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## **ENSET, THE TREE OF THE POOR: NUTRITION AND IDENTITY IN HADIYA ZONE (SOUTH-CENTRAL ETHIOPIA)**

### **§ The people and the plant**

Hadiya people are nowadays mainly settled along the Ethiopian Rift Valley, between the Gibe river basin and the northern part of the Omo river. The southern administrative region which they belong to is one of the most densely populated areas of the Federal Republic<sup>1</sup>.

Usually a community of a certain size is inhabited by clans (*sulla*) that are divided into lineages (*moollo*) and sub-lineages (*mine*). Each of these is chaired by its respective judge or head (*daannuwwa*), which are also responsible for the agricultural associations of mutual assistance. The farmers generally live in village communities, as opposed to the isolated farms in the north; they give great weight to the kinship relations because of the more immediate ties they keep with the household. They have a structured legal system; the domestic group and the political institutions are able to keep a close watch on the behavior of the individual.

Their society is characterized by a predominant commitment to agricultural activities, especially the enset-growing, which is often combined with that of grain, barley and maize, as well as the breeding of domestic animals. The methods of cultivation and harvesting of the plant follow a specific and detailed cycle. Enset seems to play a key role in both the economic and the family life. In fact, the presence of human intervention, the habit of processing the plant and its visual and physical intrusiveness let us assume its importance in the areas where it is grown. As witnessed by some surveys (American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1997), the peasants are accustomed to say in a strong evidence of self-awareness that "enset is our food, our clothes, our beds, our homes, the food for our animals, our dishes".

The *ensete ventricosum* is an herbaceous plant, indigenous of Ethiopia, closely related to the family of the banana tree from the morphological point of view but completely different in terms of usage, life cycle and development. The domestic enset, in contrast to the wild one, shows a great variety of shapes and colors and has different names in different groups. Each group recognizes many varieties of the same plant (Kefale Alemu and Sandford, 1996; Shigeta, 1997) and every household combines a large number of these varieties in its own plot of land. At a common sense level, because of the food and economic security it assures, the domestic enset has been described as a kind of "bank" for the farmers in the south.

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<sup>1</sup> The present project has been carried out in the district of Lemu, village of Kidigissa. The range has been restricted to a portion called Lamsella and inhabited by about 600 people (111 'families', with an average of 5/6 components per unit).

Many writers and scientists, over the centuries and despite its importance, have overlooked the significance of food and the social system that pivots on it. The enset is probably the least studied domesticated plant in Africa<sup>2</sup>. Only since the early nineties multidisciplinary research teams of agronomists and social scientists have begun to conduct pilot studies and to dialogue with the Ethiopian institutions. Currently, the researches are supported by the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Regional Government (SNNPR), which has its center at the Awassa Research Center and the Areka Research Station. Only on July 1997 the Ethiopian Ministry of Agriculture has recognized the enset as a source of wealth at a national level.

The available literature asserts that the enset ensures food security in a country where the food periodically is missing. Some areas have survived the famine by using it as a mean of subsistence. Interviews with farmers in many southern areas suggest that people who base their economy on the enset have never been hungry, either during the tragic drought of the Seventies and Eighties of the last century. In the view of the agronomists, which are involved in promoting the introduction of the enset in the agricultural systems based on cereals<sup>3</sup>, it is at least peculiar that some groups prefer to address the famines and refuse the food security just not to adopt an hated plant and to change a food taste.

The Hadiya zone falls within the area of the combined enset<sup>4</sup>, which is used as a staple crop, being however combined with cereals and tubers. The groups that use this model are Gamo, Hadiya, Wolayta and Ari. Within the Hadiya group there are considerable differences among the households: richer families with more resources use more cereals at the expense of the enset, families with fewer resources depend entirely on it. Livestock is important to get the manure; the oxen are used to plow. The density of the population is high, sometimes more than 200 people per km<sup>2</sup>. The main products derived from the enset are *kocho*<sup>5</sup>, *bulla*<sup>6</sup> and *amicho*<sup>7</sup>; they presuppose

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<sup>2</sup> The literature on the enset agriculture is quite lacking and includes the Wolayta zone, the Gamo Highland, the Gurage and Sidama areas (Dessalegn Rahmato, 1995, 41).

<sup>3</sup> Brandt, 1997 alludes to the enset's potential to increase the food security throughout the country. The plant would become a kind of mirage, a challenge for the XXI century. The same developmental perspective is supported by Godfrey-Sam-Aggrey and Berek T. Tuku (eds.), 1987 and Bezuneh Taye, 1996. Nevertheless these positions do not consider the cultural and political depth of the aversions to the enset.

<sup>4</sup> If we keep following the agroecological map it is likely to come to the peoples' cultural faces. In Ethiopia four major farming systems are recognized (Westpahl, 1975; Gascon, 1994, 89; Brandt, 1997, 844-845): pastoralism; rotation farming; farming based on grain; farming based on enset. Within the last category four sub-systems can in turn be identified, depending on the degree of dependency on the enset as a key product and on environmental, agronomic and cultural considerations: the intensive area of enset; the area of combined enset; the cereal-dominated area; the area dominated by tubers and roots.

