

PAUL B. HENZE

**Ethiopia and Medieval England:
Persistence of Patterns in Rural Life**

Abstract

The author describes a trek through the Goncha Gorge in the very northeastern corner of Gojjam in 1995. He observed life and customs which reminded him of descriptions of life in medieval England as described by Barbara Hanawalt in a book recreating the essence of life at that time, “The Ties that Bind”. He describes striking similarities between traditional peasant life in today’s Ethiopia and life in medieval England in style of houses, customs relating to food and drink, family life and social organization.

I

During November and December 1993 and January and February 1995 I spent several weeks traveling in remote regions of highland Ethiopia – northeastern Gojjam and parts of Tigray, mainly Tembien, now accessible via the new highway that has been constructed linking Adwa to Makelle via Abi Adi, as well as Wag, Lasta, Wadla Dalanta, and Gaynt. The principal purpose of this travel was to search out, photograph, and describe religious art and manuscripts in monasteries and churches and gather information on their history. In much of it I traveled in the company of Professor Stanislaw Chojnacki, deeply knowledgeable and tirelessly adventuresome in spirit. In Tigray I had Ato Girma Elias as a convivial companion and expert guide. Both are firmly committed to study and preservation of Ethiopian art, history, and traditions, and both are known well to Richard Pankhurst. In Gojjam our party spent three days completing a survey of the treasures of the historic Monastery of Mertule Maryam which we had begun in December 1993.¹ Our

¹ Professor Chojnacki reported our 1993 travels in ‘Voyages d’exploration en Ethiopie (Novembre–Décembre 1993)’, *RSE*, 36 (1992), publ. 1994, pp. 37–48.

1995 visit coincided with the great festival of Tir Maryam attended by thousands of the faithful from the surrounding area. On the last day of our stay at the monastery we were invited to a feast in the *senbet* presided over by the abbot, *Eserunan* Haile Maryam Tagale, and his entire hierarchy. There were prayers and, as special guests, we were asked to speak. I praised the monks on the preservation of valuable national treasures and thanked them for the hospitality they had shown us. Great trays of *brindo* were served and good *talla* flowed freely. We reflected that the occasion would have been very similar to those in the great European monasteries at the height of the Middle Ages.

The next day we trekked northeastward to more remote monasteries, Wafa Yesus and Getisemani, in the Gwoncha Gorge which leads down to the Blue Nile.² In Tigray in 1993 we visited Chelekot and made an initial reconnaissance around Hagere Selam. In 1995 after visiting rock and built churches in Enderta, we explored monasteries on Debre Asa near Abi Adi. In 1993 we spent several days in Wag and several more in Lasta and then crossed into Gaynt and Belesa.

Everywhere in these travels we enjoyed the hospitality of churchmen and villagers – drinking, eating, talking, and sleeping in peasant houses and local inns. Life in these regions still follows age-old patterns. The concerns of the people are almost entirely local. We found little reflection of the disputatious politics of Addis Ababa. The only manifestations of modernity were occasional, impressively dedicated young school teachers and even more occasional agricultural and forestry project workers. But their impact on traditional life and attitudes is still very limited.³ This will change in the next decade or two, for new highways are bringing these regions into contact with the outside world and, as the pace of economic development in Ethiopia accelerates, people will develop new awareness and new wants.

I commented when I came back to the bright lights of Addis Ababa in March 1995 that I felt as if I had returned from the 14th century. When I returned to Washington a few weeks later, I picked up a book I had ordered before I left: *The Ties that Bound – Peasant Families in Medieval England*,⁴ by Barbara H a n a w a l t, a professor at the University of Minnesota. With recollections of rural Ethiopia still vividly in mind, I found it so absorbing that I devoured it in a weekend. It read in many respects as if it were a description of the rural life I had observed in travels in Ethiopia not only in recent years, but over the more than 30 years I have known the country.

² Professor C h o j n a c k i gave a preliminary report of our Gojjam expedition in *IES Bulletin*, 4, March 1995, pp. 6–10.

³ It was good to observe in these regions that the dogmatic politicization and intrusive socio-economic engineering of the Derg had left almost no permanent impact. Derg villages were almost all gone, often without a trace, and Derg-organized groups no longer existed. The church remains the predominant moral influence in the countryside. The Derg's vaunted literacy program appears to have made little lasting impact in these regions. On the other hand, sensitive young Ethiopians – teachers and development specialists – working in harmony with the local population are making an impact that bodes well for the future.

