'DECENTRALISED THERE, CENTRALISED HERE': LOCAL GOVERNANCE AND PARADOXES OF HOUSEHOLD AUTONOMY AND CONTROL IN NORTH-EAST ETHIOPIA, 1991–2001

Teferi Abate Adem

On 28 May 1991, a coalition of insurgent movements calling itself the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) captured Addis Ababa.[1] It did so after nearly two decades of rural-based guerrilla warfare waged against the military regime of Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam, which came to power in the wake of the 1974 popular uprising that dethroned Emperor Haile Sellassie I. Over the years since 1991, the EPRDF has embarked on a programme of devolving state powers. The centrepiece of this programme is a new constitution which claims to solve long-term political questions concerning power-sharing, ethnicity and human rights by restructuring the country into nine broadly decentralised ethnically based units called 'national regional states'.[2] Each national regional state is empowered to formulate and implement its own policies by further devolving power to district (*woräda*) and local (*käbällé*) government levels. More importantly, EPRDF leaders have publicly stated their intent to implement these provisions through participatory democracy which they viewed as a tool for achieving the desired goals of bringing government closer to the people and making it responsive to local concerns (see, for instance, EPRDF 1995).

These changes are still in full swing throughout Ethiopia, and it may be difficult at this stage to pass judgment on their outcome. But rural people have certainly been affected by the processes through which the fine-sounding objectives of power devolution were articulated and implemented in different localities. As a consequence, two competing views of devolution have increasingly dominated the Ethiopian political discourse. One view characterises it as 'radical reversals', from

TEFERI ABATE ADEM was a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Program in Agrarian Studies at Yale University in 2002/2003 academic year, and prior to that an Assistant Professor and Chair, Department of Sociology and Social Administration, Addis Ababa University.

[1] The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) is a military–political coalition consisting of a Tigray-based core called the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and three other groups, namely, the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), the Oromo People's Democratic Organisation (OPDO) and the Southern People's Democratic Organisation (SPDO). The EPRDF has also official affiliate members operating among different ethnic groups, notably Afar, Somali, Gambella and Beni Shangul. For the history of the TPLF, see Young (1998b). For ethnically based movements in southern Ethiopia, see Aklilu (2001).

[2] The nine regional states are Tigray, Afar, Amhara, Oromia, Somale, SNNPR (Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples), Benishangul-Gumuz, Gambella and Harrari. The Constitution also grants an autonomous status to the capital Addis Ababa and the eastern town of Dire Dawa.

decades of monarchical despotism and socialist dictatorship, to a genuine decentralisation that would enhance local autonomy and self-governance. A second view counters this by arguing that the devolution process appeared rather as the 'continuation and working out' of the centralising projects of previous Ethiopian regimes (Donham 2002: 3).

The 'reversals' argument, which is best reflected in the official statements of EPRDF leaders and in the writings of some scholars, tends to be highly discursive (see, for example, Young 1998a). It encapsulates the administrative systems of past Ethiopian regimes as hopelessly authoritarian and acclaims the present as qualitatively superior and unencumbered by the past. Indeed, proponents of this argument maintain that Ethiopia's experience with power devolution is 'radically different' from similar programmes implemented elsewhere in Africa both in its causes and objectives. To begin with, the argument goes, the impetus for devolution in Ethiopia came from a political and military coalition of formerly marginalised nationalities, as opposed to being a result of the national government's initiative or that of pressure from external donors. As a consequence, the argument continues, the objective of devolution in Ethiopia was not a mere transfer of power and resources from the centre to regions, but the creation of a 'new political and economic community' by the 'free will' of regional states. While this argument praises Article 39 of Ethiopia's new constitution which formally recognises the rights of regional states to self-determination, up to and including secession, it does not tell us much about the ways devolution has been actually undertaken in different localities.[3] Proponents of this argument do not explain whether these changes in the EPRDF's self-representation and ideology were accompanied by similar changes in the images, metaphors and administrative practices through which state powers have been locally understood and experienced by ordinary citizens.

The 'continuation' view is best reflected in a recent collection of edited articles by a group of scholars who examined broader effects of the devolution process by taking specific societies mainly from southern Ethiopia as examples. According to these scholars, EPRDF leaders have used the devolution of state power to ethnically based local governments to promote simultaneously two potentially contradictory, but equally important, objectives. One was providing the legal and political framework by which each ethnic group could reconstitute itself as a self-governing entity in the new federal system. The other was identifying and recruiting local advocates of ethnic politics (from both existing and newly emerging movements) who would govern these localities on terms acceptable to the EPRDF by minimising (or even ruling out) alternative interpretations. The outcome as yet seems somehow clear for these scholars. While devolution is reflected in the

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[3] Article 39 of the Constitution of Ethiopia provides that ethnic groups, referred to as 'nations', 'nationalities', and 'peoples', have the right to self-determination including and up to secession.

actual emergence of new power centres, it has simultaneously led to the further extension of state control down to the villages through the instrumentality of EPRDF co-opted ethnic elites.[4]

In this paper, I draw on insights from these two contrasting views to examine the impacts of devolution on the ways farming households in Aba Sälama, a local administrative unit in north-east Ethiopia, have been politically mobilised and locally governed since 1991. My focus will be on the ways different categories of farmers experienced devolution and the changes that subsequently occurred in their relations with the state and among themselves. I will show that decentralisation has increased the significance of local government as a site for struggle over the meanings of 'state' and 'people', and how these two ought to relate both with one another and among themselves. I will further show that the outcome of this struggle, which is quite difficult to pin down in terms of centralisation and decentralisation, is shaped by some long-standing political cultural issues.

