

Migrants Narrating: Challenging Received Wisdom on the Causes of Rural-rural Migration in Ethiopia

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Abstract

Migration in rural Ethiopia has largely been from north to south in recent years. People have been moving on their own, some to escape the threat of death and others further to improve their lot based on the information obtained from different sources about better opportunities in the south. The processes of movement are influenced by many factors and the departure and arrival give rise to contradictory pictures of hope and despair. Decisions to move out are made long before the actual migration starts and the latter 'takes a long time and involves several stages' (Shami 1994:4). In some instances, migrants experienced back and forth movements between two or more potential settlement areas, an indication of step migration, occasionally to the home areas as well. The case studies discussed in this papering to light the complex circumstances surrounding migration and settlement. They help us grasp the dynamics of migration, including sources of information, the ordeal of long distance travel, and in some instances returning home with no hope but to re-experience the suffering that poverty inflicts on them.

Introduction

Population movements, temporary or permanent, are caused by many factors. Even for a particular individual there must be some combination of factors that influences the decision to leave one's home village, town or city. Although one may get precedence over the other, various circumstances that exist, or are imagined to have existed, both at the sending and the receiving ends are responsible for someone's decision to emigrate. For the conditions at the other end to be attractive, those at this side must be less attractive, less rewarding, if not the worst.

It is also true that migration may take place in the absence of other choices, for example (with refugees) in a situation of war or cataclysmic natural conditions (drought, famine, earthquake, etc). There are times when people migrate because of wider publicity (from earlier migrants or the media) of the opportunities in the parts of the world to which the potential

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migrants may be attracted. State policies may encourage migration through promises of land grants or employment opportunities at their destination. Even in these circumstances, the potential migrants have to at least imagine what migration might mean in terms of improvement of their lives although this does not always guarantee a positive outcome at the end of the day.

This paper attempts to discuss this complex. Although not exhaustive, an attempt is made to represent the major factors, where possible demonstrating the conditions thought to have existed on both the place of origin and destination, commonly referred to as 'push' and 'pull' effects. Each case represents a story that adds up to the whole picture of the circumstances surrounding migration.

These materials range from a brief overview of the imperial government's policy pertaining to settlement in the name of migration to life history-like stories representing the difficult circumstances experienced by the migrants. They also range from rather short descriptions of contingent encounters on a bus, which could loosely be regarded as Marcus' (1995:106) 'opportunistic movement', to planned interview materials. The factors of migration show a range of issues. They represent the stories in which the migrants describe the sending regions as places, which 'God's bounty has deserted', and the receiving regions as 'a country of honey and milk'.

The returnee migrant (Section V) likens his family's return from Wallaga to Wallo to a movement from 'life to death'. The new migrant (Section VI) sees the promising future for his family in the fertile land of Wallaga. These cases, the first representing the sustenance of suffering and the latter the vision of hope, are excellent contrasts. They also represent the 'hellish' depiction of the sending regions and 'canaanization' of the destinations. These are the complex ethnographic testimonies (Malkki 1997), which this paper tries to communicate with the reader. What is unfolded in these stories is that migration is less the result of drought/famine than of the interplay of the complex social, economic and environmental conditions.

I. Imperial Settlement Policy of the 1960s

In this section I will focus on a few relevant steps taken by the imperial regime to settle the northern Ethiopians in the south in the sixties and

seventies. In 1958, the governor of Sidamo, Dejazmach Wolde-Semayat, initiated settlement schemes at places called Abella and Bele. Their objectives were to: (1) open these lowland regions to agriculture; (2) provide land for residents of the over-crowded Walayita highlands; and (3) create an integrated community by bringing settlers from other over-crowded regions of the country (Simpson 1975:5). As will be shown below, it is the third objective that has been successfully carried out and reinforced subsequently by the regime's plan, published about a decade after the Walayita settlement scheme was initiated. The Third Five Year Development Plan (TFYDP) (1968-73) was the first published document to unequivocally state the regime's intention of settling northern Ethiopians in the south.

A gradual but accelerating shift in the agricultural population will begin to be seen during the third plan, from the present overcrowded northern and central highlands to the lowland areas, and in a still longer run, to the south-western highlands (and those parts of the southern highlands where population pressure is not a problem).

In south-west highlands of Kefa and Ilubabor provinces and parts of Wellega, Gemu Gofa, and possibly the northern parts of Bale provinces, represent clear potentialities for the future. *The south-west highlands in particular are distinctly under-populated and under-utilized at present. Their potentialities and land-use will be carefully examined to take advantage of this rich natural resource and to see that it is not inadvertently destroyed before it has been able to contribute to agricultural development.*

...If development succeeds in promoting expansion and prosperity in settled areas, resettlement, in the form of migration from over-populated areas will be promoted, to the advantage of both areas (TFYDP 1968: 373-4, emphasis added).

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The argument was that the agricultural population of the overcrowded north should be settled in the southwest where population pressure was not a problem. This also meant that the Christian highlanders should exploit the rich development potential of these 'under-populated and under-utilised' regions before they were inadvertently destroyed [by the local people]. In 1972, the Ministry of Land Reform and Agriculture reported that there were 8.5 million hectares of rain-fed sparsely settled or even empty land that

would be available for settlement in the following 30 years in the southern parts of the country (Wood 1976:70).

The publication of the TFYDP strengthened the fragmented settlement schemes started earlier resulting in the commencement of larger scale programmes in Gamo Gofa, Bale, Harar and Wallaga in the 1960s and early 1970s. The settlement of the people of Menz in the southeastern part of the country started around the mid-1960s. An armed group of six hundred families from Menz were settled in Warka settlement of Dollo *Awraja*, Bale province. Although some of these projects started, as it were, in line with the objectives stated in the TFYDP, "in actual fact there is more population pressure in such areas as Kambata, Wollamo [Walayita], Arssi, etc. than the north" (Nogo 1973:58).²

Between 1971-1972 a number of settlement projects started in Gamo Gofa for migrants from Menz with the aim of providing land to the landless farmers and each settler was promised half a *gasha* of land in the settlement area (Simpson 1975:87). However, it was not clear whether all of the settlers were actually landless or whether they in fact had land (ibid.).

