Can national identity be built on local democracy?

Siegfried Pausewang

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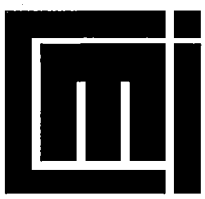

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Summary:
In Ethiopia, with 85 % of the population in agriculture, most of them illiterate, democratisation has to work against adverse experience: Peasants can refer back to democratic traditions on local level. But their experience with state authorities for the last 20 and even 100 years is only negative. They had to accept that authority means the power to enforce anything on the people. They are used to obey, if only to avoid severe punishment. However, democratic practice can not be introduced from above: Local as well as central authorities will always respect only as much democracy as the people demand and enforce upon them. A teaching programme in rural Ethiopia is described, which tries to show to local people that they have democratic rights and that they have to put them into practice by living them and by demanding them from their superiors.

Indexing terms:

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To be ordered from Chr. Michelsen Institute, Fantoftvegen 38, N-5036 Fantoft, Bergen, Norway. Telephone: +47 55574000. Telefax: +47 55574166

CAN NATIONAL IDENTITY BE BUILT ON LOCAL DEMOCRATIC TRADITIONS?

Experience with democratic education in Ethiopia.

Both democracy and national identity are challenged in Ethiopia today: Does national identity concern Ethiopian citizenship - or the Amhara, the Tigre, the Oromo nationality? Is democracy a project of the central government - or could it better be built on a revitalisation of local traditions? At least for some of the ethnic groups or "nationalities" as they are presently termed, it may seem that democracy could be a natural part of their traditional identity, instrumental in distinguishing themselves from others and escaping from greater Ethiopian embracement.

About one half of present day Ethiopia's population, and two thirds of the territory, have been conquered during the second half of last century. Most of these people associate "Ethiopian" nationalism with the centralising experience under autocratic Emperors, in which they were the victims of "Abyssinian" colonialism. A tiny elite of those conquered peoples were invited to become "amharised", to be assimilated into the dominating power elite. They are today vehemently criticising the decentralisation programme of the government as fermenting "ethnic hatred and "divide-and-rule" policies. They propagate a crude and often chauvinist nationalism of Ethiopian unity.

The rural majority were subjugated to a double exploitation as rural producers and colonial subjects. For them, the central state was always experienced as the source of uncontrollable power. Under the Emperors, the central Ethiopian state was associated with colonial exploitation. Under the military regime of Mengistu, socialism and democracy became equally discredited as an experience of growing terror and tightened control from above.

Actually, there was a short period during which peasants, especially in the "new" Ethiopian areas in the South, made a different experience. The land reform of 1975 released the peasants from an increasingly repressive and exploitative landlord class. In some areas, notably in Sidamo and Arsi, peasants were impatient with the military government for holding back their liberation, and freed themselves even before the land reform law came into force. The conflict between the peasants' desire to decide their own affairs in their local communities and the military's attempt to establish control over the country, its people and resources was probably the most critical political issue of the Mengistu period. Throughout this period the peasants fought a losing battle. The peasant associations, formed in 1975 as organs for peasant self-administration, were transformed into the lowest organs of state control over peasants. Taxes and contributions were increased step by step. Peasant communities were subjected to unpopular and uprooting resettlement and villagisation programmes. The probably most hated and feared intervention of the military government were the arbitrary and brutal campaigns for military conscription among peasant youth. Peasants became increasingly disillusioned, withdrawing their loyalties from the Ethiopian state and retreating from politics and from the marketplace.

Over the years this conflict has been interpreted from a number of different angles. It has been seen as a question of resource appropriation (Eshetu 1986) and distribution (Fantu

1989), in terms of the confrontation between centre and periphery (Payer 1974), peasant and the military (Brüne 1986), or simply as marginalisation (Fantu 1989). It was also interpreted as a conflict between local democracy and state control (Pausewang 1988, 1994), as a struggle between peasants and the state (Brüne 1988 and 1990) or between peasants and the urban classes (Taye 1989). These views need not be contradictory: they overlap and supplement each other. But they show in how complex a psychological and historical landscape "nationalism" and "democracy" are to be reconciled. Other lines of conflict, notably between different cultures; between Christian and Moslem faith, and even within different Christian denominations; between different social groups etc. are cutting across such cleavages, to form a complex web of interests and affiliations within which each individual has to find his (or her) personal integrity and national identity.