<sup>5</sup> The bulk of the fermented starch, which is made from a mixture of decorticated leaves and crushed roots. It can be stored for long periods without being damaged. Its quality depends on the age of the collected plant, on the type of enset which has been used, on the season in which the process took place. In relation to the single plant, the quality of the product varies depending on the part of the leaf and root that has been processed. The preferred type of *kocho* is usually white, made from the inner leaves and the upper central corm; the blackish *kocho*, extracted from the outer, hardest and most exposed parts of the plant is instead considered poor. Although many different dishes can be prepared from this product, depending on the occasion on which it is served, the most common is a sort of flat bread with a sour flavour.

<sup>6</sup> It is obtained through a longer process: the leaves, stems and roots are chopped and reduced into a pulp; the pulp is squeezed until the liquid is extracted; the resulting starch is then left to thicken into a kind of white powder, which later will be rehydrated. The product can be prepared as a bread, or in a thick sauce similar to the porridge. *Bulla* is the most valuable product which the enset provides; it is made from fully mature plants and consumed at special occasions.

<sup>7</sup> It comes from the boiling of the corm, usually of a quite young plant. The process of cooking and consumption takes place in a manner similar to the methods used for other roots and tubers (like potatoes). *Amicho* can not be obtained from all the specimens: specific clones are designed for such a production. It is a fast food, prepared when the amount of harvest is short, but also for special occasions.

different methods of production and are consumed at different times throughout the year and even in special occasions<sup>8</sup>.

One of the most impressive feature of the area is the flourishing, luxuriant vegetation. The single plot resembles a botanical garden, filled with countless species of plants. The first striking thing for the observer is the size: the largest exemplars can reach 10 meters in height, with a false trunk up to one meter in diameter. It is a tough plant, with thick and hard leaves: it grows at best at an altitude between 2000 and 2750 meters; it does not tolerate the frost, but it survives the drought; it is not affected by heavy rains; in case of inclement weather or limited rain it may stop to grow but never dies completely. This characteristic - the persistence in extreme situations, that Dessalegn Rahmato (1995) called "resilience" – plays an important role in the environmental conservation: the enset protects the soil from the erosion due to rainwater; it positively alters the land because of a continuous application of manure. Many fields keep productive for decades, if not for centuries. Around the house, where commonly it is grown, it provides protection from the wind and the sun. It is considered aesthetically desirable, since it beautifies the landscape and gives shape to the human settlements which result to be close-knit and encircled by the plantations.

The enset is a plant of which every single part is used. There are a variety of not-alimentary purposes which the plant is designed to: (a) the building function (enset is used to cover the roofs or the house's walls, to baste materials, to make containers, ropes, mats, bags, ropes and sieves); (b) the economic function (the leaves of the plant, and the strong fibers which are extracted from it, are important articles of barter, an integral part of the inter-tribal trade, and goods through which to get money); (c) the domestic function (the stems and central nervatures, once dried, feed the fire; the pulp extracted from these parts can be used as a duster or a brush, as a pillow or a nappy for children, as a support for pots; the fresh leaves are used as serving dishes or as a protective covering inside the pits where the enset is fermented or to pave the ground where the processing of the plant takes place); (d) the protective function (the fresh leaves wrap *kocho*, honey, tobacco, butter, bread, crops, but also, in the past, the newborn babies; they cast a shadow over the other crops or men, screening them from the light of the sun, the wind, the rain; they allow the packaging and therefore the transport of objects and goods to the local markets; the enset plants surround the house providing security, primarily in the form of a supply of close and always available food); (e) the dietary function, but for animals as forage (since the plant contains a lot of water and is quite resistant to drought, some specimens of enset are cut down to feed the animals especially in the dry season when the grass is spare); (f) the healing function (specific clones and parts of the enset are used for therapeutic purposes, both for humans and animals, to treat fractures and broken bones, problems related to childbirth - for example, as an aid to release the placenta, for diarrhea and as a means of birth control - for abortion).

Since the existence of a close intertwining of food and eating with so many other subjects, the enset might become a privileged pass key to the study of ecology, small-scale agriculture, nutrition and gender relations. The specificity of the enset's case suggests the existence of more flexible and varied working patterns. Moreover, an analysis of the nutritional processes - which goes beyond the purpose of this reserch - will allow to draw correlations with the property systems, the assets' transmission (access to resources), the implicit meaning of the ritual practices (religious beliefs), the dynamics within the family (domestic responsibility and division of labor). The aim of this paper will instead be modest: to focus on the claims, at a local and public policy level, which since a long time have been realized around a plant on which a large part of southern Ethiopia's population relies for food, fibers, forage, building materials and medicines. The available sources

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<sup>8</sup> First of all the celebrations linked to the month of September with the opening of the New Year and the festival of Meskel, when the enset is collected in its best exemplars - *Meskel's wasa*, that is the enset of Meskel.

emphasize two aspects: on the one hand its importance in religious, therapeutic and social activities; on the other hand the stigma attributed to it (especially from interlocutors located in the northern parts of the country) as a 'backward' and 'poor' cultivation.

### § Enset in regional history

As regard to Ethiopia, three main plants, each linked to specific symbolic structures, can be identified: the t'eff (*Eragrostis t'eff*) in the northern highlands; enset in the south, the dyad corn/sorghum in eastern and western areas.

The contradictions in the history of the enset, peripheral as the argument might appear, let us come to the otherness that is said to form the "cultural mosaic"<sup>9</sup> of Ethiopia. We are dealing with a plant (and human groups) at the same time locally very visible and symptomatically forgotten at a scientific and political level.