⁴ Oxford University Press paperback, 1988.

Prof. Hanawalt's study is an example of the kind of research for which Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie broke new ground with his *Montaillou* in the 1970s.⁵ In it he recreates the lives of inhabitants of an Albigensian village in the French Pyrenees in the late Middle Ages. On the basis of meticulous reading of written records – parish registers, court files, sheriff's logbooks, and coroners' reports, Prof. Hanawalt, like Le Roy Ladurie, lets us observe the daily activities of individuals, provides intimate insights into their behavior, describes their work and problems connected with it and, thus, evokes the spirit of the life of the times. Rather than fitting their information into preconceived theories of the way people interacted and lived their lives, these historians paint a vivid and remarkably complete picture of a live, though long-gone, society. They do the equivalent of the work of modern anthropologists when they go to live among the people they wish to study.

Comparison of life in England of the 12th, 13th and 14th centuries with life in the remoter parts of rural Ethiopia today reveals remarkable parallels. It tells us something fundamental about human beings that should be quite obvious but is often lost sight of. In her Introduction Prof. Hanawalt states two important conclusions: "Much of human and familial behavior is dictated by biological needs that cannot be culturally denied or even culturally distorted." (p. 10)⁶ She underscores the importance of the family, finding that peasant families remained much the same over the centuries she surveyed. The family "was able to maintain its basic structure because it was a remarkably flexible institution with a capacity to adjust to varying circumstances." (p. 3) Rather than agonize over defining the term *peasant*, she adopts a simple definition: "Peasants are rural dwellers who possess (if they do not own) the means of agricultural production." (p. 5) This definition seems to me to be as appropriate for Ethiopia today as it was for medieval England. It distinguishes settled agriculturalists from nomads and pastoralists.

Prof. Hanawalt's book is rich in descriptions of people of all ages and in all walks of life and, though it is filled with detail, it is easy to read. In the six sections which follow I cite and summarize descriptions from it which parallel some of my observations in recent and earlier Ethiopian travels. To those familiar with Ethiopia, similarities will immediately come to mind.

II

The Family

Families were mostly nuclear because wattle-and-daub housing was cheap and readily available. Mature offspring could easily build their own houses. Old people could either retain the family house (if it was in good enough condition) or construct a new one when

⁵ *Montaillou, the Promised Land of Error*, transl. by Barbara Bray, New York 1978.

⁶ Hereinafter all page references are to Prof. Hanawalt's book.

they turned their land over to their children (p. 5). The most common form of household in medieval England consisted of parents with a married son with his wife and children (pp. 91–92). Children were put to work as soon as they were able – boys in caring for animals and other farm work, girls in household tasks, such as carrying water. Live-in servants were rare but servants who came for all or part of a day's work were quite common. If they were not from the same village, they often lived in separate simple housing. Teenagers not needed for work at home were often sent to work as servants in other people's homesteads from the age of 12 until they married. Sometimes servants married into the families where they worked (pp. 162–167).

By modern standards, people died young, so widowhood and widowers were common in medieval English society. Second and third marriages were frequent. Widowers tended to remarry sooner than widows because of the need for a wife in the household. Property arrangements were often a major consideration in choice of a second spouse. Some women did not remarry and operated their farms themselves. When they grew old they were seldom lonely, for children and relatives tended to look after them (pp. 220–226).

There were of course many variations in family structure, just as there are in rural Ethiopia today. The flexibility of the family as the basic element of social structure has been of great importance to Ethiopians as they have coped with the disruption the country experienced during periods of crisis, but has continued to serve as the strongest element in Ethiopian social structure.

Villages and Houses

The most important consideration in location of medieval English villages was the availability of drinking water – streams, ponds, springs (p. 21). Villages were comparatively small. If population increased, people would establish new villages, for they did not like to live in too large agglomerations. Boundaries were important and disputes over fields sometimes led to violent confrontations (p. 23).