Ethiopian democratic traditions

On central state level, Ethiopia has only authoritarian and autocratic traditions. And since there was no experience of democratic rule at least since over 100 years, the population has internalised a pattern of behaviour and an expectation that state authorities are central and do not tolerate any challenge from local level.

Yet there are democratic traditions on local level. They are today the base for centrifugal forces, demanding secession as the only remedy against being colonised and subjugated under central despotic rule.

The Oromo are the most topical case in point. Their traditional "*Gada*" system has historically been a set of institutions of self-determination based on age groups. The rights to participation of the Oromo pastoralists were bound up with sharing responsibility for everybody's well-being within the family or clan. At the danger of simplifying, one might say the community was integrated by elaborate obligations to share food and other goods (*maarro*) and to participate in mutual aid (Taye 1989). A cycle of age groups, called *gada*, distributed work and responsibilities (Asmarom 1963, 1973, Haberland 1963). One age group would take care of the cattle, the community's most important wealth, while others would be responsible for organising community activities, for protecting peace, or selecting grazing areas and coordinating the movement of cattle. Every individual had her or his place. Everyone had a right to life, food, shelter, health care and education within the community's resources. Everyone had also a responsibility to contribute his share, specified by the obligations of their specific *gada*, and to ensure that these rights were maintained for all. "Democracy", then, was a right to participate in decision making as well as in the use of resources, in the work as well as in the responsibility. *Gada* gave the member of an Oromo family both social security, community integration, personal identity, influence and pride.

However, such integrity was limited to small groups. The Oromo were tolerant in assimilating individuals from other ethnic groups. But they were efficient in keeping 'the others' in place as outsiders. Moreover, *gada* was adapted to the life situation of relatively small pastoralist communities. Adopted to the larger unit of a state, *gada* has proven to be difficult to practice. Therefore, when Oromo groups settled down and became agriculturalists, in an environment exposing them to potential competors for land, they developed local kingdoms, not democratic states. The reign of the Aba Jifar of Jimma is a case in point (Lewis 1965).

Also the Amhara and the Tigre have their democratic traditions on local level. Though today often overlooked, and considered by the Oromo as a tool of colonial and quasi-feudal exploitation, it is still possible to identify the original democratic qualities in the "*Rist*" system of governing the relations between man and land. *Rist* was originally, before the Abyssinian state conquered it for its own purpose of extracting rural surplus, an institution to share community responsibility for the fair distribution of land and the provision of basic resources to all its members.

The Amhara had been agriculturalists for many centuries. Land was controlled by the community but farmed individually. A right to life meant for them a right to a share in the land of the community. This right, called *rist*, was associated with responsibility for the community. Pride in one's *rist* was not only an assertion of an inherited claim to land, as many foreign observers stated (Hoben 1973). *Rist* was also a basic right to membership in a community, including a share in the responsibility for a fair distribution of land. "Fair" did not necessarily mean equal. Plots were allocated according to needs, which could differ depending on family size, social obligations, and military and political functions. A widow who had no oxen to plough would get help from neighbours who could afford it, as part of their community obligations. In his own community, also a cripple or a beggar could expect a share to live on. However, the definition as to who belonged to the community and who was excluded were rather narrow, defined by descent from a common ancestor. Even within that family group, there was no equality. But there was a basic security, which was built on common responsibility.

Pride in *rist* is also expressed in the Amharic word *gebar*, meaning a farmer, or a contributor. The term refers to his contribution to the community, his commitment to the well-being of all. In contrast, the English word '*farmer*' or the German '*Bauer*' refer to the activity of rural production, the French '*paysan*', the English '*peasant*' or the Spanish '*campesino*' indicate rural residence, while the Scandinavian '*bonde*' or '*husbond*' (a term living on in the English word '*husband*') refers to the settler, who lives on his land as head of a household.