One of the first European travelers to notice its economic salience and cultural distinctiveness was James Bruce (1790). Murdock (1959) pointed out that the enset was cultivated as a food source only in the south-western Ethiopia, being almost unknown in the rest of Africa. In the past some historians and botanists argued that the origin of the enset should be traced back to the ancient Egypt (to the Nile's source). On the contrary, others (Smeds, 1955; Simoons, 1960; Stanley, 1966) have argued is is for sure a native plant of Ethiopia. The hypothesis is that the original core of the cultivation is the western edge of the Rift Valley, particularly the plateau of the Wollamo-Kambata-Gurage area. This hypothesis has then been improved (Brandt, 1997): over the millennia the southwestern highlands have eventually become an environmental refuge with the emergence of complex systems of hunting and gathering (highly dependent on the use of certain plants and animals). This led first to an "accidental domestication" (continuous interactions between men and the enset would have produced genotypic and physical changes in the plant) and then to a "specialized domestication" - with the food resources increasingly close to the settlements and an higher level of sedentarism. Only at this stage an anthropogenic environment, marked by the intensification of interactions between people and plants, has been created and the enset's cultivation has become mindful and selective.

The enset is endemic, but perceived by a large part of the Ethiopians as extraneous. Given its invasiveness in the landscape (as visual mark) and in the economy (for it involves an intensive system of production), it is quite puzzling to observe both the neglect shown towards the plant by those who do not cultivate and eat it, and the delay of the academic contributions devoted to it. Since it plays such a pivotal role in the contemporary diet of about 10 million Ethiopians and has turned out to be a plant with cushioning effects against the famine, I wonder why almost no one, at least until recently, have considered it as a subject worthy of being studied and ranked<sup>10</sup>. The answer is complex and depends on the history, the politics and the cultural perceptions.

Richard Pankhurst (1996) has recently outlined the history of the enset's diffusion such as it has been recorded in the Ethiopian literature. An isolated reference can be found in the royal chronicles (annals of the late Sixteenth century). Hence there is the evidence from two Seventeenth-century Portuguese Jesuits, Manoel de Almeida and Jerome Lobo. It is thanks to the latter that we have the more detailed observations, and a first, meaningful characterization of the

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<sup>9</sup> On the proliferation of the cultural diversity in the context of the southern Ethiopia cfr. Abbink, 2000; Data De'a, 2000 e Donham, 2000 (who defines the area "a structuralist's delight"). Freeman, 2000a, 2000b believes that the cultural variation is the key to interpret the renewed identity politics in the southern parts of the country.

<sup>10</sup> "Ensete is grown by a minority of Ethiopians and as a crop it is completely neglected in agricultural training institutions. It is therefore peculiarly vulnerable to incompetent outside decision-making" (Sandford e Sandford, 1994, 198).

enset that is destined to last for centuries, in the words both of the detractors and the admirers of the plant:

When cooked it resembles the flesh of our turnips, so that they have come to call this plant “tree of the poor”, even though wealthy people avail themselves of it as a delicacy, or “tree against hunger”, since anyone who has one of this trees is not in fear of hunger.<sup>11</sup>

Beyond the debates, it is sure that around 1840 the enset had disappeared as a food resource in the North of Ethiopia<sup>12</sup> and the reasons for this rapid withdrawal remain unknown and little studied. Brandt (1997) suggests the possibility of diseases or famine, but, more convincingly, traces the eclipse back to the turmoils which involved the north in the period from the mid-eighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century. This perspective indicates a kind of cultural war beneath the rejection of the plant: it seems in fact as the landowners, having to deal with debts and costs, put pressure on the farmers so that they emphasize prestigious plants like cereals (able to produce food surplus and income) rather than a plant for survival as the enset was (suitable for the rhythm and needs of the lower classes). This would be an historical, not isolated case of intersection between the policy of a military conquest, the land management and a cultural campaign: the élites' need of publicly acceptable, representative foods came to modify the production of specific foodstuffs (ibid., 849) .

When, at the end of the Nineteenth century, the Emperor Menelik conquered the neighbour regions in order to create a modern map of Ethiopia, the Christian settlers, as the Oromo, refused the enset considering it a food of low prestige which could generate weakness<sup>13</sup>. The enset has always been considered a not modern product, only suitable for marginal people<sup>14</sup>. Whereas the Amhara have settled, there greater if not exclusive attention has been given to the production of wheat. Even today, especially in the areas of Welo and Tigray, bulwark of the Amhara and traditional Christianity, people verbally express a marked disgust for the plant and often refer to the activities around it as curious and full of superstition practices typical of pagan peoples.

The evidence that the enset is endemic, the history about the origins have been of no use: the myth of foundation and the effectiveness shown by the plant in situations of crisis are not enough to legitimize its value. Its character of "tree of the poor" or "tree against the hunger", which was already pointed out in the Seventeenth century by the Father Jerome Lobo, can still be guessed. And it is not a coincidence if this policy of foodstuffs (and of cultural dislikes) has continued until recently at the institutional level: it is proved by the fact that the regime of Emperor Haile Sellassie (1930-1974) exerted considerable pressure on the people of the South to convince them to grow cereals at the expense of the enset. After the revolution in 1974, the communist-inspired dictatorship (*Derg*) established some low-spectrum research programs and experimental stations on the enset, but the venture turned out to be ineffective for a lack of funding and staff.

