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Juggling agendas: circus in Ethiopia

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Juggling Agendas: Circus in Ethiopia

Research Master's Thesis
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African Studies Centre: Leiden University

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*Dedicated to
Girum Kelemu
for his talent and
commitment to
Ethiopian circus
and his valuable
friendship.*

Abbreviations

AIDS:	Acquired immune deficiency syndrome.
BBC:	British Broadcasting Company.
CAMA:	Creation of Alternative Methods for Advocacy and Awareness.
CIE:	Circus in Ethiopia for Youth and Social Development.
CNN:	Cable News Network.
EATI:	East African Theatre Institute.
EDA:	Emmanuel Development Association.
EPLF:	Eritrean People's Liberation Front.
EPRDF:	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front.
Fig:	Illustrated figures are listed after the list of references.
HIV:	Human immunodeficiency virus.
NGOs:	Non-governmental organisations.
NOVIB:	Dutch Branch of Oxfam International
OAU:	Organisation of African Unity.
SIDA:	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency.
TPLF:	Tigrayan People's Liberation Front.
UNICEF:	United Nations Children's Fund.
USAID:	United States Agency for International Development.

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Juggling Agendas: Circus in Ethiopia



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Introduction

I was three years old when I saw my first images of Ethiopia. The television was on in the ‘grown up’s room’, but as a curious child, I crept in. The BBC was broadcasting an exposé¹ of a devastating famine in northern Ethiopia. Distressed and confused by what I had seen, I attempted to make sense of these horrifying images. Everyday, sometimes three four times a day, for the next two years, I drew the same picture. It was a circle cut in half; the top half was the sky with birds and a huge sun, the lower half was the barren ground where a mother stood holding the hands of her two children, everybody in the picture was crying. Concerned, my parents would ask me what this picture was about; I would reply ‘Ethiopia’.

From philanthropist to journalist, theatre practitioner to politician, mass starvation haunted the imagination and plagued the conscience. ‘The face of aid was transformed and the face of hunger was Ethiopian’ (Gill 2010: 2). Such distressing images continue to dominate the popular perception of Ethiopia. Circuses in Ethiopia attempt to challenge this stereotype.

Victor Turner, ‘the undisputed founding father of the “performative” turn in anthropology’ (Conquergood 1989: 84), defined humankind as ‘*homo performans*’. In *The Anthropology of Performance* (1986), Turner aligned himself with postmodern theory. His aim was to ‘liberate’ anthropology from the limitations of structuralism and functionalism by rejecting models of society based on ideology rather than reality. By focusing on processes Turner drew attention to ‘the rich data put forth by the social sciences and the humanities on performances’ (1986: 81), to propose:

‘Human beings belong to a species well endowed with means of communication, both verbal and non-verbal, and, in addition, given to dramatic modes of communication, to performance of different kinds. There are various *types* of social performance and genres of cultural

¹ On 23 October 1984 BBC journalist Michael Buerk reported on the famine from Korem in northern Ethiopia (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/in_depth/8315248.stm, accessed 22/05/2011).

performance, and each has its own style, goals, entelechy, rhetoric, developmental pattern and characteristic roles'.²

The study of performance is complicated by its ambiguity. Goffman³ depicted all human interaction as performance, whereas Turner distinguished between 'social drama' and 'cultural performance' to include aesthetic and staged productions. The elements that make up cultural performance are illustrated throughout this thesis.

The study of performance is a complex field of interaction, communication, cultural ritual and aesthetic production. This thesis examines the relationship between cultural performance and society in the context of circus in Ethiopia. It both reflects the history of political struggle through the lens of performance and analyses contradictory international, national and local agendas that inform and influence circus performance. Detailed descriptions of specific performances illustrate the reciprocal relationship between artists and their audience as they address community issues. It is not the purpose of this thesis to analyse the artistic content or specific skills in depth but rather to focus on the individual, social, and political aspects of circus performance.

The central research question of this thesis is:

Does circus performance in Ethiopia facilitate individual and social transformation?

Secondary questions include:

Has the history of political struggle been reflected through performance in Ethiopia?

Is circus performance being used as a tool for domestication?

In what ways has international interest affected circuses at the local level?

Are there tensions between artist's individual ambitions and their social responsibility?

How do specific performances communicate community issues?

How is diversity and investment shaping the next generation of Ethiopian artists?

² Turner (1986: 81), *The Anthropology of Performance*. Baltimore: PAJ Publications.

³ Goffman, Erving (1959) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* is regarded as a seminal study on the subject of interactive performance.

The central research question is based on a tension between ideology and reality. Circus in Ethiopia for Youth and Social Development (CIE), 'aspires to play a role in promoting socio-economic change'. The premise that performance stimulates social transformation is the ideological basis of the 'theatre for development' movement. The founding theoretician, Augusto Boal, explicitly articulates the relationship between politics and performance and proposed a new form of 'liberation theatre' to act as a rehearsal for the 'revolution'. Supporters of such theatrical practise value popular performance as capable of stimulating social change through both the cohesive dimension of the creative process and its communicative capacity. Performance for social transformation is thus examined in both theoretical terms and in practise exemplified during 'liberation' conflict in Ethiopia and analysed in detail through examples of contemporary circus performance.

The contentious relationship between performance and politics in Ethiopia is illustrated historically and evidenced locally. Edmondson described performance as a site of 'contestation and capitulation' (2007: 135). Her concept of 'the poetics of nationhood' (2007: 7), builds upon Hobsbawn and Ranger's theory of 'invented tradition'.⁴ She illustrates how in Tanzania both *ngoma*⁵ performance and contemporary theatre troupes contain symbolic expressions of social values that instigate a process 'of inventing, counter-inventing and re-inventing tradition' (Edmondson 2002: 79). Her studies reveal how performance is being adopted by the Tanzanian state as a symbolic expression of national identity. The social significance of the adaptation of traditional aesthetics remains an interesting theoretical perspective to analyse political influence on performance in Ethiopia.

Turner's postmodern rejection of models of society based on ideology rather than reality appears to have influenced Harding's (2002: 1-28) critical approach to the ideological practise of 'theatre for development':

⁴ Hobsbawm, Eric & Ranger, Terence (1983), *The Invention of Tradition* Cambridge University Press.

⁵ *Ngoma* translates in Swahili as 'drum' but is symbolically used as a term for different competitive dance and ritual practices which are related to rhythms heard throughout East Africa.

'The extent to which any form of 'popular' culture which is not directly political initiates social change, which improves the daily conditions of the disempowered, is likely to be minimal and localised [...] Inevitably and paradoxically this moderating process deflects outright social rebellion against conditions of injustice and thus can be considered a process of 'domestication' rather than 'liberation'.⁶

Whilst Harding approach to domestication is vital to understanding the political containment of the transformative effect of performance, the implications and processes of domestication are further explored in this thesis. It is by developing the theory of domestication through both the political dimension depicted by Harding combined with Nynamjoh's concept of 'domesticated agency' (2004: 33-65) that individual and social transformation can be examined in its complexity. It is by integrating both the negative implications of Harding perspective with Nynamjoh nuanced stress on negotiation, interconnectedness and interdependence between the society and the state that processes of domestication are interpreted.

Over the last twenty years circus has flourished throughout Ethiopia with an estimated twenty-five circuses performing in different regions across the country (Niederstadt 2009: 9). This contemporary phenomenon inspired my interest and influenced my decision to conduct research in Ethiopia, further affirmed by my fascination with this extraordinary country.

My six-month field-research focused on Circus Debre Berhan and was complemented with comparative case studies in Awassa and elsewhere in Ethiopia.⁷

Debre Berhan has a population of around 70,000 and is situated one hundred and twenty kilometres northeast of Addis Ababa. During the Middle Ages Debre Berhan was one of the capitals of the Shewa kingdom after being selected as a sacred site during the reign of Emperor Zära Yaeqob (r. 1434-1468). Under orders from Emperor Zära Yaeqob, the Selassie Church was constructed during the 15th century, when a miraculous

⁶ Frances Harding (2002: 9), *The Performance Arts in Africa: A Reader*. London: Routledge.

⁷ The five circuses I observed were; Circus Debre Berhan, Circus Awassa, 'One Love Theatre', Circus Bahir Dar and Circus Shashemene.

“apparition of the Holy Light of God” is said to have occurred. Historian Richard Pankhurst (1967: 36-38) suggested that Debre Berhan was founded in 1456 when Halley’s Comet passed over the Shewa region. Situated 2840 metres above sea level, Debre Berhan translates as ‘Mountain of Light’.

Presently Debre Berhan epitomises the government’s popular political slogan of a town undergoing ‘transition’. Chinese construction companies are in the process of building a modern highway from the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa to the Eritrean capital Asmara passing through the centre Debre Berhan. Buses take advantage of the newly laid asphalt, reducing the journey from Debre Berhan to Addis Ababa to less than two hours. During my field-research from August 2010 to February 2011, the hum of machinery and the sound of cracking concrete were ever present in the centre of the town.

Construction continued at a rather different pace in the surrounding suburbs. A bewildering number of building projects preoccupied a hand full of engineers. Skeletons of new hotels, banks, and shops marked the outline of potential developments yet to be realised. The Selassie Church rebuilt by Emperor Menelik II in 1906, offered refuge to the destitute and provided religious sustenance to the 95% local Ethiopian Orthodox Christian population. Religious rituals were regularly performed and observation of such practises gave me a sense of the ‘performative’ culture of the society from which contemporary cultural performance, including circus, took inspiration.

Located in the Amhara heartlands, ‘outsiders’ emphasised the conservative nature of Debre Berhan’s population and exaggerated the extremity of the weather conditions of the highlands, at night temperatures can drop below freezing. Limited employment opportunities were found at the local blanket and water factories, but as students gathered at the newly constructed Debre Berhan University hopes for better employment opportunities fuelled youthful ambitions.

As I arrived at Circus Debre Berhan’s compound a performer juggled with the word **WEL CO ME**. Human pyramids were enriched by eclectic ethnic costumes and a flexible gymnast was the teenage star of the show. Live music accompanied the cultural

dances linking the diverse acts. Skipping ropes on imported unicycles, juggling firesticks, hats and clubs, balancing bodies, stilt walking and somersaulting off human trampolines were some of the elements that composed their performance.

I involved myself in active ‘participant observation’ in daily training sessions. During rehearsals, observation was crucial to understanding the performance process. Excerpts from my fieldwork diary (*written in italics*), offer short detailed daily descriptions of a small sample of my documented notes and evidence my participatory method. Attending meetings and feedback sessions with audiences, government officials and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) introduced me to the various facilitators and spectators that shape and support circuses in Ethiopia.

Using film and photography to document performances, training sessions, rehearsals, touring shows, religious rituals and promotional advertisements, I captured a visual ethnographic record of this research.⁸ This allowed me to contribute something tangible to the circuses, which they continue to use for promotional means. The footage has been an invaluable source of data that informs this research; particularly the descriptive analysis of the performances depicted in chapter four and five. An edited short documentary is available as an appendix to this thesis, offering a visual account for further interpretation and research purposes.

During field-research, I was privileged to establish close inter-personal relationships with both the performers and directors. Members of Circus Debre Berhan and Circus Awassa generously invited me to their homes and together we attended religious rituals and circus social celebrations. Regular conversations with the participants and their family members revealed their personal ambitions and concerns. The ‘natural conversation method’ takes time and ‘requires considerable psychological, and even emotional, investment. The latter is indeed an essential part of the anthropological approach, without feeling there is no understanding’ (Geest 1998: 46). This was the

⁸ I produced a short documentary that can be viewed using the link: (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sEESIQtZFQQ>, uploaded on 01/06/2011 by Leah Llewellyn).

same during my research where I became involved with the circus members and engaged in debates with performers, directors and their families.

During Daniel Mains research in Jimma, Ethiopia, he noted that ‘rumours passed on through casual conversation are clearly a significantly different form of discourse than accounts of history obtained through formal interviews’ (2004: 348). During research I also found this to be the case, with many insights coming from casual conversations and everyday ‘rumours’ that significantly complimented the results of the formal methods.

Towards the end of my fieldwork, I conducted formal interviews with circus directors, performers, and lecturers at the Theatre Arts Department at Addis Ababa University. Focus groups were conducted in Amharic to enable the younger members to contribute to the research results. My basic Amharic limited my ability to facilitate the focus groups and translation was done with the generous assistance of English speaking members of the circus. These formal methodologies enriched my research results and inform the following chapters.

Chapter one of this thesis, explores the transnational development of modern circus from the 19th century American and European circuses to the blending of Eastern and Western cultural performance traditions, epitomised by Cirque du Soleil. It maintains a focus on the role of Africans throughout the evolution of circus. It illustrates Cirque du Soleil’s use of theatrical narrative and their economic support for the global phenomenon of ‘Social Circus’. The concept of ‘theatre for development’ is analysed further and begins the discussion on the relationship between performance and social transformation. The transnational historical study reflects ideological transitions and takes us on a journey from West to East and North to South. It moves beyond the exploration of Africans performing in foreign societies to the foundation of circuses throughout the African continent. Ethiopian circus is thus contextualised within the transnational domain of cultural performance.

Forty-five kilometres outside of Debre Berhan, I sat with a few of the circus artists looking out, over the 360-degree vista, from the remains of Emperor Menelik II’s palace

at Ankober. They were debating the significance of the various Emperors of Ethiopia. Most agreed it was Menelik that unified and modernised Ethiopia, whilst others suggested that Tewodros was the true hero who died for his country, unlike Haile Selassie who ‘ran away’ during the Italian invasion. One artist defended Haile Selassie, suggesting that it was he that brought cars and other Western inventions to Ethiopia. Their debate emphasised the importance of history for understanding the society. It is for this reason that chapter two includes an historical account of the creation of modern day Ethiopia.

Beginning with a contemporary nationalist ‘flag day’ performance by Circus Debre Berhan, chapter two establishes the contentious relationship between performance and politics in Ethiopia. After the historical reflection on the imperial unification of Ethiopia, Haile Selassie’s modernisation of theatrical performance is examined. His personal engagement with practitioners and the active process of censorship reveals the societal tensions that lead to the revolution of 1974. Performance then becomes a weapon of war as agitation propaganda and ‘liberation’ theatre play out on the battlefields of ethno-nationalist conflict. The victory of the Ethiopians People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) signified a new political era, where circuses began to perform the ‘poetics of nationhood’ by symbolically embracing the politicised slogan of unity through diversity.

In chapter three the growth of circus in Ethiopia is analysed from the perspective of the members at Circus Debre Berhan. From the ‘world-tour’, during which CIE depicted their performers, as the ‘real ambassadors for Ethiopia,’ to the unexpected consequences of defection. The circus had to be redefined within the local society. The politics of everyday at the circus becomes a continuous negotiation of economic and political demands complicated by personal ambitions. Harding’s (2002: 18) suggestion that the transformative process of performance is constrained by political domestication is illustrated at the local level. The circus reinvents itself as an educational arena, juggling the agendas of NGOs and politicians, whilst attempting to meet the aspirations of both the performers and their local community.

Chapter four builds on the theory of domestication by introducing Nyamnjoh's 'domesticated agency' (2004: 38), 'a multifaceted concept of agency that needs not be defined solely in terms of resistance but also recognizes the possibility of working with the state rather than against it' (Edmondson 2007: 6). The emphasis at the circus places on collective awareness attempts to create cohesion between the circus members and their social responsibilities. The process of domestication is the result of continuous negotiations and interdependence between the members within the 'circus family' and their wider social and political obligations. Exploring a talented individual at Circus Debre Berhan reveals tensions between individual ambitions and collective awareness. Their performances aimed at social transformation illustrate the role of the circus within the wider society.

The final chapter takes the reader on a circus tour from Debre Berhan to Awassa. This diverse and comparatively large southern city stimulates questions about international investment and local ownership. An analysis of the future direction of circus in Ethiopia is challenged by the various approaches taken by different circuses. 'One Love Theatre' defined by international donations, takes from the urban environment in which circuses have flourished into the rural countryside. The audience's response to their multi-purpose didactic performance and the behaviour of the artists confused their intended narrative. The social issues they depicted in their performance translate to the problems artists face in their own urban environment where realities are juxtaposed against international aspirations. However, in a different approach Circus Awassa's market led investment illustrates how circus in Ethiopia is embracing all aspects of the performing arts. Their vision of creating an alternative educational institution is beginning to be realised as they invest in the next generation of Ethiopian artists.

Chapter 1

Transnational Circus and Performing Africa.

Circus a transnational performance

Turner suggested that ‘performances, particularly dramatic performances, are the manifestations par excellence of human social processes’ (1986: 86). Circus, as a transnational performance arena, has evolved from ancient times by incorporating eclectic dramatic and artistic genres in diverse settings. Thus, in the context of the current debate surrounding cultural performance, circus offers a unique vantage point to examine the relationship between performance and society.

The name “circus” is derived from Latin, itself a metathesis of the Homeric Greek “κρίκος” (*krikos*), meaning “circle” or “ring”.⁹ ‘Circus Maximus’, the 150,000-seat stadium constructed in Ancient Rome stands infamously proud in historical accounts of circus. ‘Circus Maximus’ was predominantly used as a site for chariot racing and exhibitions on lavish scales, including gladiatorial combat.

Whilst the circus was associated with bloody spectacles and extreme sports in ancient Mediterranean civilisations, in China the form has a distinct performance tradition that dates back over 2000 years. It reached a remarkable level of quality and refinement during the Chinese Western Han Dynasty (206 BC-24 AD). The circus tradition evolved from a simple exhibition of skills into a performing art with a rich and eclectic repertoire including tumbling, balancing, plate spinning and rope dancing. The acrobatic performance known, as *The Show of One Hundred Skills*¹⁰ was originally a form of street entertainment performed by and for the local peasantry but went on to gain

⁹ Lewis & Short (2002), *A Latin Dictionary* and Liddell & Scott (2007), *A Greek-English Lexicon*.

¹⁰ Dominique Jando: *The Chinese Acrobatic Theater*

(http://www.circopedia.org/index.php/The_Chinese_Acrobatic_Theater, accessed 22/04/2011).

recognition by the ruling elite as an artistic form suitable for the royal courts. A specialist school was established by the T'ang dynasty¹¹ (618-907), for training acrobatic dancers and musicians. The Pear Garden opened in 714, was, perhaps, the first theatrical school in the world.

Whilst ancient carvings¹² date the Chinese circus back to the Warring States period (475 BC-221 BC), Hoh & Rough use historical evidence to emphasise the transnational domain of American circuses and the role of nomadic performers:

'Our modern circus is a genuinely international art form, and any attempt to assign its origins to a single cultural tradition is misleading [...] In the Nile Valley of Egypt, acrobats and balance artists are depicted on wall paintings that date to 2500 BC' [...] During Greece's Hellenistic period, subsequent to the reign of Alexander the Great, there was a rapid expansion of Greek influence among the many cultures of the Eastern Mediterranean, Africa, and India, accompanied by an internationalization of Greek culture itself. New trade routes and a spreading common language insured a co-mingling of many different cultural traditions, and bands of itinerant entertainers, including actors, acrobats, comedians, ropewalkers, and animal trainers freely roamed around the known world'.¹³

The British equestrians, Philip Astley (1742-1814) and Charles Hughes (1746-1797), are regarded as 'the founding fathers of modern circus' (Hoh & Rough 1990). Astley developed his equestrian variety show into a British entertainment industry, whilst during the 1770s Hughes claimed to have toured America and Africa, arguably being instrumental in disseminating the circus throughout the world. During Hughes trip to Russia in 1790 his horse act was a favourite of Catherine the Great and formed the basis for the Russian circus (Hoh & Rough 1990).

Throughout history trade routes and expanding empires have precipitated exchange between cultures and, consequently, performance genres. Africans either took advantage of opportunities provided to them by expanding trade or were forced,

¹¹ The Tang dynasty was a vast area, which included Korea, southern Manchuria, and northern Vietnam. In the west, the Tang influence was felt as far away as present-day Afghanistan.

¹² Such as the brick carvings discovered in the Han Dynasty tomb of Chengdu, in the Szechuan province.

¹³ Hoh, La Vahn G. & Rough, William H (1990) *Step Right Up! The Adventures of Circus in America* Whitehall, Virginia: Betterway Publications (Electronic edition: not paginated <http://www.circusinamerica.org/cocoon/circus/xml>, accessed 24/05/2011).

through slavery, into pursuing livelihoods in foreign lands. Africans, brought to the West, were showcased in museums, world trade fairs, theatres, freak shows and circuses. The European and American tradition in ‘ethnological show business’ demonstrated that when it came to the arts of human display, science and showmanship converged in ‘anthropological’ spectacles that were meant to entertain and inform.

[African’s performing in American and European circuses from the 19th century](#)

Literary and visual accounts of Africa made by Bruce, Lugard and Stanley aroused Western audiences’ curiosity. Their adventures were illustrated in popular magazines for children¹⁴ and re-enacted on stage. The visual arts reproduced both imperial and militarist iconography in magazines, posters, postcards and public performances. The British were dismayed to discover that their expanding empire faced opposition. The Indian Mutiny, in 1857, took officials by surprise and was quickly followed by the Jamaican rebellion in 1865, which led to accusations about the ‘ingratitude’ of emancipated slaves (Judd 1996: 6). It was during such conflicts that ‘the Mid-Victorian public found their preconceptions of savagery and the unreliability of the ‘black’ races amply confirmed’ (Judd 1996: 8). Literary accounts, popular culture and show business, ‘together fabricated an image of Africa for the mid-Victorian public that accorded with the central preoccupations of the age, mingling humanitarian concerns with dreams of cultural and economic, if not yet explicitly imperial, expansion’ (Barringer 1996: 196).

British ambitions for expansion in South Africa instigated the Anglo-Zulu War that began in 1879 and was re-enacted on stage and in circus rings for British and American audiences. In a performance on 8 July 1879, *Farini’s Friendly Zulus* opened at St. James’s Hall in London. ‘The crowds came in droves, thrilled by the mere presence of these exotic men but particularly excited by the spectacle of the terrific throws of their assegais, which they buried deep into targets’ (Peacock 1999: 89). The British government were shamed by their inability to quell the continuing crisis in South Africa

¹⁴ From 1830-1880 there was a boom in ‘penny dreadfuls’ aimed at children that presented the world as a vast playground in which Anglo-Saxon superiority could be repeatedly demonstrated against all other races (MacKenzie 1984: 203-204).

and thus banned Farini's 'dangerous performance'. Farini and his Zulu performers were left to seek new opportunities offered by circus in America (Peacock 1999: 90).

Once in America, Farini discovered that his Zulu show excited American's fascination with the exotic. This encouraged Farini to add San 'pygmies' to his human collection. The local media reported: 'Farini's Dwarf Earthmen's' conversation is similar to the chatter of monkeys [...] their heads narrow and un-intellectual'.¹⁵ Such descriptions were informed by the 'scientific' practice of measuring of skulls. Blumenbach's¹⁶ (1752-1840) 'craniology' method was perceived to distinguish intellectual differentiation between races. Social Darwinists depicted humanity on an evolutionary scale from 'barbarian' to 'civilised'. During the late 19th century whilst 'armchair anthropologists' browsed the musings of colonial administrators, circus defined the 'other' in the popular imagination. The imperial expansion of Western culture was 'symbolically ascribed to the heroic behaviour of the colonizers who, like the circus acrobats or animal trainers, were supposed to be able to overcome formidable resistance and thus prove their exceptional fitness. The ideological context was indeed provided by 'Social Darwinism'



(Bouissac 2010: 71). American and European circus proceeded to incorporate sideshows,¹⁷ and competed with museums and zoos in 'educational' exhibitions of the exotic.

Fig. 1

Barnum and Bailey's *Greatest Show on Earth* was inspired by the exhibitions at World Fairs and featured the 'Grand Ethnological

¹⁵ New York Clipper 13 December 1884 (cited in Peacock 1999: 97).

¹⁶ J.F. Blumenbach (1752-1840), a comparative anatomy professor in Göttingen, was one of the founders of (physical) anthropology as a discipline in Germany.