From Simpson's work we understand that the settlers came to the settlement areas hoping that "they would become small landlords who cultivated enough land to meet family needs and rented the remainder to tenants" (Simpson 1975:109). "Twenty hectares is much more than anyone hoped to personally farm; settlers expected to have tenants, sharecroppers, or merely give portions of their holdings to needy relatives" (1975:90). Consequently, the settlers made tenants of the indigenous population who were landless themselves: "Settlers claimed that locals (Borgi [sic] and Gugi [sic] groups from Sidamo) were attracted to the settlement and made tenancy arrangements with the grantees" (Simpson 1975:89).

In 1971, another scheme started in Jidda Kiramu Woreda, Wallaga, at a place called Guten under the auspices of the *Association Solidarité et Développement*, a European organisation supported by private donations. It

² What is interesting to note is that settlements of people from the north in the southern provinces have continued in recent years on a large scale, sometimes with arms, whereas the southerners do not have land, and the majority of them are tenants. Such settlements have resulted in widespread reactions, and at times violence with local population. Such settlements are not carried on empty lands always (Nogo 1973:57).

was reported that most of the initial settlers of this project were the urban poor and its ultimate goal was to 'create an integrated agricultural community' (Simpson 1975:78). During the Derg's [re]settlement programme of the 1980s, Guten became one of the four (the other being Asosa, Qexo, and Jarso) major settlement sites in Wallaga (see Maps 1 and 2). The small village established in the early 1970s, has now grown to a town with its own city council.

II. 'Taking your father's rist and your wife, that is no joking matter'

This section introduces us to the part conflict and intra-kin killings in northern Ethiopia, the settlement policy of the imperial regime and the effect of the political ambitions of the *balabbats* in the south-west in the realisation of the settlement of the northerners in the south. Although detailed accounts of conditions of conflict cannot be obtained, there is no doubt that tension and conflict dominated the process of migration. A young man, who was eight years old when his parents migrated to Wallaga said: "Long live my father! If we did not come here, I would have killed either my uncle or my brother, or, in the worst case, I would have been killed myself over a land dispute."

Until the 1975 land reform, land was the main source of conflict and murder in northern Ethiopia. As Tibebu (1995:74) argued "intra-kin killings were not abnormal, and the basic source of conflict was the contradiction between descent claim and effective possession of *rist* land". It is regarded as manly behaviour and part of the tradition of *sheftenat*³ (banditry) covering 'rebellion and banditry' (Crummey 1986:135). Defence of one's power, *rist* and wife may require or lead to *sheftenat*.

According to one settler Walloye informant, one of the first settlers who arrived in October 1972, drought/famine was not the cause of migration. Whenever it occurred, people used the grain from the granaries. He says, 'when we came here, we left an enormous amount of grain in the

³ On the balanced discussion of *sheftenat* and resistance in the nineteenth century read Crummey (1986:133-149); and on the role of bandits in social mobility of the dissident elites read Timothy Fernyhough (1986:151-172)

granary'. The major factors were population pressure, land degradation and blood feuding over land disputes among kin, on the one hand, and the promise of half a *gasha* (20 hectares) of land from Wallaga by the Emperor, on the other.

Population increased beyond what the land we had could carry. Women give birth up to 12 or even fifteen children. My paternal grand mother, for instance, had fifteen children and all of them lived to their adult age. Our custom allows land inheritance through both parents. Inheritance claims that come from both male and female descendants led to extreme fragmentation of land. People could not plant a garden in their homestead let alone have land for crop cultivation. When those born to male descendants show unwillingness to share the land, those who descend from the female insist saying '*taqomto rucha, tawaldo bilcha yalam*' (as it is not possible to run for the leper, it is impossible to discriminate between siblings). They take their case to court, but as it was not easy to win a case unless you are economically powerful or politically important in those days, feuds led to intra-kin killings, arson, rustling or hamstringing cattle.

Below are couplets collected, one by Levine and the other by myself, from different parts of Amhara region that show how acrimonious disputes relating to land were and how the culture encouraged blood-feuding in order to protect one's land and wife.

*Balaw ba-dimotfar daggmaw ba-wanza,
Babbat ristenna bamist yallam wazza.*

'Shoot him with a *dimotfar*, get him again with a *wanza*,⁴
Taking your father's land and your wife away, that is no joking matter'
(Levine 1972:249).

*Kamisana mofar yishalal yawanza,
Babbat iristinna bamist yalam waza.*

'The beam of a plough of *wanza* (*Cordia africana*) is better than that of *misana* (*Coroton macrostachys*),
Taking your father's *rist* (land) and your wife, that is no joking matter'
(Tolera 1999:47).

⁴ *Dimotfar* and *wanza* are types of rifles.

The widespread problem of conflict and blood-feuding led to a reign of tension in all spheres of life. The increasing number of murder attracted the attention of the provincial governors and the emperor through reports from *Awraja* and *Woreda* Governors and Yohannes Yimer, the then MP from Sayint *Woreda* in the lower chamber of the imperial parliament. According to this informant, these conditions forced the emperor to find a place for people from Sayint in Wallaga.

Haile Sellassie asked the Wallaga *balabbats* to report the number of *gasha* of land they ruled over and the number of people living in their respective territories. At the same time, he promised to appoint them to *woreda*, *awraja* and provincial governorship posts if they met the set criteria of a certain number of *gasha* they ruled over. In order to meet the criteria, they doubled the figure. If they had 100, it now becomes 200, and if it was 300 it becomes 600, and so on and so forth. For instance, if you have a *gasha* of land called Soyye, you name it Soyye I and Soyye II, etc. The *balabbats* were also aware that the more populous their territory is the more powerful they become. As a result they over-reported the number of *gasha* and under-reported the number of households lived on those lands. The former was to qualify for the posts the Emperor promised and the latter to invite as many more people as possible to their territory. They wanted to achieve two goals by inviting more people: first, more people means more subjects and tribute; and second to meet candidacy qualifications for election to the Chamber of Deputies.

