

TRIBAL FORMATION ON THE ETHIOPIAN FRINGE: TOWARD A HISTORY OF THE 'TISHANA'

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1. INTRODUCTION

This article has two purposes: a) to provide a first historical outline of the Tishana or Me'en, a small 'tribal' group living in southwestern Ethiopia and ethnographically as well as historically one of the least known populations in the area; b) to illustrate the importance of a political economical approach for the explanation of such a process. Inspiration has been derived from Eric Wolf's seminal book *Europe and the People without History* (1982). In this historical anthropological approach, the interdependence of political economical factors on the one hand, and social dynamics and cultural factors on the other, both placed in a 'global' perspective, is axiomatic. One of the merits of Wolf's book is to have demonstrated the need to rethink the explanatory framework for research and interpretation of traditional ethnography and anthropology on the basis of the idea of what he has called the 'global interconnection of human aggregates' (Wolf 1982: 385).

Also for the study of the 'periphery' of Ethiopia, an African state never colonized and therefore not as deeply transformed by global or even Western, politico-economic forces as other African countries, this approach is important. As I will demonstrate, wider processes of mercantile expansion and political entrepreneurship played a vital role in the emergence of tribal units in an obscure frontier area of Africa's oldest independent country. In outlining the history of the so-called 'Tishana' it will be demonstrated that the specific emergence and cultural form of a tribal ethnic group cannot be understood within a classic case-study approach focusing on the group itself. The Tishana social formation is the result of changing 'social alignments' (Wolf 1982: 386) and adaptive responses of certain human groups within this broader framework of such historical and politico-economic forces. How this result came about is what constitutes the history of the Tishana.

2. THE PROBLEM

'Tishana' is the tribal name which northern Ethiopians (mostly Amhara from the Gojjam and Shewa regions in Central Ethiopia) gave to various

groups of Surma-speaking agro-pastoralists who lived in those areas that they conquered after 1898. The word 'tishana' is a greeting word from one of the dominant Surma languages (Me'en) in the area, but in the early part of this century it designated more groups than merely Me'en-speakers; it was not the self-chosen ethnic name of any people. The label was first mentioned in the literature in 1913 by C. Montandon in a book on the Omotic-speaking Gimira, a group of peoples north of the Tishana.

Little is known of the history of these 'Tishana' before the 1890s, because theirs was the 'history of a people without Europe'. Life in the flood-plains of Southern Sudan and the bordering Ethiopian area was not deeply influenced by outside forces, neither politically, nor economically or culturally. The reconstruction of Tishana-Me'en history from oral tradition has only just begun.¹ Some of the people who currently speak Me'en were pastoralists who lived in the lowlands bordering the southwestern foothills and fringes of the Ethiopian highlands (in the Käfa and Gämo-Gofa administrative regions of Ethiopia).

A small part of this pastoral population (the Bodi-Me'en, ca. 2500) still live east of the lower Omo River (cf. Fukui 1979). The vast majority of Me'en speakers (close to 40,000) now live in highland areas west of the Omo. *Me'en* is the modern self-designation of the group (especially after the 1974 Ethiopian revolution). It is derived from the language they speak (*tuk-te-Me'en*: 'mouth of the humans').² Linguistically the Me'en belong to the southeast, Surma group, an East Sudanic language family, the Nilo-Saharan group related to the proto-Nilotic language group, from which it may have separated several millennia ago (cf. Ehret 1982, Dimmendaal 1982, Unseth 1988). The area of origin for this Surma language group is probably the lowlands of South Eastern Sudan, close to the present border with Ethiopia (see Ehret 1982: 21). In addition to 'Tishana,' the Me'en were, especially before 1974, also derogatorily known as *Shängila* (a widely used referent in the west and southwest connoting 'black'). The history of these 'tribal' reference names (there are more, given to them by neighboring groups) is important: they chart the perception of this group by the peoples who had contact with them from the late nineteenth century (the Amhara and Oromo) and before (for instance, the Gimira, Käfa, Konta, and Dizi).

The problem to be explained here is how and why a portion of these Me'en pastoralists apparently left the lowlands and, more notably, how they successfully adapted to highland areas where cattle-keeping was notoriously difficult due to the tse-tse fly and where the invading northerners tried to prevent them from settling. A further issue is how come they were able to absorb other groups and individuals from different ethnic origins.