Rist was the base of peasant production; but the base of the Ethiopian state was a parallel structure of (semi-) feudal rights called *gult*. In a simplified way one might define *gult* as the right of the Emperors, and on their behalf the local rulers, to appropriate part of the peasant's produce, in exchange for military protection, political leadership and social order. There was, ideally - if not in practice, a delicate balance of rights: A peasant would have to abide with his gult lord as long as he lived under his rule. But if he felt his situation too oppressive, he could decide to move to another place where he could claim community membership and hence access to land, because of his grandfathers' or his mothers' origin from that area. And while a *gult* lord could coerce an individual peasant, he could never dare to confront the peasantry as a group, or he would face their revolt.

Historical experience

Rist was in constant competition with the demands of the centralised authority, with the "*gult*" rights of the nobility. In the 19th century, both *rist* and *gult* were modified and overshadowed, and changed in their character, through the centralisation of the Ethiopian Empire. For the Amhara and Tigre, this situation created a state of century-lasting rivalry for

hegemony. For the majority of the (rural) Oromo, the centralisation meant colonisation, exploitation, expropriation.

During the 'Scramble for Africa', the *gada* of the Oromo and the *rist* of the Amhara, as well as similar cultural practices of other national groups, were disintegrated and corrupted. The vast resources needed to carry out the centralisation of the Empire as started by Teodoros, established by Menilek and completed by Haile Selassie, were collected at the expense of local communities. The Oromo areas in the South were conquered to increase Menilek's power. The Oromo peasants' resources were used to pay for the weapons and the soldiers with which they were conquered. Soldiers from the North were given local authority in the South, paid through rights to land and other privileges. These people had no interest in ploughing land themselves, but to collect part of its produce. So they became landlords, locally called '*neftegna*' (man with a gun). Their rights to land, being considered hereditary and inalienable, were called '*rist-gult*' or '*rist*' (Pausewang 1990 b). Hence the Oromo's abhorrence of the term '*rist*' until today, as a tool of colonial domination.

The Amhara peasants were no less forced to contribute. When their *gult* lords were given positions in the central army or administration, they left their villages but kept their privileges there. They continued to collect their part of the peasants' harvest every year, but no longer performed their functions for the community, neither distributing their share in the village nor employing peasants to work on their farms or in their rich households. While a nobleman lived in the village, he might have collected half the village's produce; but it was redistributed within the community. Once he left, the village lost these resources, and had in addition to finance those social services and functions which before had been his responsibility.

The effect was the same in both cases. Pastoral and peasant communities alike became subjugated to a centralised political and economic structure which they had to finance through contributions and through new taxes. The interests of the centre were given priority over those of the community, and the interests of export over home consumption. This destroyed indigenous systems of social security. Communities were forced to conform to economic rules that did not accommodate the practice of collective responsibility.

Most of the resources produced were expropriated to finance the government's central administration, the Imperial court and an expanding international trade. In the rural areas, competition for the remaining local resources was severely sharpened. Peasants who had to deliver more than half their produce, needed more land to produce sufficient food for their families to survive on. The *rist* system degenerated into a cut-throat contest between everyone for more land, in which people's closest relatives became their most dangerous rivals because they owned the same claims to *rist* land. *Gada* either disintegrated into an order of social ranking of little practical consequence or disappeared totally.

It is thus no exaggeration to state that Ethiopia escaped colonisation by participating in colonialism. Menilek's state in effect joined the ranks of the colonial powers to become the only African colonial power Europe hesitatingly recognised. The firearms Menilek used to conquer the South and later to repulse the Italian colonial invasion came from Europe. The European powers accepted his claim because they understood that he offered therm access to the resources they wanted. Once they had helped him build up his empire it was far cheaper to control the area by trading with him than by enforcing European military control over him.

African and European Traditions of Democracy

Democracy is mostly defined as government by the people. In consequence, free elections are usually seen as the best indicator of democracy. But free elections are not sufficient: majority rule has to be controlled and supplemented by protection for the rights of the minorities. Generally, respect for the human rights of all citizens is seen as a necessary complement to democratic mechanisms of political steering.

Comparing African and European traditions of democracy, one observes easily that the principles may be the same, but the balance between different components may vary, and some rights and principles may be taken better care of than others.

African concepts of democracy are based, not on 'one man, one vote', but rather on the individual's sense of belonging to a community. In African tradition, decisions are not made by a majority vote, but through a debate aiming at a consensus. Anthropologists have described the practice in many African societies whereby discussions go on and everybody gets a chance to speak until a solution is emerging which benefits the community and with which everyone can go along. Julius Nyerere, Nelson Mandela, Yoveri Museveni, each in his way, referred to this tradition in developing their political projects.