The emperor welcomed the reports from the *balabbats* and the news of the availability of land in the south and the emperor's promise of half a *gasha* of land for each migrant household was passed to the Sayint people through their representative in the Chamber of Deputies. The informant reports that as soon as the information on the availability of land in Wallaga and the Emperor's promise to give each migrant household half a *gasha* of land was passed on to Sayint, people crowded the *Woreda* offices to get pass-letters before setting out on the long journey to Wallaga. Although the promise was made only for the people of Sayint *Woreda*, the Gojjames and the Gondares who lived in the bordering *woredas* in Gondar and Gojjam provinces also benefited. They came to Wallo and got the pass-letters. He recounts how people then reacted to the news of land grants:

Land is not an easy matter. People killed their relatives over disputes on land entitlement. Our fathers and forefathers got entitlements after Adwa and Mayichew battles with the Italian invaders. One had to die for land entitlement. When the Emperor

promises half a *gasha* for each household, why should people hesitate? We said to one another '*yala t'or yataganga maret silale mahad alabin*' (we have got the land which we didn't fight for, we should go). People came from Gondar and Gojjam and went to Ajbar to obtain the pass-letters. When asked 'where are you from?' everybody said, 'Wallo', 'Wallo'.

I do not think the Emperor's promise was for the Sayint people alone. There is ample evidence that the Amhara from different provinces had been involved in similar projects of settling in the south, in some instances many years before the arrival of the first Amhara immigrants in Aaroo, Jidda KIRAMU *Woreda*, Wallaga.

III. 'Let's go to Dangila in order that we eat honey'

The case in this section was based on an interview conducted in March 1995. By the time I interviewed him, the informant was 34 years old. He was born in Wallo, Borana *Awaraja*, Sayint *Woreda*. He says he was only five or six years old when his parents moved to Gojjam in 1966. They lived in Gojjam for eight years and then moved to Wallaga, Aaroo in 1974/75. Again after eight years they moved back to Gojjam only to return to Aaroo in the following year. He narrates the conditions relating to their emigration from Wallo, the back and forth movement between Gojjam and Wallaga as follows.

We came to Mandura *Woreda*, Matakal *Awaraja* in Gojjam Province. There were a number of factors why people moved. Drought was traditionally regarded to be the main problem. But when we migrated, it was not a problem. What I remember from what I used to hear as a child was a kind of love song, which says '*anchiye inhid Dangila, mar indinibala*' (you [my lover] let us go to Dangila, in order to eat honey). Dangila is an *Awaraja* in Gojjam, which was reported as prosperous land to us in Wallo. People said 'in Dangila, the cow is milked three times a day. '*Yamar yawatat agar*' (the country of honey and milk). When I got tired on our way to Gojjam, my parents were giving me hope saying 'we are going to a country where milk is drunk like water and honey served with every meal'. Although the name we were told was Dangila, we actually moved to Matakal. For some reason Dangila used to be portrayed as a land of abundance where we lived in Wallo. It could be the place where early migrants from Wallo settled and the

above couplet coined then. Matakal is also a very good country. The problem we had there was that the Gumuz were hostile towards us and killed many of our people.

According to this informant, as his parents told him later on, drought was not a problem at all when his parents decided to emigrate from Wallo. He said that they had sufficient grain and the rain was also normal. The main reason why people migrated was that they were influenced by people who emigrated earlier and settled somewhere in Gojjam who, in order to overcome their feeling of strangeness in areas where they had settled, encouraged relatives and others by portraying the new plots as a world of abundance. He maintained that although the new lands were far better than that of Wallo in many respects, some of their qualities were exaggerated. He said, 'I have not seen a cow being milked three times a day. But still you get more milk here than in Wallo, because of pasture.' According to him, the portrayal of Gojjam as a land of honey was true.

He said there were two main reasons why they crossed the Abbay to settle in Wallaga.

Dibate area where we settled in Matakal is the land of the Gumuz. They are hoe cultivators. They grow cotton, *daguza* (finger millet), *meera* (millet) and ginger by clearing bamboo forest on a shifting basis. When we arrived there, we cleared the forest (bamboo and others) and changed it into farmland. They complained saying that the land, which we thought was no-man's-land, was their traditional hoe cultivation field only recently put to fallow, while they were using other fields. They also complained that their cattle, upon which they rely most, starved because the forests were cleared. As the settler population increased, the problem became more serious and they started to attack us. The most devastating attack was the one in which the whole village of thirty households was completely destroyed in 1969/70. They set fire on the entire village and killed everyone present during the attack. They use both gun and spear-arrow. They made life very difficult for us.⁵ Another problem was that the *balabbats* demanded high tribute,

⁵ "The relationships between the spontaneous settlers and the indigenous Gumuz are not smooth and fully harmonious. Both groups have engaged in several individual disputes and inter-ethnic blood feuds, which occasionally developed into a massive group war. The disputes have occurred since 1966. Thus conflicts and the process of resolving these

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which our people were neither accustomed to nor able to pay. If you pay 30 *Birr* this year, they make it 50 in the following year. When they finally demanded 80, our elders started to discuss among themselves with regard to what to do next if they make it 100 or more in the following years. It is, therefore, the double pressure, one from the Gumuz and the other from the *balabbats* that forced us to come here.

The decision to come to Wallaga was made. Since the movement involved hundreds of households, some kind of preliminary study was in order with regard to the where and how to get land. For this purpose, they decided to send a reconnaissance team but still they needed someone who knew the area to guide them. A group consisting of five men was sent with an Oromo trader who frequently travelled between Wallaga and Gojjam and who volunteered to bring them to Aaroo where the first settlers from Wallo arrived in October 1972. 'When they arrived some of the reconnaissance team members found their kin and those who settled here earlier really liked the proposal as they were a bit worried about their demographic minority vis-à-vis the Oromo.' The team returned to Gojjam and the movement started as soon as they arrived, both because they did not want to lose more people at Gumuz hands and to avoid the *balabbats* hearing of it and producing fictitious excuses to obstruct the movement. The movement to Wallaga proceeded as planned except that some people were robbed by the Gumuz in the Abbay gorge. This informant believed that the robbery was in retaliation for the damage the settlers had caused to the Gumuz forest.