Friedman and Ekholm (1980: 65) in their proposal for a 'global anthropology,' used the term *systemic social reproduction* (that is the social system of

the tribal peoples in the area) and sketched how such smaller units are shaped by wider, global forces. Assuming that people strive for cultural continuity, how does this process actually take place? In answering this question, Wolf's idea about the role of 'cultural' or 'ideological' notions in the process of social (re-) alignments can be used and clarified further. It will then be seen that his global mode-of-production perspective (while an indispensable precondition to get the analysis started) may need to be augmented by a theory of cultural functioning of the modes of production, brought out by what neo-Marxists call *articulation* of such modes and their ideological concomitants. My intention is not to deliver a full-grown theory in this respect on the basis of one illustrative case study of a single ethnic group—but to show the dialectic between economics and cultural material (cf. Wolf 1982: 387), the latter sometimes being decisive in ordering the production processes in the society itself. The notion of the requirements of social reproduction along a 'cultural model' are important here, and in this respect Wolf's approach should be developed further.

3. 'DISCOVERY'

The story of the emergence of the highland Me'en begins in the late nineteenth century. It is tempting to start with the notion that the Me'en, the ethno-linguistic group as we now know them, were living in their present area of settlement in the present Administrative Region of Käfa at the time of the first recorded Abyssinian and European travellers (cf. Bureau 1975). Travellers learned from their contact with the inhabitants of the old Käfa kingdom that people called 'Shuro' (meaning 'Blacks' in the Käfa language) lived to the south. This was the first label to be applied to the people later known as Me'en. The first written mention of 'Shuro' is by the Italian traveller A. Cecchi. In his book he included a short 'Sciuro' vocabulary, which refers to the Me'en language (Cecchi 1887: 445-56), but had little else to say about the people. The next reference to 'Suwro' is by the French explorer A. d'Abbadie (1890). It is significant that he gathered his information in the 1840s and 1850s and he already made mention of the word 'Mekan' as a self-descriptive term for part of the Suwro.³ However, from the contradictory descriptions of the Shuro/Suwro by d'Abbadie and other travellers (summarized in Pauli 1950: 95f.), it appears that many Shuro were *not* Mekan and many other groups were subsumed under this term. Where the 'Mekan' lived and what their culture was like, remains vague. My speculation is that these Me'en speakers (the Mekan of the older sources, for example d'Abbadie 1890 and Conti Rossini 1913) were transhumant pastoralists on both sides of the Omo and Shorum Rivers. The highlands were not yet invaded nor securely settled by them. D'Abbadie mentioned the following groups speaking the "Suwro"

language: Bota, Schebel, Mala, Kukit, Tschira, Bokol, Kascha, and Kirim. These groups were most likely the original pastoralists from the Omo area. Significantly Kirim (Cirim) and Mala (Mela) are the two main divisions of the present-day transhumant-pastoral Bodi-Me'en east of the Omo River (Fukui 1979). Bokol and Kascha (and perhaps Bota, if this can be identified with the present-day Bayti) are territorial divisions of the Me'en now living west of the Omo. The other three groups have not been identified; other groups such as the highland Gabiyo and the lowland Nyomoni (north-west of the Shorum-Omo confluence) are not mentioned. Today the western Me'en maintain a tradition that they originated from the Omo River Valley area. An earlier tradition recorded that they come from a place in Sudan called Chomu (Muldrow 1976: 604).⁴ The Surma pastoralists⁵ share with Me'en the tradition that they came from the Omo plains, which they entered from the south, north of Lake Turkana.⁶

Until 1897, the pastoral peoples in the south were not bothered by the Abyssinian quasi-feudal polity of Emperor Menilek II (r. 1889-1913) or by any other colonial state or empire in the area. British colonial boundaries (Sudan and Kenya) were provisionally drawn, but administrative effects were nominal. Long-distance trade was not developed and the pastoral economy was largely self-sufficient at least within the framework of an interethnic system of exchange and minor trade, extending into the Sudan.

4. THE IMPORT OF RINDERPEST

In the 1890s, however, the effects of a rinderpest began to be felt. This disease wrought havoc in the entire Horn of Africa, even among the Sudanic pastoralists (cf. Kelly 1985: 266-67). It all started on November 8, 1887, when Indian cattle were imported through the port of Masawa in Eritrea (Pankhurst 1986: 59). Some of the cattle were infected with the fatal disease, which spread at an alarming rate. In the following years almost the entire livestock population of Ethiopia and neighboring areas died (ibid. 1986: 62, 65). For many purportedly 'isolated' tribal groups, the subsistence base was disrupted. Many people were uprooted when forced to leave their areas in search of food and better living conditions, triggering a process of internal migration and socio-cultural change (cf. Turton, 1988; Sobania, 1988).