Correspondingly, in the African legal tradition the community and not the individual is the subject of justice. A traditional court is concerned primarily with reconciliation and reintegration of the community, not with personal interests or individual justice. It attempts to reintegrate a deviant into his society, to reconcile him with his adversaries, to re-open a door to unity and peace in the community.

This is fundamentally different from European-type democracy. In Europe it would be futile to seek solutions through continuous palaver: If vital individual interests clash, a compromise can not be found through debate. A decision can only be reached by the force of a majority or of economic power. It would be equally futile in Africa to decide a dispute by a majority vote which can not relieve the feeling of hurt prestige among those who "lost" the vote, nor the nagging grudge of those who suffer material damage. Such loss becomes acceptable only if it can be seen as a contribution for the sake of community integration.

This difference indicates some inherent weakness i European type democracy: Liberal concepts of democracy individualise decision making and dissolve responsibility. Following a liberal model of the market economy, it assumes that the interest of the community will be taken care of if every individual takes care of his or her own interests. Accordingly, one theory of democracy assumes that political parties should 'sell' their programmes to the voters; the party that sells the best 'product', will win most votes (Schumpeter-Downs model). Between elections, held every four or five years, voters have neither influence nor responsibility: they delegate both to their 'representatives', who will take care of their (individual) interests. In such a model of democracy there is no space for community responsibility as basis for individual identity, which is so important in Africa.

Another weakness in European practice of democracy is its standing aside from economic decisions. In the economic field, private ownership rights precede democracy, and economic

responsibility relates to the owner, not to the community. Again, there is little space for co-responsibility for all members, which is so fundamental in Africa.

On the other hand, African traditions may be weak in protecting the rights of minorities and individuals. For centuries the *beta israel* (*Falasha*), the *Nuer* and *Annuak* (*Shankalla*), and the artisans (*fuga*) were minorities accused of having the *buda* (evil eye). They were excluded from community membership and, accordingly, deprived of equal economic and democratic rights. Even more, in historical times, slaves were segregated and left without individual rights - though African societies knew the practice of assimilating slaves into their community on an individual base. On a different level, women were deprived of most of the community rights as far as participation is concerned, though they were normally included in the social security and the family identity through their husbands. The practice of female circumcision is another aspect of severe interference with individual rights. It may not be possible to list all groups being exposed to severe discrimination - both physically and mentally handicapped people certainly need to be considered.

Whether a synthesis is possible, integrating the positive sides of both traditions, seems a project for the future. It would ask for a democratic model in which decentralised individual decision making is practised with responsibility for the well-being of the community, and democratic control of the economic activities is combined with the protection of the rights of minorities and generally of each individual.

Decentralisation

In consequence of historical experience, the EPRDF government after 1991 codified the principle of "self-determination up to and including secession" for all "nations, nationalities and peoples" of the country. The right to self-determination was considered essential to give the different groups (which were conquered after 1850) a consciousness of being freed. Being free to secede, it was expected that they would be enabled to gain the necessary self-consciousness to understand that it was in their own interest to remain within the Ethiopian federal state.

This policy was violently attacked by a majority of the urban and educated opposition in Addis Ababa, as well as the exile community in the United States, as a "divide-and-rule" tactic of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), trying to set the different ethnicities up against one another, to be able to control the country. Tribalism, it was asserted, was the only way for the Tigray, comprising only a small minority of the Ethiopian population, to control the vast territory of Ethiopia and her population.

This argumentation overlooks the historical situation in rural Ethiopia of 1991. The peasants' experience of the Mengistu regime had brought them closer to the national resistance movements, which were the only opposition accessible to them. In 1977-78 Mengistu crushed the urban opposition in the Red Terror campaign. To be young and to be educated, was equally life dangerous in those days. Young intellectuals from the student movement and others in the towns who did not want to give up, had only one choice - to retreat to their rural home areas. Their only chance to continue political activities was to join the existing national liberation movements of their peoples.