Their life on this side of Abbay, in Wallaga, was partly good and partly not. They liked the bountifulness of the harvest, it was much better than what they knew in Matakal. They also liked the suitability of the land for various kinds of crops. What they did not like about Aaroo was the *gendi* (trypanosomiasis) problem. He said 'all our oxen were killed and we went back to Matakal for fear of the death of our remaining cattle'. In Matakal his parents continued farming while he was employed as a guard at Sorit Elementary School for fifteen months (January 1983-March 1984). Although they managed to restock their cattle, especially oxen, life continued to be difficult for them making a longer stay in the area impossible. That is, the Gumuz attack on the settlers continued unabated

conflicts became the major parts of their inter-ethnic relationships since then." (Mebratie 1999:76). For further information, read Mebratie's article.

and in one of these attacks his younger brother was killed. This was the cause for their re-crossing of Abbay to Wallaga since, he says, 'we could not afford to lose more family members at their [Gumuz] hands' (Tolera 1999:68). Despite the problem of *gendi* in Aaroo, the whole family decided to return weighing the two evils, loss of cattle (more importantly of oxen—the lifeline of the family) due to *gendi* and loss of human life at the hands of the Gumuz. The decision was made in favour of saving human life and facing the lesser evil, the loss of cattle due to *gendi*. He says, 'there is no *gendi* anymore and we are pleased to return here'.

This case makes four points clear. First, the decision to migrate was based on factors other than drought or famine. Second, the influence of early migrants attracts more people from their home areas. Third, in many instances step-migration and back and forth movement between two or more potential settlement areas are involved. Finally, it shows the difference in the definition of what constitutes 'wilderness' between the settlers and the indigenous people, namely the traditional hoe-cultivation field and grazing land of the Gumuz was seen as 'no-man's land' and cleared for cultivation by the settlers. This sparked violent conflict which claimed many lives and destroyed several villages forcing the settlers to migrate to Wallaga. The following section gives a brief account of the migration story, which was necessitated by the combination of economic conditions and cultural restraints that prevent people from engaging in unaccustomed practices to earn a living.

IV. 'Shouldn't he descend to Jimma...?'

This informant was born in 1949 in Gayint *Awraja*, Gondar Province. When he was only two years of age his parents separated and his mother remarried to another man across the Beshilo River in Sayint *Woreda* in Wallo where she took her child along. He grew up there and got married in 1967. In 1972 he went to Metema to find job after cattle disease killed his three oxen and a cow. He did not want to become a sharecropper in his home village in front of his friends and people who knew him from childhood. 'To accept a job such as sharecropping in one's village for someone who comes from a dignified family is disgraceful' he says.

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Therefore, he had to move out and the culture encourages this as the couplet below shows.

Samay sidamamin bare yalalaw saw;
Irabsha sinasa birat yalalaw saw;
Aywardim way Jimma min alkasakasaw.

Someone who does not have an ox when the sky is cloudy;
And one who does not have a gun when there is unrest;
Shouldn't he descend to Jimma rather than loitering here. (Tolera 1999:48)

This couplet shows that someone who does not have ox when the rain is about to start and one who does not have a gun in the event of unrest should go to Jimma. Jimma, the capital of Kefa (one of the south-western provinces), is known for coffee production, to which poor men from northern and central highlands flock during the coffee picking season and accumulate considerable amounts of money within a short period of time. My informant thought Jimma was too far from where he lived and went to Metema in Gondar to work in commercial farms. Unfortunately, he could not get a job and his dream of raising money to buy plough animals did not materialise. Moreover, he fell seriously ill. From Metema his brother who lived in Tedach, Northern Gondar, collected him and took him to a mission run clinic where he was treated and recovered. After staying in his brother's house for three months, he recovered and returned to Sayint. What happened next?

On return to Wallo I knew I did not have anything to rely on. I had only a cow that survived the disease that killed my three oxen and a cow. I knew that does not take me anywhere. I sold the only cow I had but I was not sure what to use that money for at the time. Unfortunately, my brother borrowed the money to trade with and squandered it. Then I decided to come to Wallaga since I had already heard about it from people after I returned from Metema. There were people who returned to Wallo (from Wallaga) to collect their families and I hid myself from my parents and came here [Aaroo] with those people in April 1975.

On arrival, he did not have money to buy food let alone an ox. He did not have a relative either. But there were people who had arrived in 1972

and were able to hire agricultural labour. The land was so fertile that people managed to buy a pair of oxen selling the crop from only one harvest. Since he has moved out of his home area, there was no cultural restraint, that stopped him taking a sharecropping arrangement. He took this job with an Amhara settler in Bagin *Qabale* where there were few people from his home village. There was still a concern for anonymity, but there was less emphasis on tradition. What mattered most was to earn a living and reconstitute one's family in the new land. He recounts:

I started farming with an Amhara as sharecropper where I worked for two years. In 1977, I started my own farm and at the beginning of 1978 I had managed to buy a pair of oxen. I said to myself 'I have the land and a pair of oxen now. I need additional labour.' I returned to Sayint and brought my mother, brothers and my maternal uncles in 1978. All of them got land here and now live comfortably.

I asked him if he could comment on whether or not the migration of his relatives whom he brought to Aaroo had anything to do with landlessness, drought or degradation. He says 'neither scarcity nor landlessness was a problem for my relatives. They were convinced by what I told them about the land and bountifulness of the harvest. When I told them that I managed to buy a pair of oxen in about three years time and still have grain in the granary, they said 'we should go'. Drought was not a problem either.' He says that drought was the cause of migration for those who migrated in 1972/73 and recently in 1984/85.

