the then state-owned Agricultural Marketing Corporation. See Dessalegn Rahmato (1994:247), Siegfried Pausewang (1994:216), Getie Gelaye (1994:157-160, 1999:138).
27. Among the people of Gojjam, the nouns 'Muslim' and 'Amhara' are used differently from what may be the case in other areas of Ethiopia, for Amhara means an Orthodox Christian. It does not refer to ethnicity. As is expressed in the poem, Muslims were marginalized for years and treated by former regimes and governments as if they did not have their own ancestors' rest land. Therefore, their existence was dependent on trade in the towns and on handicraft work in the rural areas. Now the singer is delighted as he has got his own plot of land like the Amharas, meaning Christians.
28. See Teferi Abate (1997a:9).
29. In Gojjam, according to local perception, the peasants believe that this is the best quality, fertile land that provides best produce (Interview with Ato Abiyu Fekadu, in Dejj Mariam on 16.05 97).
30. See *Maḥtot*, 4th year, No. 115, April 1997 (Bahir Dar).
31. According to Thomas Kane (1990:862), this refers, originally, to "keeper of a fortified *amba*", an honorific title used to be given in Ethiopia to individuals at the lowest level administrative positions until 1974.
32. Traditionally, in the rural areas of East Gojjam, women are not given necessary sanitation when they give birth. There is a belief that after delivery the women smell badly because they stay inside the house at least for a month. It is partly because they put a lot of butter on their head and do not properly keep their cleanliness.
33. According to Dessalegn Rahmato (1997:2) 57 percent of the rural population in Ethiopia lives in poverty. He differentiated the farmers as destitute (30 percent; those without oxen), poor (27 percent; those with one ox), middle (26 percent;

- those who own two oxen), and rich (16 percent; those who own more than two oxen). In Gojjam 59 percent of the rural population live in poverty (ANRS, Agriculture Office 1997:1). See also McCann (1987) and Aspen (1994).
34. Somma, Fenterge and Enegenna are the neighboring peasants' KA of Gedeb Giorgis where I carried out my field research. Since the redrawing and readjustment of rural *kābāles* or communities in 1995, there are currently 26 rural *kābāle* administrations in Enarj Enawga *wärāda*.
  35. This is similar to note 28 above.
  36. Until 1974, in Gojjam *räst* used to be a form of rural land tenure system with a right to inherit, use and hand over ones hereditary land-holdings held with conditional rights and obligations. *Räst* rights were inherited through descent from mother's and father's line on a particular plot of land and on membership in a given community. The land reform of 1975 abolished the *räst* rights system and replaced it by a common right to land for cultivation. For a further reference see Allan Hoben (1973), Shiferaw Bekele (1995), Teshale Tibebe (1995), among others.
  37. Literally, white *teff*; this is the best quality and highly desired crop in Gojjam as well as in other *teff* producing regions of Ethiopia (Getie Gelaye 1994; McCann 1987).
  38. In Gojjam, historically or traditionally, *gāmād* (rope) and *mätt añña* (thong) are used to measure land.
  39. This idea was developed as a result of the frequently organized political seminars, meetings and orientations arranged especially for local officials in Bahir Dar, the regional capital. As my informants explained to me, local officials receive various technical, financial and material assistance from the Regional and Federal states, primarily for their loyalty and the straight-forward service they perform for the ruling parties of ANDM and the EPRDF.
  40. See *Federal Negarit Gazeta*, no. 1/1995, no. 89/1997.
  41. Several local and international newspapers and magazines did report on the grievances and protests of Gojjam peasants against the Amhara land redistribution policy. However, locally, government and private magazines and newspapers reported differently.
  42. Machakkel, Gozamin, Berenta, Tilatgin, Enessie, Goncha, Sar Midir, Awabel and Aneded are the neighboring districts of Enarj Enawga *wärāda* in East Gojjam administrative region.
  43. Such poems and songs can also be classified and analyzed under *ṃgurguro* (lamentation also dirges or funeral songs) as they mainly express deep sorrows and grievances about inequality and injustice, loneliness and imposition by administrations, besides dealing with the natural phenomena of death (Getie Gelaye 1994:74-75).
  44. During the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie and long before, *gult* was tribute appropriation right granted by the Emperor to the various ranks of the warrior class, the church, local rulers, the nobility, members of the royal family and the nobility, in return for military, administrative and religious services rendered to the Emperor

by the *gult* grantees. According to Teshale Tibebeu (1995:79) *gult* grants were of two kinds: grants to lay men and women, and grants to religious institutions. See also Shiferaw Bekele (1995), Allan Hoben (1973).

45. At the time of my fieldwork, peasants confirmed that as a result of the confiscation of private plots, and the deliberate isolation and harassment of these peasants by local officials and from the rest of the rural population, some were sick or got mental illness, while others committed suicide. (Interview with *Aggafari* Mengistie Goshu, on 2 February 1998 in Gedeb Giorgis). See also the discussion under the sub-topic ‘categorization of the peasants’ in this chapter.
46. Locally distilled liquor.
47. In Gojjam, one *bawund* means ten Ethiopian *Birr*.
48. Fertile, top quality land to produce crops.
49. This is expressed figuratively in that the peasant could not afford and was unable to give money (bribe) to the committee members the amount that they demanded (Interview with Ato Kassaw Tesfaw, on 06.02.98).
50. *Abäləj* literally “father or mother of a child”; in Gojjam *abäləj* is a type of kinship established through God-parenthood in a special ceremony. For a further reference, see Getie Gelaye (1998a: 77-79).
51. This is similar to note 48 above.
52. *Yäbäqqolo ətät* (fresh ripened maize) is eaten in the months of August and September before the main harvesting season, and it is the major available and fast ripening crop for the poor to feed their family in the rural areas.
53. This refers to members of the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) and their supporters.
54. In recent years, when local conflicts arise, the peasants of Gojjam migrate to the neighboring regions, namely Shoa, Wollega, and across the Blue Nile river. My informants explained that in the past they preferred to be *təfta* (bandits) and join other rebels in the forest.

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**Note:** The names of Ethiopian authors (both Christian and Moslem) are listed as they are customarily used in Ethiopia, that is author’s name followed by father’s name.

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