House sites were very mobile. Most houses were built to last only one generation. When houses began to disintegrate, new ones were built. This occurred even in places where houses were built of stone (p. 33). Sons did not have a strong attachment to the father's house – they often built a new one when their own families were fully established or when they took over the farmland from their parents. While attachment to the family house was weak, attachment to family land was strong (p. 34).

Some houses were round, some rectangular – often long. They were roofed with thatch. The most common type of house had a timber frame with wattle-and-daub fill-in. Wattle and daub was also used for interior partitions. Cob – mud and straw strengthened with chalk – was used in some areas in place of wattle and daub (p. 34).

Floors were usually of packed earth – clay – though occasionally they were stone-paved. They were swept periodically – for archaeologists who examine old village sites seldom find accumulated layers of soil and rubbish. “Doorsills were often built-up and were favorite places to sit, particularly for children, who could watch their parents at

work and look at chickens and ducks in the yard.” (p. 37) Mud and filth around dwellings were a problem, but the effect of rain was often controlled by drainage channels. Floors were strewn with straw – which represented a danger when it caught fire from the hearth. The central hearth was a basic feature of the house, sometimes simply placed on the floor, sometimes built up with clay or stone and with a clay canopy. Cooking was done in vessels held by tripods or trivets. There were no chimneys. Chickens and pigs wandered in and out of houses (p. 40).

Long houses had living quarters at one end and a place for animals at the other; the two areas were usually separated by a cross passage. More prosperous peasants sometimes had separate buildings clustered around a courtyard for their animals (p. 33).

Equipment for farming was stored in the animal section of the house or in the yard: plows, harrows, shovels, forks, flails, and winnowing fans. Most peasants kept some combination of cows, hogs, sheep, poultry, oxen or horses (p. 51).

Food and Drink

Peas and beans were a major part of the peasants’ diet. “For a short period they could be eaten raw and were a much appreciated delicacy, but in the main they were dried” for later use. Common condiments included garden herbs, salt, and honey. Less common and more expensive were pepper, cumin, and cinnamon (pp. 55–56).

Wheat and rye were used for bread and porridge. Barley was made into ale. The quality of ale varied greatly. Ale was drunk at meals and both men and women drank ale after the day’s work. Drinking was an important social activity. Women were ordinarily the brewers. Men ran taverns but much ale was sold directly from the house where it was made. Women with ale to sell put up an ale staff with some device on it in front of their houses (pp. 28, 55–56). “[B]rewing was a lucrative side occupation for peasant women, particularly... among those of primary village families who could afford caldrons and capital outlays for malt necessary to brew on a large scale.” Many villages regulated the price of bread and ale (p. 132).

The Economy

Most women spun wool, did home weaving, or sold thread in markets for extra income. Some beat flax and made thread from it. In cattle herding districts, women made butter and cheese for sale. In areas where they were available, peasants gathered rushes and took them to markets for sale to others who wished to make mats and baskets (p. 116).

Almost all peasants had access to market towns where they sold their surplus agricultural production – grain, eggs, butter, thread, livestock – and in turn bought pottery, other household items, or special foods and condiments. Some peasants regularly rented market stalls and sold things for friends and neighbors. Thus they developed into petty traders (p. 116).

Work and Social Customs

Medieval English peasant culture was almost totally illiterate, therefore “public ceremonial, symbols, and celebrations did not simply provide entertainment but also publicized important events such as marriage.” “Marriages were festivals.” (p. 203)

Birthrates were high, but infanticide appears to have been rare and, like abortion, was condemned by both society and the Church (p. 101). Divorce, accidents, and early death kept the population down.

Children were commonly married at a very early age through marriage contracts. These contracts were sanctioned by canon law but were only valid for ages above seven. Marriage contracts could be repudiated at puberty, but the parties themselves often had very little say in the arrangements, which were between parents. Puberty was canonically established at the age of 12 for girls and 14 for boys (p. 98). “Partnership is the most appropriate term to describe marriage in medieval English peasant society.” (p. 219)

Men and women performed quite different tasks and had different responsibilities. Neither sex was necessarily subordinate to the other.

Peasants gathered together and helped each other perform major seasonal tasks such as plowing and harvesting. They also carried out obligations for larger landowners and officials – “work for the manor”. Those with teams of oxen would bring them for such occasions. Food and drink for the whole group would be provided by the lord of the manor or by local officials and such work undertakings often became major social occasions (p. 59).