¹⁷ In 1871 Barnum began P.T. Barnum's Museum, Menagerie and Circus, a travelling combination of which the "museum" part was an exhibition of animal and human oddities, soon to become an integral part of the American circus known as the Sideshow. Sideshows were an additional spectacle to the main show and tickets were often sold separately. They were a particular feature of circuses in the United States, but also toured in Europe.

Congress: A Partial display of the new enormous menagerie & characteristic grouping of strange & savage people’.

On 7 October 1883, the New York Times reported:

‘All of the savage as well as some civilized races of the earth are to be represented in the ‘congress’ [...] The delegates of several savage tribes are already in this country. The Zulus, Nubians and New-Zealand cannibals are now travelling around the United States, and the Hottentots, Malay and Bushmen representatives will soon arrive. The Island of Borneo will be represented by the famous wild man. The representatives will appear at the ‘congress’ in their native costumes’.

The manipulation of Darwin’s theory of evolution by Social Darwinists served to reinforce pre-existing Western prejudices. Africans were considered closer to animals than ‘civilised’ man. This was evidenced in 1906 when Ota Benga, a Batwa ‘pygmy’ was exhibited as ‘the missing link’ alongside a live orang-utan at the Bronx Zoo (Blume 1999: 192).

Fig. 2

Even as late as 1931, Congolese women were being brought to the USA to parade around the circus ring as a *Tribe of Genuine Ubangi Savages* ‘from Africa’s Darkest Depths’. Such circus acts supports Lindfors paradoxical claim that ‘ethnological show business thus promoted and perpetuated racism, pushing whites and blacks further apart by placing them in closer proximity. Africans were put on stage in order to distance them from the rest of humanity’ (1999: xii).



Such examples are only part of the transnational history of the development of circuses. Other nations have also shaped the contemporary form and content of circuses by incorporating diverse performance traditions that reflect other historical and ideological transitions.

Chinese Circus and the blending of circus traditions

When the People's Republic of China was founded in 1949, the new government's rhetoric, "let a hundred flowers blossom and weed through the old to bring forth the new", stimulated a spectacular renaissance of the old acrobatic theatre. Re-marketed as 'Chinese circus,' numerous groups began to perform abroad. Their aerial acrobatics acts and symbolic references to ancient Chinese history informed audience expectations of contemporary circus. Their repertoires included dragon processions, hoop formations, balancing acts on unicycles, martial arts, Tai Chi, Chinese percussion and opera, magic acts, juggling, contortion acts, and human pyramids.

Chinese circus influenced African artists even before the huge Chinese investments in Africa in the new millennium. In 1985, the China Wuqiao Acrobatic Art School was established in north China's Hebei Province, the place considered to be the cradle of the ancient Chinese circus arts. The school was funded by the 'China-Africa Cooperation and Aid Program', which offered free twelve-month programs to African students to train in the Chinese acrobatic tradition.¹⁸ At the first ever Sino-African Summit held in China on 4 November 2006, twenty-three African circus students were invited to perform. One of the participating students said the goal of their education was, "to take the precious Chinese acrobatic culture to Africa and let more and more African people understand the Chinese culture."¹⁹ In China, there are presently over one hundred and twenty professional Chinese acrobatic troupes and more than twelve thousand performers.²⁰

The Chinese circus was inspirational to Cirque du Soleil. Founded in Quebec in 1984, Cirque du Soleil is regarded as one of the most successful and prestigious contemporary

¹⁸ Xinhua News Agency 2 November 2007: *Foreign students train in Chinese circus school* (<http://www.china.org.cn/english/LivinginChina/230621.htm>, accessed 22/04/2011)

¹⁹ *China Pictorial* 18 October, 2006: *African Disciples Study Chinese Acrobatics* (<http://www.china.org.cn/english/LivinginChina/184612.htm>, accessed 22/04/2011)

²⁰ The Academy of Music Press Release March 2011: *Art beat presents the New Shanghai Circus* (<http://www.academyofmusictheatre.com/2011/02/08/new-shanghai-circus/>, accessed 22/04/2011)

circuses. Employing over five thousand people, this Canadian based company took a theatrical approach to circus emphasising both character and narrative and breaking with the Western circus tradition by excluding animal acts.²¹

One of Cirque du Soleil shows, *Dralion*, was advertised as ‘a harmonious blend of



Eastern and Western acrobatic prowess’. The performance style claimed to draw inspiration from ‘Eastern philosophy and its never-ending quest for harmony between humans and nature. The show’s name was derived from its two emblematic creatures: the dragon, symbolizing the East, and the lion, symbolizing the West’.²²

Fig. 3

Touring around the world, Cirque du Soleil has performed on every continent and has had a significant impact on the development of theatrical narrative in contemporary circus performance. After thirty years of observing circuses, Bouissac argued that ‘from the mid-twentieth century on, the circus has proved to be one of the most marketable symbolic commodities worldwide as if it were pre-adapted, so to speak, to cultural globalization and adaption to universal novelty, as Cirque du Soleil has demonstrated by reaching the status of a global brand name’ (2010: 73). Their use of theatrical narratives

²¹ Predictably, animal rights activists had been expressing their concerns on the condition of circus animals. Claims of ‘animal cruelty’ became increasingly vocalised. Even today the debate on the use of animals in the circus is discussed in the British Parliament. Whilst no laws have been strictly imposed the attacks on the use of animals made many circuses end the practice because of diminishing popularity.

²² Cirque du Soleil website page advertising their show *Dralion*

(<http://www.cirquedusoleil.com/en/shows/dralion/show/about.aspx>, accessed 22/04/2011)

closed the gap between theatre and circus and reinvented the potential role of circus as an educational medium that could be used for social transformation.

Theatre for development

'Theatre for development' practitioners had already established the concept of performance for social transformation. The theoretical foundations of the 'theatre for development' movement have been traced back to the writings of Freire and Boal. Referring to the western Marxist writing of Gramsci, Freire was depicted as, 'the exemplary organic intellectual of our time' (West 1993: xiii). Freire intended to break the 'culture of silence' of 'oppressed' people by a commitment to human liberation through critical awareness. 'Freire's education for liberation requires a new kind of teacher, one who believes in the innate creativity, wisdom, and knowledge of the people with whom he or she works' (Erven 1991: 20). In 1979, Boal's adapted Freire's methodology into a theatrical setting. Boal explicitly expressed the political nature of theatrical performance and critiqued Hegelian idealist poetics as 'elite entertainment' and opposed it to the Marxist poetics of Bertolt Brecht. He introduced his concept of 'Liberation Theater' as a didactic tool to prepare for the Marxist revolution.

Odhiambo suggested Freire's theory and Boal's methodology 'have had the most significant, remarkable and extensive influence and impact upon the practices of Theatre of Development throughout the 'third world' and over the time has become a sort of a theoretical and methodological model in 'theatre for development' (2008: 31). The idea was that theatre could be adapted 'to change society rather than contenting ourselves with interpreting it' (Boal 1979: 224). Open-ended theatre used by practitioners invited the 'spect-actors' to change the dramatic action by replacing the characters on stage and performing alternative outcomes to social problems. In the same year in which Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* was published, networks of meetings were set up across Africa, Asia and Latin America to discuss the application of theatre as a developmental tool.

The first meeting was held at Chalimbana, Zambia in 1979, where practitioners debated ‘the extent to which theatre should be seen as a shield against colonial and neo-colonial indoctrination, or, even more controversially, as a weapon of class struggle’ (Kerr 1999: 80). Further workshops were held in Mhlangano, Swaziland (1981), Mbalachanda, Malawi (1981), Benue, Nigeria (1982), Freetown, Sierra Leone (1983), Yaounde, Cameroon (1984), Maseru, Lesotho (1984), Morewa, Zimbabwe (1984). Many practitioners came from the respective university departments and invited ‘experts’ from abroad (Kerr 1999: 59). ‘The inspiration for these activities came not from the West but from Latin America, although progressive European development workers and Christian priests often served as intermediaries in this third-world-to-third-world grassroots cultural cross fertilization’ (Erven 1999: 14).

‘Theatre for development’ practitioners actively engaged in Ethiopia, emphasised the relationship between performance and politics and highlighted ‘uses and abuses’ of cultural performance genres (Plastow 1998: 97-113). During the pioneer workshops it became conventional wisdom to distinguish between ‘popular theatre’ and ‘elitist theatre’. The latter was seen as a style of cultural imperialism based on a Western model, which denied the experience and values of the South. It was argued that performances should rely on indigenous traditions, be performed in local languages with an explicit intention of highlighting the inequities of local and global power structures. The workshops stimulated projects where target communities devised and performed plays, which were meant to address the concerns and values of the local society.

It was in Kenya, in 1981, that Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s popular play *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (I will marry when I want) led to his imprisonment and the state destruction of the community built popular theatre. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o wrote, during detention, that his plays ‘could never have called into being that which was already there. Classes and class struggle were the very essence of Kenyan history. The play did not invent that history. It merely reflected it – correctly’ (1981: 72). This statement is consistent with Brecht’s theory of poetics where, ‘the artist’s duty consists not in showing true things but in revealing how things truly are’ (cited in Boal 1979: 112). Performances such as these

were given as example of the transformative power of theatre to effect social change. The use of imperial languages in theatre was called into question and it was proposed that 'theatre for development' should be performed in local languages to assist with the 'decolonisation of the mind'.²³

Practitioners, without the capacity to understand or communicate in the numerous indigenous languages in the societies, began to look to new performance genres that did not necessarily rely on dialogue. Dance and music troupes became a new source of inspiration and finally there was circus. Despite the idealistic claims of the transformative nature of such performance troupes, two decades later the theory was critiqued when postmodern and post-Marxist approaches began to dominate academia. Criticising what she perceived as simplistic idealism, Harding suggested that whilst, 'Theatre-for-Development practices was once potentially radical, it is now becoming a favoured tool of international aid agencies and government instruction for 'domestication' (2002: 18).

Social circus

Since 1995, Cirque du Soleil donated one percent of its annual revenue to the subsidiary organisation Cirque du Monde. This organisation supported its concept of *Social Circus*, a circus arena where 'young people develop a sense of belonging, freedom, creativity, perseverance and discipline'.²⁴ This has had a remarkable impact on the contemporary global circus landscape, as they continue to fund social circus projects in eighty-six communities across fifteen countries. At a conference held 2002, at La Seyne-sur-Mer in France, representatives from Brazil, France, Colombia, Australia, Senegal, Chile, Northern Ireland, Morocco, Canada, Spain, Argentina, Guinea and the

²³ Thiong'o, Ngũgĩ wa (1981) *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language In African Literature*. Oxford: James Currey and Nairobi: Heinemann, was his last book to be written in English in which he declared that the use of colonial languages in African literature perpetuated cultural imperialism.

²⁴ Cirque du Soleil website, page on Social Circus (<http://www.cirquedusoleil.com/en/about/global-citizenship/community/social-circus.aspx> accessed 22/04/2011)

Netherlands signed the draft *Charter of the Creation of the United Nations of Social Circus*:

This confederation is dedicated to cooperating to produce *social transformations* using circus arts as a tool. The members of this confederation are moved by the conviction that *circus is an educational instrument of emancipation and economic development*. We also believe that circus is a particularly efficient means of communication. It operates as a magnet for disadvantaged groups and clearly demonstrates its potential for social change.²⁵

Tanzania, Kenya, Cameroon, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Senegal, Uganda, Nigeria, Morocco, South Africa and Ethiopia, are the African countries cited as involved in what Wood-Babcock²⁶ described as the ‘Social Circus Movement’. This investment in social circus is derived from international agencies including; Oxfam International, the International Red Cross, United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), Jeunesse du Monde, the Canadian International Development Agency and the Dutch, *Stichting Creatieve Wereld* (Creative World Foundation) amongst others. Support is also received from local and national NGOs, individual politicians and central governments. This movement is not restricted to African countries but is also occurring in East and West Europe, Australia, North and South America and Canada. New institutions such as ‘Caravan’ (European Youth Circus and Education Network) have been created to encourage cooperation and exchange between a long list of affiliated circuses and organisations. This global phenomenon is arguably the most dramatic example of a contemporary re-imagining of the relationship between circus and society.

²⁵ Information obtained from Appendix 1 of Marianthi Research: How Social Circus Programs and Institutions are Promoting Children’s Rights: Master’s Thesis published online by ‘Caravan’ European Circus Network, *italics added* Appendix 1: *Charter of the Creation of the United Nations of Social Circus* (<http://www.caravancircusnetwork.eu/assets/images/Caravan%20network/Publications/Miscellaneous%20-%20THESIS%20%20Research%20project%20on%20social%20circus%20programmes.pdf> accessed 10/07/2011).

²⁶ Wood-Babcock, Donna (2004) *Social Circus Movement*, Presented at the Regional Circus Conference: Circus Center, San Francisco. July 2004. Lecture.

Circus in Ethiopia

Circus Addis Ababa was Ethiopia's first circus troupe, founded in 1991 by Andy Goldman, an American working for the National Association for the Care of Ethiopian Jews and Marc La Chance, a French-Canadian working at Addis Ababa's International Community School. During the final months of the Ethiopian Derg Regime (1974 -1991) the first circus students came from the Ethiopian Jewish community, but during escalating conflict in Addis Ababa, in 1991, the Israeli government evacuated the remaining Ethiopian Jewish community for 'repatriation' to Israel.²⁷ Despite such turbulent beginnings, the demand for participation in circus by Ethiopian urban youths increased. In 1993, the founders registered an umbrella circus institution under the title 'Circus in Ethiopia for Youth and Social Development' (CIE), which gained NGO status and official recognition by the new governing power. Donations from UNICEF, the Ethiopian Committee of the Red Cross and the Dutch branch of Oxfam International (NOVIB) assisted in the creation of new regional branch members. The first four officially registered circuses were Circus Addis Ababa (1991), Circus Jimma (1992), Circus Tigray (1993) and Circus Nazreth (1995).²⁸

Marc La Chance used his Canadian connections to obtain costumes from Cirque du Soleil. In 1995, when Cirque du Monde started investing in social circus CIE was one of the first recipients.

²⁷ Nearly all of the Ethiopian Beta Israeli community, now over 120,000 people live in Israel. The Law of Return gave Jews the right to settle and obtain citizenship in Israel. The Israeli government undertook two 'rescue' operations, Operation Moses in 1984 and Operation Solomon in 1991 during famine and conflict in Ethiopia, thus evacuating nearly the entire Jewish community from Ethiopia.

²⁸ Bereket Tizazu established Circus Jimma in western Ethiopia in 1992. Tesfaye Gebre Yohannes founded Circus Tigray in the northern city of Mekelle in 1993, followed by Circus Nazreth founded in 1995 by Ephrem Haile.



Fig. 4

CIE produced and facilitated further workshops and projects throughout the country attracting numerous enthusiastic individuals already experimenting with circus skills. The emphasis was placed on circus to promote socio-economic change. They engaged theatre practitioners with knowledge and experience of ‘theatre for development’ methodology. Young performers experimenting with circus acts were encouraged to form their own circus troupes. These circuses epitomised the ideology and practise behind ‘participatory development practice’ (Chambers 1995: 30-42) that directed development aid to ‘grassroots’ organisations. With economic assistance, what began on school playing fields grew into an organised and subsided circus phenomenon rapidly spreading throughout Ethiopia.

In an interview with Bichu Tesfarmarium, (one of the original members from Circus Jimma, presently a professional juggler touring with Gifford’s Circus in England), he remembered how they used to make their own juggling equipment from seeds and wood.²⁹ When Circus Addis Ababa went to Jimma they gave this small group of interested teenagers a circus workshop. In exchange for incorporating educational messages into the performances given by these new circuses, UNICEF and the

²⁹ Interview with Bichu, on 10/07/2010, Oxford, England.

International Red Cross provided materials and financial support. Bichu and the other young participants were shown videos of Cirque du Soleil's performances:

This became a huge inspiration for all of us. My ambition was to join this circus.³⁰

Before leaving Ethiopia for education in England he was one of the performers in the first staged theatrical circus performance in Ethiopia, 'The Shoe Shine Opera'.

'The Shoe Shine Opera', was devised by Abate Mekuria and performed at the *National Theatre* in 1995. It combined circus with theatre and music to draw a portrait street life in Addis Ababa by focusing on a day in the life of a group of abandoned children. Château-Valon Dance and Music Company had sponsored the original script to take part in an International festival in Southern France in 1990. The Peter-Brook Theatre at the Champs-Élysée (Paris) had arranged to host 'The Shoe-Shine Opera'. The Ethiopian Derg Regime banned the production and refused permission for the international tour because it undermined the image of Ethiopia they wished to portray. After the transfer of power to the transitional government, in 1991, 'The Shoe-Shine Opera' remained highly contentious. Abate found himself being interrogated and was dismissed from his position at the *City Hall Theatre*, after being accused of depicting the new president, Meles Zenawi, as bringing poverty to Ethiopia.³¹ After four years out of employment Abate began to dedicate his energy in 'theatre for development' projects.

Theatre for development continues to be sustained by several organisations in Ethiopia particularly the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA). In 1994, SIDA funded the 'Creation of Alternative Methods for Advocacy-Awareness' (CAMA). SIDA is presently involved with thirty partner organisations³² in Ethiopia

³⁰ Interview with Bichu, on 10/07/2010, Oxford, England.

³¹ Interview with Abate, on 24/12/2010, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

³² SIDA's partners include: Action for Development, Addis Development Vision, African Initiative for a Democratic World Order, Alem Children Support Organization, Cher Ethiopia Society for Humanitarian & Development Assistance, Cheshire Foundation Ethiopia, Education for Development Association, Ethiopians for Ethiopians, Ethiopian Muslim Relief & Development Association, Ethiopian Rural Self Help Association, Ezana-Ethiopia Mahaber, Guraghe People's Self-Help Development Organization, Hiwot HIV/AIDS Prevention, Care & Support Organization,

through their project *Metebaber* (unite and collaborate) and supports various performance-oriented approaches to development with an emphasis on female empowerment.³³ In 1995, SIDA financed the production of ‘The Shoe-Shine Opera’ at the National Theatre with performers from Circus Addis Ababa and was directed by Abate. Whilst watching a performance by Circus Addis Ababa, Abate realised the dramatic potential of combining theatre with circus as a new form of ‘street performance’ and adapted his original idea for ‘The Shoe-Shine Opera’ to combine theatrical performance with circus.³⁴ The show opened as street children woke up disturbed by the screams of a young girl being raped. The narrative took the audience from morning into the night as the children encountered numerous hardships. Lighting and sound effects represented the bitter wind and rain battering down on their make shift shelters. Comedic theatrical elements offered relief from the anxious atmosphere and the circus acts were used to symbolise the remarkable ability of these children to adapt to their intimidating surroundings.

Despite its haunting depiction of poverty the show was an outstanding success and engaged the audience with a new form of artistic expression. The following year, in 1996, Rädde Barnen, the Swedish branch of Save the Children, funded the first ever Children’s Festival held in Jimma, Abate directed members from Circus Jimma for a second performance of ‘The Shoe Shine Opera’. When asked about the success of this show Abate said:

Ethiopia is a seriously culture oriented nation. The people are so vibrant in their own culture. So any cultural scene is extremely attractive, because they enjoy it they endorse it immediately, and circus being a new language was attractive. So I put dance, drama, circus and music to

Kulich Youth Reproductive Health & Development Organization, New Life Teen Challenge Development Program, Redeem the Generation-Ethiopia, Rural Reach Ethiopia, Save Your Holy Land Association, United Volunteers Development Organization for Children and Women, Women Support Association, and Ratson Women, Youth and Children Development Program. *Metebaber* is operational in Oromia, Amhara, Afar, Benishangul Gumuz and Southern Nations Nationalities, and People’s Region (SNNPR), as well as Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa city administrations.

³³ See Anis (2007), *SIDA Pact Ethiopia Research Report: Unpacking Empowerment: Profiles of Empowerment through the Metebaber Project*.

³⁴ Interview with Abate, on 24/12/2010, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

make it vibrant. My approach was also conceptual because I wanted to pay attention to our resources, our resources of traditional dance, of telling folklore in literature, oral and physical talent. When that was synchronised it worked very well with circus language. It worked so well because it is an expression of identity.³⁵

In March 1997, ‘The Shoe-Shine Opera’ was again performed with Circus Jimma at the International Windybro Festival in Johannesburg. When Abate offered to have the Amharic script translated the festival organisers deemed it unnecessary – everyone could understand the performance without knowledge of the language. This reinforces the transnational nature of circus as a medium for communication, irrespective of language barriers. The show received first prize in the FNB Vita Awards for best ensemble piece.

Conclusion

Ethiopian circus has been situated within a larger transnational performance arena. The American and European circus tradition that developed in the 19th century combined ‘science’ with showmanship. African performers became part of a menagerie of the exotic. American and European Circus assisted in popularising the evolutionary paradigm manipulated by ‘Social Darwinians’, which, in turn, supported an imperial ideology that justified colonial expansion under the guise of ‘civilisation’.

After the Communist revolution, circus in China was transformed from an ancient art form and re-marketed as a cultural export. African performers continue to train in Chinese circus institutions and have taken Chinese acrobatic skills to Africa. The blending of circus traditions was an inspiration for Cirque du Soleil’s performances. This Canadian circus developed a theatrical narrative form of circus.

The adoption of narrative circus style closed the gap between theatre and circus and reaffirmed the educational capacity of circus within society. The concept of social circus is based on a belief in the transformative effect of theatre already established by ‘theatre for development’ practitioners. This organised, grassroots, ‘popular theatre movement’

³⁵ Interview with Abate, on 24/12/2010, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

inspired by the Marxist writings of Boal, depicted the political dimension of theatre. The audience were invited to change the outcomes of the performance; theatre was being used as a rehearsal space for a potential class 'revolution'.

Circus became popular in Ethiopia, in the 1990s, assisted by investment from international and national agents. Practitioners such as Abate Mekuria, who had been trained in 'theatre for development' realised the potential of circus as a new language to produce thought provoking physical theatre accessible to a mass audience.

The growth of circus in Ethiopia took place at a time of extreme instability after seventeen years of conflict had created crises in social and ethnic relations and the country suffered from widespread poverty. Circus began when Ethiopian society needed to imagine a brighter future. CIE was set up as an umbrella organisation and investment in circus came from both international charitable organisations and government officials. Such engagement by national and international agencies draws attention to Harding's claim that the radical potential of popular performance increases political domestication of its practises (2002: 12). However, if that is the case, the question remains, as to whether or not circus can still facilitate individual and social transformation? To examine this further it demands a consideration of the historical relationship between performance and society in a specific context.

Chapter 2

Ethiopian history and the poetics of nationhood

Monday 20 September 2010: Fieldwork diary

It is 6.00am Monday morning Circus Debre Berhan is preparing for their 'Flag Day' performance. The young performers have been rehearsing for weeks. They don their multi-ethnic costumes, pull out the dusty red carpet and set up their aging sound system. The musicians dressed in kabbas³⁶ start to play as the flag bearing crowds descend at Debre Berhan's Zonal Administration Office.³⁷ Following the lead of the Ethiopian press cameramen, I begin to film the arrival of the rally. Children wave mini flags handed out by officials, old army veterans proudly march by displaying their medals. It is difficult to differentiate between the numerous uniforms. The trainer calls me backstage, "I have been told that you must stop filming, you must only film the circus just focus on the circus". Accepting his pleas I turn my camera away from the crowd. The local press continue to film, as the police, emergency forces and the army in perfect formation file into the courtyard. The circus director, on the microphone hails the arrival, the band stops and everyone falls silent. The flag is unfurled, immaculately raised up the flagpole and is greeted by loud cheers from the assembled crowd.

The circus musicians strike up as the performers acrobatically enter the stage. The crowd watch as the flag bearer begins her extraordinary gymnastic routine. She has been chosen because of her talent and beauty to embody 'Ethiopia'. Her father, a local politician watches his daughter with pride. In his colourful Oromo costume, the circus trainer performs with spear in hand to symbolically protect 'Ethiopia'. Another performer, carrying a gun and dressed like a rural farmer, majestically balances 'Ethiopia'. The jugglers surround her in a wall of fire before she is lifted into the air, high above the heads of the dazzled children, fighting to get a closer view. When the human pyramid is established, the soldiers and police salute as the flag is lifted, the

³⁶ A "kabba" is often worn for weddings and special celebrations. It has a solid colour (black, green, or red) with gold or silver embroidered designs along the neck and midline of the cape.