The pastoralists of the Omo Valley were also affected. It is said by Me'en informants that "...our grandfathers left the area in the lowland because of the great death of our cattle in the days of *atse* Yohannis [King Yohannis IV of Ethiopia died in 1889]. They lost so much that they had to leave and go elsewhere to find cattle." Other informants stress that their forefathers' living conditions "...became too crowded." Part of the Me'en and other groups

started to move out of the valley into other areas with different ecological characters. It might be asked why they did not simply return to the lowlands north or west of Lake Turkana, but these areas were occupied by the Nyangatom and the Dasenech. Two directions can be discerned from the oral and written documentation: towards the north, along the Omo bend, to the Kullo-Konta area, and toward the higher grounds west of the Omo. These two movements were fueled by the desire to replenish lost stock, which is always the first incentive for pastoralists. They did not intend to give up pastoralism all at once.

By raiding their new neighbors for stock in the Koyscha area, the groups moving towards Kullo-Konta succeeded in maintaining their lifestyle as pastoralists in new areas of settlement along the Omo.⁷ Nevertheless, a Me'en-speaking group established itself in the area bordering the Konta and Ch'ara areas although they could not penetrate the territory of the groups themselves. This group—one of the least known Me'en groups—is now known as the *Nyomoni* (named after the 'father of all Me'en,' Nyamon Shua).

The other groups, however, who gradually moved into the highlands east and north of Maji, took another course. First of all, the heavily wooded area of the highlands was not conducive to a pastoral mode of subsistence. Only small herds of cattle could survive here. Furthermore, the immigrants came often into violent conflict with small groups of people like the Dizi, the Bensho and Shako (Gimira), and the Kāfa, none of which had much cattle for them to raid. Me'en oral tradition confirms that this entry was not peaceful: protracted battles with these groups for possession of the area were fought (cf. also Tippet 1970: 79). The Shako-Gimira, for instance, came to regard the Shuro (that is the Me'en) as their archenemies (Straube 1963: 17-18). The latter were accused of being cruel 'cannibals' (Conti Rossini 1913: 412).

However, the heroic traditions of the Me'en conceal the fact that the process of settlement was equally rather gradual, new groups (patrilineal clans mostly) arriving in small number and allying themselves with fugitives from other groups or with some indigenous groups who were absorbed by them. (Of these groups, nothing is known except for some unidentifiable names, now only referring to regions, like Golda.) In this period, the Kāfa and the Gimira used the name 'Shuro' (blacks) for the invaders, and not Mekan or Me'en.⁸ It is simply not known how many of these invaders were Me'en speakers. One informant from the Bayti-clan said his ancestors (a chiefly family) came from the Bako area, which is much more to the east, outside the Me'en country of origin along the Lower Omo. But although other groups are also likely to have moved into this higher area, the Me'en speaking element was without any doubt predominant. Whether they called themselves 'Me'en is not known. More likely they used their clan names (Bayti, Boqol,

K'asha, and so forth). Informants stressed that at that time they were not united under one leader; the different clan groups regularly fought one another. It seems, however, that the Me'en clans split and dispersed according to a genealogical pattern, lineage groups detaching themselves from the larger patrilineal unit and claiming specific parcels of territory, which are at present still considered their patrimony only. (See section 7 below).

It can be concluded that this migration of part of the Me'en pastoralists led to an extension of hunting activities and apiculture (usurping the Gimira and Käfa territories) and to the adoption of a more agricultural mode of subsistence as the new area proved favorable for the shifting cultivation of corn (*Zea mays*) and sorghum (*Sorghum bicolor*). The latter crop especially the Me'en had already cultivated in the Omo area, as the Bodi me'en agro-pastoralists east of the Omo continue to do to the present day.⁹ In the course of settling in this new area, they took over more and more crops and techniques from their neighbors and effected notable changes in social and religious organization.