Feasts and celebrations often became boisterous because they occurred during times of the year when work pressure was not great: the most popular months for such observances were October, November, and January. The Church prohibited marriages during Lent, Rogationtide, and Advent (p. 204).

Men played football, held wrestling matches, and played at skittles and stone throwing as well as cards and dice. Cock-fighting was popular (p. 217).

Voluntary guild associations performed important religious, political, economic, and social functions. Among the most widespread guild activities were funeral arrangements. Members organized processions and prayers for the deceased and in case of need sometimes provided aid to the family of the deceased (p. 262).

The Church

The church was taken for granted as an integral feature of peasant life. The quality of the clergy varied greatly. Ballads and popular tales often reflect criticism of the behavior of priests and monks. They show that medieval English peasants were often humorously realistic about human shortcomings and relations between the sexes. But they also demonstrate that people understood and recognized the desirability of high standards of personal behavior, even though they did not always live up to them. Custom, public opinion, and the influence of the church combined to maintain moral standards.

“The Church...tried to preserve marriages and ensure the marital validity of sexual unions,” for it was important for purposes of inheritance and social order. “In the matter of prostitution, the Church could only condemn.” “In cases of concubinage, the Church acted to legitimate the union if there were no impediments.” “Although dedicated to preserving the sacrament of marriage, the Church realized that adultery, cruelty, and heresy could make a marriage intolerable for one or both partners and that a judicial separation might then be in order. Acting in this capacity, the clergy often performed more like marriage counsellors trying to arrange amicable settlements than judges.” (p. 211)

III

There is hardly any feature of the descriptions of life in the preceding sections for which I have not observed parallels in rural Ethiopia in recent years. Space, of course, does not permit me to discuss them all, so I will confine this section to a few experiences that serve as examples.

Most Gojjamis still build their houses with wooden frames interlaced with branches plastered with earth – *chiqa*. They are normally roofed with thatch, though the use of tin is expanding and will spread much more rapidly as rural prosperity increases. Floors are of compacted earth, though doorways sometimes have a bit of stone paving, as do areas around the central hearth. In the head priest’s round thatched house at the Monastery of Wafa Yesus where we were guests for the night, we awoke to watch the mistress of the house busy making the day’s supply of *injera* on a *mitad* firmly set on three stones over the hearthfire. A baby tucked under one arm suckled at her breast as she lifted her free hand high and gracefully poured a measure of batter. A burst of steam rose. When the huge round pancake reached the proper stage of brownness, she picked it up in a single motion and swung it onto a growing pile in a *mesob* at her side, then repeated the same sequence over and over again. Two shabbily dressed children watched from the floor near the door. Chickens and a calf wandered in. Only when it came up to sniff the *injera* was it whisked away. When the last drop of batter had been poured out of the large gray clay pot and the last round of *injera* baked, she covered the pile in the *mesob* and pushed it aside. Removing the *mitad*, she positioned a pot of *bakela* – our later breakfast – in the fire. Outside a cock crowed, a dog barked, and through the door we could see a ray of sun striking a neighboring house as it rose over the edge of the gorge.

Later the same day we arrived at the Monastery of Getisemani in mid-afternoon, having stopped to photograph a 16th century manuscript at the Church of Emaus on the trek from Wafa Yesus. The monks greeted us with the happy news that we were in time for a wedding feast. They were celebrating the marriage of a young deacon. We were led past the rather decrepit church under immense old cedars to a two-story stone building on a shaded hillside. On a small terrace on the lower side the newlyweds shyly greeted us. Both wore gilded paper crowns and colorful capes. We asked the age of the groom. Sixteen. He certainly looked no older. The bride? Eleven. She looked no more than nine.

Why do they marry so early? – we asked one of our Ethiopian colleagues, an Addis Ababa University graduate student still unmarried at 25. “The country people are concerned about young men wandering off to towns and leading immoral lives,” he explained. “Parents marry boys early to girls from families they know so that the young men will stay at home and feel responsibility.” He went on to explain that the church is now especially concerned about the morality of deacons. It wants to keep them linked to religious life: “When they marry so young the groom promises not to attempt relations until the girl reaches sexual maturity,” he said, but added he doubted the promise was always kept. Children are often conceived very early and thus the population increases rapidly.