A couple of concluding remarks. First, because the society disapproves of a person becoming a sharecropper in his own community, migration is sought as a strategy to liberate oneself from cultural restraint and enjoy the freedom that anonymity bestows upon him. Second, the success story of early migrants attracts more people even when conditions in the home areas show no sign of shortage of rainfall and poor yield, which are often blamed for causing migration.

V. 'Mother of the Poor: Abandoned'

On Wednesday 12th of January 2000, I was returning to Addis Ababa after a couple of days of travel to Naqamte. As we could not find a cross-country bus⁶ to return to Addis Ababa (330km), we had to take a taxi (commonly called mini-bus), which are normally used for short distance travel. In this kind of travel, one may change three or four mini-buses to reach Addis. We started the 80km trip between Naqamte and Bako at 7:00am and by 8:00 we were already in Bako. Again we took another mini-bus to Ambo, mid-way along the 250km road between Bako and the capital and arrived there at 12:00 noon. We stayed there for about three hours, having lunch and visiting friends, before we started the last lap of our trip. As we got closer to Addis the situation improved and we found a bus for the remaining 125km. It was 3:00pm.

In the bus, I met a young man. He and his wife (carrying a baby girl) were sitting opposite to me. He was between 25-30 years of age. Their physical condition showed that they had experience of hardship in life. Although I guessed the age of their baby daughter between 24-30 months, her father told me that she was four years old. Her appearance was that of a much younger child. She was emaciated. The condition of the mother was no better, except that she looked slightly stronger which could be attributed to nothing but age. In conversation, they told me about their life experiences, full of hardship, and could imagine what awaited them as returnees to their home areas. This reminded me of what I was once told in a bus while travelling from Wallaga to Addis Ababa by Walloye settlers in Assosa, who were going to Wallo to visit their relatives, about the status of the returnees in their home areas. "People say '*yasafari gabare yistihi*' when they bless or express best wishes to one another" It means, let God give you a [returnee] settler as a sharecropper. "Returnees had nothing to depend on when they returned to their home villages as their land had been taken away. Therefore, their older children became sharecroppers and the younger ones shepherds of their relatives who stayed in their home areas."

Their relatives were [re]settled in one of the villages in Guten [Re]settlement Site during the 1985 state sponsored [re]settlement

⁶ We were told the buses were transporting recruits to the military training centres and the soldiers to the war front during the Ethiopia and Eritrea border conflict.

programme. Fourteen years later, the couple and their two daughters, six and three, emigrated from Waja, Rayana Qobo *Awraja* in Wallo, to join their relatives in Wallaga. The man had visited his relatives in Wallaga a couple of times before and it was these earlier visits which helped him to learn about the area, above all the availability of land. He saw an expansive area of forestland and convinced himself that the fortune of his family and himself lay in Wallaga forest. He said, 'the rain has refused to fall on Wallo land; even if it rains, the crop does not grow as the land is degraded. The little that grows is either washed away or destroyed by worms before it matures. These forced me to leave the country where I was born and grown up.'

According to informants, people have come to realise that the saying 'how come one leaves a country where his placenta was buried?' is of no relevance to the people of Northern Ethiopia in general and that of Wallo in particular. One Gojjame informant once told me a saying '*yamit'afan hagar amat asqadimeh liqaq*' (leave a year earlier a country that is doomed to destruction) to emphasise the problems that force people out of Amhara region. For the Walloye migrant, the golden days of Wallo have gone never to return.

In the good old days, Wallo used to be green where famine victims from Tigray and Gondar sought refuge. Today, let alone feed famine victims of other provinces, she could not feed her own children and reached a point where Wallo become synonymous with drought and Walloye a quotable example of starved people. In 1973/74, Wallo was hit by drought and thousands of Walloyes fled their homes. How many millions died, I do not know, those who survived did so because of aid. Some were taken to Wallaga for resettlement. The rest of us are moving out every year.

Liberating himself from the old saying 'my father's country' or 'the country where I was born and brought up', he migrated to Wallaga. He left his farmland in the hands of his relatives and started his five days journey (on foot and by bus) to Wallaga, '*yedaha tasfa*' (the hope of the poor), as he put it. On arrival, they received a warm welcome from his mother and other relatives. Although the forests he had seen during his earlier visits were largely converted to villages, there were still some lands that did not require

ox drawn ploughing (though they needed to be cleared) in order to produce sustenance for family. He said:

Wallaga yadaha inat nat, bare atil madabariya (Wallaga is the mother of the poor, she doesn't say [require] 'ox or fertiliser'). There is nothing that the mother holds herself back from to help her children; she feeds them while starving herself. The forest is destroyed and the wildlife is gone. We are once again born to life in Wallaga. Our country is of no good even for the wealthy, let alone for the poor. In fact, it was the wealthy who left Wallo first; the poor, even if they wanted to, stayed for fear of transportation cost or for lack of resources for rehabilitation in the settlement area and left at last burying the dead and taking the survivors.

His settler relatives supported the arriving family until the first harvest. As he did not have oxen, he cleared the forest, scratched and sometimes used a hoe to soften the soil for the seed. He said, 'the harvest was so bountiful and I thought my dream of becoming a self-sufficient man has come true in less than a year's time after leaving my country'. Unfortunately, however, he faced another problem; not ecological, but domestic. A few months after arrival, his wife started complaining of health problems. It was not a problem of physical health that could be treated at the clinic. Her problem was homesickness.

The food is abundant, but I was deprived of peace at home. We had got used to the hot weather. We get treatment for the malaria in a nearby clinic. But the restlessness of the woman made me restless too. I could not let her go alone, nor could I follow her to Wallo, as I always remember the misery we left behind only a year ago. I remember the number of relatives we were robbed of by famine. It is not a too distant past, just yesterday. Nevertheless, I was faced with two difficult choices. I did not want to let her go alone in a foreign country (*basaw hager bichawan lilaqat alfalaghum*). *Ayarum tamalisoal, ihilim dahina naw yamibal warem samahu* (lit. I also heard 'the air⁷ has returned and the crop is also good'). Finally, as we have had a good experience of difficult life together, I decided to return along. Then I said, 'let us return and see'.