To sum up, the cattle disaster at the end of the nineteenth century led the pastoral Surma groups in the Omo Valley, of which the Me'en were a part, to a reorientation of their social reproductive system. It was the result of the impact of largely exogenous forces, notably an ecological disaster caused by a political economic factor (the Italian colonization of Eritrea), impinging from outside the confines of their regional system. At first they tried to reproduce the conditions of a transhumant-pastoral economy by raiding cattle, and by taking the remnants of their herds to new pastures. But, being forced to move into the highlands, many Me'en took up (and took over from the Gimira) the cultivation of grains and root crops. And although 'pastoral' economic activities diminished in importance, the possession and accumulation of cattle remained a highly valued ideal. Without cattle, no marriage could be concluded, no funeral could be organized, and no rite of passage could be held.

Their adaptation to new natural and socio-economic elements in another environment set the course for new social and cultural alignments (see below). The rinderpest crisis thus provides one part of the answer to our first question. Why the Me'en were successful in the long term is another matter. This has to do with the above-mentioned cultural 'conservatism' and its relation to their production system.

5. THE ABYSSINIAN CAMPAIGN IN SOUTHWESTERN ETHIOPIA

The second external factor to cause change among tribal societies in the south can be traced back to 1898 when the military conquest of the southern

fringes of the Ethiopian highlands by troops of Emperor Menilek II took place. (It must be remembered that before these military campaigns, part of the Me'en had already filtered into these highlands, cf. p. 22). As a result of this conquest, the semi-pastoral and sedentary groups in the Maji area were forcefully 'incorporated' into the quasi-feudal political-economic structure of Abyssinia.¹⁰ The effort of Menilek in conquering these areas can be seen as part of a *political* plan to stake his claim in the imperialist power game being played by England, France, and Italy; he was also *economically* motivated to find new territories from which to parcel out land to his supporters and to increasingly market the indigenous products from the southern areas, including ivory, hides, wood, coffee, and honey. These motives demonstrate the entanglement of an apparent fringe area, such as the Abyssinian southwest, with global forces.

The Russian officer Bulatovitch, who accompanied Menilek's general *ras* Wolde Ghiorgis in his campaign to conquer the Käfa region, gave a short description of the Shuro (Bulatovitch 1900: 128-129). This account seems to refer to a Nilotic-like pastoral people. Bulatovitch stresses that 'Shuro' was the name for various groups organized in "independent states" (among them, Golda). He notes that they refused to surrender and pay tribute to the emperor and yet, the forces of Wolde Ghiorgis traversed the region toward the Dizi area without encountering much armed resistance. This would seem to indicate that the 'Shuro' retreated without surrendering, although from the Abyssinian perspective, sovereignty and claims to tribute were established. This then led to a phase of violent conflict—raids and counter-raids—between the Abyssinians and the people who, from 1898 to 1936, came to be known under the new collective name of 'Tishana'.

The period after the conquest saw the Maji area become almost classical 'frontier area,' where men from the center, in this case Shewa, the core region of the Amhara quasi-feudal imperial state, could make a fortune. A small nucleus of northern soldiers and traders settled in the newly founded town (*kätäma*) of Maji, among the Dizi people on a strategic ridge. The local population was drawn into the *gäbbar* (serf) system: a system of quasi-feudal exploitation of labor power and taking of agricultural surplus. As subjected indigenous groups were assigned to work for the northerners they lost their economic autonomy.

In addition, and also as a result of this confrontation, the Me'en and their allies became more intensively involved in an international network of trade for two vital commodities: *ivory* and *slaves* (cf. Darley 1935; Garretson 1986), while soon a third item was involved: firearms.

It is this confrontation between the Tishana and the Amhara, and the efforts of the latter to turn the former into *gäbbar* that provides the main social dynamic of the era. Much of this process has been described in an excellent

article by Peter Garretson (1986), in which the Maji area is conceptualized within the framework of a political center-periphery model at a national (Ethiopian) and international level (the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan and British Kenya).

What cannot be answered on the basis of his account is how this process of confrontation led to a radical rearrangement of traditional kin-ordered modes of production by the indigenous population (especially Dizi and Murle) and how and why the Tishana put up such a protracted struggle with the Amhara forces, never to be completely subjected.

Under the *gäbbar* system, the local population had to supply labor and slaves to the military. They were forced into a tributary mode of production, superimposed on their kin-ordered mode. The tribute had to be delivered, not only in the form of cattle and grain for the subsistence of the northern settlers, but especially in the marketable commodities of ivory, hides, coffee, honey, and slaves.