³⁷ Ethiopia has a three-tiered local government; zone, woreda and kebele. The kebele is the lowest level of local administration. Generally the zonal administration is not autonomous and functions as a branch of the regional government, although zonal administrators are provided with certain powers and functions by the regional government as a form of 'decentralization'. There are 66 zonal administrations in the country; Debre Berhan is part of the Northern Shewa zone.

audience stand to sing the national anthem. The finale is a rapid display of gymnastic talent combined with a traditional dance routine. Full of smiles they take a bow and exit the make shift stage back into the Zonal Administration Office.

This Flag Show exemplified the integral relationship that has developed between performance and politics in Ethiopia. The director conceptualised this in his use of symbolism:

The flexible feats of the female embody 'Ethiopia' to exaggerate her extraordinary abilities. The rural peasant enchanted by 'Ethiopia' lifts her into the air to symbolise that the country is built upon the hard labour of the rural majority. The performers dance in their multi-ethnic clothes, as the 'Oromo' spear routine unites them in their defence of 'Ethiopia'.³⁸

Abbink suggested the introduction of a countrywide annual 'Flag Day' in 2008, illustrated a growing recognition by the Ethiopian ruling elite that the integrity of the state was fragile. Whilst this event attempts to perform 'the poetics of nationhood' as a symbolic expression of unity and national identity, 'they are often viewed with scepticism and ironic humour by the general public' (2009: 22). The circus appeals to the majority by using references to history and by depicting an image of a united future. Circus had become extremely popular form of physical theatre and is often used to draw in the crowd at rallies by the governing party.

Whether the picture the director paints through his use of ideological symbolism reflects the values of all the circus artists is open to question. However, the performers are required to take part in such events to maintain support from local officials. This is not a financial but a pragmatic arrangement as no payments are received by the circus for such events. The director is required to sign letters of collaboration with local government initiatives in return for permission to have the use of facilities for training and performance purposes.

Barber suggested that the popular is 'inscribed with the history of political struggles' (1997: 3). Before discussing Ethiopian circus in relation to its current political circumstance it is first necessary to place it in the wider historical context that informs

³⁸ Fieldwork note: 20/09/2010.

the here and now. If the ‘poetics of nationhood’ highlights the reality of how a ‘nation’ understands itself, the nation’s history is necessarily reflected in artistic expression in general and therefore in performance in particular. A nation’s history provides a context, which speaks to the origins of its nationhood and informs the reality of its present sense of self. In short, it is important to place what is performed in the context of what is known of the past to better understand the language of the present. Whilst this is perhaps true of almost every nation, society or cultural group, it is certainly true in the case of Ethiopia.

The very name Ethiopia is only the most recent of many names used to describe the peoples who’ve lived on these lands since ancient times. Moreover, those living here today, specifically, see themselves in the context of the hinterland of these ancient cultural historical origins. They define themselves profoundly as custodians of an ancient cultural inheritance. Their present is actively shaped by their sense of their ancient roots, whilst simultaneously re-invented by their reinterpretation of their ancient myths and stories. It is this history that has bestowed upon them their sense that their geographic place was ordained and remains a unique repository of special religious and cultural significance, not merely to them but to the world. Just as the Jewish concept of being a ‘chosen people’ informs much of how Jews culturally consider themselves to be. In Ethiopia, the ancient connection to Solomon and to the Queen of Sheba, as well as to early Christianity, informs modern Ethiopian circus performers’ cultural consciousness as least as much as Marxist ideology informs it’s recent past.

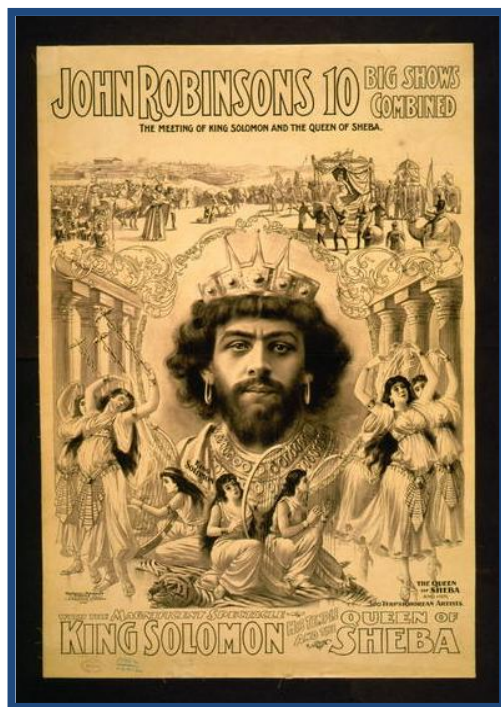
[Ethiopian history](#)

Ethiopia’s rich and extensive history is a source of great pride for the population. The national museum displays some of the most remarkable archaeological discoveries ever made. In the Afar region of eastern Ethiopia the legendary human remains of ‘Lucy’ unearthed in 1974 date back 3.2 million years. The discovery of the skeletal remains of ‘Ardi’, located in the same region, date over 4.4 million years old and surpasses ‘Lucy’ as the earliest known hominid. Ethiopian playwright and poet Laureate Tsegaye Gebre-

Medhin (1998) described the importance of such finds to Ethiopians in a nationalist vein:

The cradle of man is here, the beginning of man is here, there is no refuting that. Archaeologists, geologists have dug everywhere and they have come up with the bones to prove that man started here. And that man was not sleeping; from the moment he was created he started creating. The heritage of that man, of the ancestor, is the heritage of the world. [...] This land is a museum of man's ancient history. They look at us; they watch us, the Europeans, the Americans, the other nations, with this tremendous fascination. They are awestruck by the unique practices of our church, of our Islam, of our ancient pre-Judaic worship.³⁹

Fig 5



The Old Testament refers to the encounter between the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon.⁴⁰ This encounter underpins an Ethiopian belief that they had a son together, Menelik, who became the first king of Ethiopia. The Aksumite Empire established in the 1st century BC converted to Christianity in the 4th century AD. At this time Aksum was considered to be one of the four major power brokers dealing in international trade with Persia, Rome and China. In the 7th century Muslims seeking refuge from persecution travelled to Aksum in what is known in Islamic history as the first Hijra. Both Christianity and Islam dominate the religious domain in

³⁹ Wendy Belcher's interview with Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin *Ethiopian Review*, October 1998.

⁴⁰ "Now when the queen of Sheba heard of the fame of Solomon concerning the name of Yahweh, she came to test him with hard questions. She came to Jerusalem with a very great retinue, with camels that bore spices, very much gold, and precious stones; and when she came to Solomon, she spoke with him about all that was in her heart. So Solomon answered all her questions; there was nothing so difficult for the king that he could not explain it to her." (1 Kings 10:1-3)

Ethiopia and inform the Ethiopian calendar.⁴¹ Rituals that surround religious festivals continue to be highly performative and signify an intimate relationship between performance and Ethiopian society.

In 1270 Yekuno Amlak, traced his ancestry to the ancient Askum royalty. He claimed direct descent from King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba and declared himself Emperor. This marked the beginning of the Solomonic dynasty, which was used (and misused) to determine the legitimacy of the majority of Ethiopian Emperors right into the 20th century. The Solomonic dynasty was threatened with disintegration when regional power struggles broke out during *Zemene Mesafint* or ‘Era of princes’ (1769-1855). The place many historical accounts refer to as ‘Abyssinia’, was beset with conflict and was only reaffirmed as a “national political unity” when Tewodros II emerged as Emperor (r. 1855-68). Tewodros’ reign was cut short when he faced defeat by the British expeditionary forces and, rather than being captured, he committed suicide.

The region was again in turmoil as foreign invasions collided with regional disputes over the rightful heir to the throne. Emperors, Tekle Giyoris II (r. 1868-1872), Yohannes IV (r. 1872-1889) and Menelik II (r. 1889-1913) all faced internal and external opposition and military invasions. Emperor Yohannes IV’s stronghold was in Tigray in northern Ethiopia but Menelik *Negus* (King) of Shewa disputed his authority and refused to recognise Yohannes IV as Emperor. The threat by the British was weakened when they were impelled to sign a treaty respecting the sovereignty of Emperor Yohannes IV. Tigrayan dominance of central government was lost when Yohannes IV died in battle against an invading Sudanese Mahdist army in western Ethiopia, in 1889, and both Menelik II and the Italian colonialists were quick to take advantage of the disarray in the north.

⁴¹ The Ethiopian calendar is based on the older Alexandrian or Coptic calendar, but like the Julian calendar it adds a leap day every four years. There is a seven- to eight-year gap between the Ethiopian and Gregorian calendars resulting from alternate calculations that determine the date of the Annunciation of Jesus. There are 12 months of 30 days and a short month of 5 or 6 depending on the leap year. Presently it is the year 2003 in Ethiopia.

Born in 1844 near Debre Berhan, Sahle Maryam declared himself *Negus* (King) of Shewa at Ankober in 1865, after escaping previous imprisonment by Emperor Tewodros II. Subsequent to the death of Emperor Yohannes IV, he took the name of the first mythological king of Ethiopia, calling himself Emperor Menelik II, by claiming direct male descent from King Solomon. After becoming Emperor (r. 1889-1913) Menelik II signed the highly contested Wuchale treaty with the Italians, who pronounced northern Tigray (part of modern-day Eritrea) an Italian protectorate.

Emperor Menelik II denounced the treaty, justifying his actions due to inequities between the Amharic and Italian versions of the text. This inflamed tensions and Italy declared war on Ethiopia invading from their stronghold in the north. The Italians were defeated at the battle of Adwa in 1896, which forced them to capitulate and recognise Ethiopian sovereignty. Despite humiliation in Europe due to this defeat, the Italians managed to retain Eritrea as a colony. Menelik II, keen to protect Ethiopia from European expansion, aligned himself with Russia, and through violent conquest of the lands and people of the South, East and West he created a large East African empire, which defines the contemporary borders of Ethiopia. During Menelik's reign Ethiopia was the only African country (apart from Liberia, reserved for the 'repatriation' of African-Americans), which remained free from European colonial conquest during the 'Scramble for Africa'.

It was after Menelik II death in 1913 and during the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie (r. 1930-1974), that the Italians under Benito Mussolini's Fascist regime sought revenge against their defeat at Adwa. They invaded Ethiopia in October 1935. Using heavy artillery, air bombardments and unrelenting chemical warfare the Italians claimed victory on 5 May 1936. Just three days earlier Emperor Haile Selassie had fled into exile. It was during this invasion that 'a prominent government official Makonnen Hapte-Wold, formed the Hager Fiker (Patriotic Theatre Association) from a group of

Azmaris',⁴² performing music, dance and short propaganda plays in Menelik II Square to inspire the citizens of Addis Ababa to resist the Italian invasion (Banham 2000: 11).

Emperor Haile Selassie travelled to Geneva to put the Ethiopian case in front of the League of Nations. As Ethiopia had been a member state since 1923, the Emperor challenged the League to adhere to its policy of 'collective security'. Despite his pleas, several member states recognised Mussolini's claim that Ethiopia was an Italian province. It was not until the outbreak of World War II in 1939, when the Italians allied with Germany, that the British began to co-ordinate a military assault using their colonial troops to liberate Ethiopia. The East African campaign saw Haile Selassie return from exile in England to Ethiopia where he addressed the nation on the 5 May 1941.

Haile Selassie and Ethiopian theatre

After the Italian troops withdrew from Ethiopia, a nightclub used by the Italians was refurbished and transformed into *The Hager Fiker Theatre*. This theatre remains open to the public six days a week, claiming audience figures of up to 13,300 every month.⁴³



Fig. 6

African theatre historian Martin Banham claimed 'Haile Selassie's influence on the development of Ethiopian drama can hardly be overestimated' (2000: 348). As part of Haile Selassie's 'narrative of modernity, development and authoritarian control' (Abbink 1997: 163) considerable investment was made in the arts. After renovating the *Hager*

⁴² Azmaris are skilled at singing extemporized verses, accompanying themselves on either a masenqo or krar (string instrument). They have an extensive legacy of musical performance in Ethiopia.

⁴³ Addis Ababa Culture and Tourism board (<http://www.addisculturetourism.gov.et/en/addis-ababa-culture-hager-fikir-theater-ethiopia-3.html>, accessed 30/03/2011).

Fiker Theatre no expense was spared in commissioning the 1400-seat *Haile-Selassie I Theatre* in 1955. The ornate imperial box at the renamed *National Theatre* continues to dominate the auditorium. Other theatres established in Addis Ababa include: *The Municipality Theatre and Art Gallery*, 1947 (presently known as *City Hall Theatre*), the *Ras Theatre*, 1970, and most recently, the *Children & Youth Theatre*, 1989.⁴⁴

After the end of the Second World War, Ethiopia became an active member of the United Nations (UN). Somali's claims over the Ogaden region were thwarted, in 1948, when Ethiopia was granted authority over the disputed region. This failed to prevent violent tensions that afflicted the region and escalated during Somali military incursions in 1977 and 1978. The UN federated Eritrea (the former Italian colony) with Ethiopia in 1952. Ethiopia was seen as beacon of hope by African countries seeking independence from their colonial masters. As African nations began to achieve independence, Eritreans also started to demand independence from the imperial Ethiopian state. Haile Selassie annexed Eritrea as the fourteenth province of the Ethiopian state. In 1962 the UN federation was abrogated, Ethiopia retained Eritrea, by force, over the next thirty years.

In 1963, Haile Selassie presided over the establishment of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) with headquarters in Addis Ababa. The Emperor Haile Selassie had become an international figure, an inspiration to Pan-Africanists and was even revered as 'Jesus Christ incarnate' by Jamaican Rastafarians. Despite such international accolades it was domestic crises that would determine the Haile Selassie's future.

Haile Selassie had travelled widely in Europe, the Middle East and North America. Inspired by technological developments, whilst maintaining the absolute power of the monarchy, he attempted to 'modernise' aspects of Ethiopian governance and society, amending taxation regulations and producing the first written Ethiopian constitution in 1930 (revised in 1955). He established the first University and offered scholarships for excellence for students to study at prestigious colleges abroad. Domestic institutions

⁴⁴ This final theatre is the only theatre that was not commissioned during the reign of Haile Selassie and its title points to the present shift in political focus of the role of theatre for youth development rather than purely for entertainment.

were founded to encourage artistic performance including Addis Ababa Arts School and The Creative Arts Centre at the then *Haile Selassie I University* (presently known as *Addis Ababa University*). Influential playwrights toured the country with private theatre companies attempting to capture large audiences and popularise theatrical performance throughout Ethiopia.⁴⁵ Biaya (2004: 4) suggested:

'This state-controlled version of modernization gave priority to those places of pleasure and cultural activities such as theatre, music, painting, and cinema, where the role of traditional aesthetics was reduced to a minimum. These attempts by the state were aimed at regulating popular cultural practises. Paradoxically, they produced very different results from those anticipated at the time'.

Studying abroad, playwrights were introduced to critical drama. Satirical comedies began to subtly challenge the Imperial regime. In the early 1960's the Creative Arts Centre became home to an increasing number of students activists. Abate, a student at the centre at this time emphasised the critical discourse espoused in poetry recitals.⁴⁶ Poets using the Amharic rhetorical device of 'wax and gold'⁴⁷ criticised the politically engineered installation of a new director at the University. With political activism escalating the Emperor 'frequently attended new productions, and no play could be published or performed without his approval'. Censorship became rife as 'plays of the 1960's and early 1970's were increasingly either cut or ordered off the stage' (Banham 2000: 348). Haile Selassie withdrew funding from the Creative Arts Centre claiming it was a luxury the country could no longer afford by blaming the deteriorating economy.

In 1964, Ethiopian playwright and Poet Laureate Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin became internationally renowned when his production of *Oda Oak Oracle* was staged in Britain,

⁴⁵ Three travelling theatre companies at this time were: Matewos Bekele's '*Andinet Ye Theatre Budn*', Melaku Ashagrie's '*Tewodros Ye Theatre Budn*', and Tesfaye Ababe's '*Tesfaye Abebe Ye Theatre Budn*'. See Yonas Meskel: *History of Ethiopian Theatre* (2) (<http://www.webspawner.com/users/yonashailemeskel/>, accessed 03/03/2011).

⁴⁶ Interview with Abate Mekuria, on 24/12/2010, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

⁴⁷ 'Wax and Gold' is an Amharic poetic style used to suggest hidden meaning.

Denmark, Italy, Romania, Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania and the United States.⁴⁸ Two years later he received the *Haile Selassie I Prize* for Amharic writing but quickly lost favour when he rejected the Emperor's offer to become a court scribe. His refusal instigated the onset of repeated censorship of his work. Travelling to Asmara, in an attempt to avoid the censors, Tsegaye reached Mekele, in Tigray. He described the "city as screaming", when he came "face to face with hell. That is famine; I was only 29 years old."⁴⁹ During his desperate attempt to assist, an emaciated child died in his arms. The horror of famine inspired his poem; *The Days Hunger Consumed*. After failing to bypass the censors in Asmara, he returned to Addis Ababa and gave his poem to a friendly broadcaster at Ethiopian Radio. That evening the poem was read live on air. The broadcaster was immediately dismissed from his position and news of the famine was denied. Each subsequent Ethiopian government has continued to censor this poem.

Despite attempts to silence a growing opposition, 'the poems Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin wrote lamenting the Wollo tragedy were widely circulated' (Plastow 1996: 145). In 1973 famine again struck the Wollo region which spread throughout the northern region and was compounded by the simultaneous international oil crisis. Massive inflation brought crowds of protestors onto the streets of Addis Ababa. On the 12th of September 1974, dissenting military officials deposed Emperor Haile Selassie and brought the Solomonic dynasty, dating back to the thirteenth century, to an end. 'The flagrant inhumanity committed by the feudal regime - the utter indifference to the death of more than 100,000 Ethiopians who perished as a result of the famine and drought [...] was vividly demonstrated in plays, poems and revolutionary songs' (Eshete 1982: 18). The Derg, a committee of 126 soldiers, who had overthrown the Emperor, assumed formal power with the stated intention to transfer governance to civilian control.

⁴⁸ Ayele (2006), *Poet Laureate Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin of Ethiopia: A short walk through his literary park* (<http://www.dramatool.org/en/news/item/119/>, accessed on 20/05/2011).

⁴⁹ Wendy Belcher interview with Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin, *Ethiopian Review*, (1998), October.

The Derg and rehearsals for the revolution

‘During this time of open debate, Ethiopian dramaturges seized the opportunity to express their views with a clarity which had previously been impossible’ (Banham 2000: 348). Tsegaye, then director at the renamed *National Theatre* in Addis Ababa depicted and critiqued the onset of the revolution. This supports the suggestion that ‘because it is public, performance is a site of struggle where competing interests intersect, and different viewpoints and voices get articulated’ (Conquergood 1989: 84). The artistic freedom experienced during the transitional period came to an abrupt end. Three of the five Amharic plays Tsegaye produced between 1974 and 1979 were banned; *Enat Alem*, an adaptation of Brecht’s *Mother Courage, Melekte Wez Ader* (Message of the Worker) and *Ha Hu Ba Sidist Wor* (ABC in six months). The latter of these plays was written in the first thirteen days after the revolution and directed by Abate, who commented:

The Derg Regime took us for bourgeois elites; because we were Western educated they said we were CIA. Although we were harassed they did not take the theatre from us because in those days agitation and propaganda was used by music and theatre. They saw it as a tool for them, we survived for that purpose. We were doing a lot of plays, all political, we were very brave. Sometimes we were imprisoned, sometimes we were suspended and our plays were mostly banned.⁵⁰

Mengistu Haile Mariam emerged as leader of the Derg and in a dramatic televised display smashed three bottles of blood in Addis Ababa’s Revolution Square to express the consequences of any attempted counter-revolution. This marked the onset of ‘The Red Terror’ (1977-1978), which involved house-to-house searches and assassination campaigns to root out ‘counter-revolutionaries’ and ‘pseudo-Marxists’. The Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party (EPRP) used Agit-Prop⁵¹ theatre techniques to spread opposition to the military regime. Theatre practitioner Jane Plastow who was working in Ethiopia at this time and depicted how ‘suspected EPRP members who survived The Red Terror were often sent for political re-education, and one of the proofs of their

⁵⁰ Interview with Abate Mekuria, on 24/12/2010, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

⁵¹ Agit-Prop is shorthand for political agitation and propaganda used in literature, performance, and other art forms.

satisfactory conversion was that they then made pro-government pieces of drama' (1998: 102).

Tsegaye continued in the 1980s to produce plays depicting heroic figures from Ethiopia's past, including two plays based on the lives of Emperors Tewodros II and Menelik II. These plays were also banned by the Derg as they attempted to de-emphasise past class structures and create an image of a 'Marxist utopia'. 'They nationalised all land, created a state economy, allied with the Soviet camp, ruled with military force, and did not allow political freedoms or an independent civil society' (Abbink 1997: 9).

The Derg adopted the rhetoric of Mao Zedong and declared a 'Cultural Revolution'. Grants were given to theatre practitioners to train in prestigious colleges throughout the Eastern Bloc. Russia endorsed the burgeoning 'communist' Ethiopian state and supplied military equipment to the regime. Ethiopian artists trained at the Leningrad school in Russia to assimilate the principles of 'socialist realism'. Based on the belief that the Arts should glorify the political and social ideals of communism, 'socialist realism' legitimised censorship. The guiding ideology was that artistic production should be comprehensible to the 'masses' and 'unchain the proletariat'. In Russia after the 1917 Bolshevik revolution, circuses, like all institutions, were nationalised. To legitimise circus performance, various 'revolutionary committees' defined circus as an art form devoted to the elevation of the 'masses'.⁵² Circus was considered an egalitarian performance that could be enjoyed by everyone irrelevant of race, class, language, or educational background. In a similar approach taken by Chinese circuses, 'The Moscow State Circus' became a cultural export. For a minority of Ethiopians with access to the international media the Russian Circus was broadcast on the Ethiopian television channel (ETV).

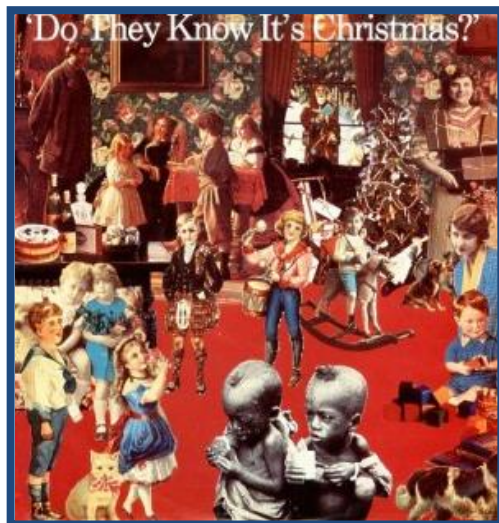
⁵² *Circus Nikulin: The Circus on Tsvetnoy Boulevard*, by Dominique Jando (http://www.circopedia.org/index.php/Circus_Nikulin, accessed 20/05/2011).

Whilst the centralist regime promoted ‘Ethiopia First’, which ‘hybridized Ethiopian nationalism with Marxism’, it failed to ‘stem the rising tide of ethno-nationalist rebellion’ (Berhe 2009: 4). The greatest threat to centralised military control eventually came from the separatist Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) and the ethno-nationalist Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front (TPLF). The heavy censorship experienced in Ethiopia was not as viable in the northern region of Eritrea, where theatre was performed in the local language of Tigrinya. In 1974 the Derg retaliated to an Eritrean guerrilla attack on an Ethiopian base. Soldiers surrounded the Italian built opera house in Asmara, ‘and threatened the entire audience of over two thousand. The actor and playwright, Solomon Gebregzhier, was taken out and shot twenty-four times before being left for dead, though he in fact survived his ordeal’ (Plastow 2004: 204). The EPLF concerned that Eritrean culture had been devalued during Italian colonialism and Ethiopian ‘occupation’, set up a cultural department, in 1975.