We were seated on rocks around low tables and local monks and guests clustered on the hillside. The wedding feast consisted of dark brown *injera* made with *mashila* over which servants poured thick, spicy red *shuro wat*. Others carried out great pots of *talla* and poured it into horn beakers. As soon as we drank to the health of the newly married pair, the beakers were refilled.

We were traveling in the month of *Tir*, a favorite season for weddings in Gojjam. The next day on our trek out of the gorge as we were passing a small cluster of houses beyond the beautiful crater lake of Bahir Giyorgis, young men came running out to tell us there was a wedding and we must stop. We were led to a temporary shelter made of tree branches where a boy and girl, even younger than those we had seen at Getisemani, were sitting on a cloth of honor surrounded by relatives and friends. Our coming was seen as a favorable omen for a good marriage and we were immediately given *talla* and a *womfit* filled with lightly cooked *bakela* and *shimbera* to munch. This year’s harvest had been good, local men said, and life was improving, better than during Derg times. There was peace and people could farm as they pleased. But there was not enough land. Young couples had difficulty getting the land that they needed to farm. They felt government needed to help them find more land, but where they could not say.

IV

In much of Tigray and many parts of the northern Ethiopian highlands permanent dwelling houses are usually built of stone, though often round and traditionally with roofs of thatch. In Wag and Lasta stone houses often have two stories, with an outside stairway leading to the second floor, which is the primary living and sleeping section. Some are remarkably attractive. Many have been preserved in Sekota and Lalibela, though new ones are now seldom built. Most stone houses seem to be used from one generation to the next. In Shoa, in the Ankober region and in Jirru, where people live on cold heights at 3000 meters, Derg zealots carried out villagization campaigns in the mid-1980s. People were forced to abandon their oblong, thatched, solid stone houses and move into lightly built wood-frame *chiqa* structures spaced on a checkerboard grids. It was depressing to talk to them after they had been moved. Deeply attached to their land and resenting being moved from it, they had two other complaints – they did not enjoy being so close to

all their neighbors and the *chika* houses were drafty and cold. As soon as Derg power evaporated, they abandoned the makeshift villages and returned to their old homesites, rebuilding their houses if they had been deliberately knocked down or, where the walls still stood, putting on new roofs and thatch.

In Sekota we were pleased to find that half the town still consists of two-story round houses, some of them remarkably picturesque and well built. The thatched roofs of some have been replaced by tin. Most have outside stone stairways leading to the second floor, while the ground floor is used for cooking and storage, brewing as well. Many houses had poles with cups in front of their doors. Beside others weavers had looms. There is controversy in Sekota about how it should be modernized. Some people regard the stone houses as relics of the past that ought to be eliminated. It will be unfortunate if they are all replaced by rectangular pole structures with fronts of brick or concrete block, as in so many Ethiopian towns.

In Tigray we stopped one sunny morning along the new highway between Abi Adi and Hagere Selam to photograph a particularly attractive round house standing alone with no others in sight, as often occurs in this part of Ethiopia, though many Tigrayans also live in clusters of farmsteads and long-existing villages with both rectangular and round stone buildings. A weaver – a man – was at work at a loom beside this well-built house, weaving cotton *buluqo*. He said they took cloth to market to sell and bought raw cotton which his wife spun. Even remote peasants have their connections with markets which are an essential component of the traditional economy all over Ethiopia. Women bring butter, eggs, and vegetables to sell. Some bring reeds and straw for basket-making. Itinerant peddlers, often Muslims, provide the services of a Woolworth's – needles, buttons, Chinese coffee cups, scissors, knives, soap. Some peddlers still travel from market to market with their wares on donkeys. More and more now travel by minibus.

During the years since the demise of the Derg it has been encouraging to note that new products as well as a greater variety of local produce are offered at markets in country towns – a sign of gradually improving conditions in the countryside and movement toward a broader market economy. In the more than 30 years I have traveled in Ethiopia I have watched many rural market sites develop into towns. Originally they were simply open spaces with perhaps a few stone platforms or rude pole shelters or hitching posts for animals, utterly deserted six days of the week. Then peasants with trading instincts or quantities of produce to sell started to build sheds to store grain or other commodities. As tracks were improved to become roads, buyers would come by truck to purchase grain, hides, cloth, and other goods. Instead of bringing pots of *tej* and *talla* only on market days, enterprising women would have drinking houses built. They turn into *buna bets*, bars, and *megeb bets* and attract daily customers as traffic increases. Families move in permanently from rural sites. Craftsmen set up shops. Soon there is a town. Towns all over Europe began in this fashion too and grew into cities.⁷

⁷ Cf. Ellen W. Moore, *The Fairs of Medieval England*, Toronto: The Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1985.