The imperial attempt breached the food taste of the southern groups, but it never entirely supplanted the habit of resorting to the inexhaustible resources of the false banana tree. Still now, despite the indifference flaunted by the peasants when asked about the qualities of the plant, the enset serves as a symbolic divide between the north and the south. During my fieldwork, an informant used to reassert at every meeting the link between the politics and the cultural wars. He never said that the peoples of the North perceive themselves as superior. According to the data I

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<sup>11</sup> Lockart, 1984, cit. in Pankhurst, *ibidem*, 48. More recently Gascon, 1994 defined the enset as “une plante *peuplante*”.

<sup>12</sup> Cfr. Beke, 1884 and Cecchi, 1886.

<sup>13</sup> Eyasu Wako, 1992.

<sup>14</sup> Dessalegn Rahmato, 1995, 24.

was then collecting, the farmers seemed alternately to love the enset, but also depend on it and suffer the hard work and the poverty. As long as he understood this contradiction, he expressed his opinion quietly and harshly: "the peasants, in front of you, will always say they prefer the cereals. But they would never get rid of the enset. The Amhara instead prefer to starve or to beg on the streets rather than cultivate it". The stereotype of the enset eaters as half-starved was then reversed. After a long, apparently careless silence, he added: "they save the face in front of those who watch them, but meanwhile their children are starving".

If the plants are related to specific symbolic structures, therefore it should be possible to map the perceived differences between the north and the south in pragmatic terms, as a set of both agricultural practices and social projects<sup>15</sup>. Growing different plants, according to local peculiar practices, means to cultivate different forms of humanity: the enset should be regarded as a "cultural food" and a system of communication through which to decode the social behaviour (Douglas, 1985, 1999).

Starting from the assumption that the enset represents an essentially successful, environmentally friendly and risk-free system, we have now to understand why the north and the south show different attitudes not only toward the plant, but the lifestyles it promotes; what are the underlying reasons why the northern people have chosen to focus on other crops and do not currently recognize the enset as a staple food. This includes, along with a geography of landscapes, a kind of geography of the "likes" and "dislikes" in terms of food. What is the element capable of provoking the aversion of the "others" (Amhara, inhabitants of Addis Ababa, not devoted to agriculture) to those of the central and southern areas? where does the root of the stigma lie? does it lie in a specific plant, carrier of distinctive features and affecting the lifestyle of its growers, or rather in the compliance to a religious or political creed, or even, in belonging to the rural universe?

And over all: does the development or strengthening of cuisines in competition have something to do with the nation-building project? and who are the actors implicated in the promotion of "good" cuisines and the incrimination of the "bad" ones?

### **§ Ethnic issues through likes and dislikes**

The studies carried out in Ethiopia from an anthropological point of view have suffered up to the Seventies and Eighties of the last century from some ambiguities inherent in the academia, based on the political interests of one part to the detriment of others, that led to the building of an Abyssinian nationalism. The topics which have dominated the anthropological investigation are the interest in the so-called "East African Cattle Complex" (especially represented by the semi-nomadic Borana) and the selective attention given to the Semitic group of the Amhara, for the most part grain growers.

It is starting from the stereotypes that we can analyze the flagrant contempt for the minimal and circumscribed tradition of the "uncultivated" in the Ethiopian context: that is those configurations of the enset which are considered to foster a subaltern culture, and consequently little visited from an intellectual and human point of view. Perhaps the mockery of the drudges, of the backward people, is aimed not so much at undermining their presumed stupidity, but rather the lack of docility in adapting to the dominant development patterns. Let us observe in particular the case of the Hadiya.

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<sup>15</sup> Cfr. Braudel, 1985, for the concept of "plants of civilizations" and Dessalegn Rahmato, 1996, for its declination in the Ethiopian context. A detailed anthropological work has been conducted in such a perspective only about the Gurage by W. A. Shack and D. Shack since the Sixties; their decades-long investigation has remained an isolated case within the Ethiopian Studies.

According to Ulrich Braukämper (2002), the Hadiya were also known by the name of *gudélla*, a term which in the past has been used by groups of Semitic origin as an epithet to describe their degree of ferocity. But which were the real or imagined contents for such a social etiquette?

The Hadiya went to war several times with the Christian empire of Ethiopia: during the reign of Amda S'eyon (1314-1344), Dawit (1382-1413), Yishak (1414-1429) and Zara Yacob (1434-1468). Several accounts of the Arab historians confirm that the Hadiya started to pay taxes to the Christian empire in the fourteenth century, and throughout the following century repeatedly fought for the independence. In the early seventeenth century the name "Hadiya" is mentioned again; since then the vassalage of this principality to the empire was only formal. Even with their closest neighbors, the Kambata, there were frictions and open fights (Grenstedt, 2000). The tensions grew when the Kambata kingdom around 1810 and the Christian kingdom of Shoa around 1870 began to expand. The Hadiya groups were conquered by Emperor Menelik II between 1889 and 1894.