As conflict continued unabated, in the 1980s, ‘the EPLF was forced into a ‘strategic retreat’ into the northern mountainous region of Sahel. From here they set up a network of cultural troupes, not only amongst the fighters but also amongst the women, children, the disabled and even prisoners of war’ (Plastow 2004: 204). Cultural officers ordered rehearsal spaces to be cut into the hillside for performances. All performances were meant to redress local religious and ethnic divisions by including songs and dances from the various ethnic groups in Eritrea. This reinvention of cultural performance celebrated traditional aesthetics as a reaction against the perceived cultural imperialism of the Ethiopian state.

The TPLF also used ethnicity as ‘the prime mobilizing factor of the people of Tigray, while Marxism served as an ideological tool of organizational and policy matters as well as to attract other ‘oppressed social classes’ outside of Tigray’ (Berhe 2009: 5). Retaliating against these northern insurgencies the Derg cut employment levels, interfered with trade flows, disrupted agricultural activity and burnt crops. In 1984, the region was overwhelmed by famine, which brought Ethiopia onto the global stage.

Fig. 7



Performances for poverty relief⁵³ raised record results in international aid for Ethiopian famine victims and the images of starving Ethiopians continue to dominate Western perceptions of this country. Due to the affiliation of the Derg regime with the Soviet Union, Western NGOs began to channel relief aid to non-governmental quasi-relief organisations (Pool 1998: 33).⁵⁴ The warring factions siphoned off huge donations.⁵⁵ Meles Zenawi, then ideological orator of the TPLF

movement, proposed allocation of relief aid 'as follows: 50% for MLLT⁵⁶ consolidation, 45% for TPLF activities and 5% for the famine victims' (Berhe 2009: 184). These figures are contested by the international charitable organisations that were involved in the famine relief efforts. The civil war continued for another seven years after the onset of this famine, leading to De Waal criticism of international aid policy claiming that 'the humanitarian effort prolonged the war, and with it, human suffering' (1997: 127).

⁵³ Bob Geldof engaged a host of famous musicians to perform in a dual-concert in Philadelphia and London. *Live Aid* was the first satellite linked televised international concert. Live Aid gained over \$100 million in a broadcast watched by 400 million people worldwide.

⁵⁴ In 1984 appealing for access to this aid the EPLF set up ERA (Eritrean Relief Association), which 'operated as an internationally legitimated quasi-governmental aid organization distributing relief-supplies' (Pool 1998: 33). The TPLF established REST (Relief Society of Tigray) reflecting growing recognition by the insurgencies' leadership of the importance of international assistance. NGOs and foreign governments found it politically more acceptable to deal with a designated relief agency than 'liberation movements' (Young 1998: 44).

⁵⁵ 'By June 1985, REST had received more than US\$100 million from donors in the name of famine victims' (Berhe 2009: 184).

⁵⁶ MLLT stands for the Marxist Leninist League of Tigray which was set up in July 1985 by Meles Zenawi and continued to function up to 2001 acting as the 'official' political wing of the TPLF.

In an attempt to regain favour and ‘thank the West for their generosity’, the Derg put together a performance troupe *Hizb le Hizb* (People to People), ‘to present a fresh face of Ethiopia on the international stage; one that was far removed from the tragic images that had been commonplace on television screens everywhere’.⁵⁷ Fifty-four musicians and performers commenced a whirlwind world tour in March 1987 performing in sixty different cities over one hundred and eighteen days. This tour began as the geopolitical situation turned unfavourable to the Ethiopian military regime. In the Soviet Union Mikhail Gorbachev implementation of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, from 1985-1991, marked a dramatic shift in international financial relations. The Soviet Union opened their markets to foreign investment and significantly reduced the amount of funding to affiliated countries. This was an indication and perhaps a precipitating factor in the collapse of the political and economic unity of the Eastern bloc.

[Ethno-nationalism under a new government](#)

After the end of the Cold War the remains of Soviet funding to Derg dried up and on the 24th May 1991, victorious TPLF troops took control of Addis Ababa, whilst the EPLF simultaneously took control of Asmara. The transitional government under the title of the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), dominated by the TPLF, represented a selected ‘union’ of four ethno-nationalist groups⁵⁸ that had opposed the Derg regime. It re-established Tigray’s dominance of the political arena, which had been marginalised ever since the death of Emperor Johannes IV in 1889. The EPRDF conceded ‘to the *de facto* separation of Eritrea under the leadership of the EPLF’ (Vaughan 2003: 27) and gained formal independence in 1993.

The following year a new Ethiopian Constitution was drawn up that stated all ‘nations, nationalities and peoples’ of Ethiopia had the ‘unrestricted right to self determination

⁵⁷ ‘Remembering Hizb le Hizb’ article published by Horizon Ethiopia, on 17 March 2009 (http://www.addisconnexion.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=247:-remembering-hizb-le-hizb&catid=28:music&Itemid=80,k accessed 22/05/2010).

⁵⁸ Including the Oromo People’s Democratic Organisation, Amhara National Democratic Movement, Southern Ethiopian People’s Democratic Front and the dominant Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front.

up to secession' rooted in the ideology of the TPLF's armed struggle for autonomy (Abbink 1997: 165-167). This unique form of governance was based on 'revolutionary democracy' and 'ethnic federalism'. New political borders defined eleven ethno-regions but failed to account for the multi-ethnic internal composition of each designated region. Abbink (2009: 10) suggested the constitution provided:

'A model excellent for pursuing a divide-and-rule-policy, "balancing" groups under the aegis of the centre (the ruling party) Ethiopian nationalism or national identity, in other words the shared public cause, was de-emphasised in the process. [The TPLF/EPDDF] ideological tenets are still visible in current policy, e.g. state ownership of land (inhibiting agrarian development and usable as a political control mechanism), strong control of the political process and of civil society, the judiciary and the civil service, and in general a model of "democratic centralism" with the party as sole arbiter and power factor'.

This 'vanguard' model of ethno-nationalist governance was the national political environment in which circuses in Ethiopia developed.

[Poetics of nationhood](#)

The contemporary political discourse of promoting 'unity through diversity' is articulated through circus performance in Ethiopia. The production of the 'flag show' by Circus Debre Berhan, (despite all performers claiming Amhara ethnicity and being located in the highlands of Northern Shewa, a stronghold of the dominant Amhara imperial history), was a multi-cultural performance. The combination of various, cultural dance forms, ethnic music and 'traditional' costumes attempted to depict the 'unity' and multicultural identity of Ethiopian society. Such processes of re-inventing tradition through performance are part of the poetics of nationhood. Such multi-ethnic performance offers insights into the reinvention of Ethiopian cultural tradition.

Although many of the performers have minimal direct lived and learned experience of the various cultural forms they employed or cultural knowledge of the ethnic traditions that informed the music and the costumes they wear, they learned the different dance styles by studying modern music videos. The lyrics of these popular songs emphasised particular localities and the dance style and dress codes, which are copied by the circus performers and integrated into their performance. The wider community applauds their

skills not only during performances but also at social venues where they entertain the locals with their ability to perform the various dances to the style of the music played. Cultural costumes are reserved for performance and rituals as the circus performers only tend to wear ethnic clothes during Orthodox Christian festivals whilst normally choosing to dress in Western fashion styles.

Conclusion

On the day of the flag performance the circus performed to an audience of military veterans, serving politicians, active servicemen and the police. Members of the local society were invited to attend the event and once the flag was unfurled Circus Debre Berhan's performance began. The symbolic depiction of Ethiopia was a celebration of both the society's history and the political status quo.

The creation of Ethiopian society is both a religious story combined with a history of political struggle. The unification of Ethiopia during the Solomonic dynasty offers insight into the legacy of Tigrayan and Amhara political dominance. Religion remains significant when considering contemporary performative forms. The role of Haile Selassie was crucial in the early development of modern theatre. While attempting to break with tradition, cultural aesthetics were replaced by Western elite forms. Playwrights and poets produced artistic productions celebrating heroic figures from Ethiopia's past. Plays were banned and censorship continues to this day.

After the military campaign unseated the Emperor, a new era stimulated a wealth of creativity, theatres became rehearsal spaces to debate the revolution. When the Derg settled into office, dramatic freedom was quickly repressed in favour of agitation propaganda theatrical techniques. As the military government aligned itself in a global ideological warfare, practitioners were sent to Russia to train in the artistic principles of socialist realism. As ethno-nationalist conflicts erupted throughout the country, performance became a weapon of war. The TPLF and EPLF emphasised the importance of ethnicity and encouraged performance troupes to celebrate their cultural aesthetics and traditional values. As conflict continued unabated, Ethiopia suddenly appeared on

the global stage. Performances for poverty relief raised record results of aid and the face of famine became Ethiopian.

After Russia withdrew funding from its communist allies, the ethno-nationalist TPLF troops took power in Ethiopia and the EPLF gained Eritrea as a sovereign state. With the right to self-determination and even secession, the state politicised the doctrine of 'unity through diversity'. The multi-ethnic reality of Ethiopian society was celebrated through the cultural performance of circus. The 'poetics of nationhood' are depicted through dance, music and costumes as exemplified during their 'flag day' performance. This was not in keeping with the contemporary fashion of everyday urban youth dress style but is part of a reinvention of cultural traditions through contemporary performance.

Chapter 3

Developing agendas: Circus Debre Berhan

Circus in Ethiopia: Popular physical theatre

In Ethiopia it was estimated that 700,000 people attended circus performances in 1997 (Niederstadt 2009: 7). The popularity of the circus stemmed primarily from the attraction of the extraordinary display of human physical capacity. Their performances celebrated traditional aesthetics and adapted forms of cultural dance and music. The thrilling acts performed by the artists challenged the audiences' fears and surpassed their expectations. Generally performed outdoors, the space was transformed from the mundane to the exceptional, busy markets were interrupted from their daily routine and crowds gathered, inspired by the beautiful display by of this youthful performance. From young to old, audience members were spellbound by the skills exhibited at the circus.

It was difficult to determine the exact amount of circuses presently active in Ethiopia. The popularity of circus had been exploited by numerous religious and charitable organisations that include circus training in their educational programs.⁵⁹ The umbrella organisation CIE officially included twenty-three circuses⁶⁰ and there were a number of independent circuses.⁶¹ Over the last twenty years, tens of thousands of children and

⁵⁹ In Debre Berhan alone, three religious organisations include circus training in their after school activities and offer employment to members of Circus Debre Berhan as trainers for the young students.

⁶⁰ Branch Circuses: Adama (Nazareth), Alma (Addis Ababa), **Awassa**, Benshangul, Dire Dawa, **Debre Berhan**, Jimma and Tigray. Associates Circuses: Ambo, Biruh Tesfa (Debre Zeyit), **Barhirdar**, Gonder, Azezo (Gonder), Lalibela, Dessie, Woldiya, Mersa, Bisheftu (Debre Zeyit), JiJiga, Wolkite, **Shashemene**, Melka Jebdu (Harrar), Semera, and Kombolcha (In bold are the case studies used during this research). Circus in Ethiopia website (<http://circusethiopia.org/branches/index.html>, accessed 03/07/2011).

⁶¹ '**One Love Theatre**', is an independent circus in Awassa that informs this research.

young people have been trained in circus skills. Established troupes included a variety of multi-skilled performers: acrobats, jugglers, balance artists, unicyclists, stilt and tightrope walkers, accompanied by musicians, dancers and actors. The main performance troupe trained the next generation of potential artists, collectively referred to as the 'school group'.⁶²

The economics of circus

Between 1994 and 2003, Rädä Barnen, the Swedish branch of Save the Children, funded 'theatre for development' workshops to over sixty theatres, circuses, music and dance troupes in Addis Ababa, Diredawa, Amhara, Oromia, the Southern and Somali regions of Ethiopia. Theatre practitioner Abate stated the objective of the workshops as follows:

'The **goal** is to use the theatre as a cultural language of disseminating information about Child Rights, Human Rights and Democratic rights. The company has been working and teaching for creative processes with children, youth and adults, to give them an understanding of the development in the society, a confidence of their own resources and future role in the society. Through workshops the company has been trained in and teaches the methodological approach of *Theatre in development*'.⁶³

Abate said the aim of the workshops was two-fold; to promote modern forms of artistic expression and to use these skills to give advocacy and awareness to rural communities.⁶⁴ Whilst Rädä Barnen funded the workshops, other international organisations were supporting CIE. In their 2005 magazine publication CIE thanked their partner NOVIB, for their total overall investment of over six million Ethiopian birr (approx. US \$350,000.00) to address social problems relating to HIV/AIDS. In their 2004 annual economic report a total 2,797,654.00 Ethiopian birr (approx. US

⁶² 'School groups' are sometimes called 'group B' or 'group C' and are made up of training circus artists who are yet to be selected to perform with the 'main group'. Sometimes they train alongside the main group whilst others circuses chose to have separate training schedules for their 'school group'.

⁶³ Abate Mekuria, 'The journey from CAMA to Mekuria Theatre Studio & Entertainment' (www.dramatool.org/en/library/view/106/files/mekuria.doc, accessed 10/07/2011)

⁶⁴ Interview with Abate, on 24/12/2010, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

\$164,500.00) was received from eight donors.⁶⁵ At this time only branch members, Nazreth, Addis Ababa, Jimma, Dire Dawa and Tigray had access to these funds. The criteria and the amounts of funding was dependent on the objectives of the organisation's management structure, which included, the General Assembly, Board of Directors and an Executive Director who are all based at the Head Office in Addis Ababa.

The publication of these large donations led to tensions between the Head Office and their associate circuses who felt they were being used by CIE to promote themselves as an 'umbrella' organisation without receiving any financial benefits. Several circus members accused the Head Office officials of 'self enrichment' and repeatedly avoided my introduction to personnel at CIE suggesting this would only be possible at significant personal expense.⁶⁶ This made it difficult to investigate or update the present level of investment made by international donors to CIE. I was warned against personal engagement with the organisation and given the complications Aklil Getachew experienced during her fieldwork in 2006,⁶⁷ these warnings were heeded. Therefore, this research focuses on circuses that had, up until the completion of my research, never received any direct funding from this central organisation.

⁶⁵ These contributions were made by Cirque du Soleil 810,464.00 birr (\$47488.91), Novib 784,139.00 birr (\$45946.41), NACOJI 520,996.00 birr (\$30527.62), HAPCO 223,334.00 birr (\$13086.19), ICCO 142,098.00 birr (\$8326.19), Action Aid-CIPA 132,990.00 birr (\$7792.51) Netherlands Red Cross 116,663.00 birr (\$6835.84), ICRC 67,000.00 birr (\$3925.85).

⁶⁶ Fieldwork notes 10/08/2010, this was particularly emphasised by the director but his advice was supported by other circus members and a Dutch photographer that had previous encounters with the Head Office.

⁶⁷ Getachew, Aklil (2006), *Circus as an NGO and as an Artistic Outlet: A Balancing Act?* Unpublished MA Thesis in Social Anthropology, Amsterdam: VU University. Getachew intended to study circus performance in Addis Ababa but her study had to be redefined to investigate the relationship between 'Circus in Ethiopia' and its donor partners due to preoccupying demands of the Head Office and the limited number of performances by Circus Addis Ababa during her three month fieldwork. Her interest shifted to the internal and external politics of NGOs in Ethiopia.

The beginnings of Circus Debre Berhan

In the early days of Circus Debre Berhan they also avoided affiliation with CIE. Back in 1997, one of the original members of Circus Debre Berhan learnt his first circus tricks from a friend at school who had seen a performance by Circus Nazreth. The Northern Shewa Zonal Sports Commissioner heard about this group of interested teenagers and offered them the use of a local government hall for evening training. The local government Youth and Sport Department commissioned a fifteen-day circus workshop given by Circus Addis Ababa for the fledging troupe in Debre Berhan. An educated and experienced circus performer, Netsanet Assefa, from Addis Ababa remained in Debre Berhan and became the first director. Due to his personal disillusionment with the management of CIE, Netsanet established Circus Debre Berhan as an independent circus in 1998. After months of training, the troupe held their opening performance in Chenbere, a rural village near Debre Berhan. The nervous performers donned their ethnic costumes hired from the local ‘cultural’ shop and performed to a delighted market crowd.

As Circus Debre Berhan attracted more members they required material support. The director also invited disabled students to join the circus. This was achieved by convincing the schools and the parents of the young disabled individuals to let them join the ‘first African Disabled Circus’.⁶⁸ This challenged local perceptions of the physically disabled, as one deaf member, Wosene Tefera, communicated in sign language:

People used to see us and think we were lazy and could not do anything but now they see us performing in the circus they are surprised. Working with the circus has given me advantages, the ability to communicate with others not just through sign language but also through their eyes and mouths. I see a lot of places and have got to know many deaf people because they look up to me and want to meet me. It has made it possible for me to get work because I can communicate I got a job at the library.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ This excerpt is from Circus Debre Berhan's promotional leaflet.

⁶⁹ Interview with Wosene (in sign language, translated by Aster), on 01/12/2010, Debre Berhan, Ethiopia.

A twelve-year-old deaf girl, Habtamnesh Behailu, was told about Circus Debre Berhan from her teacher and she was selected during a trial run by the circus trainer. She started in the school group, in 2006, and after two years she was promoted to the main group. Habtamnesh excelled in a wide range of circus skills and was learning sign language from her fellow performer, Wosene. She had become the assistant trainer for the school group, which despite her limited communication increased her confidence.⁷⁰ She learnt by copying the other artists and her ability to keep the rhythm of the dance routines was remarkable. Her achievements reinforced the argument that individual transformation was taking place within the circus educational environment.

This venture made Circus Debre Berhan unique and the early inclusion of disabled artists became a key element of the ‘social agenda of the circus’.⁷¹ Their integration of disabled artists gained Circus Debre Berhan project based support from the International Red Cross⁷² and UNICEF. The majority of the first generation of disabled artists was invited to perform during Circus Debre Berhan’s first international tours.

International Tours

In 1999 four members were invited on a 20-day circus tour of Sweden to collaborate with three Swedish Circuses.⁷³ Their touring show ‘Come Let Us Drink Coffee Together’ combined the traditional Ethiopian coffee ceremony⁷⁴ with a circus display. The show was great success and radio interviews with the artists were broadcast in Amharic for

⁷⁰ Interview with Habtamnesh (in sign language, translated by Aster), on 16/01/2011, Debre Berhan, Ethiopia.

⁷¹ Fieldwork note: 4/10/2010: Conversation with Henok during training.

⁷² The ICRC involvement with Circus in Ethiopia began in 1995 when it asked them to create a performance based on the meaning of the Red Cross emblem.

⁷³ Cirkus Cirkor, Cirkus Piggelin and Cirkus eX

⁷⁴ The Ethiopian coffee ceremony is a regular way to welcome guests. Grasses are laid down on the floor and the green coffee beans are roasted on the fire. The aroma from the beans is inviting and once they have turned black they are crushed into a fine powder in a pestle and mortar. The coffee is then put inside a jebena and boiled on the fire. The host serves three rounds of coffee as incense is burnt. The coffee is often accompanied with fresh popcorn.

the Ethiopian Diaspora living in Sweden. Hiwot, only 11 years old, was selected for this tour due to her outstanding gymnastic talent:

My father was very proud and I was very excited go on a plane. When we arrived we watched the Swedish circus and I was amazed at the hall and all of their materials. When I got back to Debre Berhan I got a lot of attention, I had new clothes and my friends still remember the shoes I wore to school on my first day back.⁷⁵

Already a local celebrity, in 2001 Hiwot went on to win the gold medal at the national gymnastics competition, in Addis Ababa. Circus Debre Berhan was making an impression and with the funds they received from the International Red Cross the management provided the members with food and transportation costs as well as a small payment for public performances. Visitors from Sweden came to the circus and provided materials and equipment. Circus Debre Berhan participated in the second East Africa Theatre Institute (EATI) festival held in Mbarara, Uganda, in 2002. One of the artists involved in the Uganda tour remembered how excited she was to travel to another country and despite the difficulty in communication, when they started to perform everyone was amazed, they had never seen circus before.⁷⁶

International tours became extremely popular, between 1996 and 1999 various Ethiopian circuses gave over six hundred performances throughout six continents.⁷⁷ These tours were highly appreciated and received coverage in the international media including the BBC and CNN. They generated significant income and CIE claimed:

The tours made a relentless effort to persuade foreigners that the country could also be mentioned as a mother of talented individuals not poverty, famine and backwardness. It was after their unreserved efforts and catchy shows that they started to be nicknamed as “Ethiopia’s Real Ambassadors”. Their efforts have somehow met CIE’s vision: “to see a flourished self

⁷⁵ Interview with Hiwot, on 02/12/2010, Debre Berhan, Ethiopia

⁷⁶ Interview with Aster, on 15/12/2010, Debre Berhan, Ethiopia.

⁷⁷ Niederstadt, L. (2009), Information obtained from: *Newsletter of the Delegation of the European Commission to Ethiopia*, No. 16, January 1997: “*Establishment, Growth and Experience of Circus in Ethiopia: A project profile submitted to Radda Barnen*”, January 2000.

reliant Ethiopia of multifarious cultural heritages through compatible circus acts as well as realizing holistic development of children and youth of this nation.⁷⁸

As 'Ethiopia's real ambassadors' these circuses carried on the transnational tradition of circus performance and in a similar venture to both Russian and Chinese circuses, they have become a cultural export to promote Ethiopian society in an international arena. As this excerpt suggested, Ethiopians were well aware of the image of poverty prevalent in Western consciousness associated with media images from the 1984 famine and saw the potential of youth circuses to transform public perception. This was affirmed by the review of their Australian tour. Thirteen circus artists and six musicians were selected from Circus Addis Ababa to tour to Australia. The Australian Advertiser wrote of their show in Adelaide on the 3 March 1998:

'Entertainment for the masses doesn't get much better than this wonderful Ethiopian troupe. Breaking through cultural boundaries and dissolving social stereotypes, this troupe is a celebration of life that embraces all ways of life. This troupe was developed from nothing but has flourished into a tight team, which exudes a sheer love of performing. And can they perform! Human pyramids are their specialty - each one more exciting and gravity defying than the last. And while they twist themselves around about and inside out never does it err on the side of a "freak show" as many human circuses can [...] the group knows that our idea of Ethiopia have been shaped by images of war and starvation. Upon watching this troupe these images start to fade. They don't want us to feel sorry for them; they want us to feel exhilarated by them'.⁷⁹

This review celebrated the popularity of the skilled display. The performers challenged the stereotype, both of the American and European circus tradition and the image of Ethiopia. The performance avoided the negative association with the exotic spectacle whilst still delighting the audience with their extraordinary physical capacities. However, their attempt to project an image of a 'self reliant Ethiopia' brought Ethiopian circuses unexpected consequences.

⁷⁸ Article in Circus in Ethiopia's magazine (2005), 'Circus in Ethiopia (CIE): Its Background and Activities'.

⁷⁹ Review from *The Advertiser* (3 March, 1998) Adelaide, Australia cited on Circus in Ethiopia's website, International Press Page, '1998 World Tour' (http://www.lefourneau.com/artistes/circus/monde/presse/presse_tour_98.htm, accessed 10/07/2011).

Defections from the circus

A serious problem began to occur, just days after this review appeared in the Australian newspaper, fifteen performers ‘disappeared’ from the circus. Fifteen out of nineteen performers defected. The Australian media televised their asylum claims, which were supported by allegations of sexual abuse implicating Marc La Chance, the founder of CIE. This was a public relations disaster for Ethiopian circus. An emergency meeting was called with CIE’s main sponsor NOVIB. Marc La Chance resigned and left Ethiopia and NOVIB reservedly agreed to continue to support the organisation under new management.