⁷ The word 'air' refers to climate, this time to refer to the improvement, namely it is raining and there is no drought. A. Pankhurst (1992:31) refers to the concepts 'nature came', 'the air altering', the 'air changing', 'the sky being perturbed' as they were used by the Walloye settlers in Wallaga to refer to the changes in the climate.

He is aware of the consequences of the return: suffering or death. Famine claimed several hundred thousand lives in the 1970s and 1980s alone and, as Caplan (1997:232) remarked in a different context, 'in a society in which death is common, awareness of mortality cannot be far away'. I did not want to probe further into the issue he raised about the 'relatives they were robbed of by famine' not because I am aware of these facts, but because I thought doing so was immoral since I cannot offer a solution to the desperate situation in which they find themselves. His emigration from Wallo to Wallaga was to leave behind all bad things of the past, including memories of suffering in toto. Therefore, it was pointless to make him focus on the 'traumatic experience' he had gone through while he is still grappling with the present and challenged by the gloomy future ahead of him.⁸

Then he moved to other issues that were of immediate concern to him. It was in the middle of the harvest season, half of the crop still in the field. During the harvest time crops do not fetch good prices, since almost every peasant household sells grain to pay off its fertiliser debt. Land taxes are also due this time of the year. 'I was pressed by the woman at home and felt like throwing the fruit of my labour in a river. But, I had to do it.' He raised some money by selling the crops (sometimes below its market value) and borrowed some money from his relatives to cover their food and transport expenses of five days travel back to Waja about 980km.

My last question was whether they had only one child. He told me that they had two daughters, and their seven year old daughter refused to return with the family and stayed with her paternal grandmother at Guten. He said, 'she refused to come with us, saying '*Wallo baqan ande bicha yamibalabet hagar, yawum ayatagib. Izihi baqan asir yibalal, alimalism*' (Wallo is a country where one eats only once a day, moreover it does not gratify. Here one eats ten times, I will not return).

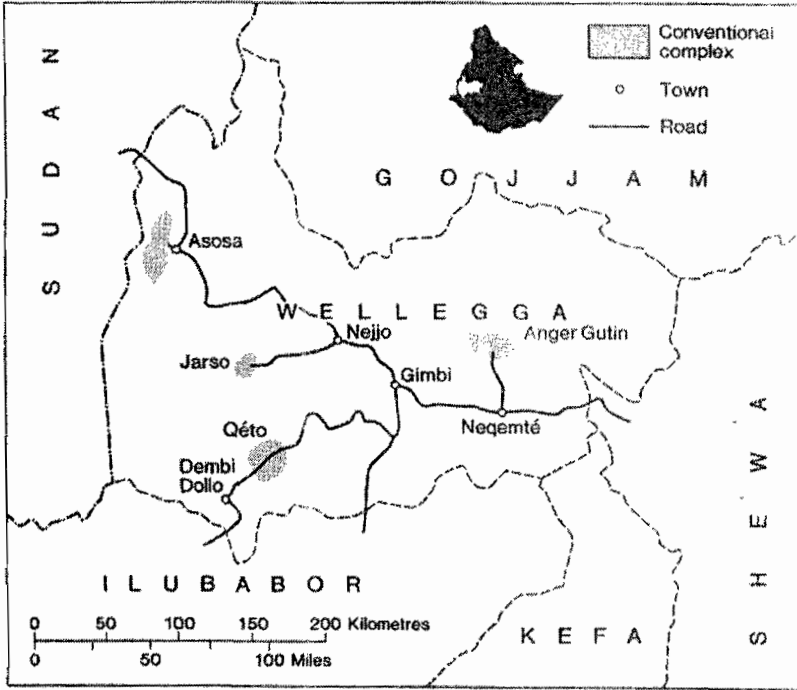
⁸ Writing about the post-Partition memories of Indian women, Veena Das (1997:84) remarks: 'when asking women to narrate their experiences of the Partition I found a zone of silence around the event [of abduction and rape]... one woman warned me it was dangerous to remember.'

The following section backs up the complaints of this little girl who stayed in Wallaga with her grandmother on the ground that there was not enough food in Wallo where they had come from and to which her parents had decided to return. Its other contribution is that the decision to migrate requires a prior knowledge of the potential destination. It also shows the resistance of the local authorities to the settlement and how they were rendered powerless by the federal laws while trying to protect the land and other natural resources within their locality. What this case also tells us is that migration takes place over a period of time, with migrants still keeping hold of the land and other investment in the home areas while developing new villages.