The Tishana, still in the process of taking possession of the highlands, resisted this incorporation from the start. At one level it endangered their own newly-developing subsistence basis in the highlands, which was a profitable combination of lowland pastoralism and shifting cultivation with new crops (root crops, coffee, cereals), hunting (elephant, antelope, buffalo) in the highlands, and at another it hindered their emerging role in regional markets. It is important to note that *before* their political subjugation the Tishana were already becoming involved in the nation-wide trade of these commodities and foodcrops.

The arrival of the Amhara, including the *näfstänniyotch*, or armed trader-settlers, increased the demand for these products at the same time that it sharpened competition for their supply. The northerners' intention was to monopolize the economic exploitation of the Maji frontier area, while incorporating the indigenous peoples into their labor system. This led not to institutionalizing the *gäbbar* system (which grew into one of its worst forms in Abyssinia) but to an enormous increase in slave trading that denuded of population entire districts of the Maji area. This also occurred on the Boma plateau in Sudan, which was within the Abyssinian (Maji) sphere of influence, despite its nominal British sovereignty (cf. Garretson 1986: 204). The Maji area became a frontier zone where politically ambitious persons could build up a support base (the local governors) and where entrepreneurs of various kinds (not only northerners, but also Swahili and Arab traders from the East African coast, 'Tigre' bandits from the north, and others) could roam nearly undisturbed.

We can therefore say that the Tishana and the Amhara (and the people in their wake) *competed* over a common economic *niche*. But for the Amhara this was fired by the demands of transregional markets for ivory, slaves, and

also cattle, while for the Tishana it was a matter of survival in a physically and socially new environment. This was true not only in a vital economic sense, but also in a demographic sense because the Tishana could not escape the effects of the slave raids. These raids threatened the integrity of their kin-ordered work units, and caused a perpetual social disequilibrium within their corporate groups and those of their indigenous allies. This was additional reason for Tishana-Me'en resistance and for the gradual formation of social units larger than the patrilineal clans with which they had penetrated the highlands during the previous generations. From this process the Tishana, consisting of Me'en and other lesser known groups (for instance, the Belodiya, cf. Garretson 1986: 202; and the ancestors of the present-day Idinit, a small subgroup in Me'en society) emerged as an ethnic unit organized into clan chiefdoms. Through trade they had already secured a substantial amount of firearms at a relatively early stage (that is before 1910; cf. Garretson 1986: 202-3). They also formed alliances with various rebellious Gimira and Käfa groups. Raiding and counter-raiding between the Amhara and the Tishana, despite the apparent defeat of the Tishana in 1913 (Garretson 1986: 204) continued in the area throughout the 1920s and 1930s.

After a further outline of the historical process itself, the remainder of this article considers the conditions of social reproduction from an external as well as internal point of view, emphasizing the interdependence of the 'Tishana' with the larger Abyssinian social formation as well as the measure of its cultural modelling within this interdependence. Thus the local ethnographic and, ultimately the global level can be analytically integrated.

6. ECONOMIC NICHE AND POLITICAL OPPOSITION¹¹

After the conquest in 1898, the Maji region was given to *ras* Wolde Giyorgis's follower *dejazmach* Demte. The predatory nature of the newly established socio-political order is evident not only from the forced restructuring of the day-to-day socio-economic relations of the indigenous groups in the area, which destroyed the fiber of their society, but also from the common practice of wholesale pillaging of the natural and human resources of the area whenever a governor departed. His troops captured as much cattle, gold, ivory and slaves as possible and this was either taken as spoils to the north or distributed to his followers. This customary practice continued up to the last governor, *ras* Getatchew Abbate, in the 1930s.

Economically Maji and its surroundings were quickly incorporated into the international trade network focusing on ivory. Apart from the East African (Swahili) traders, Indians first dominated the scene. A monopoly

over the local ivory trade in Maji was initially given to an Indian trader (Garretson 1986: 202), but abolished when it inhibited trade and profits. Slave-trading—stimulated by the *gäbbar* system—quickly followed in the wake of the ivory business, especially after 1910 when the elephants were largely wiped out. The significant increase in the slave trade that followed led the British, present in both neighboring Sudan and Kenya, to become involved, as they saw in the slave trade the foremost threat to local peace and the commercial prosperity of the area.¹² The constant attention paid by Britain to southwest Abyssinia dates from this period. However, the vehement protests by the different British consuls did not lead to any real improvement of the situation. Maji thus remained a notorious, unruly, exploited frontier region where the half-hearted directives of the center (Addis Ababa) against illegal border-crossing, poaching, and raiding of people and cattle were largely ignored. Even when it was placed directly under Emperor Haile Sellassie in 1935, this was but another attempt to counter the continuing British criticism of the deplorable state of affairs in the area.¹³