Once peasant self-determination had been undermined and reversed by a socialist central state, the only alternative appeared to be a hope that national self-determination would offer liberation from central state repression. An independent nation state of the Oromo, Tigray, Afar or Sidamo appeared to be the last hope for many to win more influence and control over their own situation. The Eritrean issue had long since become a question of national liberation from the central Ethiopian state. And there were national resistance movements such as the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) ready to welcome the disillusioned socialists and to offer them a new political platform. The national issue, defined as liberation movements from Ethiopian colonial control, emerged as the new uniting denominator.

In 1974, the key to legitimacy of the new government of the Derg lay in solving the *land question*. The land reform of 1975 was clearly a response to a compelling political demand of necessity. In 1991, no new government could have hoped to win legitimacy without solving the *nationality issue*. A far-reaching decentralisation was, at that moment, the only chance to keep Ethiopia together. It would be denying realities to ignore this need.

This does not necessarily deny the possibility that decentralisation gave the new authorities a chance to at least temporarily defuse some other burning issues, and possibly even to dilute responsibility for some unpopular measures. However, all in all the decentralisation exercise appears to have been met with more success than expected, and the accusation of "divide-and-rule" tactics against the government has largely subsided. It appears that "ethnic nationalism" is gradually loosing its importance, and criticism against the government for using it as a tool to dismantle Ethiopia is calming down. The only field where ethnic sentiments are continuing to create resentments is the apparent building up of a Tigrean economic hegemony, directly or indirectly controlled by the TPLF, and the allegations of an unfair concentration of investments and development efforts in Tigray.

The decentralisation project is still riled with problems. But few will deny that it was, all in all, a necessary exercise. And while the negative sideeffects are stubbornly persisting, its positive features become slowly visible.

"Civil Society" or "*Gada*"?

"Civil society" is a fashionable term in Europe these days. Historically it goes back to the writings of the German philosopher Hegel. His term "Bürgerliche Gesellschaft", translated as civil society, indeed indicates the urban origin of the very idea. So was the entire concept of Human Rights a product of the European Enlightenment philosophy, from the "Declaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen" of 1789 and the Declaration of Independence of the United States in 1776 to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948. Indeed, the liberal project of human rights and democracy is born out of the demand of the citizens in Europe and in the New World to free themselves from the restricting control of the nobility, as well as to free their economic dispositions and their political aspirations from the limiting regulations of state control. As such, the European history of human rights and democracy is the history of urban individualism and the commercialisation of urban life.

"Civil society" in Ethiopia today is a title monopolised by a small group of organised urban people, who are vocal and have clear political opinions and interests. Their positions mirror the ambiguity of the term "civil society" in a Third World country, where an urban minority

is vocal and organised, and has no hesitation to present their interests as those of the "silent majority", while the rural majority is silent and dispersed and without influence.

Dominated by a small group of urbanised intellectuals, whose interests have long since been associated with a professional career in an urban setting, the relatively few organisations and circles which can today claim to be the "civil society" stand for a solid "urban" view of politics in Ethiopia. It would be highly misleading to take their views as those of the democratic majority, given the fact that over 85 percent of the population live in rural areas, and even of the urban population, a majority is uneducated and illiterate, and unable to appreciate the values of a free press and freedom and of speech. However, there is no reason to weigh the liberal traditions of democracy and human rights against the community-based catalogue of rights as they are valued by the rural traditions. Rather, an attempt at integrating the two traditions seems vital if the process started with decentralisation is to be completed successfully. An attempt at co-existence of liberal civil rights and community-based integrative rights is indeed essential if at all democracy is to win practical political relevance in a predominantly rural people.

However, any such attempt at a co-existence has to be critically aware that it has to bridge over a serious conflict of interests, inasmuch as both concepts will demand measures which need resources. Hence, both concepts are bound to compete for resources from the state, and strain the capacity of a state notoriously short of finance. Moreover, they will compete for the attention and concern in a bureaucracy and not least a judicial system staffed by predominantly urban-recruited, educated and raised personnel.

On the other side, there is far less manpower and material support to be expected. The Oromo Liberation Front claims that the superior democratic tradition of the Oromo could offer a wealth of experience for building democracy. But in spite of such advantage (or maybe because of it, as some suspect,) they feel excluded from political positions with influence on democratisation processes on state or regional level.