By 2001, on their Ethiopian circus *Survival Tour* twenty-seven artists toured Germany for two months. This tour also ended in turmoil when the circus artists claimed that their director, Aweke Emiru was also guilty of abuse. Aweke suggested that their family and friends had encouraged the young members to make such allegations after successful asylum status had been granted in Australia. Only the director and two other members returned to Ethiopia whilst the others remained behind as refugees in Germany (Getachew 2006: 58). In the light of the defections, whether opportunistic or a consequence of genuine abuse the future of Ethiopian circus looked bleak. Questions surrounding their integrity and accusations of moral corruption of its leaders had far-reaching and grave consequences. Abate commented:

When the scandal happened the circus reputation became very immoral, it did not please our public who are very hard line culturally oriented people and they don’t accept this kind of scandal. It is blasphemy, it is evil, and it is a taboo.⁸⁰

As well as the impact on the relationship between the society and circus, there were consequences for the performers still in Ethiopia. The management of CIE made a decision to postpone international tours and withdraw the payments received by the

⁸⁰ Interview with Abate, on 24/12/2010, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

performers. In the aftermath of the scandal, Marc la Chance, implicated in the original abuse scandal, allegedly⁸¹ committed suicide (Niederstadt 2009: 13).

It was in this volatile and unpredictable environment that Circus Debre Berhan independently embarked on their third international tour. The success of their first Swedish tour led to an invitation for fifteen members of the circus to return to Sweden in 2002. When they arrived in Stockholm, even before they commenced their first performance, the director, Netsanet fled. The tour continued but day-by-day performers ‘escaped’. The atmosphere was extremely tense particularly for the younger artists. Twelve-year-old Hiwot was devastated by the disappearance of the director, who ‘had been like a father to me’.⁸² By the time the tour came to an end, only Hiwot and two other children were left. Rädde Barnen (the Swedish branch of Save the Children) assisted them to return home. However one of the children was offered adoption and returned to Sweden.

Rumours continued to circulate relating to the abuse scandals, some, like Abate believed the accusations⁸³ and suggested that Marc La Chance brought shame on circus in Ethiopia. Others still actively engaged with circus performance, suggested the allegations were politically motivated:

We don’t know about this, but we heard, we heard different politics. [Mark La Chance] was the one that founded Circus in Ethiopia, he was a foreigner and there were some people who wanted to take over. They abused him, and then he disappeared. [...] It was the same when Circus Debre Berhan went to Sweden. All the small girls said they were advised to say the director was abusing them, that is why he escaped; I know he is not such a man.⁸⁴

Belay, the present musical director of Circus Debre Berhan explained:

⁸¹ Rumours still circulate that he is actually alive but the claim of suicide was an excuse to prevent any further investigation.

⁸² Interview with Hiwot, on 02/12/2010, Debre Berhan, Ethiopia.

⁸³ Interview with Abate, on 24/12/2010, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

⁸⁴ Interview with Henok, on 02/01/2011, Debre Berhan, Ethiopia.

Only Hiwot and I returned and at that time even my father and mother really insulted me. Why had I returned from Sweden? People here in Debre Berhan they also insulted me, they expected like I was a grown up and said I had lost my chance. It is impossible to hide it so I must tell you the truth. When people said such things it really touched me and I was confused. I failed one year at school because I was unable to continue. This town is small and everybody was talking about me.⁸⁵

The reaction of local people and his parents illustrated conflicting insights into the relationship between the circus and the society. The shame that Abate suggested was brought on circus was in the case of Belay, directed personally at his ‘childish’ decision to return. The contradictory attitude of the local society and even his family towards his return challenges the perception of circus as an integral part of Ethiopian cultural society. Local perceptions revealed that there was a belief that if circus members were offered opportunities to ‘escape’ they should take them, irrelevant of the consequences for the remaining members and the sustainability of their local circus. This was for many an opportunity not to be missed. For others, still at the circus, the reaction was different and only further confused young Hiwot:

I wanted to carry on with the circus but life in the circus was very difficult. Nobody trusted each other everybody was let down. My parents though were very happy I came home, I gave my father 2000 birr⁸⁶ and he opened a bank account for my education.⁸⁷

The disappointed artists who had not been selected for the Swedish tour were angry:

Circus Debre Berhan was not 15 people, it was 40 people, at this time I felt really bad, because I started the circus with my friends and now my friends were in Sweden, 25 people were left in Debre Berhan they feel sad and they cry.⁸⁸

Many blamed the director:

He promised us a lot and we lost a lot, all I could think about at school was the circus. He promised we would tour to other countries but they didn’t come back. I think it was just about money for them.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Interview with Belay, on 14/01/2011, Debre Berhan, Ethiopia.

⁸⁶ 2000 Ethiopian birr is approximately US \$120.

⁸⁷ Interview with Hiwot, on 02/12/2010, Debre Berhan, Ethiopia.

⁸⁸ Interview with Solomon, on 12/01/2011, Debre Berhan, Ethiopia.

Such complex and contradicting accounts of the defections and its implication on circus in Ethiopia are significant when examining the relationship between Ethiopian society and the circus. Despite the shameful accusations, perhaps changing the society's perception of the circus, many of the circuses managed to survive the ordeal and have, in fact, grown in number since the defections. Performers still remain hopeful that one day their circus will get the chance to tour internationally.

Whilst walking with Aster Abebe, one of the original members of Circus Debre Berhan, she pointed out a particularly grand house by Debre Berhan standards. She told me how one of the disabled artists that escaped in Sweden, had bought this house for his mother and brothers. When this man returned to Debre Berhan to visit his family, the artists were requested by their present director not to have any contact with any of the previous members that had left the circus. This did not prevent several of the circus members meeting with him, in secret, to hear his experiences of living in Europe. They all admired his clothes and were envious of his ability to financially assist his family. The unique international opportunity given to youths participating in circus had an impact on the local society. Residents of Debre Berhan offered the circus management large sums of money to take non-circus members on tour.⁹⁰ The possibility that skilled artists may have had professional opportunities abroad remained both an inspiration for those involved and their families who supported them.

Questions asked of the present performers as to whether they would seek asylum if the opportunity arose, were always met with denial. In 2007, Circus Tigray embarked upon a sold-out tour. The performances had to be cancelled when twenty-two more artists claimed asylum, whilst on tour, in Holland. This time, as well as claiming abuse by the management of CIE, the artists accused the present government of harassment.⁹¹ The

⁸⁹ Interview with Aster, on 15/12/2010, Debre Berhan, Ethiopia.

⁹⁰ When rumours circulated that the circus was going on another tour to Sweden one individual offered Henok 80,000 birr to claim his child was a member of the circus and take him on the tour.

⁹¹ "We are under virtual prison; we are deprived of our freedoms in Ethiopia." Four of the defected said in a brief interview with EMF. Youngsters are primary victims of Meles Zenawi's

actions of these individuals certainly brought Ethiopian circus troupes under closer political scrutiny. As international demand for Ethiopian circus performance continued, tension remained between the images the circuses projected, and the lived realities that many performers attempted to escape.

A new generation at the circus

After the defections in Sweden, Circus Debre Berhan was in disarray. Teklu Ashagir (known as Henok) a childhood friend of Netsanet, decided to step in. Initially invited to Debre Berhan to assist with the education of the circus artists, Henok had always been interested in the arts. His mother and uncle belonged to a traditional dance group in his home Megenagna, in Addis Ababa, and just down the road from his family's house was the training hall of Circus Addis Ababa. As a young boy Henok briefly joined this circus but gave up, suggesting he was more interested in dance and theatre. When he was in high school, Carin Asplund, the Swedish producer of 'The Shoe Shine Opera' gave a 'theatre for development' workshop:

I was the star of the show. She really liked the way I acted; she identified me and guided me. It was then that I realised I could be professional. I continued to act and against my father's wishes I started as a dancer at the Ras Theatre. The theatre at my school became bigger and we got funding to tour all schools in Addis Ababa with a show about HIV/AIDS.⁹²

Henok believed that Circus Debre Berhan had the potential to become a professional circus but when his childhood friend failed to return from Sweden, he thought the dream was lost:

When you develop an art at least you should have some money. All the money was coming from outside from exchange and international performances. When this escaping history started everybody stopped funding.⁹³

repression policy after the May 2005 rigged elections. The regime's security forces follow every movement of any group activities. "I am faded up of the beating of the federal police, says a young performer. I couldn't stand it anymore! Cited in EMF article written by Ternafi on the 06/04/2007 (<http://redseal.websitetoolbox.com/post?id=1936075>, accessed 06/072011)

⁹² Interview with Henok, on 02/01/2011, Debre Berhan, Ethiopia.

⁹³ Interview with Henok, on 02/01/2011, Debre Berhan, Ethiopia.

They lost economic support for their projects from both UNICEF and the International Red Cross. Without such financial support between 2002 and 2006 there was a significant drop in circus activity. The ‘privileged’ days of transportation costs, evening meals and free exercise books were over. Without such subsidies, many of the disabled artists that had not defected in Sweden gradually left. Morale was extremely low and the question of sustainability became the first priority. As an independent troupe the circus had no legal status. Henok took it upon himself to register Circus Debre Berhan as an affiliate member of CIE. The organisation had managed to retain a degree of international funding and as a registered NGO, could offer Circus Debre Berhan legal integrity but still only granted financial support to their four selected branch members.

Henok wanted to realise the educational and artistic role of circus within the local society. Using his knowledge as a student of ‘theatre for development’, he took a didactic approach:

I was smart; in 2003, I found a new philosophy - Circus is my life next to education. The focus should be on education, at this time I could not give them exercise books but I could teach them. I was there all the time in the library with the blackboard. At the same time I was directing I was teaching.⁹⁴

The management of the circus was restructured and responsibilities divided among the remaining members. Henok became the new director, assisted by two trainers, one for the ‘main group’ and one for the ‘school group’, a musical director, technician, and administrator. An executive board was created with representatives from the government administration, local NGOs and family members. The emphasis was on education and discipline and was supported by a strict hierarchical management structure. Henok took responsibility for international relations and implemented penalties for members he considered to undermine his overall authority. After the defections, families of the artists were concerned that participating in the circus was distracting their children from school, Henok started to have:

⁹⁴ Interview with Henok, on 02/01/2011, Debre Berhan, Ethiopia.

Formal meetings with the parents every six months, they tell me everything, the members have to be careful, I have a good relationship with their parents and we discuss their behaviour, not their circus skills they don't care about the skills but about their education.⁹⁵

This strict method of leadership was an attempt to integrate the demands of families, politicians and local funding organisations into the management structure of the circus. Thus began a process of domestication, which emphasised the importance of the circus' social responsibility towards the local community over and above individual ambition.

Circus Training and the politics of everyday

In Ethiopia the state owns all the land and since the circus was struggling to afford rent, Henok negotiated with the Zonal Youth and Sports Commissioner and in 2005 acquired a circus compound. The members of Circus Debre Berhan worked together to build facilities at the outdoor compound. They constructed four temporary units providing an office space, a small library, wardrobe, and music room. The outdoor space was used for training and a garden was created with small plots for vegetables maintained by a full-time guard employed also to protect the property. Despite scarce resources it was compulsory for the artists to attend revision sessions in the library. For those attending state school this provided additional support,⁹⁶ for others, this regulation restricted their capacity to earn a living.⁹⁷ After several well-intentioned endeavours the study group was disbanded. As Hiwot grew-up she remained very determined; she had never stopped circus training and excelled at school. Scoring high on her leaving examination she gained a degree in business management from the newly established Debre Berhan University.

⁹⁵ Interview with Henok, on 02/01/2011, Debre Berhan, Ethiopia.

⁹⁶ Ethiopian state schools tend to be limited to morning or afternoon sessions. The library offered an alternative place to study when school was closed.

⁹⁷ Several members' work: one is a shoeshine boy and by attending these sessions he found it impossible to make enough money to support himself and his family.

The local administration offered sporadic permission to the circus to use their meeting hall for training purposes. The relationship established between local politicians and the circus involved the artists performing for free at political rallies and government meetings. Despite being granted their own compound the circus performers still required the indoor facility due to the harsh climate and rocky terrain of their compound. Training sessions at the hall encouraged more children to join the circus because of its location in the centre of town. Once the artists no longer received subsistence expenses for transportation, many parents refused permission for their children to attend training at the compound because of its location on the outskirts of town.

At 17.00 hours the artists would wait patiently outside the hall whilst local meetings generally overran. After the hall finally emptied and the four wheel-drive vehicles cleared the street, the artists would pack away the rows of benches, sweep up the remnants of the governmental meeting and pull out the training mattresses before repeating in unison their daily mantra:

To make Circus Debre Berhan stand first in Ethiopia. I promise to perform being loving, peaceful and tolerant. I also would like to change my life and my family's life by circus art.

This ambitious sentiment marked the beginning of every training session and clearly depicted the motivation that inspired the gruelling physical exertion that was to follow. The children in the school group imitated the main group's warm-up and work out. Misbehaviour was punished by press-ups and physical discipline. Exercising in a circle formation they followed the directions of the chosen leader. Everyone was given a chance to lead the troupe. During each session the trainer selected the acts he wished individuals to improve upon; all the students worked extremely hard and assisted each other to develop new skills. Regular training sessions at the hall continued until 20.00, during rehearsals, the circus would often stay later. At the end of every session the artists stood together in a circle and everyone was given an opportunity to voice their

concerns and ideas. Henok suggested, ‘that this is part of the democratic culture I foster at the circus and gives a feeling of ownership to all the participants’.⁹⁸

The loss of their training hall

In November 2010, the permission to train at the government hall was withdrawn creating tensions about the relationship between the local authorities and the members of Circus Debre Berhan. Whilst most members avoided talking about local politics, conversations about such matters were discouraged,⁹⁹ Dibabe Metaferia, an outspoken gymnast and the technician at the explained:

They took the hall and now we fight against the cold every night. Our music and sound equipment is very old, how can they expect us to work for free. They use the circus only for their own purpose and just leave us after they get what they want.¹⁰⁰

No reason was given to the artists as to why they were refused permission to use the hall. The immediate consequences resulted in training being reduced to only two and half hours per day. Starting earlier at 16.00 meant that those who had jobs arrived late and the school group diminished to only four or five children and several of the most talented students were unable to attend. The older musicians could not attend until 17.30 and were left to rehearse in the small temporary studio cut off from the circus artists. This affected their ability to synchronise the music with the acts. By 18.30, it was dark and the young members had long journeys home by foot. Despite such difficulties it was still rare to hear complaints as the artists continued to train outside and added additional acrobatic sessions on Sunday mornings.

Such political agendas seemed to complicate and control the capacity of the circus artist’s ability to achieve their stated goal. To become ‘the best in Ethiopia’ the artists

⁹⁸ Fieldwork note: 18/09/2010

⁹⁹ Fieldwork note: 20/10/2010: Henok suggested that I should not talk to the members about politics and any questions I had on this matter could only be addressed to him, this warning was not heeded.

¹⁰⁰ Interview with Dibabe, on 14/12/2010, Debre Berhan, Ethiopia.

needed suitable training facilities and economic support to nurture their individual and collective talent. With defections having increased political scrutiny, the circuses became vulnerable to political influence. As, Solomon Getachew, one of Circus Debre Berhan original members suggested:

I don't accept the government circus is not political. Sometimes the government calls the director this is a mistake. The director is political, but there is a big difference between art and politics. Art is freedom, first freedom.¹⁰¹

His comment seems to suggest that the art of their performance offers the society a sense of freedom but as the circus becomes vulnerable to political interference its purpose is perhaps being undermined. Despite being one of the most technically talented performers, Solomon left Circus Debre Berhan and questioned the motivations of the director.

Political affiliation

While everyday politics had implications for all circuses in Ethiopia, the extent to which circuses engaged in the political arena was informed by individual affiliation. Circus Debre Berhan's director, Henok, was a member of the governing party and was invited as a guest to represent 'the youth' on their recent tour of the battlefields in northern Tigray, in celebration of the 30-year anniversary of the formation of the TPLF. Henok also acted as spokesman at political events and encouraged the circus members to join the party suggesting it would help their employment prospects and the ambitions of the circus. However, despite his political affiliation Henok had rejected positions offered to him to participate in the local government.¹⁰² He claimed that he was more interested in the arts and the needs of the circus than the privileges of a political position. He wanted

¹⁰¹ Interview with Solomon, on 12/01/2011, Debre Berhan, Ethiopia.

¹⁰² Fieldwork note 22/11/2010: Henok told me that he had taken a job to represent the 'youth' at the local parliament but refused the position of Sports and Culture Minister and the position of Communications Officer offered by the local government.

to maintain the autonomy of the circus, in keeping with the 2005 five year strategic plan for CIE.¹⁰³

Henok's political affiliation increased the political dimension of Circus Debre Berhan performance. Whether his intentions were personal or whether the demands for the sustainability of the circus, after the defections, instigated this 'reciprocal' relationship remain debatable. What was evident was an increasing political pressure that affected both the circus and shaped aspects of their performance.

Conclusion

Ethiopian circuses have proven to be an extremely popular form of physical theatre. In Ethiopia they are seen not only as an exceptional display of youthful talent but also celebrate traditional aesthetics and cultural performance genres. The success of these circuses has had international appeal both in terms of funding and in an increasing demand for touring troupes. During their international tours the circus artists were aware that their performance bridged cultural borders and challenged the stereotypical and negative images of Ethiopia associated with famine and conflict. As the 'real ambassadors for Ethiopia' diplomatic relations faced crisis as the defections purported accusations of managerial abuse.

The legacy of defections continued to have a significant impact on Ethiopian circus. It undermined the image of a 'self reliant Ethiopia' suggested by their promoters. Some viewed the defections as an embarrassment, but others saw them as an opportunity. Most of the artists still had the ambition to become professional performers and to tour abroad and were encouraged by their families to take such an opportunity if it was offered. Political scrutiny of the circuses increased particularly with accusations of government harassment. Circus Debre Berhan lost its international donors and had to create new means to maintain their financial sustainability.

¹⁰³ *The 2005 Strategic Plan for Circus in Ethiopia*: Published by Circus in Ethiopia.

The priorities at Circus Debre Berhan turned to education and discipline, which were reinforced by a hierarchical management structure. All interested parties, including family members, politicians and local NGO organisations were brought in as ‘advisors’. The circus needed to rebuild their image whilst taking account of parental concerns and political agendas. The relationship between performance and politics was not a contemporary phenomenon but was reflected throughout Ethiopian history. When such conflicts of interest arose it was common for political interference to increase.

The prevailing view that performance stimulated social transformation continued to encourage economic support for circus in Ethiopia. With increasing pressure from donors and associate members, CIE have recently granted four more circuses ‘branch’ status including Circus Debre Berhan. This long promised development may potentially re-establish a level of international funding and help provide salaries to the full-time management, perhaps the ‘privileged’ days of food for the performers and assistance with their education may be reinstated. CIE claims to represent twenty-three circuses but have, since their establishment in 1993, (up until this recent expansion to eight branch members to in 2011), only offered financial support to four branch members. Many others circuses continue to struggle without international support.

Lessons have been learned from the previous defections, but as members of the circus achieved professional standards, talented individuals are entangled in a web of conflicting individual and collective ambitions. The perspectives of the members at Circus Debre Berhan highlight the contradictory demands of individual, social and political agendas. The following chapter attempts to address these contradictions by questioning why individuals join the circus and what impact does this have on their social reality? When talented individuals are engaged in a collective performance process are there tensions between the ambitions of creative individuals and their ‘social responsibility’?

Chapter 4.

Individual ambitions and collective awareness

Domesticated Agency

Critiquing what she perceived as simplistic idealism, Harding suggested that whilst ‘Theatre-for-Development’ practises what once potentially radical, it is now becoming a favoured tool of international aid agencies and government instruction for ‘domestication’ (2002: 18). The tension between individual agency and their ‘social responsibility’ is additionally informed by Nyamnjuh’s concept of ‘domesticated agency’. Nyamnjuh, ‘stresses negotiation, interconnectedness and harmony between individual interests and community expectations’ (2004: 38). The harmony that Nyamnjuh refers to, however, was challenged by the artist’s differentiation between their family’s expectations, their social duty and their individual ambitions as artists. The interconnectedness of the circus with the wider society was illustrated by educationally oriented performances that depicted social issues and stimulated community dialogue. The transformative process was thus examined in its complexity. The individual, their family values, their collective creative process, and their social awareness were all aspects that had to be considered. The negotiation of political and developmental agendas by Circus Debre Berhan was further explored through their performances, which were aimed at creating awareness and social transformation.

Collective effort, effective bonding and trust between performers were all essential attributes for a successful circus. An individual’s mistake and the collective human pyramid would collapse. An acrobat may have command of their own gymnastic ability but as they somersaulted in the air and landed back on the hands and feet of their fellow performer they had to have faith in their ‘human safety net’. The artists at Circus Debre Berhan suggested, during focus group discussions, that their motivation to participate in the circus was personal but together they had common bonds:

Circus is like a family we are like brothers and sisters, there are not differences like between friends; we are all family.¹⁰⁴

In 2011, the youngest member of Debre Berhan's 'circus family' was six, the eldest, Henok, was twenty-nine; the older members assumed responsibility for the security of the younger students. They walked them home together in order to make sure that everyone was safely returned to their families. They ate, drank, laughed and cried together. This extended circus family helped to protect the individuals involved from hardships; they knew that their personal generosity and care would be returned. The entire company professed and practiced Orthodox Christianity and celebrated the religious festivals together. During times of worship, training at the circus was put on hold whilst the artists joined in with the religious rituals. These were rare moments when the performers became the audience. During Meskel¹⁰⁵ the circus artists stood together watching the theatricalised ritual performance depicting the finding of the 'True Cross'. Despite the popularity of circus, no single performance brought in the crowds to the same extent. The whole community was dressed in ethnic or religious costume. They sang together in unison in a performance that resonated with religious tradition. After the bonfire had burnt out and the cross had fallen the artists gathered back at their compound. Celebrations continued around the circus bonfire as the performers recreated the spectacle back in their own setting. This was a private performance of religious and familial unity.

This festival performance drew attention to another similarity that observation revealed. While Ethiopian circus had developed among urban Orthodox youth, religion did not explicitly feature during the performances,¹⁰⁶ but the values and habits of the artists were shaped by their belief system. The meaning and values of family, their

¹⁰⁴ Focus group with the circus artists, on 20/01/2011, Debre Berhan, Ethiopia.

¹⁰⁵ Meskel is a celebration of the finding of the true cross by Saint Helena in the 4th century, which take place on the 27/28th of September in Ethiopia. It is believed that part of the true cross was buried on top of Amba Geshen a mountain located in the Amhara region of northern Ethiopia.

¹⁰⁶ Apart from under close examination of personal accessories worn in addition to their costume as nearly all the artists wear crosses around their necks tied on with a piece of string.

understanding of collective action and the awareness of the society at large was informed by faith. Ethiopian society is not monotheist but since the 7th century has been home to both Muslims and Orthodox Christians. Whilst the relationship between religious practice and performance was beyond the remit of this study, the view that performance developed out of ritual must be acknowledged.

Family Matters

Girum Kelemu, joined the circus when he was sixteen years old, just after Henok had been appointed as director in 2002 and subsequent to the defection of thirteen members in Sweden. Girum learnt his circus skills under Henok's leadership and looked up to him as if he were his elder brother. Due to Girum's dedication, technical skills and diplomatic character, he was appointed in 2006, without salary, as the new trainer and full-time circus manager. Girum described his personal ambitions and his collective awareness in his self-evaluation:

Circus has become my life. I am a skilled performer with talents in both acrobatics and juggling. I work closely with my fellow performers and together we have created some unique routines. I love to perform and have recently returned from touring the Amhara region where we performed in twenty-five towns including the capital city. It was a great success and I hope to continue to tour both nationally and internationally. I coach gymnastics skills at competition level and would love to represent my country. I am a dedicated trainer working with large groups of children and young adults passing on my knowledge and performance techniques. I aspire to be a professional artist.¹⁰⁷

Girum's commitment to his life at the circus was underpinned by the moral values associated with his religious faith and sensitive, empathetic personality. Both generous and ambitious, his motivation to succeed was driven by both his own and his family's aspirations. Since childhood he had practiced various styles of cultural dance largely informed by his study of contemporary music videos. The second son of what turned out to be a large, single parent family, Girum experienced the daily hardships of urban living on an extremely limited family income. Fortunately his elder brother, managed to

¹⁰⁷ Written CV with Girum, on 16/07/2010, Debre Berhan, Ethiopia.

establish, what has become a thriving family business. Girum assisted this enterprise by helping his elder brother building carts for the local *garrie*¹⁰⁸ before joining the circus.