In the first years after the conquest, the indigenous population had no fire-arms and were powerless to resist. Every time northerners appeared to collect taxes (in the form of grain and honey; Hodson 1929: 37) or to capture stock and people, the groups known as Tishana retreated into the dense forests then covering the highland area. Occasional ambushes of small parties of northerners provided their first fire-arms; they forced their captives to show them how to use them (cf. Hodson: 106). Further, the Tishana were joined by armed outlaws from the Gimira and Käfa people, and guns were introduced as payment for ivory and slaves. The Tishana especially took the opportunity to acquire guns by supplying slaves to the Abyssinians and they began to raid neighboring groups like the Gimira, Tirma, and Dizi, as well as other Me'en groups. In the earliest days, three to five slaves were exchanged for one gun; but in the 1920s when slaves had become more difficult to obtain, the exchange was one for one.¹⁴

The first 'Tishana' resistance after their arms build-up came from a group under a chief called *Serie*, a leader of the mysterious Belodiya mentioned earlier. This was either an indigenous highland group which allied itself with more recently arrived Me'en, or a Me'en clan.¹⁵ *Serie* is first mentioned as "chief of the Bolodiya tribe" [sic] by Major H. Darley (1926: 75, 141), a British officer of the Kenyan King's African Rifles, sent by the British authorities to the Maji area to try to prevent boundary violations. (In 1918 he became a vice-consul in Maji, and was an active hunter-participant in the legal ivory trade.) Darley first met *Serie* in 1909, claims he became his friend, and mentions that *Serie* sought British protection of his people from the Abyssinian deprivations (1976: 76-77).

Serie set the pattern of Tishana resistance to the encroaching northerners

by instigating hit-and-run ambushes: travelling parties of traders or soldiers were attacked and killed, the Tishana making off with their trade goods and livestock.¹⁶ Isolated military outposts were also attacked and wiped out. All of this made the 'Tishana area' with its important trade route to the north dangerous to cross despite the fact that, as Garretson states, the 'first of Tishana rebellion' ended around 1913, possibly after the death of *Serie* (1986: 204, 285). Nevertheless, the Tishana territory was not completely "pacified;" new Tishana leaders emerged and on several occasions the fortified town of Maji itself was attacked.¹⁷

Whenever a governor departed Maji, leaving behind the familiar devastation of the countryside, the Tishana retaliated with attacks on northern outposts, and increased their raids on weaker neighboring groups to make up for their own losses.¹⁸ Leaders of this resistance included Kamale and 'Cutler' (a name probably anglicized by Hodson) and a new alliance noted by Garretson (1986: 205) of Gimira, Maji and Kefa under the leadership of Gallajira although it is not known whether this was a 'Tishana leader.'¹⁹ These first two were undoubtedly Tishana and Me'en speakers and Kamale is remembered to the present day by members of his clan and family living north of Maji. With these cattle and slave raids, the Tishana definitely proved to be competitors of the northerners. These attacks and raids provoked a massive response from the northerners under the new governor *fitawrari* Wesene, a resistance which Garretson depicts as having been crushed in 1925 (Garretson 1986: 206). However, the Tishana area north of Maji was not conquered or 'cleared.' In this important formative period of the Maji frontier area we thus see the Tishana developed into competitive slave traders in their own right, venturing far outside their new home territories. Their attacks on the Dizi, Tirma, and Gimira were reminiscent of pastoral raids: attacks with well armed troops who killed the older and adult male inhabitants and then retreated, carrying off livestock, foodstuffs, and women and children to be sold as slave to the northerners. By supplying slaves they attempted to prevent their being raided themselves for slaves. It also enabled them to exchange others for their own enslaved relatives and to buy off the Abyssinian slave-traders. Today the Amhara in Maji recall that the "...Tishana would even sell their own sons and wives into slavery."

This same pattern is also evident in later descriptions of Tishana resistance, for instance by Hodson, British consul in Maji in the 1920s (Hodson 1929), the reports by his successors Captains Holland and Whalley, and from the traditions of the present-day Me'en, though the latter relate much more to their own suffering under the Abyssinian raids. Tishana resistance could not be stamped out and as Hodson noted at the time, "in a sense the Abyssinians are reaping what they have sown, for new and strongly armed tribes such as the Tishana, are in open rebellion and refuse to pay tribute to them, and the

local governments are afraid to tackle them." (Hodson 1929:27).