Indeed, '*Gada*' as a model for building a new democratic spirit and practice, based on rural local traditions of co-responsibility, has its merit and attraction. *Gada* in its historical forms had elected leaders (even though they were elected only from a limited group of eligible candidates) being subject to change of leadership in regular intervals. *Gada* included everybody in the responsibility for the community, and offered a strong base for personal identification and identity building. Being an Oromo meant being a member of a certain *gada* age group, of a family, a tribe, a nation. This tradition, if consciously used, could build a bridge to construct a rural, local based concept of democracy, to balance the urban-based european liberal project of the "civil society" with its emphasis on important, but insufficient civil rights. Other ethnic groups would have their share to contribute, certain aspects of the *Ottuba* system of the Sidamo, the *Diesa* of the Tigrigna, and others may supplement it. But it appears that the Oromo possess the cultural and personal strength to become the leading force in developing a modern and functionable concept from their traditional cultural roots.

And they have understood their role in this process. Already in 1992, in a discussion one of the leaders of the OLF said that, since the word "democracy" was discredited through Mengistu's practice in the rural areas, why not call it "*Gada*" in future? What he referred to was not just a new name, but developing a concept of democracy adapted to rural needs.

Also within OPDO, similar ideas are contemplated. But OPDO is absorbed with rural administration in Oromia, hardly having the manpower and skills to get even a rudimentary local administration working. Alone, they lack the capacity and the human resources to realise this historical chance. All the more, there is reason to unite forces. And for the OLF, the project of a new democratic concept built on local traditions, needs and human energies should be so important that they can not afford any longer to sit aside, in exile. Their manpower, their energies, their enthusiasm is needed in Ethiopia, in Oromia, to help build a new concept and practice of democracy on the traditions and experience they claim to represent. Against this important task, other differences and animosities should have to be put aside.

But against such visions stands today the everyday experience of Oromo farmers, who see that their peasant associations, now as before, are used to enforce the decisions of central authorities, not to communicate their demands or interests up to the political leadership. They experience that people in positions of authority demand obedience, and that authority means the ability to enforce ones will over others. An administrator who listens to people's demands is in danger of being considered a "weak" leader. Hence, they expect that they have to obey their leaders, but not that they could discuss with them how to promote their interests.

Democracy defined as local social security

Such attitudes will not yield to a more democratic spirit unless a new experience gives reason for changed expectations. The project of building democracy is, to a large extend, dependent on building up confidence and self-esteem in a disillusioned and frustrated rural population.

Such a starting position is not enviable for any new start. It needs no less than building up a modern system of rural-based social security, which could strengthen traditional experience of co-responsibility coupled to a right of all to membership.

To be attractive to rural people with a however remote experience of traditional social security patterns, it must include new guarantees for basic rights such as a right to life and integrity, which means, in a rural context, a right to food. And since no economic power in the world can feed all the Ethiopian people unless they feed themselves, it means by necessity a right to work, to feed oneself with ones own work. This right can only be given in the form of access to land.

The land questions thus reveals itself to be a central issue of rural-based democracy. In the Ethiopian tradition, land is individually farmed, but controlled by the community. New forms have to be found in which the land is allocated by the community under the co-responsibility of all community members. This is one of the most contentious issues, as the urban majority, in line with its individualised approach, believes in individual land ownership and a free market of landed property.

Rural democracy would probably further demand basic guarantees to a right to health care and education - within the limits of resource availability. It is likely that international guarantees could help, not to offer immediately the realisation of health and education for all, but a quick and tangible improvement on a widely dispersed scale. In the first place, however, the communities would have to build on a revival of those traditional mutual aid institutions that have survived in the rural areas or adjusted to urban conditions. These

include the *edir*, the important neighbourhood burial associations, the *equb*, savings exchange groups, the *debo*, village-based mutual aid groups, and *maarro*, the sharing obligations of the Oromo, and other local institutions of social relevance.

But the communities will not be able to provide basic social security, health care and education if people are not aware of their entitlement and their right to demand such services, and willing to put it on the test. They have to recognise that they have a right, and even a responsibility to insist on organising them.

They need backing from higher district and national authorities, which have to set standards, coordinate efforts, train local health workers and teachers, food security monitors and store keepers. And they require international institutions to guarantee help where communities are unable to enforce their rights for want of resources or backing on the national level.