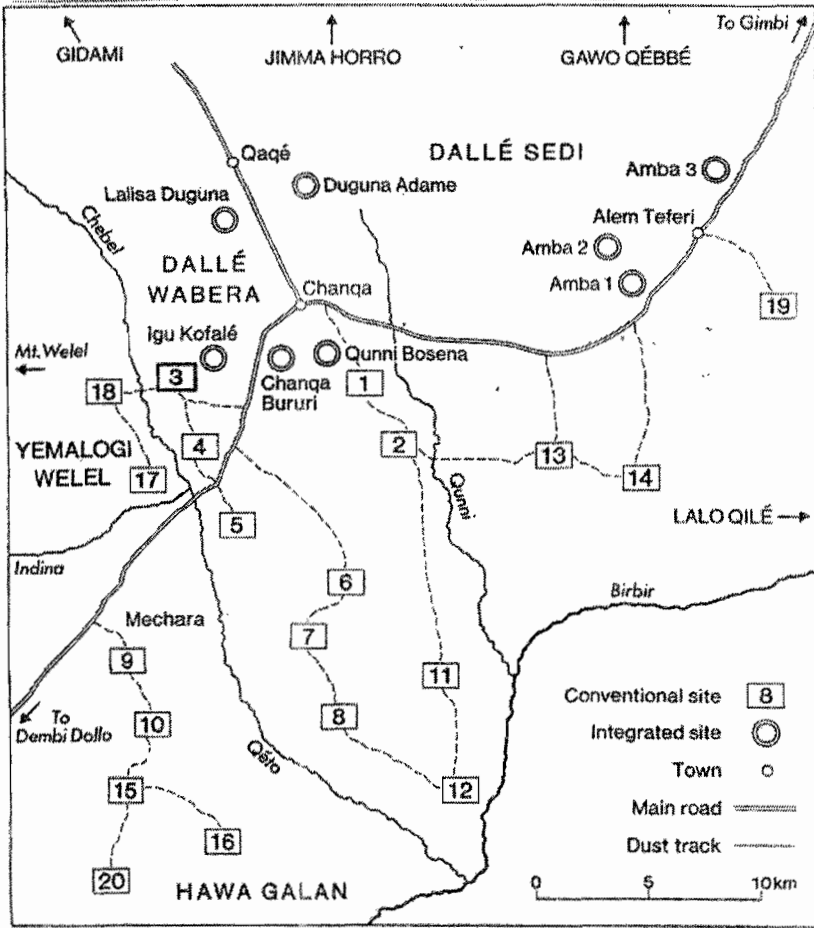
VI. 'God's Bounty has deserted Wallo'

On Saturday 14th August 1999, I was travelling by bus to Wallaga to visit a relative. By chance I was sitting by the side of a peasant who was travelling to Wallaga, Qelem *Awraja*, Qexo settlement area with his three young boys. He immigrated to Qexo in December 1998 with many other co-migrants. On arrival in Wallaga, he worked as farm wage labourer until he started working on his own plot. A few weeks before I met him, he returned to Kamise, his home area in Wallo, to visit his family and to take some of his children to his new home in Wallaga.

I asked him why they migrated to Wallaga. The major cause of their migration, according to him, was land degradation and irregularity of rain. The rain comes either early or late and are of short duration. Sometimes, it rains so heavily and washes away the crops before they mature. He said, 'Wallo used to be a good country (green, fertile and the weather conducive to crop production and animal husbandry). It is no more a country where any living thing can survive. *'Wallo barakaan rabbii irraa fagaate'* (God's bounty has distanced itself from Wallo). All good spirits have abandoned Wallo long ago. That is why people move out.'



Map 1: The four major Conventional Settlement sites in Wallaga.



Map 2: The Qeexo Settlement complex.
 (Both maps adapted from A. Pankhurst 1992)

They learned about the availability of land in Wallaga through the returnees from the 1985 state sponsored settlement schemes. The immigrants have now settled in former *Mender* (village) 18 of the Qeexo conventional settlement site in Qelem *Awraja*, Western Wallaga, which had been deserted by the settlers following the fall of the Derg in 1991. The village site was at a certain point leased out to private investors until it was once again abandoned, reportedly for fear of political instability in the area.

By the time the immigrants arrived in December 1998, it was empty except for the few remaining households from the 1980s settlers. As some of the new immigrants were returnee settlers from the same village or site, they did not have any problem going there. On arrival they received a warm welcome from their previous co-settlers and countrymen.

Immigrants constituted three hundred households, some of them with their family and others not. Although they knew the place was unoccupied, they had to get permission to settle from the local authorities, who were not willing to authorise the settlement.

Woreda and *Qabale* officials were bitter about this and they arrested our representatives who went to the *woreda* office to pursue this matter. Then, we had to go to the Zonal Administration Office in Gimbi to apply for settlement permit and demand for the release of our representatives who were detained by the *woreda* officials. As it was not possible for everybody to come back to Gimbi (about 200 km), we sent delegates. We presented our case clearly stating that we were entitled to live in any part of this country as citizens. They too were reluctant to see our case, but grudgingly phoned the *woreda* officials and told them to release those detained and let us settle.

Praising the state, he says, '*wan mangistiin nama godhu, haati ijoollee ofiif hin gootu*' (What the state does for its people, the mother does not do for her children). He emphasised their settlement was realised because of a legal provision which ensures citizens' right of choice of place of residence. He was certain that had it not been for this provision, the officials at Gimbi would not have decided, reluctantly of course, in their favour. That is why he praised the state in a metaphorical comparison with the mother-child relationship.

Before we separated, not because we had arrived at our destination, but because the bus had broken down after about 190km, he said: '*Wallagga lafa bal'adhaa, midhaan baasa, bineenssa hammaata malee; bineenssi hin baqata, qonqoon hin baqattu, nama waliin duuti*' (Wallaga is a vast country, produces crops, but is full of pests; pests run away when chased, the throat [the need for food] doesn't, she dies with one's self). He complained that the surrounding forest is full of wild animals and some of them destroy crops. He, however, emphasised that what they wanted was the land that produces crops and the pests should not be a problem. 'Until the remaining

forests in which the pests live are cleared, we will chase them away. They run away.' He adds '*lafa gaarii, gaarii isee barbaaddatanii nyaachuudha, booda isiinuu nu nyaatti*' (Get the best land and eat; at the end, she [land/earth] will eat us).

He said that he wanted to bring the whole family to Wallaga, but needed more time to do that. 'I did not bring them here this year because there is not enough food to feed the whole family. And also they have grown some crops there [Kamise]. The transport cost for the whole family is also unaffordable at this stage'. Although I am aware of the reasons why he did not take the whole family with him when he emigrated first, or when he returned to take some members of the family, I suspect that he may keep his holdings in Wallo for many more years, if not indefinitely. Most immigrants deny the allegation that they keep their holdings in their home villages, but evidence suggests that it is widely practised.

VII. Colonisation and its Precedent Effect

In the wake of the Derg's [re]settlement programme, many tens of thousands of migrants from Gojjam, Gondar and Wallo became residents in the towns and villages in Jidda-Kiramu *Woreda*. Many people I have met in some *woredas* (Quarit, Sekela, Inebse Sarmidir, Simada, and Sayint) of Amhara National Regional State (ANRS) during fieldwork knew places such as Guten, Aaroo, and Kiramu at least by name. In fact, I met a number of people who had been to these places at least once, either to visit relatives or to settle but returned for various reasons.