Then in the early 1930s, it appears that the Tishana acquired new strength and according to Garretson (1986:206, 284, note 52) some of their territorial leaders became affiliated with the Abyssinian system. He writes that the Tishana were in league with the governor, Ergete, and with a Maji (Dizi) leader "in the trading of slaves across the Omo to Bonga and then to Jimma" with the Tirma and even the people on the Boma plateau as their main victims. But this involvement with the *nāftānnyotch* is doubtful, especially when a few sentences earlier he notes that the Tishana revolted anew against their being made *gābbars* by the Abyssinians (ibid.) At best this suggests it could only have been a temporary alliance, and shows to what measure the Tishana had indeed become the formidable competitors of the northerners in the politico-economic affairs of the Maji region. It may also be seen as evidence of the rather fragmented state of the Tishana population.

Throughout the following years, the Tishana maintained this independent stand against the Abyssinians and resisted forced subjection to political domination and serfdom. Armed conflicts and slave-trading continued up to the arrival of Italian troops to the Maji area in 1936 to 1937. A spokesman of one of the largest Me'en clans, the Bayti, stated in 1988 that the Italians were, initially at least, hailed as liberators by them because they abolished the slave trade and the *gābbar* system.²⁰ By then, the Tishana, dominated by the Me'en-speakers, were firmly entrenched in the Maji region as its most numerous and powerful population.

7. SOCIAL REPRODUCTION AND THE NEW IDENTITY

Thus far, our sketch of the main events in the development of the Tishana is from the outside. This relationship with the invading northerners and the impinging forces of the national and international trade flows, illustrates their connection with forces operative on a global level. What remains is to substantiate the emergence and successful settlement of the Tishana-Me'en in terms of their social organization or, more broadly, their conditions of social reproduction. How did their expansion, as a mainly transhumant pastoral people who originated in the lowlands, become an adaptive success in every respect to the different environment of the highlands?

In answering this question one must begin by noting their maintenance of a "cattle idiom" in their socio-cultural life, an idiom which held ground even though the economic role of cattle dwindled to minor proportions in a new economy geared to agriculture and trade. This fact in itself is indicative of the relative success of this group.

Although the historical details remain to be filled in, it is certain that the

Tishana emerged from the Me'en population on the eastern bank of the Omo River. The Me'en had been living on both sides of the valley for a long time. Present-day Tishana-Me'en social organization shows clear traces of common origins and deep-structure cultural similarity with the Bodi-Me'en. Moreover, the now evident differences with the Bodi reflect the more or less predictable impact of socio-economic and ecological changes of the last 100 years. As we have seen, the process of penetrating the higher ground in the West—which was better watered, heavily forested area with low population density—began in the face of the ecological problems of cattle disease, drought, and famine and posed a severe threat to the continuity of large groups of Me'en. As the reproductive autonomy (cf. Friedman & Ekholm 1980: 68) of these groups was endangered by global forces beyond their control, the Me'en-speaking pastoralists were forced into a wider process of articulation with Abyssinian quasi-feudal society and the entrepreneurial groups operating under its umbrella. In order to survive, these groups, after losing their cattle, had to rearrange their social system, paradoxically by entering into a (negative) relationship with neighboring populations and encroaching Abyssinians, and turning to their quest for marketable trade goods.²¹

The subsequent process of expansion into the highlands meant a substantial incorporation of non-Me'en groups. One of the points of this article is that the Me'en as we now know them did not simply move *en bloc* out of the Omo Valley, settling in the Maji highlands. Rapid population growth, as well as evidence of fugitives and absorption of smaller indigenous groups by Me'en speakers is sufficient to seriously question whether such a move took place. But on account of continuous references by early travellers describing them as a roaming, warlike, and independent group, pushing back the Gimira, Käfa, and Dizi groups, it is evident that they became the dominant factor in the area.