It was demonstrated many years ago that basic health and educational services could easily be financed on a worldwide scale at a fraction of what is currently spent on development aid (see Hopkins and Norbye 1978). However, international authorities can only reach the people if the communities take the initiative and responsibility.

Local social security would give room to personal integrity, built on a right to participation in the community, and co-responsibility for the integrity of others. This is another central aspect of democracy, which brings this concept of democracy back close to the liberal ideas in Europe, where Montesquieu twohundred years ago exclaimed: "I vehemently disagree with what you say, Sir - but I would fight, if necessary risking my life, for your right to say it."

Integration in a community spirit characterised by such integrity, could give rise to a national identity in which there is room both for local democracy, for a decentralised administration in national states, and a federal Ethiopia strong enough to re-gain the loyalty of proud citizens of different national origin.

Democracy defined as upward communication flows

In 1986, we observed a formidable communications gap between central authorities and peasants. While political leaders were convinced that there was democratic discussion on grassroots level, peasants knew to tell a different story. The rural administration, recently built up, was made up of young, half-educated people who had escaped the Red Terror and who did not want to be held responsible for any decision. They preferred to execute the wishes of their superiors. They acted like a filter between the peasants and the administration: Any request from above was immediately executed as an order, even if it had asked for the peasants' views. They wanted to be efficient and to quickly report back without delays or problems. Information from the villages to the authorities was sifted through and only expressions of peasant satisfaction, support and well-being were reported. Anything that could delay their success would be brushed aside. Complaints and critical ideas were filtered out (Pausewang 1986, Mulugeta 1987).

Peasants had experienced a brief period of peasant self-determination and local democracy, which started with the land reform of 1975 and the formation of self-administering peasant associations. There was a wide variety of experiences during this period. Over substantial

parts of the country, especially in the South where peasants had most reason to get rid or the *neftegna* and take their affairs in their own hands, the land reform had opened a valve and released a wealth of energy and initiative.

After this experience it is certainly no longer possible to claim that peasants are incompetent and unable to take responsibility for local self-administration. They did it in 1976. There were problems, no doubt - but they managed to solve them largely on their own.

But the experiment was abolished already in 1977 - 78, parallel to the Red Terror. The government re-established complete economic and political control. Administratively, the peasant associations became the executive organs of the state and were no longer democratic organs of the peasants. The economic burden on the peasants was gradually increased.

Unfortunately, the role of the peasant associations - now generally termed rural *kebele* - has not been redefined after 1991. In particular, there has been little effort on local level to re-establish them as organs of peasant participation. There would have been an excellent occasion to re-establish them as discussion forums where peasants could meet to form their own political will and communicate it to the higher authorities. Instead, it seems that local authorities were quick to establish their control over the rural *kebele*. As several observers reported in 1995 (Tronvoll 1995, Aspen 1995, Poluha 1995), the cadres of Mengistu's Workers Party were replaced by cadres of the new governing group, but functioned as before in the service of the authorities, transmitting their orders to the peasants, but not the peasants' interests to the authorities.

If a rural democracy project is to succeed, it is essential that the rural democracy as practised in the 1975 *gebrewotch mahber* (peasant associations) is re-established as general rural practice. That is, it must become a routine again that peasants elect their leaders without interference from above, and that peasant associations are encouraged to express their members views, communicate them to the authorities and follow them up with active demand to the authorities. It must be routine again, as in 1976, that peasant associations can tell the zonal administrator: You are there to serve us, and we expect you to come when we ask you for explanations.

To function in such independence, peasant associations have to build on a spirit of co-responsibility. A system of upward communication presupposes a web of loyalty different from hierarchical organisations: leaders must feel responsible to their voters, and it must be the guaranteed collective right of the peasant community, not the individual right of a peasant leader, to demand rapport with the authorities higher up. It will not work unless upward communication flows are based on collective rights, as opposed to the liberal definition as individual rights.

Democracy defined as national identity

This model sounds pretty utopian. But so is democracy an utopia unless it is tried in practice and applied, if not in its full extent, at least to a considerable degree. Democracy is never perfect, and unless it remains an utopia it will most likely not remain a reality either.