One of these issues that I want to point out in this paper concerns the attempt of local farmer officials, who were elected to the position almost invariably through the support of the ruling party, at balancing the perceived interests of their superiors against the demands of their client followers in policy implementation. I will show the embeddedness of this style of administration into the farmers' view of state and society, and how these two ought to relate with one another and among themselves. I will do so by highlighting some of the dilemmas local officials face when undertaking duties of the new local government. My aim is to shift the focus of analysis from government intentions to what went on at the critical points of intersection where the varied concerns and interests of district officials, elected local leaders, and different categories of farmers 'interface' with each other.[5] My main claim is that one finds both decentralisation and centralisation sharply reflected in Aba Sälama as elected farmer officials continue to perform their 'governmental duties' by accommodating varied concerns.

HOUSEHOLD ORGANISATION IN ABA SÄLAMA

Aba Sälama, the locality that provided the data for this study, is situated in Amhara region at the buckle of one of Ethiopia's zones of chronic food insecurity.[6] As of mid-1997, the community had a total

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[4] The scholars who documented this pattern include Jon Abbink, Hiroshi Matsuda, Ren'ya Sato, and Elizabeth Watson, each of them contributing a chapter in a volume edited by Wendy James, Donald Donham, Eisei Kurimoto and Alessandro Triulzi (see James *et al.* 2002). The pattern is sharply reflected especially in the chapters by Abbink and Watson.

[5] This draws on Norman Long (1992: 127) who notes the significance of focusing on what he termed 'social interfaces', by which he means the critical points of linkages between different levels of social order or interacting parties, where structural discontinuities, based upon differences of normative values and social interest, are most likely to be found.

[6] For the geographical distribution of famine and chronic food insecurity in Ethiopia, see Webb and von Braun (1994: 21–22).

of 6,294 inhabitants who lived in about 1,643 household units called *bétäsäb* (Amharic: 'people of the house').[7] As in the rest of highland Ethiopia, these households are the basic units of social and agro-economic production. A majority of households earn their living from agriculture, which typically involves the cultivation of grain and pulses, by ox-drawn plough, and the rearing of small and large ruminants. Over the past two decades, however, the number of households which are incapable of meeting their annual food needs without food aid or remittance has increased for a host of reasons, including cyclical droughts, political instability, civil wars and misguided development programmes. Indeed, local officials I interviewed noted that about one-half of the population in this poverty stricken area requires relief assistance in any given year, irrespective of climatic shocks, and the entire population appears in emergency rolls in crisis years.[8]

As a consequence, households in Aba Sälama tend to be highly fluid in their membership and boundaries, and success as a household manager has required not only skills in farming but also political competence in the form of cultivating instrumental ties with influential individuals in local government and beyond. During my fieldwork in 1996–1998, these features were reflected in the high prevalence of a purpose-driven construction by which Aba Sälamans defined and identified different household units for different reasons. To be sure, the majority (1,023) of the 1,624 household units mentioned above were socially created through marriage, as prescribed by local cultural ideal. However, the remaining 520 households existed only on paper in the context of government policies and resources concerning land access, emergency food aid, credit services, property transactions, taxation and labour conscription. They were in reality fragments of other stem households whose heads strategically rearranged the size and composition of their constituent members in ways that they hoped would qualify them for better benefits.[9]

This was brought home to me more vividly in the context of a 1997 programme through which the Amhara National Regional State sought to regulate holding inequalities by redividing land among households more fairly.[10] Several young men and women, who had previously identified themselves as dependants of their parents, hoped to obtain their own land by presenting themselves to the local government as

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[7] I obtained these demographic data from the local government office in June 1997. I was unable to find an update in my spring 2002 fieldwork.

[8] Interview with Aragaw Muhei, Treasurer, Aba Sälama local government (14 May 2002). The federal government in Addis Ababa also recognises a similar pattern when stating that at least 4 million people in the country require relief assistance every year and the figure rises to over 8 million in a crisis year (GoE 2002: 5–6).

[9] Researchers involved in BASIS (Broadening Access and Strengthening Input market Systems) have also observed these features of highland Ethiopian households (personal communication, Pricilla Stone and Peter Little).

[10] Svein Ege (1997) provides detailed information and analysis on the ways the 1997 land redistribution programme was implemented in North Shewa.

though they had been on their own for some time (Teferi 2000). A year later, however, most of these individuals sought to evade the head (land use) tax by claiming that they were dependent members within another household. This last claim was to some extent locally justified by the existence of a third option by which farmers differentiate between a household's official or legal 'head' (*tätäri*, 'representative') and its socially recognised 'head' (*aba wara*, 'father of the house'). The former is preferred for strictly legal matters, while the latter is employed for wide-ranging social purposes, notably seasonal rituals, burials, inheritance, and inter-personal conflicts. For this reason, one would find, in the tax rolls of the local government for example, names of minors entered as the official heads of household units while the socially recognised heads were actually their aged fathers, or in some cases their mothers.

The fragmentation of Aba Sälaman households is further reinforced by local cultural and structural processes. There is, for instance, very little elaboration of kinship ideology or stable horizontal solidarity among household members and between different household heads. This is exemplified both structurally and visually. Like in other Amhara–Tigray areas studied by, among others, Weissleder (1965), Hoben (1973), and Bauer (1985), Aba Sälamans do not have enduring residence- or kinship-based sociological entities with strong influence over the marriage choice, land access and production decision of individuals.[11] Household units are not culturally expected to endure from generation to generation, as there are no family names or an estate of land to be passed from parents to children. Instead, each young 'man' worthy of the name is expected to establish and independently manage his own household by marrying a wife, building a house, and gradually acquiring the necessary productive resources, notably land, oxen and labour. Likewise, each young woman is expected to be a co-manager of her own household by marrying out to a suitable man and exercising effective influence on both household and community affairs (often indirectly through her husband).[12] In all this, parents and relatives of

[11] In Aba Sälamans, as in other Amahara and Tigray communities, blood descent is traced ambilineally, i.e. through both mother's and father's lines. In the pre-1974 period, this system enabled household heads to maintain theoretical claims to a share of land in several groups by activating actual or presumed blood relationships through all male and female parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, etc. of each household member as Hoben (1963) has noted. However, it is also widely recognised that this rule discourages corporate feelings as individuals belonged to tremendously overlapping groups that lacked boundaries. Studies show that, before the nationalisation of land in 1975, this kinship system, together with the partible inheritance rule, had led to continuity of structural tensions among close relatives who maintained competing claims over land ownership in each generation (Hoben 1973). For this reason, people used the same term *bala[a]gara* or *bala[a]nta* for both their arch-enemy and close relatives who demand a share of land. For similar use of terms in Tigray, see Merid (1986: note 36).