At that time the Hadiya "difference" broke out with violence. Already famous as warriors, they were called to the fore by the expansion of the Amhara into the south. The Ethiopian rulers had made frequent incursions toward the south with the aim not only to subjugate these areas, but also to christianize the people and spread the amharic culture. Around 1903, the region of Kambata/Hadiya became known as the "Province of Kambata", although this group was in the minority. The Kambata hierarchy of aristocrats, chiefs and kings better suited to the system of the conquerors than it was for the more egalitarian Hadiya structure. The Hadiya, because of a semi-nomadic lifestyle, appeared and in fact were less obedient to the new course imposed by the colonizers. Despite the geographical proximity, the history has in part separated the fate of the Hadiya from that of Kambata: the latter have tied their story to the defense of the Christianity, the former to the obstruction and open conflict against the values and religiousness of the invaders.

The untrustworthy Hadiya were treated more harshly by the Amhara. The Kambata were practicing since a long time an advanced agriculture, based on the *enset*, and could easily pay the required taxes. The period until the Italian invasion of 1935 was characterized by a consolidation of the Amhara rules, even if this takeover was greatly opposed by the Hadiya. Since then, they were labeled and recognized as hereditary enemies of the Christian empire<sup>16</sup>. Their historical past, framed by different expansionist policies, is summed up in a fate of resistance and reactions: from the south they were overwhelmed by the Oromo, from the north they had to face the imperial forces.

The Amhara settlers, the local authorities colluded with them, the neighbors, the allies, the same Hadiya actors contributed over the time to spread and establish the legend of their ferocity. The Gurage, until recently, referred to the subgroup Lemu with the term *wokuonteb* (savages); the Wollamo called them *märäqo* (arabs). It may be that some elements have alarmed the neighbors: but which, and why?

The Hadiya have a pastoralist background similar to that of other groups of the southern Ethiopia and only recently adopted the agriculture from the neighboring communities, that are known from a long time for the cultivation of the *enset*. The diet based on carbohydrates, provided by the *enset*, must be supplemented by other products, mainly of animal origin: in this perspective, the agricultural ability of the Kambata and the Hadiya vocation for the breeding went to complement each other. But it was not a linear conversion: the *enset*, a demanding plant in terms of treatment and agricultural know-how, was only hesitantly incorporated in their cultural system (Braukämper, 1977, 9). In the historical and legendary accounts, the evidence of a far-off

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<sup>16</sup> Cfr. Haberland, 1964, 236; Braukämper and Tilahun Mishago, 1999, 16.

time as warriors and breeders is combined with a recent past marked by the adoption of the *enset*. Even today, the Ethiopians share the idea that this area is backward and traditional. These are qualities that someone attributes to the geographical isolation and the patent poverty - few roads in a bad condition, that can be used depending on the season, and a mostly peasant population. Other informants blame it as a proverbial indomitableness - they are described as reluctant to obedience, averse to school participation and to any type of education suggested from the outside. It is not accident that these images - converging on the hostility - in some way call back to mind the ancient and legendary ferocity.

The oppositional charge to the national institutions has not been defused yet. A young guy explained in this way the progressive setting-up of a grassroots political resistance at the elections of 2000: "If they start fighting, the Hadiya people will bring their ancient weapons from their huts - swords and spears - and fight back. This is the result of the accumulation of many, many years of suppression. The Hadiya were suppressed during the Haile Sellassie and the Derg regimes, and the EPRDF<sup>17</sup> continues the same practice" (Tronvoll, 2002, 169).

The scholars do not hesitate to define the political situation which has been and is perceived in Hadiya zone in terms of repression and widespread suffering: "The legacy of politics in Ethiopia is thus steeped in memories of violence and suffering. Even today, political participation is often stigmatised and shunned by ordinary people. An often-heard expression in Amharic is *poletikana korenti béruku*, '[keep] politics and electricity at a distance'. The meaning of the expression should be obvious: don't go too close to politics, it will only stun and hurt you!" (*ibidem*, 160). At the elections of May-June 2000, the vote of the Hadiya electorate went to the opposition party (HNDO)<sup>18</sup>. The event was considered by the foreign observers a turning point in the democratization process in Ethiopia: for the first time since 1991, and only in this area, a nonaligned party challenged the Tigrayan hegemony (EPRDF), which was confirmed elsewhere in the country among violence and unveiled intimidations. The post-election repression ended in a bloodbath of the Hadiya (Tronvoll, 2002). An increasing potential for control had been entrusted to the officers of the rural areas and was exercised through blackmails and pressures that aimed at having concrete effects on the farmers' lives: "Peasants were threatened they would lose access to fertiliser, credit or other services if they voted for an opposition party. Many of them were beaten, threatened with imprisonment, or arrested under dubious pretexts if they refused to support the ruling parties" (Pausewang, 2002, 97-98). After the reaction against the ruling party, through acts of head-on public resistance, the Hadiya were punished with imprisonments and reprisals, having become the privileged object of the state control: "The local and administrative structure of governance (*kebele*) is perhaps the most important tool in state control of the peasantry" (Tronvoll, 2002, 160). On the bleak control exercised by the government officials, especially at a village level, Pausewang writes: "The events during the elections of 2000 and 2001 demonstrate that local administrative structures are again built up to control the peasants, not to give them a voice. Communications are again firmly established as command flows from top downwards, not from down upwards" (2002, 97). The situation has suffered a further regression starting from the controversial elections on May 2005.

These forms of resistance are reflected, often in an oblique way, in food issues. The food preparation, taboos and preferences are one of the languages through which people express crucial signals of status and identity. In the Ethiopian context the food and the orthodoxy have always dialogued (Braukämper, 1984). Many people in the southern areas are not only aware of different levels of "purity" or "impurity" associated with food and know how and when to put in

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<sup>17</sup> Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, the party who came to power in 1991 and still now is leading the country.