The family business was doing well but in 2005, before the general elections, Girum's brother was accused of supporting the opposition party. He was arrested and 'disappeared' leaving the family devastated. Girum took over from his brother's responsibilities and gave up the circus. Thus, despite Girum's dream of becoming a professional artist his priority remained orientated towards his family's needs. Months after the elections, Girum discovered that his elder brother was being held in a secure camp in the Afar region. His brother's accuser was found guilty of corruption and his brother was released. Despite his initial objections to Girum's participation in the circus, when his brother returned to Debre Berhan, to find the family business still intact, he resolved to support Girum's ambition. His youngest brother took over from Girum in the family business and the income they generated both supported Girum's career in the circus as well as enabling his two younger brothers to achieve college educations. Girum's relationship with his family underpins Nyamnjuh suggestion of interdependence and the how family expectations domesticate individual's agency.

Girum's family were proud of his achievements at the circus and attended performances. Girum quickly became a key member of the circus and its management structure. Despite his limited education, he had taught himself English and basic sign language, to meet the needs of both foreign visitors and the disabled members. Girum had no interest in party politics but assisted the director in negotiations with local NGOs and government agencies. Furthermore, his role involved the preparation of budgets for performances, the organisation of advertising campaigns through the media centre, the construction of new facilities for the circus as well as providing technical assistance at

¹⁰⁸ Garries are a local form of horse drawn transport. The carts are designed to travel across the difficult terrain and remain a well-used form of transport. Competition has come from rickshaws but despite new roads, many routes can still only be achieved with the use of a garrie. They can carry heavy loads and are used to transport large goods from the rural countryside into town. Girum's family business supplies garries all over the Amhara region.

music events and liaising with local bureaucratic bodies. In the evenings he ran the training sessions and, whilst developing his own skills, he taught various acts to the members. He was the assistant director on shows and advised Henok of the capabilities of the performers. Finally as a performer he lit up the stage with energy, exuberance and technical excellence, leading the other artists by example. Given similar responsibilities at the circus as he had towards his family, he played a multifaceted role in the management and collective cohesion required at the circus.

The creative process

An opportunity for Girum to take centre stage arose when the ‘Emmanuel Development Association’ (EDA)¹⁰⁹ offered to finance a public performance to raise awareness about the current social problems associated with child trafficking. Their initiative, *Protection of Children on the Move in the Northern Ethiopian Corridor*, informed the narrative. In early August 2010, Girum was instrumental during the negotiations with officials from the association who brought representatives from the organisation to the circus-training hall to explain the issue of child trafficking to the creative team and the members. They revealed personal accounts from families, deceived by human traffickers, and victims that had been forced into bonded labour. They pointed out that criminal networks actively exploited families’ aspirations for the future prospects of their children and how promises of better education and income opportunities convinced vulnerable individuals to leave their family homes in the company of human traffickers. They explained that, once taken from the security and protection of their homes they became economic hostages, unable to afford to return home and how they were open to abuses by profiteering criminals.

¹⁰⁹ EDA is a development organisation ‘committed to improve the lives of vulnerable children, youth and women through integrated community based sustainable development programs. EDA envisions bringing positive change and protection for Ethiopian children through empowering their families and communities. EDA has been working in two regions since 1997 including; Akaki Kality, Debre Berhan, Tarmaber, Kemissie, Combolcha, Dessie, Mersa, Woldya and Kobo. Information obtained from EDA Annual report 2010 (<http://www.scribd.com/doc/52987633/EDA-2010-Report>, accessed 19/07/11).

Observing the circus artists whilst they sat in silence and they reflected on the horrors of the accounts, a discussion began about how to present the issue honestly and effectively on stage. Following the performers initial encounter with the verbal accounts from the victims and the relatives of the victims, Henok prepared a play-script. This script was written in a realistic style with a narrative structure based on the issues raised during the presentation. The script was constructed to suit the objectives of the EDA and dialogue was further developed through improvisation. The artists were cast in their roles and strict instructions were given to them to learn their lines so rehearsals could begin. The controversial role of the trafficker was given to Girum. Through previous experience, Girum was acutely aware that his character's actions would disturb and anger the public, as personal antagonisms have been known to spill over into the society long after the curtains close.

The rest of the cast, aware of the potential dangers, adeptly embraced and empathised with their roles as victims. Once the scenic structure and the scripted dialogue learnt, Girum integrated the physical theatre of circus performance to illustrate and express the themes and ideas within the narrative. The show combined circus acts alongside realistic dialogue and developed characters, producing a hybrid style of physical didactic theatre. During the dress rehearsal, at the disused cinema venue, employees of the EDA offered critical comments. This caused nervous tension on the eve of the performance. Intimidated by the comments, at the last moment, Henok made significant changes to the dramatic structure. The performers became even more anxious about their public performance due the following day and finished late in the evening without completing a full run through.

[The child trafficking show](#)

Friday 22 August 2010: Fieldwork Diary

Early in the morning Girum helped organise the advertisement for the afternoon's event. At the media centre a hired minibus arrived to be loaded with Circus Debre

Berhan's sound system.¹¹⁰ On a microphone inside the bus, the confident musician, Josef Zewdu, started the public announcements as we drove around the town. The speakers blared out the message of the dangers of child trafficking. Information leaflets were dropped out of the moving vehicle. Children ran behind the bus fighting over the leaflets excited by the announcement that the circus would begin the day's event. At the venue the rest of the artists were setting the stage and making preparations for the welcoming coffee ceremony. After two hours of advertising the show the minibus finally arrived at the old cinema and the sound equipment was unloaded and prepared. As the crowd descended, the circus musicians began to play, the air filled with incense while coffee and bread was served. The local audience took their seats and they waited for the show to begin.

The show commenced with the curtain closed as a conversation could be heard between parents discussing the potential opportunities for their children if they were sent to the city. A man's voice, louder than the rest, offered to take their children to the capital to be educated and to find employment. The curtain opened at the home of a man in Addis Ababa on his mobile, firmly locating the drama in the present. He was colluding with the trafficker making arrangements for the delivery of the children. His young female house servant who was sitting hand-washing his clothes distracted the man. When he ended the call and to reinforce his own dominance, he ordered her to work harder and he beat her before exiting the stage.

The mendacious villainy of the traffickers was further underlined in the minds of the audience as the action proceeded to the next scene. From offstage amplified screams echoed around the auditorium. The trafficker entered the stage proudly zipping up his trousers. The implication of rape was evident as his captives followed looking frightened and huddled together at the back of the stage. His associate recognised the lascivious expression on the trafficker's face and became angry claiming the 'hotel' manager would pay more for virgins. In an attempt to appease his associate the trafficker got on his unicycle whilst balancing one of the young victims on his shoulders. They continued their dialogue as he illustrated the long journey he took through towns and villages along the northern Ethiopian corridor, deceiving families and persuading their children

¹¹⁰ The circus has invested in four speakers, two mixing desk and an amplifier. This makes them a key resource for public events and promotional meetings with only one other competitor in Debre Berhan possessing such equipment.

to accompany him. Sitting quietly in the corner, the servant girl over-heard their conversation and reacted nervously when the trafficker suggested one of the children would be good for the man at the local church. Dragging a girl centre stage he instructed her to close her eyes and sing:

Please help me in the name of God and Mother Mary
I don't have eyes, I cannot see, please, please help me.¹¹¹

The traffickers were pleased by the quality of her voice as this would increase the profits from her sale and laughing together they exited the stage to celebrate over a drink. The young house servant got up to answer the door to her neighbour. After seeing the bruises on her face, the neighbour discovered the other children in the house. She asked them why they were in Addis Ababa and in unison they replied they had come to be educated. Concerned, the neighbour became furious when the young servant shyly reported that her owner had left to meet with the man from the church who disfigured children and forced them into a life of servitude begging on the street for his personal profit. Outraged the neighbour resolved to call the police but the young victims were afraid because they didn't have any money to return to their families.¹¹² She told the children not to worry and explained that there was an organisation that would help to protect them; she asked them to wait until she returned with the police.

Shortly after the neighbour departed, the trafficker stumbled back into the house drunk. He singled out one of the girls and chased the rest off stage. A rape was signified through a display of aerial acrobatics as the victim somersaulted off his feet in a dramatic and tense portrayal of a horrible act. Once the act was over, the trafficker staggered off stage leaving the girl crying out in pain in a heap on the floor. The neighbour returned with the police to find the girl bleeding. The police sent the girl off to hospital to establish the evidence of the cruelty the audience had just witnessed. The rest of the children returned into view and the police juggled a protective wall of fire

¹¹¹ Translated by Dibabe from the Amharic script from my filmed footage of the show.

¹¹² This problem is taken up by EDA during the panel discussion because without such organisations even after the traffickers are arrested the children are still in a very difficult position and need further assistance, which is where such organisations step in.

around the young victims. When the protagonists returned the police were waiting in the wings. The buyer from the church arrived and as they began negotiations for the human sale they were arrested in the act.

The band played out as the relieved victims formed a human pyramid to symbolise the support they required from each other. The play concluded with all the artists on stage; full of smiles they somersaulted over skipping ropes to clarify their message that only if the society work together can they prevent such heinous crimes. Entranced and shocked by the performance the silence of the audience was only tempered by ripples of applause for the circus acts and moments of laughter that had been astutely integrated into the script. After the performance was over the stage was turned into a platform for the representatives from the EDA to begin their three-hour panel discussion. The audience were invited to express their opinions of the drama through a community dialogue to stimulate awareness of the present crisis in human trafficking.

Their show addressed a number of significant social issues. Firstly the way in which traffickers manipulated family aspirations for the future prospects of their children for their own devious ends. If the children were successful in finding employment in the city they were expected to assist their families back home. Such aspirations left the children vulnerable to profiteering criminals and as depicted in the drama could result in physical mutilation and sexual exploitation. Secondly, as the piece suggested, once captured, the children had no economic means to return home. The expectations of their families added additional pressures and even when the crime was discovered many children might remain away from home in the vain hope of finding employment. Thirdly, criminals can disguise themselves in respectable clothes. Finally, it is only by acts of individual courage and collective awareness that the evil of this social problem can be tackled.

The depiction of a man from the church being guilty of mutilation of these children was perhaps the most controversial characterisation in this performance. It questioned the higher authority in which the majority of the audience place their faith. This was used to highlight that no matter where people claim to be affiliated, individuals can lack moral

integrity. The play's conclusion, attempted to show the collective responsibility of the authorities and the society to recognise these problems and to work together to address them.

The symbolic use of circus skills had specific functions. A dramatic portrayal of a rape scene would have crossed the realms of social acceptability but by the implicit act, the audience is left to make the final connection. The skills on display both attracted the audience and added to the overall entertainment, without such elements this serious drama could have been seen as unacceptable viewing for children. The EDA officials wanted to involve all ages from the society to debate these issues relevant to their own reality.

Although an extremely different situation than depicted in the drama, parallels can be drawn with the defections from the circus due to the artist's youthful aspirations and the desire to improve the situation of their families by sending money home. A 'talent scout', who had just seen the show, began to hold informal auditions with the musicians outside the cinema. Two musicians including the circuses' promoter were selected for a paid two-month tour to represent the Amhara region concluding in a musical competition to be held in Bahir Dah. The other disappointed musicians, who had not been selected, waited patiently with the circus artists for the day's event to come to a close. Four hours after their performance had finished they could finally pack up. At the end of a long day and two weeks of intense rehearsals, Girum received and distributed one hundred birr¹¹³ to each performer. This was the first time in months the circus artists had been paid for a performance.

With financial reward so intermittent, it is perhaps not surprising that the artists took every opportunity offered. The selection of two of Circus Debre Berhan talented musicians was a drain on the circus resources reducing the band to just four individuals. Particularly, the selection of the circus' promoter left the future performances missing a key individual. Ironically, despite the message of the performance to be suspicious and sceptical of outsiders promising unique opportunities, few questions were asked, when a

¹¹³ 100 Ethiopian Birr is approximately US \$ 5.90.

chance suddenly came the musicians' way. Driven by their personal ambitions and family expectations, artists could, just as easily as the children depicted in the show, become victims to self-enriching profiteers.¹¹⁴

Transformative Performance

The EDA show is one of many examples of how Circus Debre Berhan attempts to use performance for social transformation. This is part of what the circus refers to as their 'social responsibility'. The director suggested that the artist's should be role models for society with a shared responsibility to create awareness about numerous social issues. Throughout the past year, Circus Debre Berhan has been involved with several awareness campaigns. In March 2010, Marie Stopes International Ethiopia,¹¹⁵ funded a sexual health campaign and employed circus artists to assist in communicating their message. Girum was one of the artists selected to perform throughout the Amhara region in twenty-five predominantly rural localities. Arriving on stilts in busy markets, dressed in the blue star of the Marie Stopes logo, the artists transformed the space, acting as 'pied-pipers' to draw in the crowds. The function of the circus acts was to retain the attention of the audience whilst reproductive health information and condoms were distributed.

After this paid tour, the Marie Stopes clinic in Debre Berhan has become the circus' favoured hospital offering both regular health treatments as well as specialising in family planning. This facility initially faced disapproval because the majority of the community viewed it purely as an abortion clinic and rumours circulated about 'immoral' females that were seen visiting the clinic. Abortion, though legal, is widely

¹¹⁴ This did however turned out to be a genuine opportunity and the two musicians enjoyed their two month paid tour and was beneficial to their skills and professional experience.

¹¹⁵ Built upon the foundations laid by Marie Stopes (1880 -1958), one of the notable figures of the birth control movement, Marie Stopes International was established in 1973 under the name of Population Service, a non-governmental organisation for Family Planning and Reproductive Health Care. Based in London, the organisation operates mainly in developing countries where population pressure is high. Its overseas program acts as a catalyst in the stimulation of family planning and reproductive health programs. They have 24 clinics in Ethiopia.

(http://www.corhaethiopia.org/marie_stopes_international.html, accessed 23/07/2011)

disapproved of, both Muslims and Christians believe it to be ethically reprehensible. By touring to raise awareness and by their own example of using the facilities, circus members encouraged the community to use these health services and have contributed to generating local support. Likewise on an individual level Girum incorporated blood tests in public performances to confirm his negative HIV status and encouraged others to check for the virus. Despite their religious beliefs, the circus youths are actively engaged in dispelling myths that are unproductive to the health of the society.

Circus Debre Berhan also worked closely with the local HIV Secretariat through its new media centre, opened by the circus in September 2010. In the centre there is a condom distribution machine and information leaflets on sexual health. It has a relaxed atmosphere and provides an environment open to the public. In particular it draws in local youths attracted by the loud music that plays and the availability of computer equipment donated to the circus by the HIV Secretariat. In the last few years the circus has done annual performances during the celebrations of HIV/AIDS Awareness Week. Many artists had personal experiences of family tragedies associated with that disease, they take their educational ability, to create awareness and offer practical preventative measures, very seriously.

Saturday 27 November 2010: Fieldwork Diary

Today was the start of HIV/AIDS awareness week in Debre Berhan. At midday the circus drove into the centre of the town. Saturday is the busiest busy market day and many traders had arrived from the rural countryside. From their hired open-backed truck, decorated with AIDS awareness posters and mounted with speakers the circus announced the purpose of their arrival. A local bar supplied the electricity as the artists pulled out their large red carpet across the dusty track, disrupting local traffic. Bemused marketers made space for the circus as gradually the crowd gathered to watch the unfolding performance. The Amhara district police pulled up, approved the performance and cleared the congested garries. Quietly the crowd gathered around the edges of the carpet, the musicians began as the circus artists somersaulted onto the stage.

The HIV/AIDS Show

The show told a love story; Girum stood entranced by the female gymnastic display whilst the other artists danced around the edges of their make shift stage. The crowd applauded as Girum took her by the hand and led her backstage. Dressed in a white coat, the ‘doctor’ discussed HIV pre-natal medication with a pregnant lady. The new couple arrived to pick up their blood test results. Receiving good news they embraced before lying down on the ground to perform their ‘intimate’ aerial acrobat act. The fast paced music kept the acts flowing as the circus took the opportunity to display their well-crafted routines. Hiwot’s running jump onto Girum shoulders, into a handstand balancing off the feet of the fourth artist in their human pyramid was greeted with loud cheers. When the artist juggled with the letters **H I V**, the musicians addressed the crowd:

Now let us put our hands in the air, what I say you repeat with me. We hand the future of our country to our children. They should be born free of this deadly virus. Let us learn from each other about HIV/AIDS. Let us do the blood test and check for the virus. Let us be informed.¹¹⁶

This poignant performance transformed the market square from make shift stalls to a performance platform. At first the crowd seemed bemused and *garrie* drivers took exception to their right-of-way being blocked. Once electricity had been established, the atmosphere quickly changed as the musicians began to play out on their large speakers. A large crowd gathered as hundreds of people surrounded the edges of the carpet. They climbed onto every raised area including the queuing *garries* pleased to take an additional ‘fare’ so audience members could get a good view. Apart from the sun causing problems during the human trampoline ‘intimate’ act, blinding the catcher as the gymnast fell to the ground, their high quality show appeared to be a great success. The audience were delighted, which filled the artists with confidence for their busy week ahead.

¹¹⁶ This is translated by Azeb Amha from the documentary film of this performance and is attached as an appendix to this thesis.

Sunday 28 November 2010: Fieldwork Diary

This was a demanding weekend at the circus. After yesterday's HIV show, politics was straight back on the agenda. As soon as the performance was over we packed and loaded the equipment onto a hired local bus and set off to the country town of Deneba, for another 'flag day' performance. Once we finally arrived, (after the bus had broken down), the girls prepared the coffee ceremony at our local hotel. The evening was full of laughter. The local politicians arrived and the artists were persuaded to dance. Everyone was happy to be out of town and celebrating together.

Today, thousands of people descended on the small country town for the big event. The circus was only one of many performances. Dressed in military uniform and guns in hand, everybody was singing and dancing. Groups formed around individual singers as drums beat to the rhythm of dancing feet. The atmosphere was charged with nationalist sentiment. The crowd climbed onto top of buses as men on horseback paraded around the outdoor arena carrying Ethiopian and Amhara flags. Politicians took centre stage with long speeches extolling the transformation of Ethiopia. Caps were handed out with logos celebrating the 'thirty year' anniversary of the formation of the TPLF. The circus artists hid back stage as Girum relaxed with the performers playing the fool with the newly acquired policeman's gun lent to them for the performance.

This circus performance was particularly demanding. Henok had insisted on adding an extended gymnastic routine that created complaints about his lack of understanding of the physical requirements. Unimpressed by the artist's protests and excited by the patriotic atmosphere the director demanded more from his performers. After the show the gymnasts retired in pain. On the microphone, Henok organised the rally and invited speakers to take the stage. The musicians played on throughout the day's event as excited children ran up to the stage to kiss the performers. An eating competition brought a hilarious spectacle as large quantities of food wrapped in injerra¹¹⁷ were stuffed into mouths. After the excesses of the day's activities and tempted by free food the crowd followed the circus across the town to attend a three hour political meeting. Another long weekend over everyone fell asleep on the bus before we reached Debre Berhan.

This busy weekend reinforced the multiple agendas the circus negotiated. The political affiliation of the director was expressed through performance and his demands on the

¹¹⁷ Injerra is made with *teff*, a tiny, round grain that flourishes in the highlands of Ethiopia and is the main staple of the diet. This spongy, sour flatbread is used to scoop up meat and vegetable stews. Injerra also lines the tray on which the stews are served, soaking up the juices of the meal.

performers. After the exhausting political rally, the next day their social agenda of promoting sexual health was straight back on the schedule.

After returning from school, promotion for their second HIV second performance began. This was not such a success. The hired generator failed and before they managed to get power it was dark. The show went on and despite setting up in the middle of the road the crowd protected the performers from oncoming traffic. This time they had set up in the middle of the highway and the queuing cars were not so patient. A drunk from a nearby bar only added to the frustration of honking horns. The artists continued to perform in the dark when eventually after several dangerous falls the show was cut short. Henok was furious and demanded more effort from the exhausted performers on the Wednesday's night's and Thursday's morning's performance. The disappointed artists responded positively repeating their market show at the sports ground and finally at the local meeting hall with notable perfection.

This demanding week at the circus signified the commitment of all the artists involved. The shows transformed the space from the ordinary into the exceptional. With very few entertainment venues in Debre Berhan¹¹⁸ the circus afforded a unique collaborative site of social celebration, outside of the religious domain. It is this alternative, performative realm that drew in the audience and thus provided the didactic platform for the various messages different NGOs wished to promote to as many members of society they could reach.

During the HIV/AIDS awareness celebrations, Henok and Girum reflected on the role of the circus. Henok had asked two girls earlier in the year to leave the circus because he deemed their behaviour inappropriate. Rumours emerged that the two girls had been working as waitresses in one of the local hotels. Men mainly attended these local

¹¹⁸ There are two small cultural bars where musicians from the circus band support Azmaris masenqo players. Azmaris is a common term for Ethiopia singers who entertain in bars playing the masenqo and making the punters laugh by clever improvisation inspired by suggestions from the cliental or just simply poking fun out of the audience present. They are often tipped when they make a particularly good joke or play a favoured song. Apart from these two venues there are a number of local hotels but the circus management does not approve attending such places. There are no functioning cinemas, theatres or other social venues.

drinking spots and women seen in these venues gained a reputation as prostitutes. Several of the hotel/bars provided cheap sleeping quarters that offered privacy to both locals and people travelling into Debre Berhan. Whilst it is not always the case, in some of these local hotels, waitresses and regular female clients offered 'additional services'. Girum feared that the girls had 'fallen in with the wrong crowd' and Henok claimed they had brought shame on the circus undermining the message they communicated to society about protection against HIV/AIDS. Regardless of their protests two talented girls were dismissed from the circus.

A talent scout seeking African circus artists for *Afrika! Afrika!* a German based 'African' circus,¹¹⁹ had previously selected one of these aforementioned girls for employment. Henok rejected their offer and chose never to tell this girl about the opportunity. He maintained the principle that if such international opportunities arose, he would only accept them if he considered it to benefit the whole circus, not just the individual. This girl continued to struggle to find employment and the pressure for money may have led her to compromising both her integrity and that of the circus. Unaware of the denied opportunity, both the girls were devastated to leave the circus but refused to apologise for the accusations made about their behaviour. After a few months had passed, Girum contacted one of the girls to congratulate her on passing her college graduation. With contact re-established Henok finally reconsidered his decision and after six months of exclusion he invited the girls back to training.

When asked whether he rejected international opportunities out of concern that the artists would defect abroad, Henok felt reassured that due to his influence on the collective consciousness nobody would attempt to escape because they understood their responsibility to each other and to the wider society. At Circus Debre Berhan it can be argued that this strict hierarchical leadership creating familial obligations within the circus itself and this increased their collective responsibility to society at large.

¹¹⁹ *Afrika! Afrika!* a circus founded by André Heller premiered in Germany in December 2005. Representatives from this organisation spent two years selecting performers from several African countries as well as members from the African Diaspora. The German tour was a resounding success, receiving over 1.5 million spectators.

Henok did, however, accept international opportunities provided to him. He received an invitation from his mentor, the Swedish producer of ‘The Shoe Shine Opera’ to attend a theatre director’s workshop. During his lone visit the producer made an offer to invite Circus Debre Berhan on tour in Italy. Henok again declined, suggesting the payment offered was not enough to meet the needs of his artists. His second personal invitation came from a Swedish theatre director interested in creating his own ‘social circus’ in Sweden for marginalised youth and promising future prospects for members of Circus Debre Berhan on exchange programs.

In May 2011, four members of Circus Debre Berhan were invited to give a three-week workshop in Sweden. This reinforces the continued international appetite for Ethiopian circus. It was their first international tour in nine years since the original troupe defected there in 2002. Henok, with assistance from his political contacts at the Ministry of Culture and Tourism in Addis Ababa, managed to obtain visas for himself, Girum, Hiwot and the young deaf girl, Habtamnesh. This was the first time Hiwot had been back to Sweden since she was stranded there when she was just twelve years old. For Girum who had never been outside Ethiopia, this was a ‘dream come true’ and an unparalleled economic opportunity. Henok had selected these three artists not only for their talent but also because of their dedication to their circus ‘family’ and their respect for his personal authority.