[12] The advantages of this notable lack of cultural rules that prohibit individuals from getting married and establishing their own household becomes more evident when contrasted with other family models. Unlike in the 'champion country' of medieval England where, according

newly married couples are not strictly obliged to extend much help other than an initial marriage endowment contingent on their own free will and other considerations.

This strong emphasis on household autonomy is reflected both in settlement patterns and the farming process. One observes in Aba Sälama the fenced and widely scattered homesteads of individual household heads. And inside a homestead, one will typically find a married couple and, depending on their age and wealth, unmarried children or ageing parents. Household members grow their food by cultivating a number of plots often scattered over different local agro-ecological zones that vary widely by altitude, soil type and rainfall situation. This requires household managers to skilfully adjust farming decisions to changes both in household circumstances and the broader natural and political environment. Household managers also need to adjust the size and composition of their household members in ways that will allow for undertaking rigidly defined job description along the two sexes.[13] They also need to augment income from farming by any combination of trading, labour migration and, especially since the 1984/85 famine, relief food aid and remittances. All this has required household units to maintain a reasonable degree of autonomy from one another in their seasonal activities.

However, household heads also encounter several factors that set critical limits to their managerial autonomy. Economically, not all household heads are able to maintain a sufficient combination of key factors of production such as land, labour, oxen and seeds. Socially, the strategic decisions that a household head makes in the interest of his or her household often conflict with the interests of other household heads. Culturally, household heads have wide-ranging duties and expectations towards one another in the context of their relationship as relatives, neighbours and, more importantly, patrons and clients. Household managers seek to minimise the contradiction between their desire for a reasonable degree of autonomy in production and the above-noted structural limits to it by forming a number of cross-cutting associations for mutual help and cooperation. However, the associational lives of Aba Sälamans tend to be largely transitory, often established around extra-ordinary life situations and pressing common issues.

One example of such extra-ordinary life situations that necessitates mutual support among farmers is the death of a household member.

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to Homans (1941), only a single heir was allowed to marry and set up his own household, the Amhara–Tigray household model allows every individual, regardless of land entitlements, social standing, or in-born characteristics (e.g. seniority, gender or parental background) to establish his or her own household. Unlike pre-modern Japan where establishing a household was viewed as a favour to be obtained from the 'family heir', Aba Sälaman girls and boys, like others in highland Ethiopia, do not necessarily require the permission of anyone, including their own parents. On the other hand, this freedom of young men and women also entails absence of obligatory parental support to them.

[13] Amhara gender ideology anticipates that women do 'domestic' jobs such as cooking, fetching water and fuel wood, cleaning and raising children, while men engage themselves on agricultural works in the fields. See Helen Pankhurst (1992) and Weissleder (1965).

Residents of a given locality obtain the necessary moral, labour and material support from each other during times of bereavement by forming an association called *kiré* (lit. 'assembly'). By joining this 'assembly', household managers decently bury their dead, organise mourning rituals and extend emotional and material support to survivors. *Kiré* members also form a deep sense of community when their life seems threatened by misfortunes such as the outbreak of drought and famine, epidemics, epizootic illnesses, and war and lawlessness. When misfortunes like these occur, or local prophecy informs that their occurrence is imminent, men and women of each *kiré* organise communal prayers and sacrificial rituals.

There are also some religious associations that cross-cut *kiré* (residence) boundaries. Several Christian men and women, for example, join weekly (*sänbäté*) and monthly (*mahbär*) religious fraternities established around their favourite local patron churches. Each member takes a turn in preparing a feast for all other members as a commemoration to the patron saint to which the local church was dedicated. In addition to religious objectives, such associations provide members with occasions for having each other's company in a relaxed atmosphere, and reinforce the capacity of the members to support one another, especially in emergencies.

One would also observe in Aba Sälama other more mundane life situations that demand different types of cooperation between household heads. A household head who is short of land, for instance, often brings in more plots through sharecropping arrangements (*mägazo*), rent, purchase and exchange (usually of land for labour, oxen or both). Likewise, a household head with a shortage of labour obtains additional personnel by hiring, and through different mechanisms for reciprocal exchange, including *däbbo* ('labour for feast') and *wonfäl* ('labour for labour'). Household heads may also establish similarly useful ties to maintain access to oxen traction power. A case in point is the institution of *mäkanajo* ('partnership') by which two farmers who own one ox each team up and plough each other's land in turns. Poor farmers may also obtain the oxen of their better-off neighbours in exchange for performing labour services and favours.

Finally, there are also informal ties of various types that especially unite women who are wives within male-headed households. These women often interact on their own by forming a rotating coffee club (locally called *tärtib*) and by exchanging labour both in daily chores and seasonal farm works. There are also age-based ties that unmarried young men and women establish to play together on annual festivities and other occasions, notably weddings. Through such ties, young men and women find their trustworthy village friends, with whom they do many things, notably migrating together in search of better opportunities. This friendship helps them maintain a shared sense of localism during their sojourn in towns.