<sup>18</sup> Hadiya National Democratic Organisation.



practice the rules regarding the permitted or prohibited foodstuffs, but also express verbally concerns and warnings in the everyday life: foods to be prepared, special meals to welcome a guest or at feasts, food aimed to be exchanged with other families, meetings and conversations marked by the consumption of food and coffee. The way of handling the offerings of food - what kind of food or enset is for whom - appears to be a constant concern in Hadiya zone. Foods differ not only in composition, but because they reveal the social status, the wealth, the degree of well-being, the economic misfortunes.

The food taboos demarcate the group identity. The laws governing the table polarize the differences: there is usually a part which considers itself "pure" and there are several social fringes - usually the conquered, invaded people - who are thought to have confused, transgressive ethnic origins and dietary habits. The disposition of the clans to differentiate each other is widespread all over the southern Ethiopia. This is not only by means of the genealogical and sociological criteria, but also on the basis of the food avoidances that allegedly have to be respected. The rules may relate to domestic and/or wild animals, to specific colors of the single animal, to certain parts of its bodies - heart, liver, kidneys, lungs, stomach, intestines, hump, feet, dewlap - or, occasionally, to some plants and the ways of preparing food from them. It is a common practice to use nicknames which derive from the dietary habits and preferences to identify groups of people, a supposed ethnic identity or a nation: the Tigrayans are well recognized as "locusts-eaters" and the craftsmen as "warthogs-eaters". A Kambata *Fuga*<sup>19</sup> told to Braukämper: "We do not have religion because we eat everything" (1984, 436). "Eating the two meats", that is those of animals slaughtered both by the Christians and the Muslims, is a standardized expression to mean not belonging to the world's religions, then the declaration of "paganism". The lack of compliance with some kind of avoidance is the everyday idiom with which different groups denigrate each other.

An example of how the food is a weapon for bargaining boundaries and identities - so that "barbarians" are always the others, in a game of mutual accusations and concrete attempts of contamination - is just found from the area under examination:

The Hadiya, adherents of the Muslim-influenced *fandāno* religion, reported that up to the end of the 19th century animals which died from diseases were transported to Kambata markets, where they were bought and consumed by members of that people. The Hadiya even called one of the markets *Sombe Mera*, the market of the food-and-mouth-disease (*sombē*). The Kambata, who were proud of their Christian past, vehemently rejected the allegation that all of them had eaten this kind of impure food and stated that the dead animals were only consumed by outcastes and members of certain clans with low prestige (as was quite probably the case). When the Hadiya and Kambata were quarrelling about the denomination of their common sub-province (*awrajā*) in the early 1970s, this issue of food avoidances provided a highly delicate form of ammunition (Braukämper, 1984, 436).

The attitudes toward the food are among the most cohesive forces inside the society, since they tie its members together while differentiating them from the neighboring groups through a complex food ideology. This thesis had already and ironically been conveyed by Malinowski in the preface to the seminal work of Audrey Richards (1932, xxv-xxvi):

The natives of the Trobriand Islands, whom I studied in my Melanesian field-work, do not eat man and shudder at the idea of eating dog or snake. They abhor their neighbours as cannibals and dog-eaters or snake-eaters. These neighbours in turn despise the Trobrianders for their lack of culinary discrimination in neglecting such excellent viands as man, snake and dog. The natives of the British Isles whom I studied in another bout of fieldwork, look down on their neighbours, inhabitants of France, calling them "snail-eaters"

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<sup>19</sup> This derogatory term indicates, among many groups, the members of the artisan classes. The genesis of the groups which the literature considers as "low-caste" is often explained referring to the unruly eating habits of their ancestors.

and "frog-eaters". What the French think about British plum-pudding and white sauce and the "cut from the joint", I dare not repeat here. Any decent member of the Mediterranean Kultur-kreis looks with contempt on those who drink water; a member of the Blue Ribbon League despises who drink anything but water. It was Voltaire, I think, who expresses his scorn of the nation "who had a hundred religions but only one sauce".

The food preferences therefore play a key role in shaping the identity and in the emergence of enmity and subtle discriminations among the communities. In the history of the Hadiya the national products and dishes contain painful memories about the imperial conquest and evoke the power of the "superiors" - the rich and powerful ones - to decide on food, setting new patterns of consumption and proscriptions. The human intervention aimed to inhibit or stimulate the consumption of particular foods offers some clues to understand the historical relationships between groups, classes and genders - at any latitude, whether it is about the sacred cow for the Indians, the pig in the Islam, the locusts in a part of the Ethiopia and the enset for others. For the individuals such "culturalizing" intervention is essential to state to themselves and to others their sense of belonging and the distance from certain forms of sociality. The diet becomes a sensitive marker for understanding the ideas of what people conceive to be human and non-human, civilized or barbaric. In the field of eating people are suspicious and stubborn, putting up considerable resistance both to innovation and to the attempt of overcoming the use of food as an idiom for categorizing what is "right" and what is "wrong". Bourdieu (1983) has described it as a rhetoric of distinction<sup>20</sup>.