Involvement with the circus had certainly transformed Girum’s social reality and increased his opportunities for mobility. He had travelled throughout Ethiopia and would finally to Europe. He was self taught and passed on his many skills to the other aspiring artists. His commitment to the circus has become akin to his commitment to his own family, however, there remained a tension between his ambitions to become a professional artist and his integral role at Circus Debre Berhan. Despite his talent, Girum may not be able to fulfil his dream in Debre Berhan owing to the significantly limited financial reward, which fails to meet the demands of his own family’s and his personal aspirations. His ambitions were further fuelled by his encounter with professional circuses in Sweden and were driven by his family’s previous investment in

his potential and their aspirations that he could, one day, become an international success. At some point, Girum will have to choose between, his ambitions for himself, the needs of own his family, his obligations to his circus ‘family’ and his responsibility to the wider society. His ability to make this difficult decision will be informed by the complex processes of domestication that affect his agency but do not determine his ability.

This last Swedish tour was not marred by defection, as all participants returned to Ethiopia including Girum. He did however get an offer from an agent who wanted to promote him internationally. Henok suggested to members that this initial tour was to lay the foundations for an invitation for the whole troupe and was ‘the time where the circus started on a new road towards professionalism’.¹²⁰ Whether or not history will repeat itself remains to be seen.

Conclusion

While Nyamnjob stresses negotiation, interconnectedness and harmony between individuals and collective ambitions, Harding suggested that domestication is dictated by powerful international and national agents, which affect the ability of performance to transform society. Whilst contact with international actors and local political constraints have been investigated in detail in chapter three, it is by examining the performances and the roles of the individuals involved, that the process of the domestication of agency may be analysed.

The process of domestication is a complex negotiation of multiple agendas. International agencies, national and local political constraints all inform the realities of Ethiopian circus performers and the ability of performance to stimulate social transformation. The process of domestication is complicated by individual ambitions, familial expectations and social responsibility as they strive to achieve their ambitions. The political dimension of domestication identified by Harding and those of the

¹²⁰ Written by Henok on facebook 28/07/2011

domesticated agency outlined by Nyamnjoh shaped the livelihoods of circus performers and the content of their performances.

The circus is an arena that must balance the demands of talented individuals whilst nurturing their collective awareness. Girum is an example of faithful, generous and ambitious individual who is aware of the delicate balancing act the circus needs to achieve. His own life is informed by his religious faith and his personal experience of the hardships of urban poverty. This has resulted in his interdependence on his family, his community and the circus. When it was demanded of him, he put his family's needs before his own ambitions at the circus. His family returned his generosity and invested in his talent with the desire that he would go on to achieve his goal of becoming a professional artist.

The circus troupe considers themselves akin to members of family unit and Girum's dedication has made him an integral component of this circus 'family'. Through the entire creative process, from the initial presentation, improvised development of the script, the symbolic adaption of circus acts, throughout rehearsals, marketing, set construction and the final performance Girum led by example. During his powerful portrayal of a child trafficker in the performance for the Emmanuel Development Association he put aside his personal concerns to give a realistic characterisation of an abusive criminal in order to create a successful community dialogue that stimulated awareness about the issue of human trafficking.

The performance itself revealed the disastrous consequences of the immoral manipulation of families' aspirations for the future prospects of their children. The desire of the victims to achieve these ambitions resulted in their captivity and abuse. The performance was effective and the audience engaged with the script this was evidenced during the three hour community dialogue with the organisation. In an ironic twist of events a talent scout offered financial reward to two of Circus Debre Berhan's musicians for a two month to tour with another group. Unable to compete with such financial incentives the circus lost two of their best performers. The performance,

although a dramatic tale, reflected a social reality where the ambitions of individuals are failing to be met and opportunities are continually sought elsewhere.

Many circuses in Ethiopia also work in the area of sexual health. The tour with Marie Stopes highlights the ability of circus performance to attract the crowds and raise awareness through their communication with a large audience. They led by example, using the facilities to dismiss anxieties within their local community. During HIV/AIDS awareness week the circus transformed the market from an ordinary trading space to an extraordinary performance arena and educational platform. It was a demanding week as the circus juggled health awareness with their political commitments during the rural rally. Their dedication outweighed their exhaustion as they finally met the tough requirements of their director. His strict leadership resulted in the decision to exclude individuals that were perceived to compromise the integrity of the circus and to reject international opportunities, which, in his conservative opinion, threatened the collective ambitions fostered at the circus.

As the circus is achieving professional standards, the limited opportunities in Debre Berhan, have once again resulted in extending their ambitions into the transnational arena. Whilst maintaining the principle that international opportunities need to benefit the whole circus, four members travelled to Sweden to establish an exchange program and assist in the development of a Swedish 'social circus'. Prioritising the needs of their circus 'family' the members have all returned to Debre Berhan. The balance between talented individuals and the collective ambitions of the circus 'family' is currently tipped in favour of the latter outweighing personal dreams. This troupe believes that only if 'they work together' can individual dreams be realised. Social responsibility and the sustainability of the circus continue to dominate priorities, but as transnational links are further established and the members begin to reach adulthood, questions remain. The tension between the conflicting communal desires and talented individuals remain unresolved and it remains an open question whether this generation of circus artists can achieve both their personal dreams and their collective ambitions.

Chapter Five

Towards a new vision of circus in Ethiopia: Investment and Diversity in Awassa.

Awassa is three hundred and ninety kilometres south of Debre Berhan. It is the capital of the Southern Nations, Nationalities and People. The population growth of this town has increased dramatically from approximately sixty-nine thousand in 1994, to two hundred and fifty-nine thousand by 2007. It is three-times larger than Debre Berhan. The city was built upon the volcanic shores of Lake Awassa, in the Sidama zone. The landscape was remarkably different from the dry mountainous region in the north. Tropical storms irrigated the fertile fields full of sugar cane and false banana trees.¹²¹ Local workers tended the grassy verges that separated the networks of new roads. Shops and bars surrounded the ornate St. Gabriel Church that dominated the centre of the city. The roads were busy with traffic; petrol stations were congested with queuing *bajajis*,¹²² petrol shortages were common and price fluctuations created competition at the pumps.

At night the city was alive with young people who filled bars and restaurants and danced the evenings away in live music venues. Singers from circus bands entertained the punters at the local Wolaita restaurant cottage and bar. The fifty-six different ethnic groups that composed the southern nations influenced the architecture of the city. The stadium proudly presented a colourful display of ethnic diversity with fifty-six posters depicting the nations and nationalities emblazoned upon its walls. White faces were less unusual on the streets of Awassa than in Debre Berhan. A handful of tourists and NGO workers enjoyed the accommodation at the luxury Haile Resort, owned by the Ethiopian

¹²¹ False banana is the common name for Enset due to its close resemblance to the domesticated banana plant. It is a very important root crop in Ethiopia, a traditional staple in the densely populated south and southwest parts of Ethiopia.

¹²² Bajajis are motorised rickshaws commonly used in towns in Ethiopia as affordable taxis service. They are called Bajaj after the Bajaj Auto Company that manufactures them.

long distance runner Haile Gebrselassie. Travellers and researchers often took a few days off the road to enjoy the comforts of Awassa.

A competitive environment

The first East African Children and Youth Theatre Festival,¹²³ was held in Awassa, on the 16-21 October 2000. Hosted by the East African Theatre Institute (EATI) with sponsorship from SIDA:

Theatre practitioners from Sweden, Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda who believed in the importance of drama, theatre, and education to improve society met in Awassa, Ethiopia to discuss the possibility of networking among practitioners.¹²⁴

After the festival, five circus troupes began to compete for performance space in Awassa. Competition resulted in circuses expanding their creative activities to attract further participation and investment. This growth in creative training resulted in a significant number of talented musicians, actors and circus artists being based in Awassa. Despite the initial expansion of circuses only two circuses have managed to maintain economic viability; Circus Awassa, affiliated with the national organisation CIE and 'One Love Theatre',¹²⁵ a theatrical circus company, based at the Awassa Youth Campus (AYC). These two circuses took different approaches to sustainability and despite significant competition continued to thrive. In an interview with the manager of the AYC, Sintayehu Mengistu, reflects on the early days of circus in Awassa:

At the beginning we did the circus to entertain ourselves and the audience. There were so many talented guys. But nowadays the culture of the circus has changed. There were more than five circuses in Awassa, but now there is only Awassa Youth Campus and Circus Awassa. Now no

¹²³ In 1998 the EATI was established with financial assistance from SIDA. The EATI members are Tanzania, Uganda, Ethiopia and Kenya. The Ethiopian chapter of EATI includes 'Circus in Ethiopia'. Circus Debre Berhan was among the circuses invited to attend an event.

¹²⁴ The 'Dramatool' project is administered and run by the EATI and the Swedish National Organisation for Authorised Drama Pedagogues. There are two national project coordinators and web administrators from each EATI member countries of Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and one from Sweden who coordinate, undertake and facilitate the activities (<http://www.comminit.com/node/265376>, accessed 10/07/2011).

¹²⁵ Previously known as Circus Debu Nigat (Southern Dawn).

circus performer will do a show for free. Ten years ago we would all do shows for free because we get excited and use our talent to do something but nowadays for the circus performers it has become a business for them. When there is money they do it, if there is not money they don't do it. It is getting worse not growing, but in an artistic way it is improving it is getting technical, organised we have music equipment we can do live music composition, with the circus before there was no music equipment we just performed with a tape recorder.¹²⁶

The assertion Sintayehu made, that circus was contracting in Awassa, despite a recognised improvement in artistic and technical quality, hints at his reservations with the current professional approach as opposed to the vitality and collective commitment of circus performers in previous years.

The introduction of a professional ethos has made the circus in Awassa operate in a competitive arena. However, from the outset, supported by foreign assistance,¹²⁷ the AYC was established as a commercial venture for trained artists. In 2000, foreign investment in Circus Debub Nigat (Southern Dawn) provided food and education for aspiring artists. The following year land was granted to this group and was developed with US\$50,000 investment from support groups in Germany. Consequently the AYC possessed a well-equipped centre with a music studio, rehearsal space, indoor and outdoor training facilities, an art workshop and gallery, two small offices and a library. Circus training was offered on alternate days to Akedo.¹²⁸ An American donor organisation, The Awassa Children's Project,¹²⁹ supported the AYC and specific artistic projects which included the performances by 'One Love Theatre'. All full-time staff at the AYC received salaries and artists were paid per performance. Whilst some of the circus artists and musicians employed for the performances were active members of the

¹²⁶ Interview with Sintayehu, on 14/01/2011, Awassa, Ethiopia.

¹²⁷ The early foundation of the present Awassa Youth Campus¹²⁷ began in 1996, when an Ethiopian gymnast started working with a group of street children. He used his family connections in Europe to help raise funds and provided food for the young participants. By 2000, the teenagers were receiving school fees, clothing and lodging through the project. The city officials granted land for a vocational and circus training centre.

¹²⁸ A martial art recently introduced in Ethiopia and is supported by an additional donor.

¹²⁹ Awassa Children's Project is a grass-root Illinois non-profit organisation formed in 2001. As well as supporting One Love Theatre they also financed the Awassa Children's Centre providing housing, food, healthcare and education to 80 orphaned children and a vocational training centre with 100 students.

centre, several others were selected purely for their talent as performers. Their commitment was underpinned by the professional facilities and the financial rewards offered. In contrast to the membership of Circus Debre Berhan most the artists of the AYC were mature and had gained their experience at different circuses including their local competitor, Circus Awassa.

In 2001, David Schein, a youth theatre advocate in Chicago became involved with the AYC and suggested that the circus group should develop a show based on AIDS education. He applied for funding from USAID. Donors invested at least US \$30,000 annually to support the AYC and the touring show. Renamed 'One Love Theatre', they performed the show for ten years in markets and rural communities throughout the Southern region. Sintayehu explained how the show had developed over the years:

At first the show was just about HIV/AIDS, but now we try to transmit messages about HIV/AIDS, genital mutilation and gender equality. This is because we proposed to the donors that it is not only HIV/AIDS, which is the problem of the society. So we wanted to include these messages so the theatre could be multi-purpose. We asked them, we gave them the script and they said yes. It was our initiative, but they approved it. They have a burning interest and we collaborated with David Schein who added some ideas, included some ideas and excluded some, so we compromised.¹³⁰

This compromise highlighted how the development of a performance was a social process. In this case it was also a negotiation between international donors and the ideas and concerns of the performers involved.

[On tour with 'One Love Theatre'](#)

Saturday 30 October 2010: Fieldwork Diary

The bus was loaded and the show hit the road. Apart from a few artists recovering from the previous night's indulgences, they were full of energy, singing and being entertained by their resident comedian. He loved the attention, telling jokes back-to-back, as the artists roared with laughter. The bus whined it way over gravel roads

¹³⁰ Interview with Sintayehu, on 14/01/2011, Awassa, Ethiopia.

over the small volcanic hills surrounding Lake Awassa. After an hour or so, the bus pulled up the artists and used ropes to push back the gathering crowd of curious children and adults. Their mobile set was cleverly constructed as they extended their painted canvas over the arched scaffolding. The bus became the backstage dressing room as the musicians and comedian entertained the quickly expanding crowd.

The show began as two girls, dressed in rural clothing, entered and established the performance space as if they were collecting water, whilst simultaneously discussing the problems they both faced: The dialogue revealed that father of one of the girls wanted her to be circumcised while the other was being forced by her father to marry an elderly man against her wishes. Together they resolved to run away from home and to head for the city. In the second scene, the shift of place was suggested by, two small street children who entered with a plastic bag full of food. Just as they start to eat a man pushed them away and stole their food. The audience applauded with delight as the boys chased the man offstage. The third scene featured a young couple walking together. A pretty young single girl caught the eye of the boy much to the chagrin of his partner. When she protested he smacked her across the face. The following scene depicted the attempted gang rape of the single girl by a group of men. The two rural girls entered and witnessed the attack. Caught in the act, they froze in an aggressive tableau that included the image of the two rural girls terrified and intimidated by the violence of the city. The tension in the audience was evidenced by a shocked silence.

The tension was relieved by an awe inspiring gymnastic display. The men danced and tumbled whilst throwing each other high into the air before catching a final flying boy at the top of the ensemble of balancing bodies. Dismounting the human pyramid the young boy showed his muscles before beginning push-ups counted on the microphone, 1000, 2000, 3000, exhausted the boy collapsed but when four men arrived to opportunistically steal from him they proved to be no match for his extraordinary strength.

The men lay as if bruised and beaten on the floor. The boy assumed leadership of the street gang to plot an assault against a man dressed in western clothes and waiting

patiently for the arrival of his girlfriend. The boy rolled himself into a ball so that one of the gang could carry him over to the man to be used as a footstool to have his shoes shined. Distracted, he was back-flipped to the ground as the human footstool attacked him. The gang stripped him and one of the protagonists' masquerading in the victim's clothes attracted the victim's girl friend. The scene was then interrupted by a tightly choreographed dance routine to western music depicting the excesses of wealth. As the dance finished the devastated man, left dressed only in his underwear, managed to get a condom into his assailants hand before he left the stage with his arm around the victim's lover.

A skilled skipping unicycle act kept the crowd cheering, as the street gang re-entered the stage; they looked tired and hungry and were begging each other for khat.¹³¹ Sintayehu, dressed as an old man, arrived with food and offered it to the street gang. They struggled to eat as their appetite was suppressed by their addiction to khat. The tempo shifted as a juggling hat routine got the audience dancing and gymnasts, once again, enhanced the performance. On a high, because the gang managed to buy more drugs, they worshiped the khat, which sent ripples of applause around the audience. The performers consumed the green khat leaves whilst singing a joyful reggae style khat-anthem. The upbeat mood suddenly changed as drug enhanced monologues brought the artists to tears as they recounted the horrors of their lives that had brought them to the streets.

A circus routine again lifted and lightened the mood as a magician elevated a performer. A clown figure then proceeded to reveal the secret behind the magician's mysterious human elevation, chasing away the audience armed with prosthetic legs. As the crowd settled, the final scene of the drama reintroduced the rural girls who now lived in the city. One of the girls had ended up on the streets, whilst the other had gone on to university. Seeing her friend with the street gang the college graduate asked her what

¹³¹ Khat is a plant native to East Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. When eaten it can cause excitement and loss of appetite. In many countries designated as an illegal drug. I heard claims it is the second biggest export from Ethiopia after coffee and many people use it for recreational purposes.

had happened. The girl explained she found work as a servant but her employer raped her and she had become pregnant. When she visited the hospital she found out she had contracted HIV. Her friend comforted her and told the gang that her adoptive father had died and had left her the house. Out of sympathy she invited them all to move in and finally get off the streets, they were delighted. Her natural father arrived through the crowd. He begged his daughter's forgiveness. He told the audience that he should never have tried to force her to marry against her will and he had learned about the dangers of female circumcision. The show concluded as all the artists danced and sang:

If we are all together we can solve the problems we face. If we all work together we can fix all these problems.¹³²

This complex performance piece addressed several social problems. The circus elements were used to provide entertainment. The set-piece exhibitions of skills effected to offer moments of relief from the darks tales of circumcision, forced marriage, rape, street theft, drug use, dysfunctional violent gender relations and the spectre of HIV. This approach contrasted with the symbolic use of circus skills and routines employed by Circus Debre Berhan. 'One Love Theatre' differentiated between, circus as entertainment and, language based theatre as the medium of didactic purpose.

The first scene between the two rural girls depicted a tension between the will of their fathers and the girl's values. Their solution to run away to the city allowed the plot to develop in an urban environment, more in tune with the realities of the artists rather than the audience. The street gang actively illustrated the harsh reality of metropolitan life. From robbery to rape to the excesses of affluence, the gang depended on drugs to subdue their appetite and desires. Street life was depicted as a competitive world where even the fittest depended upon each other for survival. A parallel between the strong boy and the strength of the circus artist emphasised the importance of physical discipline. However, the use of these skills for criminal means undermined the intended message.

¹³² Translated by Dibabe from the Amharic script in the filmed footage I documented during this touring performance.

Such farcical moments added to the audience's entertainment but, in pursuing a host of themes, the narrative became confused and the educational content diluted.

Mixed messages: Audience, Artists and Receptions

The first show was presented in Yerba, a small rural town in Sidama and took place at the bus station. As the crowd gathered very quickly, the rope used to hold back the audience got trampled on. Local 'assistants' restrained the surging crowd by hitting out with sticks and plastic water containers, to keep the audience at bay. Some people climbed up into the surrounding trees to escape the attentions of the 'assistants' and the increasingly agitated audience. This created an atmosphere of fear and intimidation, evident in the audience, which was not conducive to creating a receptive state of mind whereby the show's educational objectives might be achieved. Neither was it constructive in establishing an appropriate relationship between the performance, the performers and the audience for the suspension of disbelief necessary for the opening scene to work fully.

Members of the audience were chewing khat and greeted the drug scenes with cheers and laughter. They celebrated, with delight, that the artists joined them in their daily consumption and misunderstood their attempt to portray the negative consequences of drug use. The content of the script was lost, made incomprehensible by both the cries of children being beaten back by the assistants and the raucous laughter audience. Despite repeated pleas for order, made by the comedian, the show had to be stopped.

The anarchic scene that precipitated the premature closure of the show disappointed Sintayehu. He made the point that they were not there 'simply to entertain but to prevent such ignorant behaviour'. With other members of the company suggesting that there was no hope of success in 'such lawless places'. The social disconnection between the artists and their audience was palpable.

The following three performances in other rural towns did not suffer the disaster of the first and physical restraint of the audience was not required. There was a better selection in the performance spaces and more temperate ‘assistants’. The performances were well received. After the performance, in the filmed interviews with members of the audience it appeared the messages about HIV precaution and the prevention of female circumcision had been communicated to the majority. Not all of the audience understood the Amharic script, nor could they read the slogans – fight HIV/AIDS, fight genital mutilation and respect gender equality that were written in both English and Amharic. The use of English on the set created a backdrop of video documentation, aimed at their donors rather than their audience. Many spoke only their local languages and were unable to understand the complex narrative leaving some messages unclear and therefore open to misinterpretation.

The third show took place in a school ground opposite the rural market in Wotegra. Business at the market was quiet apart from the crowded khat stalls. Tonnes of neatly wrapped leaves proved to be the most demanded item, even by a few of the artists, who discreetly took advantage of the cheap rural prices. In such small communities, such hypocritical behaviour would be quickly acknowledged by all concerned. Returning after each performance the AYC manager sat at the front of the bus whilst the back seats offered privacy to a handful of rogue artists chewing khat and gambling with cards.

Once back in Awassa, Sintayehu distributed the cash payments to each of the performers. In conversation, Sintayehu complained again about the culture of the circus performers at the AYC. He was aware that some of them were using khat and feared that the money they earned would be wasted on this indulgence. He suggested that it was impossible to impose strict discipline in a large city where individuals could not be continuously monitored.

Awassa was a place where affluence sat alongside poverty. Whilst many of the artists came from poor backgrounds and still faced economic hardships, all invested in the latest Western fashions and envied objects that reflected material wealth. The social

tensions within their urban environment, as depicted in their theatrical portrayal, constituted aspects of their social reality. This was place where desires were set against realities and ‘illuminate the power of large-scale, imagined life possibilities over specific life trajectories’ (Appadurai 1996: 55).

Sintayehu said he had adapted elements of the drama based on his personal experience and told a story about his life history. In his early years, after his mother was no longer able to support him, Sintayehu found himself living with soldiers during the Derg Regime. After the fall of the Derg, he was interrogated by the present government but was released without imprisonment because of his youth. He returned to the military camp, but this time he worked for soldiers from the new regime. A few years later he left the camp to try to find his family back in Awassa. He was sixteen when he reached Awassa and he was living rough on the streets. He was one of the street gang selected to be part of the original gymnastic troupe.¹³³ The food provided by the foreign donations helped him to survive and finally he found his mother still struggling to care for his younger sister.

In 2000, when foreign donations started to assist with the educational fees of the circus group, Sintayehu managed to get a place at a private school. Due to this opportunity, he held the view that the circus changed his life. While his education enhanced his capacity for social mobility it was his engagement with the circus that enhanced his geographical mobility and broadened his experience of the country as a whole. In 2005, he was one of twenty-eight, selected out of four hundred performers from Awassa, to tour to the north of Ethiopia and train Sudanese refugees about the dangers of landmines.¹³⁴ It was at the

¹³³ A young gymnast, Berreket Dana, selected a group of street children and teenagers for circus training in 1996. With help from his family in Europe he managed to get funding for food and later for their education. This group was called Circus Debub Nigat, several members of which are now performing with ‘One Love Theatre’.

¹³⁴ The Mine Risk Education (MRE) Circus, performed by the Debub Nigat Circus of the Awassa Children’s Project, aimed to create awareness among Sudanese refugees and internally displaced Ethiopians about land mines in an entertaining and educational way. The circus was performed by 28 refugee youths and emerged out of the Sherkole Mine Risk Education (MRE) Circus workshop held in UNHCR’s Sherkole camp in western Ethiopia, near the Sudanese border.

refugee camp he met a Dutch photographer who then supported him through university. He went on to gain a degree in business management at Gondar University before returning to Awassa to re-invest his knowledge at the AYC.