While these sets of local ties are all important, their principal objectives seem to boil down to one major pattern. Unlike several other societies in Africa and elsewhere, Aba Sälamans do not (yet?) have stable horizontal

relations for standing united in their interests as residents of a local community. Instead, individuals seem to think of each other as members of different and largely autonomous household units and interpersonal relations assume a patron–client nature. This appears especially true for household heads[14] who cooperate only when prompted by extra-ordinary life circumstances, such as the death of a family member, accidents (floods, arson, etc.), and fear of supernatural beings that are believed to cause droughts, famines, crop-damaging pests, animal and human disease, and bad luck. In ordinary context, each household head prefers to organise his or her affairs as an individual decision maker with a reasonable degree of autonomy. The immediate consequence of this pattern has been the pervasiveness of vertical, dyadic and transitory ties, both within households and between household heads. Even when apparently horizontal relations seem to prevail, they are often established around a common patron (not by a deeply felt sense of identity and community) as evidenced in the religious associations I noted above. As a rule individuals join a *sänbäté* or *mahbär* as an offering to a patron saint whose guardianship and favours they seek. If the patron saint fails to grant the expected support, a member can leave the society to join another one.

The predominance of such vertical ties has far-reaching consequences for the everyday practices of local government officials, as I hope to show in the following sections. It has led household heads to view access to state power as a key resource for which all must compete in order to acquire a disproportionate share of government-controlled resources. The nature of these competitions, and the strategies each competitor employs to deal with the other, are largely shaped by a two-way zero-sum game attitude that Bauer (1973) observed in Tigray three decades ago. Each competitor assumes that he or she can gain only at the expense of the other competitor, rather than considering the possibility (theoretical or actual) of a positive-sum situation by which both may gain at the same time. This way of politicking has led to a continuous local need for government intervention as rivals have allied with state power to deal with adversaries. It has also led farmers to believe strongly that success as a household manager requires not only skills in agriculture and other supplementary activities, but also political competence in the form of cultivating patron–client ties with influential individuals in the local government.

ABA SÄLAMA UNDER THE DERG: LOCAL GOVERNMENT ESTABLISHED

In discussing the local legacy of the military regime, which ruled Ethiopia from 1974 to 1991, it is essential to begin by noting the administrative implications of one long-standing political cultural issue that the monarchical regime left behind in the Ethiopian north. This was

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[14] Housewives and young men and women tend to differ significantly as noted above.

the absence of a single local-level governor (or formal administrative body of any kind) who exercised control over all residents of a given geographical locality. Instead, individual farmers, living in scattered homesteads, interacted with the state through a pyramidal network of dyadic patron–client ties that cross-cut residence, kinship and religion. Indeed, the structure of these ties was largely related to the type of land tenure by which individual household heads held and used land, instead of an all-inclusive residence-based administrative framework.

On the eve of the dethronement of Emperor Haile Sellassie in 1974, there were three major land tenure types in Aba Sälama—each of them entitled the holders to specific privileges and imposed obligations vis-à-vis officials at different levels of the hierarchy of the state. These were *yägäbbar* (taxpayers), *yäzämächa* (campaigners) and *sämon* (church) lands. A majority of farmers cultivated *yägäbbar* land and were subjected to land taxes collected by a minor official called *chika shum*. But the tax was not paid per head, and unlike a village head elsewhere in Africa, the *chika shum* did not have authority over each household head. Instead, tax was imposed on a group of individuals who jointly held scattered plots of land approximately squared into a measurement unit called *gasha* (about 40 hectares of land). That meant only one representative of each landholding group was actually registered in official tax rolls. Other members of the group lived scattered over a wider area as they also belonged to several other land-holding groups with whom they reckoned blood ties by strategically activating ambilinear kinship rules, i.e. the tracing of descent through both the father's and mother's lines. Likewise, individual farmers who cultivated *yäzämächa* and religious lands paid a share of the harvest and other dues to the person (or religious institution) who held the land as a grant from the monarchy or an authorised regional lord. Each grant holder in turn performed a range of administrative, military and religious services and favours on behalf of the grant giver.

The patron–client nature of the system was further reinforced by the low institutionalisation of rules of succession to leadership positions that long prevailed at various levels of Amhara–Tigray society. As Levine (1965: 250) has correctly noted, the Amhara and Tigray regard authority as 'indispensable for the well-being of society and worthy of unremitting deference, obeisance and praise'. For this reason, authority was highly ritualised. Authority figures, ranging from the emperor to a humble peasant household head, were generally obeyed, respected and praised for their personal power and lifetime achievements through numerous codes of etiquette (Hoben 1970). Yet none of what powerful individuals achieved, including their social status and titles of honour, was thought of as a heritable trait to be passed on to the next generation. Instead, the children of a deceased authority were expected to compete both with one another and with all other able and ambitious individuals in each generation, though a person's success was greatly affected by his or her initial position. For this reason, patron–client relations were conceived only as temporary contracts that should shift and fluctuate as time goes by.

This unstable clientele system was eliminated by the Derg, which came to power in 1974 through an urban-based popular uprising. The regime did this through a radical land-reform programme that nationalised all land and provided for the establishment of popularly elected local government that would redistribute land to rural people, including former tenants and wage labourers. Implementing these provisions required reorganising rural households into a uniform residence-based administrative framework called *käbällé* (local) peasant association (PA). The regime set the geographical area of each PA at a minimum of 20 *gasha* (about 800 hectares) of land. The regime also mobilised some 50,000 high school and university students and teachers who would organise farmers and redistribute land largely bypassing all structures of the previous government, including the courts, the civil administration, and the police.[15]

In Aba Sälama, as in other communities of the Ethiopian north, the transition from the previous patronage system to the new residence-based local government encountered two major difficulties. The first of these difficulties involved squaring the remarkably rugged local landscape into a locality of approximately 800 hectares. The implementers of the programme, who were from towns, lacked even basic maps and census data that could render the locality roughly legible to them. They drew a rather arbitrary boundary between the Aba Sälama escarpment and the neighbouring localities to establish them as separate administrative units (or peasant associations).