Despite the current mixture of foods that have different origins, both local or urban-industrialized<sup>21</sup>, the Hadiya can be considered a case of food resistance, making their livelihoods largely relying on one product. The dichotomy abundance/scarcity of food is too simplistic to be accepted. Some people deliberately refuse to introduce innovations in their diet and choose to be perceived as backward and unwilling to change in order to defend their tastes. The changes which the Hadiya society is subject to must be contextualized in relation to the socio-cultural features of the surrounding communities, from the time they were incorporated into the central government in 1892. It is likely that today the ferocity, traditionally attributed to them, has no more connection with pastoralist contents and rather alludes to their low inclination towards such a prestigious religion as the Orthodox one, or their reluctance to the state political authorities in charge (still Amhara and Tigrayan, not unlike a few centuries ago).

### § Gender lines

According to a grammar that hierarchically organizes the discourse moving from the pole of the nature/wilderness (the peasants, the women) to that of the civilizing progress (the townspeople, the men), prejudices and political interests go hand in hand.

The enset, symbolically linked to the peasant identity, is also tightly tied to the gender variable. The relation between women and enset becomes apparent to those who attend the weekly market in Hossana, the chief town in the area: thousands of people gather, apparently in a

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<sup>20</sup> The food systems are intimately connected to the local environment, however in most cultures people consider only certain products as edible and abhor many, equally edible, others.

<sup>21</sup> It would be interesting to measure what has been, in the last years, the level of change in the dietary habits or the hybridization with products coming from the urban and national market; to detect the possible presence of diseases connected to the rapid, currently going on modernisation processes, often supervised by public policies; and finally to assess the impact of such changes in cultural terms, in terms of persistence or crisis of the so called "traditional practices" (gathering and use of wild plants, methods of the enset's cultivation, relationships between genders and generations).

chaotic way, in a boundless open space. Strategic locations of the vendors and the goods<sup>22</sup>, as well as defined gender boundaries, can be recognized. The area of the enset is entirely managed by women: they sell *bullā*, *kocho*, dried and fresh leaves, different types of butter (to cook, to cure ailments, for aesthetic purpose). The elements of the culinary arts (spices, honey, salt) or what women prepare for the domestic consumption at home (beverages such as *t'ella*<sup>23</sup> or *areke*<sup>24</sup>) are their domain. The men occupy the tailoring area, sewing with old Singer machines (legacy of the Italian spirit), make haircut, and manage the commercial products (*ch'at*<sup>25</sup>, coffee, *t'eff*, corn). It is up to them bargaining the animals, especially in case of choosing the sheep to be slaughtered for a ceremony, or purchase the alcoholic beverages. The women wander in areas where other women operate, negotiating for all the tools and materials connected to the house and the food preparation. When looking through a cartographic eye, we have the impression that a specific discourse on modernity/tradition is taking place between genders. Women are associated with the food because they deal with it in the everyday life, and to the enset because it is a domestic plant, usually for family consumption, that does not leave large openings to business ventures and easy money.

It can be stated that while the women rule over the enset, cereals pertain to men. The women are involved in all the central stages of the plant's preparation and harvesting; they can keep the income from the sale of products and materials extracted from it; they own the tools used to turn it into food, that are explicitly prohibited to men<sup>26</sup>. On the rural scene, there is no doubt that women are the subjects who have the richest practical and theoretical knowledge around the plant.

In the wealthy families women are entrepreneurs and organize the workforce; the poor women, on the other hand, sell their work in the plantations. In the Wolayta zone (Sandford and Kassa, 1996) the harvesting is usually carried out by small working groups, formed by women who keep up relations of friendship or kinship mostly along a female line. The harvesting is a demanding activity, and women are forced to spend much time together: a group of five can spend up to one day to process two plants. The work can be offered for free or payed by money or by sharing the product. The process is controlled by an elderly woman, who wanders through the plantation, ensuring that each step is done correctly. All the agreements concerning the service and the payment do not require the men's intervention, because the women (the eldest one and those who have offered their help) are those that directly negotiate.

According to some scholars this is the most impressive feature in terms of the gender-building: the activities related to the enset's cultivation are performed only rarely in an individual way. They often involve cooperation. The concept here implicated is that of *women's networks*. Dessalegn Rahmato (1991, 1995) defines the women's working groups with the same term employed for the enset's quality: "resilient", that is tenacious, covertly resistant to shocks and risks, able to provide women with a reliable and mutual support. These networks spring from informal aggregations on a working basis, but are also capable of long enduring and moving to other contexts, supporting emotional ties that can possibly become means for social independence and economic self-sufficiency. These networks, which might be based on kinship or residential proximity, represent forms of daily survival for the peasant women, especially for those with limited economic resources.

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<sup>22</sup> Alemayehu Lirensso, 1983.

<sup>23</sup> Local beer made from barley (amharic term)

<sup>24</sup> Distilled alcoholic beverage (amharic term).

<sup>25</sup> *Catha edulis*: stimulant plant with narcotic effects.

<sup>26</sup> Men are forbidden, or admitted only as an exception, to set foot on the enset plantations.