V

At the end of the last day of our Gwoncha Gorge trek in northeast Gojjam we returned to the country schoolhouse in an area called Eneseqol where we had left our vehicle. The five young male teachers were happy to have us back and insisted we stay with them for the night. They lived in a row of simple rooms in a long shed-like building 200 meters behind the school. Their rooms were papered with old newspapers and photographs from picture magazines. We watched a vivid sunset across the rolling landscape and then hiked with them across stubblefields to a threshing floor where a farmer was guarding his three-foot pile of teff. Teff had grown well this season, he said, but there was danger that thieves would steal it if it were not guarded during the night. He threw straw on his bonfire and it lit the whole landscape. He said he had enough teff for his own needs and some to sell at the Gundaweyn market. We walked back to the teacher's largest room, lit by lanternlight. A maidservant brought *shuro* and *injera* for dinner. We had a bottle of Gojjam *katikala*, bought the week before in Debre Marqos, in our car and shared it with them.

It was a good opportunity to get a teachers' view of life in the countryside. All five were between the ages of 20 and 24 and from other parts of Ethiopia. Two had graduated from Kotebe Teachers Training School in Addis Ababa and had already taught in other rural locations. They seemed to be a dedicated and harmonious team and were eager to talk about their school. No more than half the children in the area came regularly to class, they said, few of them girls. Some parents thought their children would be permanently lost to them if they let them go to school. Most peasants were illiterate and saw little need for their children, especially the girls, to learn to read and write. The Derg literacy campaign had had little lasting effect here. How about the church – did it encourage school attendance? They thought it was mostly indifferent, but said the people were very attached to it. The teachers had no doubts about the value of education and were confident that country people would gradually come to appreciate it, but they did not expect attitudes to change immediately and were not fanatic about trying to change them. They wanted to persuade, not force, and besides, they had more than enough to do working with the children who did come. Even minor improvements in availability of elementary medicines have accelerated the rate of increase of population. The school could not cope with all the children of the region if they attended it.

Here at Eneseqol, talking to these hard-working teachers, we could see the beginning of the end of the medieval world as it has prevailed in the Ethiopian highland countryside since it was first Christianized a millennium or more ago. Compared to the pace of change that took place in England from the 15th century onward, rural Ethiopia is on the threshold of transformation at breakneck speed. Backward as many of the practices and attitudes of the countryside may seem, it is important to recognize that rural dwellers have been living according to habits and principles of behavior that are rational and functional in their context. Change calls for adaptation and adjustment rather than obliteration of the past. The schoolteachers with whom we spent the night at Eneseqol

seemed to sense this. I found their understanding of rural Ethiopians deeper than that of many of the urban intellectuals who devote their energies to what they consider to be fashionable political dialogue. Equally shallow is the level of understanding of some *ferenjis* who look at the Ethiopian countryside and bemoan the “poverty” they say they see everywhere. “Poverty” has become a badly abused concept in the developed world. Those who talk most about it take only material conditions compared to their own affluence into account. Poverty of spirit is a more debilitating condition. I have not found much of it in the Ethiopian countryside. Barbara Hanawalt gives the impression that it was not very prevalent in medieval England either.

Glossary

- bakela* – fava beans
- brindo* – raw meat
- buluqo* – hand-woven cotton cloth
- chiqa* – mud, clay, earth
- ferenji* – foreigner
- injera* – pancake bread
- katikala* – country gin
- mashila* – sorghum, durra
- megeb bet* – eating house
- mesob* – flat basket for storing injera or serving food
- mitad* – griddle
- senbet* – sabbath house, meeting house at a church
- shimbera* – chick peas
- shuro* – lentil or bean puree seasoned with spices
- talla* – home-brewed beer/ale
- wat* – stew
- womfit* – basketry sieve