We believe that a solid democratic self-consciousness in a predominantly rural population can emerge if people experience to be integrated in their community and have active influence n the decisions that affect their lives and their future. Social security, local integration and personal integrity depend on each other, and give the individual a self-esteem which makes him (or her) proud of their community, region, and nation.

National identity, in other words, can be build on everyday experience of being an active and respected part of a community, rather than on more mythical historical roots which are conjured as an alternative to a depressing life situation and a gloomy future. Therefore it is so important that decentralisation is not just an administrative practice, but is followed up with a different experience of individual influence and collective responsibility. Such experience will give people a natural identification and a feeling of integrity.

It is therefore important to accompany administrative decentralisation with a training and practice in democratic attitudes and behaviour in everyday life. In a rural society, democracy is hardly possible without decentralisation. But decentralisation without the active experience of democracy could even discredit the term democracy further. Only the combination of decentralisation with democracy can associate both with the personal emotional integrity and national identity needed to grow democratic practice in local roots.

Such local experience is needed also to assure a healthy national identity, which does not give room for one nationality overshadowing others. Nor need an ethnically defined national identity exclude a strong feeling of belonging to the Ethiopian nation. A solid local integration gives room for multi-layered and more multiple identities. One can be a Muslim or a Christian in religious context, an Oromo, Amhara or Tigray, Nuer, Afar or Guji for social purposes, a supporter of the peasant association of Merhabete or Alle Oua in local context, and of Wollega or Manz or Gojjam in a regional one, an Ethiopian in larger political affairs, an African in international ones, and an active supporter for the local *edir* when family festivals are to be celebrated, all at the same time and without one interfering with the others.

Likewise, an ethnic national identity need not weaken the central government. To the contrary, if based on active local participation and identity, a national identity as Oromo or Amhara, Sidamo or Afar can go a long way towards defusing the explosive potential for conflict between central power and the nationalist movements, giving both an opportunity to coexist and compete in a multi-tier government system.

Nor does such national identity demand that the State give up its sovereignty. Rather, sovereignty will be returned to where it belongs: to the people. In any case, the idea of national sovereignty of state government is a remnant of the Napoleonic wars in Europe, and is ripe for a discreet burial. The people (not the state) ought to be considered the sovereign power in a democratic state. There is no reason why the state should be more sovereign than a local community, district or regional administration, or super-regional federation; nor, for that matter, than a church congregation, a peasant association , labour union or football club. All derive their authority from the people they represent. All these institutions should be controlled by their members, and their leaders be dismissed if they use their office for their own gain, or try to exceed their mandate and to impose their own will over those whom they are elected to represent.

A programme of democratic education in rural areas

National identity based not on blind allegiance to a more or less abstract nation, but on personal integrity derived from the experience of active membership and co-responsibility in a community, is the necessary foundation for building a new decentralised democracy in Ethiopia. It has to start from local level, and it has to start from the everyday experience of rural people.

Rural traditions are difficult to build on. But the mobilisation of the rural majority may be the only chance to create a demand from below for democracy. Only when people in the peasant associations and in the local administrations demand that their interests are to be taken serious, and that administrators have to respect their rights and to attend to their needs, can democracy as a national project have a chance of success. After all, democracy is to be measured not by the frequency or smooth administration of multi-party elections, but by the influence of ordinary people on those decisions that affect their lives. These two criteria are not opposed but belong together; but the criterion of empowerment is the superior one.

To contribute to a mobilisation of the democratic will of the rural people, building on local traditions, a training programme for democracy was started with assistance from a group of European Church Aid agencies in Ethiopia in the preparation of the 1995 elections. This initiative addresses the ordinary people in rural and urban areas. It teaches them not only how elections work and how the state organises the division of powers and the pluralism of opinion. More basically, it tries to engage people in a discussion, starting with questions like: How are decisions made in your family? Who is involved in discussing, who is not, and why? And who decides in your community, in the neighbourhood organisations, the mutual aid groups, the church congregations and sports clubs? What are your rights as a citizen? Can a policeman arrest you because your donkey ate the grain of your neighbour? Should a woman be allowed to participate in a meeting on agricultural issues?

Such discussions are hoped to contribute to a popular pressure for everyday democracy and respect for human rights in rural life. It ought contribute to a "counter-force" to the "civil society" on local - and rural - level, which puts the interests of the rural majority on the political map and makes local tradition applicable in political life.

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