He was convinced that the circus had transformed his reality, teaching him ‘to avoid bad habits and increase my physical fitness, as well as introducing me to foreigners who supported my education’. While Sinteyehu remained passionate about circus he recognised the parlous state of a circus dependent on foreign subsidy:

I wish everyone and all organisations that want to work with awareness will work with the circus because the circus has got an incredible capacity to teach the community about different social issues. As you saw within thirty minutes of the performance the circus can teach more than 3,000 people. I want the circus performers to really love what they are doing, including myself, that is what I wish. My fear is that if there is no way to raise money locally the circus will disappear. Now we are dependent on foreign aid but there is a lot we should learn from Circus Awassa because they are really talented in the market, they sell their art; the circus, theatre, music, they always work very hard.¹³⁵

Sinteyehu’s testimony reinforces the ability of circus to communicate to a mass audience within a short period of time. He also realises that if the circus is to be successful there needs to be a degree of autonomy and self-sufficiency. As the full-time manager, Sintayehu, received a monthly salary. Although he was aware of the contribution the circus has made to change his personal circumstances and the potential of the arts to transform the lives and conditions of performers and their audience, his commitment to Ethiopian circus was compromised by his desire to immigrate to America, following in

The six-week workshop included gymnastics, theatre, playwriting, and mine risk education training. They also learnt about leadership, work ethics, teamwork and creativity needed to create and sustain a circus group in Sherkole. The resulting show followed a group of refugees on their way home and showed their encounters with landmines and unexploded ordnance (UXO) en route. The hour-long performance offered basic mine awareness tips that, from the perspective of the organisers, could make the difference between life and death for returning refugees. After every show, the audience was asked to reflect on the lessons learnt. Sherkole camp, which opened in 1997, is one of five camps in western Ethiopia that together hosted nearly 80,000 refugees (<http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/news/opendoc.htm?tbl=NEWS&id=432993a44>, accessed 02/08/2011).

¹³⁵ Interview with Sintayehu, on 14/01/2011, Awassa, Ethiopia.

the footsteps of the previous AYC manager. His story illuminates a tension between the social value of artistic endeavour and the ambitions of the individual.

The considerable financial investment made by foreign donors informed the content of the performance and the viability of a management structure at the AYC. However, this dependency arguably reduced the incentives of the participants to behave and operate in a self controlled professional way. International aid had reduced the need for local NGOs to invest and for the community to take ownership of the enterprise. The disconnection between the circus and the society was also evident in the relationship between the artists and their audience. The performance content was based on urban themes but targeted at a rural audience. The community issues raised were based upon an articulation of the problems the artists face themselves.

The differentiation made in the show between circus as entertainment and theatre as the medium for the multi-purpose messages resulted in a confused narrative. The fact that many of the performers had learnt their skills at different circuses, which had struggled or failed to survive, had an adverse effect on the collective ethos. Cash incentives met individual needs but failed to create unity between the performers. Whilst the AYC could be seen as a domain for professional opportunities, with only eight performances per year, mature performers used the AYC as an additional source of income. For one of the performers, Ayenew Philipos, the money he earned was reinvested in Circus Awassa. When asking Ayenew about his commitment to Circus Awassa rather than to the AYC he suggested:

Circus Awassa is unique we look after orphaned children. They get transportation and food three days a week, school uniforms and support for their education. This is all provided by income generated by the circus members themselves. Nobody from outside helps us; we do everything by ourselves for economic purposes. We do circus shows and provide music for weddings and rent music equipment so all the members can get money.¹³⁶

¹³⁶ Interview with Ayenew, on 15/01/2011, Awassa, Ethiopia.

Circus Awassa

Arriving at Circus Awassa's training hall, the lively atmosphere was enhanced by musicians playing electric guitars and keyboards. Their modern instruments had replaced the sound of the *Krar* and *Masenqo*.¹³⁷ The vibrant rhythm and open atmosphere of the training sessions was strikingly different to the private and disciplined routine of Circus Debre Berhan. Directed by Masresh Wondmu, their open-door approach meant many more children were peering in, excited to participate in the theatrical workshop. Unlike the director at Debre Berhan, Masresh, was a performer himself, who started in circus when only sixteen years old. Three years later, in 2001, he won first place in the national gymnastics competition, held in Addis Ababa. He worked alongside Ayenew and together they managed Circus Awassa which included a circus, theatre and music group. Circus Awassa, originally known as Molier Theatre, was established in 1998. Masresh and Ayenew were two of the original members and their personal experience made them aware of the tensions between individual ambitions and their mutual responsibility for the sustainability of the circus.

Recently Circus Awassa faced a setback when, remarkably, on the same day as Circus Debre Berhan, they lost permission to train at their hall. Unlike Circus Debre Berhan, they had never been granted their own compound. Thus this political action closed the circus and was a reminder of how state ownership of land could be used 'as a political control mechanism' (Abbink 2009: 10). After Circus Awassa had been closed down for over a month, the management used their limited budget to rent a small space for training. This proved to be too expensive and after a short period the training had to stop. Masresh and Ayenew did not give up. They challenged the officials, threatening to make radio broadcasts about the situation. Finally, after three months, they managed to meet with the city mayor who said he was unaware of their predicament and granted them permission to return to their training hall. Masresh discussed the relationship between the circus, the society and the politicians:

¹³⁷ The *krar* is an Ethiopian style lyre and the *masenqo* is a one-string fiddle, both traditional musical instruments popular in Ethiopia.

Children and youth come here, they make themselves physically and mentally develop. We train them with discipline and knowledge. We work on social issues with NGOs to create awareness in the society. We will help the government with positive things like the national elections; we will participate to encourage the youth to vote. We don't intend to support the government or the opposition, but we appreciate the elections. In the political sense we are not appreciated and we are not established for such things. Here are children and youth not politicians.¹³⁸

For both Circus Awassa and Circus Debre Berhan, the mechanisms of government control, such as the ownership of land, were exploited by local politicians and had to be continuously renegotiated. The various directors dealt this with differently. Masresh at Circus Awassa was critical of such interference but recognised the need to adapt to political demands. On the other hand, Henok at Circus Debre Berhan actively engaged with members of the ruling political party to produce patriotic shows and thereby increase political support for their endeavours. Whilst the approaches differs both circuses engage with the state for the benefit of their circuses, this supports Nyamnjoh's theory of 'domesticated agency', which is a 'multifaceted concept of agency that needs not be defined solely in terms of resistance but also recognizes the possibility of working with the state rather than against it' (Edmondson 2007: 6).

Situated in the south, the population of Awassa is shaped by diverse cultures. This is also expressed in their performances, which, in a similar fashion to Circus Debre Berhan, celebrates ethnic diversity through costumes and dance styles. They collaborate with Circus Shashemene, their neighbouring city, during big events such as the Ethiopian millennium celebrations. 'Traditional' dance routines are accompanied by 'modern' music and 'reflect shifts in the rhythm of life' (Pels 2000: 104). Masresh suggested that because of the diverse nature of Awassa's growing population, it was a society more open to influences from both inside and outside of Ethiopia. Political debates were notably more acceptable in Awassa than in Debre Berhan and criticism of the conservative Amhara and the political dominance of the Tigray could be heard.¹³⁹

¹³⁸ Interview with Masresh, on 17/01/2011, Awassa, Ethiopia.

¹³⁹ Thursday 28 October: Fieldwork diary: This was the first time I heard politics debated in a public space.

Unlike in Debre Berhan, Circus Awassa made a conscious effort to avoid direct association with the governing party.

When illustrating the transformative power of circus, Ayenew suggested:

I have changed myself through circus and help to change others. Circus Awassa helps people to become professional.¹⁴⁰

The directors of Circus Awassa actively encouraged individuals to take up professional opportunities. Circus Awassa had already produced a number of national and international performers. Diamond developed her musical talent at Circus Awassa before she recorded *Zumbara*, in 2010, a popular song played throughout Ethiopia. Fevi Zewde, originally a member of Circus Awassa was selected for the Africa-China circus programme and trained at the acrobatic institute in Wuqiao in China. After training she toured for four years with ‘Afrika! Afrika!’ across Europe. Several other artists have gone on to make successful careers as professional performers. They are the pride of Circus Awassa and their success encouraged current performers and future members. This stimulated both artistic and economic growth because these artists regularly returned, re-invested and re-invigorated the circus in Awassa. The financial autonomy of the company was established not only through circus performance, but also by widening its artistic portfolio.

The circus built the first ever music recording studio in Awassa, competing with studios in Addis Ababa by producing professional recordings locally. This circus never received any foreign subsidy but generated its income independently through commissions for local advertisements and by producing and recording original popular music. Just as the products of the company were diversified so was the work of its creative leaders. Alongside their circus endeavours the directors’ worked at the music studio and trained potential professional musicians on composition software. The studio was both a professional and educational environment. Ever since Masresh took the position as

¹⁴⁰ Interview with Ayenew, on 15/01/2011, Awassa, Ethiopia.

director in 2006, he resolved to consolidate the economic viability of the circus and to expand its ambitions for the future:

Circus is my life, thirteen years is not easy but step-by-step when I finish my education I used my background to try and develop the circus and search for funds. I am happy with the circus. Economically it is ok, I am not a trader but I got this far and if I work harder, I can get further. Our vision is to create a competent arts institute similar to Awassa University. We can't now, but we are starting it and from here, somebody will make it. We make facilities as our capacity allows, then one day one of these kids, the new generation they can fulfil it - that is our vision.¹⁴¹

If Circus Awassa's vision of creating a performing arts institution were to be fully realised, it would offer the next generation of creative individuals, who have not had the benefit of a formal education, the opportunity to develop vocational skills. Circus Awassa is presently attempting to establish a media centre for film and edit training; this would enhance their present repertoire to take them a step closer to realising their ambitious dream. This collective venture has already transformed itself into an informal arts institution by embracing the multi-media approach whilst still retaining the brand name of circus.

The circus maintained its economic viability by taking advantage of the local market. As the city developed, the demand for musicians to perform at wedding, graduation ceremonies and in local bars and restaurants increased. Circus Awassa was commissioned to facilitate and participate, in the November 2010, fifty-year anniversary celebrations of Awassa city. Given their investment in creative talent, audio equipment and recording facilities they were in a strong position for community orientated projects. The financial viability of this circus was dependent upon the local economy. They offered management positions to talented graduates that trained at Circus Awassa. Without the capacity to employ the several hundred members that have participated throughout the last thirteen years, Masresh and Ayenew encouraged past and present members to take advantage of opportunities both at home and abroad, as they reinvest in the next generation of Ethiopian artists.

¹⁴¹ Interview with Masresh, on 17/01/2011, Awassa, Ethiopia.

Conclusion

This thesis examines the relationship between performance and society in the context of circus in Ethiopia. It both reflects the way performance is shaped by the history of political struggle and illustrates how circus transcends national boundaries and attempts to challenge social norms. My research is underpinned by an inquiry into the efficacy of artistic production to act as a catalyst for social change and personal development. Whilst the answer to this question remains tentative the research reveals that the fledgling circus of Ethiopia demonstrates its capacity to continually reinvent itself, creatively responding to ideological and political transitions.

The premise that performance stimulates social transformation has already been established as the ideological practice of ‘theatre for development’ by the founding theoretician and practitioner of the movement, Augusto Boal. In 1979 Boal explicitly recognised the relationship between politics and performance and called for an innovative ‘forum theatre’ to set the stage for the class revolution. Such politicised theatre was explored in practice during the seventeen years of conflict in Ethiopia (1974-1991). In opposition to both the imperial ‘modernisation’ of theatrical performance under the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie and the sponsored agitation propaganda performance by the Derg, cultural officers from the EPLF reinvented ‘traditional’ aesthetics to perform ‘revolutionary’ multi-ethnic dramas on the battlefields of ethno-nationalist conflict.

While the conflict between communist idealism and the capitalist free market dominated the international stage, the ‘1984 Ethiopian famine’ became a haunting reminder of international inequality as images of human starvation depicted the consequences of poverty and drought compounded by civil war. Despite the altruistic intentions of western aid that poured into the country, it failed to prevent and arguably, assisted in financing and extending the conflict. As the iron curtain lifted, the global ideological landscape began to change. Russia withdrew its military support from the ‘Marxist’ Derg regime and ‘liberation’ was declared, in 1991, by the ‘revolutionary

democratic' opposition (EPRDF). A brighter depiction of a 'self reliant Ethiopia' a society, 'united by diversity' began to be performed by a new generation of Ethiopian artists.

The new circus based on a blend of human gymnastics, dance and music provided an ideal form for the movement and circus blossomed in Ethiopia. It not only offered safe and constructive environments for urban children and youth to develop a multitude of skills, which fuelled both their individual and collective ambitions, but also provided a vehicle for social education. Twenty years since the establishment of the first circus in Ethiopia, they have flourished in almost every urban town throughout the country. The focus on youth and education has remained vital to the role of circus within the society.

In the five circuses observed all of the young performers were from Orthodox Christian backgrounds. Their understanding of social duty, communal values and their collective rituals are informed by their beliefs and shared mythological history. Their present is actively shaped by their past whilst they simultaneously reinvent cultural performance to look forward to the future. The relationship between performance and society though goes beyond religious affiliation. The circus members see it as their social responsibility to tackle issues deemed inappropriate for religious debate. Their focus on sexual health, contraception and HIV/AIDS awareness gives them moral validity and social value. Their ability to communicate health awareness messages to the wider society through performance enables these young performers to be active role models in their attempt to challenge social issues.

Nearly all of the circuses depend on international organisations and local NGOs for their economic sustainability. Such dependence continues to determine aspects of their performance and mediates their relationship with the broader society. The work as this research has shown is the result of a social process, 'not merely enactment of a pre-existing script', but rather 'it is making, fashioning, creating and is the result of a multitude of actors working together to give form to experiences, ideas, feelings, projects' (Fabian 1990: 13). For circus artists this process begins in the 'school group'

where promising individuals develop their physical and ensemble skills. The discipline and dedication that is required is both fundamental to the development of the artist and the performance. It also encourages support by sponsors that believe in the potential of circus as a social and educational force. Over the years the performers and directors created and maintained their delicate balancing act.

As the participants increased their technical skills, the circus negotiated the demands of both local politicians and funding organisations as they attempted to realise their creative work in the context of producing performances aimed at social transformation. Their goals were ambitious; being promoted as the ‘real ambassadors of Ethiopia’ the circus had obligations both at home and abroad. By reinventing traditional aesthetics and combining ethnic styles they produced multi-ethnic cultural performances. This new performance genre defied ethnic distinction and created a recognisable and distinct form of Ethiopian circus.

The impact of this new phenomenon extended beyond their borders as circus in Ethiopia began to tour throughout the world. In a similar tradition to the Russian and Chinese circus, Ethiopian circuses became cultural exports that questioned Western preconceptions. Performance by Ethiopian circuses challenged the ‘scientific’ racial discrimination prevalent in 19th century American and European circus tradition and questioned the images that had dominated international reportage that focused on famine and conflict in Ethiopia.

The international successes of Ethiopian circus were marred by accusations of managerial impropriety followed by numerous defections of circus artists abroad. The consequences for circus in Ethiopia were profound. The circuses that remained in Ethiopia lost international and local credibility. Their reputation and role with the local community had to be readdressed. The attempt to restore their reputation is exemplified by the director of Circus Debre Berhan who emphasised the educational function of the circus by creating a strict and disciplined working environment dedicated to educational imperatives. His policy of working closely with various influential figures from local

government, NGO institutions, and family members on the board of directors to monitor the management of the circus artists, restored their local credibility. This hierarchal restructuring of management was also taking place at the national organisation 'Circus in Ethiopia'. Payments for artists were halted and international tours postponed. The 'privileged' days of free meals, transportation costs and educational support were over.

Political scrutiny of the circus increased, local politicians actively used state mechanisms of land control as political constraints instigating processes of domestication of both performers and their performances. Directors had to engage with power brokers or risk losing their training facilities. Circuses took various approaches to address this political control and manipulation. Whilst Circus Debre Berhan actively supported the government, Circus Awassa managed to avoid direct affiliation with the governing party. Personal political affiliations, differing styles of management and locality must be taken into consideration when discussing the process of domestication. However, despite the increase in political interference both circuses have managed to maintain a level of autonomy by carefully positioning themselves as interdependent, negotiating the needs of the circus performers, local politicians and the wider society. Whilst they offered their creative services at local political events essentially celebrating the status quo they also pursue their social agenda and economic sustainability by working with local NGOs. Their creative adaptation to local and national political agendas illustrated the way, as Mbembe points out, 'ordinary people, guide, deceive, and toy with power rather than confronting it directly' (2001: 128).

The active relationship between performance and politics is not only a contemporary phenomenon as the history of Ethiopia reveals. The 'poetics of nationhood' is not just specific to Ethiopia but to the wider transnational performance arena. The 'power of performance' to communicate whether used for political, social or personal endeavours continues to offers 'rich insights into the manifestations of human social processes' (Turner 1986: 86). By examining individual performers during the collective creative process tensions between individual, familial, social and political responsibilities have

been considered in their complexity. Harding suggests that the radical potential of performance to change society is undermined by political domestication. Nyamnjoh's concept of 'domesticated agency' stresses interconnection and negotiation between the individual, the society and the state. Agency cannot, therefore, be understood purely in terms of the individual but needs to account for the multiple agendas that shape realities and stimulate processes of domestication. By integrating the negative implications of 'domestication' with the positive interdependence created at the circus their ability to transform society remains viable.

The majority of Ethiopian circus takes place in the open air, in public spaces. When the circus sets up, they transform the customary shape and function of the space in line with their aim to transform the consciousness of their audience. As the visual ethnographic appendix confirms, the audience gather, delighted to be entertained at no cost except that of their time and engagement. As Harding suggests, 'in Africa, and throughout the world, performing makes visible the unseen and makes present that which is in the past or in the future, manipulating space and time and challenging social and natural order' (2002: 2). The circus performance captivates and transforms the daily routine by the exceptional display of the human physical capability. Markets, sports-grounds and bus stations, in a moment, shift from a commonplace to a creative space as the performance takes the audience on a journey beyond their expectations to a place where education and change can take place. The video footage of Circus Debre Berhan's HIV/AIDS Awareness Show illustrates the audience sitting down quietly to read the information leaflets distributed by the artists. The circus communicates with the audience and their performance is met with loud applause. Even for those that cannot read they understand the message as they repeat in unison the musician's powerful call: 'let us be informed, let us be informed!'

This successful performance did not rely entirely on the spoken word but is underpinned and complemented by the performers' and the directors' capacity to communicate through the symbolic use of their bodies in a gymnastic spectacle. Stories are told but the broader themes are illustrated by staged metaphors. While these

powerful circus performances enchant the crowd, perhaps more significantly, they stimulate community dialogue. This documented show is evidence of the transformative power of circus performance. Circus performance in Ethiopia both reflects and, at times, facilitates transformation through the social process of communication and creative education. The physical training and the acquisition of skills are crucial, not only to the education and enlightenment of the audience, but also to the transformation of the performer's individual ambitions and collective awareness. The performers are proud of their constructive role for their society but many continue to be frustrated by the lack of professional opportunities available in their local community.

However, further comparative research in Awassa, where significant investment, reveals that a professional level of development is indeed taking place but its success is mixed with failure. Despite their high quality facilities and financial incentives for performance, the artists performing with 'One Love Theatre', demonstrate a limited collective investment. The urban performers and the subject matter of their work suffered from a lack of connection with, or understanding of, their rural audience. The circus entertained and amused more than it educated and the significance of the theatrical narrative was lost amidst the confusion. Instead of being interdependent on each other and the local society, the performers were dependent upon foreign donations. Their lived realities are far removed from their rural audience and bare no relation to their international aspirations. The artists' loyalty is invested elsewhere.

With many talented performers having trained in various circuses in Awassa, it was significant to observe that several successful performers were reinvesting in the next generation of Ethiopian circus artists through Circus Awassa. This circus has never received any foreign assistance and has used the developing local economy to maintain its autonomy. They became extremely popular and due to their personal investment in professional facilities and audio equipment became a vital resource for the technical requirements at public and private social events. Despite struggling to compete against the financial incentives offered elsewhere in Ethiopia and abroad, the circus adapted and diversified its approach to economic sustainability by incorporating the production

of other popular forms of entertainment and education under the umbrella of Circus Awassa. Their vision of creating an alternative school of the performing arts, to offer professional facilities through investment in the next generation of Ethiopian artists, could indeed, transform both the individual and the society.

As an 'East African famine' is once again dominating media headlines, circus in Ethiopia juggle complex local and international agendas and deserve all the applause they receive.

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List of Illustrations

Figure one: Barnum and Bailey: The Greatest Show on Earth: Grand Ethnological Congress: A Partial display of the new enormous menagerie & characteristic grouping of strange & savage people. Advertisement poster for Barnum and Bailey's 1883, touring show in America, billboards were used to announce the arrival of the circus.

Figure two: Ringling Brothers & Barnum & Bailey: Present from Africa's Darkest Depths: Tribe of Genuine Ubangi Savages. The image used in this circus poster seems to be based on photo 22 in H.F. Bernatzik, *Der Dunkle Erdteil. Afrika*. Cologne: Atlantis, 1930.

Figure three: Cirque du Soleil presents: Dralion: A harmonious blend of Eastern and Western Acrobatic Prowess. Image taken from Cirque du Soleil official website (<http://www.cirquedusoleil.com/en/shows/dralion/show/about.aspx>, accessed 22/04/2011).

Figure four: Circus in Ethiopia: For Youth and Social Development: Circus in Ethiopia aspires to see a developed circus arts institution that plays a central role in promoting socio-economic change. Image taken from their official promotional website (<http://circusethiopia.org/>, accessed 24/04/2011).

Figure five: John Robinson's 10 Big Shows Combined: The meeting of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. This American circus show was performed in 1899, and depicts an American circus adaptation of the Ethiopian imperial mythological history. Image from vintage circus posters (<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/search/?q=circus%20posters%20solomon%20and%20sheba>, accessed 24/04/2011)

Figure six: Hager Fiker Theatre. Photograph taken from Addis Ababa Culture and Tourism board (<http://www.addisculturetourism.gov.et/en/addis-ababa-culture-hager-fikir-theater-ethiopia-3.html>, accessed 30/03/2011)

Figure seven: Do They Know It's Christmas. Image taken from the album cover of the single released on 29 November 1984. The song was written by Bob Geldof and Midge Ure to raise money for the victims of the Ethiopian famine. The single became number one selling over five million copies in Britain alone.

Appendix



This eight minute short documentary film is an edited sample of over fifteen hours of footage that I recorded throughout my fieldwork. This provided detailed visual ethnographic data used throughout this thesis. This short film focuses on the work of Circus Debre Berhan. It begins with a display of circus acts featuring Girum Kelemu dressed in 'Wolaita' costume and dancing to 'Wolaita' music in a 'traditional' style.

The film illustrates a training session and rehearsal with Circus Debre Berhan at their outdoor compound. The music is recorded live during the rehearsal with members of Circus Debre Berhan and additional guest musicians preparing for a traditional music competition. The rhythm and sound is typical of this Northern Shewa region with a predominately Amhara musical tradition. The young boy watches and attempts to copy the skills. He is the baby brother of one of the artists being child minded at the circus and emphasises the family dimension of circus life.

As the HIV/AIDS Awareness Week begins they drive around the town announcing the sexual health campaign and their up and coming performances. The first daytime circus show in the market is described in detail in chapter four, pg. 79-81. The circus performed four shows during this annual campaign from 27 August - 1 September 2010. The filmed performance includes their evening show outside the local sports ground. These shows were funded by the local HIV Secretariat and offer evidence of the transformative role the circus attempts to play through their creative educational performance techniques.

The film concludes with the Meskel celebrations that took place at the circus compound on the 28 September 2010 detailed in chapter four pg. 69. The coffee ceremony is a regular feature at circus social events and proceeded an evening of dance and entertainment based on the religious ritual that the circus members had attended the previous day. The film is edited in the style of a 'day in the life' starting in the morning and concluding at night. The final credits are accompanied by Teddy Afro's song Ababayehosh, an extremely popular song used during New Year celebrations, which offers thanks to the individuals involved in the collective creative process.

The decision not to use a voiceover was a personal choice as I feel the footage speaks for itself. Translation was done with the assistance of my supervisor Azeb Amha. The circus members were delighted with this film and use it for promotional purposes. I uploaded this film on tube on 01/06/2011, accessible at www.youtube.com/watch?v=sEESIQtZfQQ. I would like to thank the Anthropology Department at Leiden University for the loan of the recording equipment, which enabled me to produce this film. All the footage was recorded and edited by myself.