A second difficulty in establishing territorialised local government concerned instituting a uniform leadership system and lines of communication that would allow for a more or less standard implementation of the stated objective of land reform and subsequent government policies in each locality. Programme implementers dealt with this problem by supervising the election of a twenty-four-person leadership committee, strategically drawn from former landless tenants, house servants and other less fortunate individuals. Previous local elites, including land grant holder soldiers, land-rich and well-off farmers, were excluded from elections on the belief that they would oppose land reform that would undermine their own interests. Programme implementers also disarmed suspect farmers, while arming and training newly elected PA leaders. They also organised all the other residents of each locality into gender- and age-based associations called 'mass organisations'. All this gave the military regime greater control over previously disconnected household units. It also enabled the regime to pursue vigorously a series of interventionist socialist programmes which Christopher Clapham (2002: 14) retrospectively called projects of 'encadrement'.

In Aba Sälama, the Derg's projects of encadrement took four forms. One was the attempt at replacing smallholder farming households,

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[15] Widely quoted works on the land redistribution programme include Bruce (1975), Pausewang (1983), and Dessalegn (1984).

which the regime viewed as 'backward' and 'inefficient', with ostensibly 'efficient', 'orderly' and 'progressive' agricultural producers' cooperatives. A second was a resettlement programme which was meant to eliminate the root causes of cyclical famines by moving victims of the 1984/85 famine for permanent settlement in the western and southwestern part of Ethiopia. A third was a 'crash' programme intended to rehabilitate the land presumably vacated by settlers by constructing on-farm soil erosion-slowing structures and by establishing off-farm schemes such as woodlots, hillside tree plantations and closures. The fourth involved putting in place an elaborate infrastructure designed to extract grain, money and labour from farmers.[16] The regime vigorously pursued these programmes through coercion and state threats until it was ousted in 1991 by a coalition of insurgent movements calling itself the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF).

POST-1991 ABA SÄLAMA: LOCAL GOVERNMENT STRENGTHENED

During my latest field work in Aba Sälama in the spring of 2002, the unfolding of the devolution programme was immediately evident. A local government, with down-sized and newly (re-)elected farmer officials was in place. More importantly, the legal powers of all the legislative, executive and judiciary units of this local government were greatly enhanced in the context of Ethiopia's newly adopted Poverty Reduction Programme which emphasised bringing government closer to the people and making it responsive to their wishes, as a tool for achieving sustainable development. This emphasis was reflected in the loosening of extremely hierarchical relations within the four tiers of the regional government, namely, region, zone, district and local. Previously, decisions were made at the regional level and then transmitted downwards for implementation at the local level, through the zone and district levels in the middle. The zone level is now totally abolished. The only link between the region and the local has become the district. More decisions can be made at the district and the local levels without waiting for approval from above.

I was struck by the sense of a fresh start in state–society relations that these changes brought locally. They have increased the significance of the local government as a site for competing views of democracy and self-governance. But the outcome, at least as of spring 2002, appeared to be a mixed blessing. The local government in place was at once highly centralised and excessively decentralised for reasons that have to do with the processes through which devolution was implemented, as opposed to its stated objectives.

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[16] There are several excellent accounts of the Derg's socialist programmes, including Dessalegn (1993) on the drive for cooperativisation and its disastrous consequences, Alula Pankhurst (1992) on resettlement, and Yeraswork (1995) on the local effects of environmental rehabilitation programmes.

A good way of examining these processes will be to begin with the very early context under which EPRDF forces and Aba Sälaman farmers met for the first time and held subsequent conversations since then. EPRDF forces came to Aba Sälama on 25 May 1991, immediately after capturing the provincial capital Dessie and three days before assuming state power in Addis Ababa. Before that, the Aba Sälaman ridge had been a war front for almost two years. The military regime had deployed a large number of soldiers and militiamen in defence of the towns of Kutabär and Dessie. The rebel forces had a stronghold on the next parallel mountain chains that dominate the skylines to the east of this community. Aba Sälama was also 'within ... cannon range', as one militiaman put it, from a strong rebel-held position south-west of Dessie. Throughout those two years, most Aba Sälamans assumed that the rebels would be chased back any given day. They thought so because of the heavy presence of well-armed government troops in the area. To the surprise of all, however, EPRDF forces finally captured Dessie and Addis Ababa while a large government regiment was still on the mountain chains there.

Aba Sälamans received the rebel forces with mixed feelings. On the one hand, they admired them for fighting an extraordinarily successful insurgent war from their small base in the north all the way to the nation's capital. On the other hand, however, Aba Sälamans, like most farmers in the government-controlled areas, were apprehensive about their future and that of the country as a whole. Decades of government propaganda had led them to regard the rebel forces as agents of the Eritrean secessionist movement who waged war to destroy the territorial integrity of Ethiopia and the unity of its people. This image was partly reinforced by the dynamics of the rebel movement itself; it started with a small number of Tigrayan men and it took it more than a decade to expand into much of the Amharic-speaking communities. Many Aba Sälaman parents by then had several sons in the government army, with only one former prisoner of war (POW) in the rebel forces who reportedly joined what later became the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM).[17]

Hence, for the first few years following the ousting of the Derg, the ruling EPRDF/ANDM had no officially registered members in Aba Sälama other than a former POW who was elected to chair an interim administrative body called the Peace and Stability Committee (PSC). Most people in the area remained largely unmobilised by EPRDF's programme of reconstituting Ethiopia along ethnic lines. This approach appeared rather problematic for Aba Sälamans and surrounding peoples of the Wollo sub-region, who stand unique in highland Ethiopia for claiming diverse ethnic, linguistic and religious backgrounds. The approach imposed a need for a clear selection of

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[17] The Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), which previously went by the name the Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (EPDM), has been the ruling party in the Amhara National Regional State since 1991.