From the accounts collected during the fieldwork we understand how the women's devotion to the plant is strong: "People here in the village do not eat *kocho* out of necessity, but because they prefer it to other foods, even if the latter are available. Here in Lamsella there are many farmers. If they eat *kocho* it will be digested just after a long time, because it gives warmth and energy, and so they will not be hungry. With *injera*<sup>27</sup> you will be hungry. "

On a human level, the plant's long-life and strength become a metaphor for the hardness of life and work that the farmers have to cope with. The enset's persistence is a symbol of the spirit of sacrifice of those who cultivate it, that is the Hadiya women. As food gatekeepers, from the little they know how to get what is needed for sustaining large families: "if women have at their disposal barley and *t'eff*, often they sell them in exchange of *kocho*. But if *kocho* is available, they will never sell it for other things because it lasts a lot without being wasted. It has a greater value than any other product, so that it can not be bartered. The farmers of the Hadiya zone export *bullā* to the Addis Ababa's market<sup>28</sup>". The rich and far away capital finally draws enset out from the rural areas. The love for the plant becomes a long distance reply to the prejudice of having been considered poor: "the work on the enset is hard, but we the women love it more than men do, and from an economic point of view: if there is *kocho* you can eat for many months; if at home there is *t'eff*, it ends soon. Fifty kilos of *t'eff* end in just two weeks. Men do not think in these terms, so that they do not understand the value of the enset. They are interested in the immediate income, they do not have a long view".

The enset becomes a controversial item especially for the young girls, who are now struggling to balance what they themselves call "modernity" and "tradition". The former is embodied in the school timetable, in the freedom of movements to go there, in the relations they tighten beyond the village; the latter is identified with the constraints that the work on the enset, by its nature slow and close to the house, implies. A young informant says: "I started working it when I was ten. I do not like it. I prefer to study and learn. This work instead takes a long time. In the afternoon I will go to school, but as you see I do not have the time to prepare the lessons properly. It is my family that forces me on the enset's work. I hate to do it because it is an hard work. The most challenging tasks are squeezing *kocho* and prepare the hole for its fermentation. Among the products I prefer *bullā* and *kocho*. But in general, if I have to choose, I prefer the cereals such as *dabo*<sup>29</sup> and *ajja*<sup>30</sup>. We cultivate the enset because it is our eating habit. You can not do otherwise".

We have seen that the neglect toward the south-central peoples introduces to the debate between centers and peripheries. If we consider that the work on the enset and the products' marketing is an exclusively women's matter, we understand what kind of political purposes contribute to marginalize a tangible and intangible heritage. For centuries this know-how has moulded the cultural face of the areas under examination and, through intergenerational transmission, gives shape to a reservoir of she-kind, both botanical and relational, knowledge. Should we not assume (and fear) that a nation on the march toward the modernity needs to move faster and leave behind the heavy burdens of the backwardness, be it rural and/or womanly?

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<sup>27</sup> Low, spongy, unleavened bread, with a sour taste, very used in the northern Ethiopia but nowadays widespread in the other areas. At the beginning it was considered a sign of assimilation into the national culture.

<sup>28</sup> *Kocho* and *bullā* have become popular in restaurants that serve *kitfo* (raw minced meat, mixed with butter and spices). The combination of *kocho* and *kitfo* is highly requested in the Ethiopian capital, especially by foreigners and as an "exotic" food.

<sup>29</sup> The western bread.

<sup>30</sup> Local cereal similar to the semolina.

## § Slow food, slow women

The enset presents an extremely dilated growth cycle; it reaches the maturity between four and ten years; once it has come to the full development, it produces some not edible fruits with seeds which are used for medicinal and decorative purposes. After this sterile fructification, the plant dies: if the enset is not harvested and processed within the following year, it gradually becomes fibrous wood, perishes and falls to the ground. The women in the Hadiya zone account for a laborious plant, which they learn to treat step by step and through the imitation, in a women's training: "I love working it, being a typical plant of this area and part of our culture. I started when I was very young, and little by little I have got accustomed. It might be I had eleven years. I helped my mother. I learned from her and the other women. It is through the experience that you learn, you have to look and try to do as the others do. My mother never told me anything by words. Children learn by themselves. When I was a child I paid close attention to how things were done; I looked at all the details because I was very interested in learning".

So this is a cuisine based on the orality and the knowledge of women's hands. The metaphor of slowness binds together the enset and the women: if on the one hand we can say that the enset is a sustainable food against the hunger, why on the other hand it is not possible rely on women's slow pace as a key break in the development policies?

In a famous essay Spivak (1988) asked under what conditions the subaltern can actually speak and be heard. In the case here analyzed, we have noted that the enset is the victim of various forms of peripherality: a plant snubbed over the centuries by the ruling classes, a sign of the peasant incivility, a reservoir of knowledge and a pretext of women's networks. We could answer the question by saying that in this case the subaltern can speak, but often not by words. The women gain autonomy and prestige "on the field", not in special moments, but through negotiations and by way of ordinary items like food. They are active, resourceful, even if often silent agents<sup>31</sup>.

The planning from above, run by bureaucrats and scientists, is likely to miss the point of view of the "losers". Their knowledge, geographically scattered and transmitted in a popular, not esoteric way, in some way represents the collective consciousness of whole groups. The urgency of modernizing threatens to overwhelm the weak or voiceless agents - it is again the case of the Hadiya women, whose power is still exercised in the interstices, inside the kitchen and by the supply of food, and not on public squares.

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<sup>31</sup> The absence of women's voices depends on the listener (Feldman-Savelsberg, 1999). We need to understand how and why women keep silent in certain contexts, which issues they can actually discuss by words, what tactics of alternative communication they adopt to negotiate motions of change and partial rebellions.