Replies to the question, 'why did you migrate to Wallaga?' include: '*mareta laqena*' (to colonise land); '*injera filega*' (to look for food); '*lenuro*' (to gain a living); '*bamaret t'ibat*' (scarcity of land); and '*sira filega*' (to look for work). Those who had just arrived say '*zemed lit'eyiq*' (to visit a relative). Samples of the pass-letters reproduced below show that the reasons given by the migrants are much more complicated than one might think. One informant showed to me two different pass-letters, signed by the same person on the same day, which were given to him when he migrated to Wallaga in 1992.

I. March 23, 1992 (14/07/1986 E.C.)

Getnet Hunegnaw and Amare Kassa are peaceful residents of (our) Abiy Ayila Peasant Association, Dega Damot *Awraja* in Gojjam Province. Because of a **problem** (*'bechigir mikniyat'*) they now wanted to move to Wallaga and live as urban dwellers. Attesting that they were peaceful individuals (*'selamawi gilasaboch'*) residing in our *qabale*, we have now given them duly signed release paper.

Mehari Atalel, Chairman
Signature and stamp

II. March 23, 1992 (14/07/1986 E.C.)

To whom it may concern

Getnet Hunegnaw, Animaw Hunegnaw and Yimene Liyew are peaceful residents of Western Gojjam Zone, Qola Dega Damot *Awraja*, Dega Damot *Woreda*, Abiy Ayila *Qabale*. The applicants have requested us to give them letter of support so that they will be able to visit their relatives, Gebeyehu Muluneh and Alemayehu Muluneh, in Aro Addis Alem *Qabale*, Gidda KIRAMU *Woreda* in Wallaga Province. We, therefore, kindly request that all concerned would extend revolutionary co-operation so that they will arrive and return safely.

Victory to the People!

Mehari Atalel, Chairman,
Signature and Stamp

For anyone who reads these two letters, it is evident that migrants wanted to use either 'I' or 'II' as they found it fit to achieve their goals. While travelling, they show the second one since it simply states that they were 'visiting relatives in Wallaga'. For the first few weeks or months after arrival, depending on how successful they become in obtaining land for permanent settlement, they may present the second letter to anyone who wants to know their identity. This does not cause any problem, because they are staying with relatives whom they 'visited'. The first letter is used when they negotiate with the *qabale* leadership for registration because it shows

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they were peaceful residents of ANRS, and migrated to Wallaga because of a problem (*chigir*).

Another point worthy of close examination is the 'cause' of migration, namely, *chigir*. It does not specify what particular problem is responsible for their migration. It seems there is a gamble here, namely they can give any reason as long as they thought it would support their case, though 'scarcity of land' and 'drought' are the often-stated ones. Another possible explanation why they had two different pass-letters was that it kept their options open if they wanted to return to their home area having been unsuccessful in obtaining 'suitable' land in Wallaga.

The letter below, which I obtained from the Enabse Sarmidir *Woreda* Administration, Mertole Mariam, Gojjam, was issued by the *Woreda* Office on the recommendation of *Qabale* 015 administration and states that Worku was a peaceful farmer visiting his relatives in Wallaga.

III.

Date: 29/4/1999 (21/08/91 E.C)

To Whom It May Concern

On the request of Ato Worku Lewute, the Administration of *Qabale* 015 has written to us requesting our office to give the applicant a pass letter so that he would be able to visit his relatives in Wallaga. The *qabale* has certified that the applicant was a peaceful farmer (*selamawi arso ader*) residing in their *qabale*.

Therefore, confirming that the above mentioned individual is a peaceful resident of our *Woreda*, we have issued this letter of support.

Best regards,

Ayehuat Assefa,
Member of the Exc.Com. /W. /Co.
Enabse Sarmidir *Woreda*
Signature and Stamp

The *woreda* officials told me that 'they [peasants] come and say to us 'we want to visit our relatives in Wallaga or Kefa', and we give them supporting letters knowing that they would not come back.' They do this first to escape policy constraints and second to retain their land entitlement in their home areas'.

The officials admit that huge numbers of people migrate to Wallaga, Kefa and Ilu Abbabor either as seasonal or permanent migrants without reporting to *qabale* or *woreda* offices. According to these officials, people migrate not because of scarcity of land, but because they are influenced by the information on the availability of land and better opportunity in Oromia, and the availability of someone whom they know at their destination. These factors rendered migration a routine exercise for many.

One Walloye informant, a pioneer settler, admits that the recent wave of migration is influenced by the success story of the early settlers like him.

VIII. Conclusion

The materials presented in this paper demonstrate the complexity of the circumstances that directly or indirectly influence migration. The presentation of short cases elaborates the range, not only of types of migration (seasonal or otherwise) but also of what causes (environmental or personal economic problems) it.

They also show that migration is influenced less by drought/famine than by ecological degradation, gradual economic deterioration, and land disputes and feuding to which the imperial regime responded by encouraging out-migration from the north and settlement in the south. The influence of early migrants and the role of social networks in facilitating migration are clearly demonstrated. The process of step-migration and the back and forth movement of people between two or more potential settlement areas challenges the assumption which often characterises rural-rural migration in this country as spontaneous. Some of the cases discussed above show that migration once started, becomes 'institutionalized and thus culturally normative' (Kubat, et al, 1981:324).

The role of the *balabbats* in facilitating the settlement of the northern Ethiopian migrants was crucial. The emperor promised promotion for the *balabbats* if they could provide land to the northern migrants and land to the latter if they migrate to the south. The outcome of this arrangement was the settlement of northern Ethiopians in the south. The promise of the emperor to the *balabbats* was not delivered because it was a false promise used as a political tool in the first place. In short, the cases presented in this paper

show how socio-cultural, economic, political and environmental factors interact in very complex ways to influence migration and settlement.

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