'Amharaness' (Amhara identity) over all the other layers of identities induced in the region through centuries of population movement, war, trade and settlement. As a consequence, many Aba Sälamans began to contemplate what might happen to them in the future by having this new identity, which narrowly amplifies their relations with what EPRDF and other ethnic groups regarded as an enemy. Many wondered, for example, whether they would be able to move freely and settle in other parts of the country as they had done in the past in search of seasonal work and other opportunities. This fear was later found to be a well-grounded one as several people of Wollo origin were subjected to forced repatriation, mainly from the Ethiopian south, in a series of 'anti-Amhara' violent revenges.

Yet the anti-centrist ideology of the time, which EPRDF dis-seminated through the oft-repeated propaganda of 'devolution' and 'self-governance', led to the emergence of three major groups, formed around generational differences and the socio-economic standing of individuals, as opposed to ethnic lines, and each group sought to take advantage of the new order to advance its own purposes. The first group consisted of heads of well-established households who were charged with the responsibility of implementing in the community the 1975 land reform and subsequent socialist policies of the military regime. The second group included former local notables, elders and religious leaders who were somehow marginalised from active participa-tion in local government affairs by the socialist regime, which regarded most of them as reactionary and traditional. The third group consisted of newly established household heads, unmarried adults, high school dropouts, returnees (mainly former soldiers, settlers and migrants) and women of different backgrounds who held neither elected positions nor monarchial land grants in the past.

Early in the transition period, the second group (i.e. notable elders and religious leaders) appeared more politically influential than the other two. Concerned individuals from this group revived local conflict management institutions to fill the gap for maintaining community order. This included attempts to expand the exclusively burial-centered functions of the neighbourhood association (*kirê*) to include other community issues, notably managing grazing grounds and presiding over land-related disputes. This group also tried to influence individual behaviour and action in the community through effective use of the moral authority of parish-based religious fraternities (*sänbäté* and *mahbär*), local Islamic traditions (*adat*) and deceased spiritual leaders. EPRDF leaders commended these activities partly because they fitted with their ideology of self-governance and participatory democracy and partly because they were themselves busy restoring peace in different parts of the country and did not get an opportunity for selectively recruiting local collaborators. Likewise, several individuals, who previously served as local agents of the Derg, sought the protection of this group from imminent revenge by the victorious EPRDF by giving loud support to its traditional revivalist zeal.

EPRDF cadres were well aware of this dynamics in local power relations from experiences in other parts of northern Ethiopia that they controlled during the civil war. They sought to reconfigure it in ways that would expand the EPRDF's rural power by extending partisan support to potential supporters. As became clear later on, the cadres considered all individuals in the first group as potential opponents for their alleged cooperation with the ousted regime. To this effect, they categorically labelled all former local officials by the term *birokrasi* (an Amharic hybridisation from the word 'bureaucracy') to amplify that they played critical roles in extending the socialist regime's structures of bureaucratic control to the countryside. Likewise, EPRDF cadres defined all former monarchial land grant recipients and their descendants as potential enemies and branded them as *kirit fiwdal* (Amharic for 'feudal remnant'). This political categorisation left the cadres to look for potential supporters from individuals in the third group whom they subsequently called *chikun* (Amharic for 'oppressed') for the sufferings previous regimes and their local supporters allegedly inflicted on them. Side by side with this categorisation and labelling, EPRDF cadres painstakingly collected the ill feelings and personal grievances of some farmers about the ousted regime, so as to intimidate, often through the use of inflammatory propaganda, former local officials and notable elders.

This partisan support became more evident during the first local election held in 1994 when the EPRDF strategically nominated individuals from the so-called *chikun* group to run for local government on its behalf even when most of them were not registered party members. The result was the further exclusion of farmers in the first group who were, however, economically powerful vis-à-vis their ageing and not yet-established counterparts in the second and third groups. As a consequence, the new government-favoured individuals in the third group continued to depend on them for access to oxen, labour, seeds and cash, depending on their household circumstances and economic standing. For most individuals in the first group, indeed, what they lost in the formal political space was gained back because of their influential roles in the informal sphere. For this reason, the EPRDF was still unable to reconfigure significantly the structure of power relations in Aba Sälama over the two years following the 1994 election.

Cognisant of the difficulties they encountered in penetrating the fabric of local society, EPRDF leaders designed another strategy in 1996. This was a programme intended to redistribute land more fairly among households. It was to be carried out in specially selected localities, such as Aba Sälama, where the party had not consolidated its local power during the civil war. This political objective was clearly reflected in two basic features of the redistribution programme: taking land from (imagined or actual) opponents and giving it to potential supporters. Accordingly, the programme limited the holding size of former elected officials and previous land grant holders (groups one and two, respectively) at a maximum of four *timad* (about half of a hectare of land) and provided for the confiscation of any extra plot

above this size for redistribution to individuals in the third group. The party grounded the justification for this punitive provision both in a deep sense of commitment to the welfare of 'poor farmers' and in a neo-Marxist interpretation of agrarian relations, which assumed that a few farmers owned most of the land, while the majority remained landless. Party leaders claimed that farmers in the first and second groups had grabbed extra land at the expense of the majority in the third group by taking advantage of their privileged positions under the past regimes.

The EPRDF entrusted the actual redistribution of land to a committee of hand-picked farmers from local party members and elected officials. The committee carried out its tasks from November 1996 to May 1997. It did this by dividing the programme into a series of tasks, including enlisting each household head in one of the above mentioned groups, measuring and grading the size and quality of his or her respective holdings, and finally confiscating extra pieces for actual allocation to the so-called landless. The subjectivities and gaps that subsequently emerged, when classifying individuals, assessing holding size and grading land values, became an important locus of a power struggle among ordinary farmers, elected local officials and higher-level state/party officials. Of all these participants, however, local leaders, who were farmers themselves, maintained decisive roles in recasting the land redistribution programme so as to accommodate its stated goals with their own varied concerns and interests. Local officials were (and still are) uniquely placed at the interface between salaried officials at the district, zonal and regional levels of government from above and different categories of fellow farmers from below. For this reason, the legitimacy of local officials depended on simultaneously meeting two, often irreconcilable, expectations. As government officials they were expected by their superiors at the district capital to redistribute land with a certain disengagement from the social expectations of fellow farmers. Yet farmers expected them to be zealous advocates of local concerns and interests as their relatives, friends, neighbours and clients.

Local officials in Aba Sälama resolved this contradiction not by choosing governmental demands over socio-cultural expectations or the other way around. Instead, they tried to resolve it in ways that enhanced their own personal standing with both district officials and favoured farmers. They did this by wielding the power vested in them in translating stated programme objectives to meaningful local concepts for accommodating irreconcilable interests. They used this power to allocate more land to their friends, relatives and clients at the expense of their contenders and adversaries. To be sure, the district government sought to minimise nepotism and favouritism in the implementation process by assigning a senior party cadre charging him with the responsibility of supervising local officials. As it became evident retrospectively, the cadre maintained little real control over the processes through which local officials actually classified each household head, measured land size and graded land value.

This attempt of local officials at balancing the perceived interests of their superiors against the needs of their client followers runs deep in

the local political culture and was not limited to land redistribution. It was also evident in the ways local officials undertook their other governmental duties such as tax collection, law enforcement and service delivery. It was further reflected in the agricultural extension programme the EPRDF implemented in the area in 1996–2000. This programme, which is also extended to the present, was meant to enhance food production through the accelerated use of modern agricultural inputs (mainly fertilisers, pesticides and selected seeds), combined with enhancing the long-term productivity of the land through improved farming practices. Yet it was implemented locally through a crash campaign strategy in which expert advice became a government order, suggested ideas became dogmas, and descriptive annual plans turned to compulsory quotas as I have demonstrated elsewhere (Teferi 2000).

The devolution programme, which became more evident in Aba Sälama after the February 2002 local election, was implemented as part of these series of interventionist programmes that gradually reconfigured local power relations in favour of the EPRDF. Like the land redistribution programme I mentioned above, devolution was viewed, both by its designers at the federal level and by farmers at the bottom, as a corrective measure to redress the harms that centralised top-down administration of past regimes presumably inflicted upon farming households. But the issues both the ruling EPRDF and farmers sought to 'correct' appeared quite different. The EPRDF focused on building the capacity of local government for carrying out its administrative duties by granting it constitutional powers and government funds and by training local officials along its own political line. This emphasis was reflected in the unprecedently rapid growth of registered local party membership from nominally one man in 1991 to an estimated total of 309 individuals (one-third of the total household heads) in mid-2002. Some twenty-five of these individuals were tightly disciplined first-level cadres who provided political leadership not only for incumbent local officials but also to all the other EPRDF members and registered supporters whom they have organised by gender, age and residence.

Farmers on their part have seized the momentum to demand a reasonable degree of autonomy from the local government, which they still view as an extension of central state control over their lives and resources. The result has been a tension between the EPRDF leaders' commitment to strengthen local government and that of the farmers to press for more autonomy in undertaking their seasonal economic activities and managing their household affairs. While the EPRDF praised devolution for bringing government closer to the people, several farmers I interviewed appeared rather threatened by this development. When I further inquired into the grounds for this apprehension, however, they noted several reasons that boil down to some unresolved, and rather familiar, inter-generational and inter-household tensions, as opposed to a categorical refusal to accept the idea of self-governance. Indeed, Aba Sälamans, like all rural people in highland Ethiopia, seem to maintain a rather favourable attitude to the state (*mängist*) which they conceptualise as something that naturally resides above the people

(*hizb*, 'masses'). They also recognise the legitimacy of local officials who bridge the gap between state and people, albeit in the way they also recognise the roles of a hierarchy of supernatural beings in mediating relations with God.

With decentralisation, however, farmers suspected that incumbent local officials would monopolise power over several potentially divisive issues. Land redistribution was mentioned as a case in point. Ever since the 1975 radical land reform, rural people are politically mobilised to believe that each person is entitled to an equal share from the land fund of the local government. But this oft-repeated provision was implemented in ways that led to imminent structural tensions between elders and youngsters who were minors when land was previously redistributed (Teferi 1995). The 1997 land redistribution was, for example, partly meant to minimise such inter-generational tensions by reducing the holdings of elders and allocating the difference to all adult men and women who did not previously receive their own land. With changes in the demographic composition of households, however, such a solution tends to increase inter-generational conflicts at the household and community levels. If land is to be redivided once again, every farmer knows that it will weaken the fathers' authority by enabling sons and daughters to establish their own households without being allocated land by parents. If not, however, the young have to remain subordinated to their elders. Local officials are now legally responsible for administering land use rights in the community, which includes handling such structurally divisive issues. And in the absence of a more stable system of local governance and decision-making, farmers have justifiable reasons to consider this a threat to their land access rights rather than as an opportunity.

<div align="center">CONCLUSION</div>

Since its coming to power in 1991, the EPRDF has sought to bring government closer to the people and make it responsive to their wishes by devolving state powers to local governments. This paper was concerned with the local effects of this political programme by taking one north-east Ethiopian rural community as an example. It demonstrated that the outcome has as yet appeared to be a mixed blessing. Residents of the community now have a constitutionally enshrined local government with enhanced theoretical rights for self-governance. But they did not, at least as of mid-2002, establish a more stable system of governance and decision-making that can operate fairly across, as well as within, their varied interests as members of different households, age categories, gender and political groups. For this reason, the local government there has at once become a site for the exercise of both central party control of farming households and promoting local autonomy and self-governance. This outcome falls short of the stated objectives of the EPRDF's devolution policy, which were to empower rural people by democratising local governance, not the extension of

state control. I attributed this outcome to some outstanding difficulties that the devolution policy locally encountered upon implementation.

The most important of these difficulties had to do with enduring gaps between the ways farmers and EPRDF leaders thought of 'local government', 'people', and how these two were supposed to relate both with one another and among their different parts. While the EPRDF's notion of local government assumed a monolithic administrative structure that would unite disconnected farming households, the farmers' view realistically underscored the diverse concerns and interests of the individuals who constituted the local government. Because of this conceptual difference, both EPRDF leaders and farmers subsequently sought to achieve different goals through devolution. EPRDF leaders wanted to build the operational capacity of local government by granting it a constitution and by allocating resources to local officials. Farmers, on their part, interpreted the stated goals of devolution to claim enhanced autonomy from the local government, which they still view as an extension of central state control down to household units. The result has been a tension between EPRDF leaders' commitment to strengthening local government and that of the farmers' to more autonomy for undertaking their seasonal economic activities and managing their household affairs.

These contrasting views show that the new emphasis on 'local governance' and 'democracy' has not yet penetrated into rural Ethiopia. Instead, the fine-sounding potentials of these terms in empowering local society appeared to have been doubly entangled with the organisational and personal self-interest of the ruling party and its local allies. The ruling EPRDF has entangled the local translation of these terms with the objective of expanding its rural power base and legitimacy, especially in communities like Aba Sälama where it did not mobilise people during its guerilla insurgency, by recruiting local supporters. The EPRDF's local allies in their turn have captured the stated objectives of devolution to renegotiate their own personal standings vis-à-vis their superiors at the district and all other farmers in the locality among whom they further differentiated between client followers and personal adversaries. The political capture of decentralisation in Aba Sälama is reflected in two forms. One is the increasingly felt role of the ruling party in reconfiguring local power relations by ensuring that its local supporters win elections through different mechanisms, including by influencing votes, by coercion, by repression and fraud.[18] The other is the unique role of incumbent local officials who surpassed their predecessors in accumulating a substantial amount of power and government resources in their hands in the name of self-governance. The devolution process has now positioned local officials not only at the interfaces of state and local society but also at critical intersection points between local and district levels of government and among different groups

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[18] For a first-hand observation of local elections in different parts of the country, see Pausewang (2001) and Aspen (1995).

of local society. This has enabled them to participate in much broader arenas than their predecessors did. To most farmers, however, this development appeared rather threatening as opposed to empowering. All these difficulties and dilemmas highlight how both decentralised and centralised administrative practices are sharply manifested in the everyday activities of local government officials.

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses whether Ethiopia's recent reorganisation into broadly decentralised, ethnically based regions was also accompanied by significant changes in the images and administrative practices through which state powers have been locally understood and experienced by ordinary citizens. Different scholars and politicians have viewed the local effects of these changes differently. Government officials and some scholars report 'radical reversals' from decades of monarchial despotism and socialist dictatorship to enhanced local autonomy and self-governance, while others counter this by noting the 'continuation' of earlier administrative practices. I draw on ethnographic material from fieldwork in Aba Sälama, a local administrative unit in Amhara, to show that decentralisation has increased the significance of local government as a site for competing interpretations of household autonomy and local-governance. Party members and elected farmer officials used the newly enhanced constitutional powers and funds of the local government to strengthen their own personal standing vis-à-vis their superiors at the district capital and fellow farmers in the community. Farmers for their part seized the rhetoric to demand more autonomy from local government which they still viewed as an extension of central state control over their lives and resources. As a consequence, one observes in Aba Sälama both decentralised and centralised administrative practices as local officials seek to accommodate this tension when performing their governmental duties.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article traite de la question de savoir si la réorganisation récente de l'Éthiopie en régions largement décentralisées sur une base ethnique s'est également accompagnée de changements significatifs dans les images et les pratiques administratives à travers lesquelles la puissance de l'État a été localement comprise et vécue par le citoyen ordinaire. Les savants et les politiciens ont des visions différentes de l'effet de ces changements. Les fonctionnaires et certains savants rapportent des «renversements radicaux», de décennies de despotisme monarchique et de dictature socialiste vers une autonomie locale renforcée, tandis que d'autres s'opposent à cette vision en notant la «continuation» d'anciennes pratiques administratives.

L'article s'inspire du matériel ethnographique de travaux de terrain menés à Aba Sälama, unité administrative locale d'Amhara, pour montrer que la décentralisation a amplifié l'importance du gouvernement local en tant que site d'interprétations concurrentes de l'autonomie des ménages. Les membres de partis et les représentants élus des agriculteurs ont usé des nouveaux pouvoirs constitutionnels accrus et des fonds du gouvernement local pour renforcer leur situation personnelle vis-à-vis de leurs supérieurs dans la capitale de district et des autres agriculteurs de la communauté. Les agriculteurs, pour leur part, se sont emparés de la rhétorique pour réclamer une plus grande autonomie par rapport au gouvernement local qu'ils continuaient de considérer comme un prolongement du contrôle étatique central sur leur existence et leurs ressources. En conséquence, on observe à Aba Sälama des pratiques administratives décentralisées et centralisées, les fonctionnaires locaux essayant de ménager cette tension dans l'exercice de leurs fonctions gouvernementales.