Evidence of groups being absorbed (apart from elements of the three above-mentioned ones) might be provided with reference to some myths of origin of the Me'en. In one of the most important of these, the ancestors of all Me'en, Nyamon Shua, had two sons. After several tests, the eldest, Banja, was designated 'king of the grain' while the youngest, Boshu, received the 'king cow' and became a pastoralist. Nyamon Shua, also had an affine (in Me'en: *koko*), Koli, and already a class of 'servant,' the Idinit, who are said to have gone with Boshu to the lowlands. (The names Banja and Boshu have become hereditary titles of some of the *komonuts* or ritual chiefs of the Tishana-Me'en.) The following points should be noted with reference to the myth:

—Koli is identified as an affine, not a consanguinal relative of the ancestor of all Me'en, which suggest the establishment of a bond with another group.

—The prototypical pastoralist and the grain cultivator are juxtaposed as ancestors of the Tishana-Me'en, obfuscating the temporal difference between the two modes of subsistence, and this contrasts with the preference to portray themselves on a conscious level as original pastoralists.

—The mention of the Idinit (self-chosen term: Kweygu), may show that this hunter-gatherer group was affiliated with them (and partially incorporated) at an early stage, similar to what happened among Mursi or Bodi.²² Furthermore, the fact that *another* oral tradition counts a famous elephant hunter as one of their ancestors is also an anomaly interfering with the pastoral tradition and again suggests the mixed ancestry of the group.

Tracing the reconstitution of the social reproductive system of the Tishana-Me'en in the highlands is best done, although with many reservations, by comparing them with the Bodi-Me'en. This group has shown less articulation with the wider Abyssinian society or with that of neighboring groups and has retained a socio-political organization more closely tied to the pastoral way of life. The Tishana-Me'en still say that the Bodi are "the real Me'en; they go after the cattle. We have only a few; we are different." This is an important ideological statement, attesting to the predominant value which they still attach to cattle and cattle symbolism, and which indeed continues to guide their central rituals. Here, it is important to note that a pastoral base of the Me'en has always been maintained in the Omo Valley in the small strip of lowland savannah adjacent to the bushbelt along the river.²³ Thus, they could explore the highlands without having to be radically cut off from their pastoral origins. Up to this day, many southern Tishana-Me'en who have accumulated cattle, take them out to be herded by relatives in the valley.

It is my contention that the very expansion out of the Omo Valley into the highlands—that is the reshaping of their social reproductive system in a new eco-economical niche—was fuelled by Me'en ideology itself, and that this ideology was activated by their confrontation with the expanding frontier of the Abyssinian state, to which they were forced to respond. Their cultural ideology entered into the adaption process of these Me'en groups in crisis. This ideology remained intimately bound up with a pastoral way of life even after the cattle were largely gone. Cattle remained the ideological and social pivot of their society, necessary for bridewealth, for achieving social status, for burial, some initiation and healing ceremonies, and for sacrificial rain rites. The premise of the requirement to provide cattle for bridewealth may well have been central. Providing bridewealth was the precondition to marriage, and thus to adult male status, including independence from the household and to continuity of the descent group. It defined the relations between domestic units as well as several kinds of cooperative links between individuals as households heads. But sufficient cattle was not available in their home area,

struck by the rinderpest, unless they would raid their own people or expand toward the southern, but more powerful, Mursi and Hamar neighbors. After they had been pushed back by the Kullo-Konta a few generations earlier (see above), the course then taken was westward. Me'en traditions of their raids on other groups, whereby they also reached the Boma plateau in present-day Sudan, confirm that their expansion into these areas began as an effort to rebuild their stock. This can, whatever the actual measure of success of such raids, be considered a constant theme in the period of Tishana-Me'en history under discussion.

One of the central problems was of course limited number of cattle, and the crisis in the 1890s suggested three possible alternatives:

1. A greater reliance on the agricultural part of their traditional diet: mainly sorghum and maize. The higher areas were particularly suited to rain-fed, thus more reliable, cultivation of these crops, compared with the Omo Valley area. This important development also led to an expanded role for women, who secured a crucial role in subsistence cultivation and gardening.
2. The sale of cattle for grain in regional markets (such as in places now called Mizau and Shāwa Gimira, and possibly in Bonga)—always a short-term option for pastoralists in times of food shortage and crisis (cf. Turton 1984). This market exposure contributed to a more 'commercial orientation' of Tishana groups which has characterized them ever since as they became increasingly dependent on it for their survival. After their involvement in the ivory and slave trade they began 'marketing' a broad range of additional products. Once incorporated into the nation-wide trade network they could not back out.
3. The adaptation of the bridewealth system, which through its integrative function constituted the basic fabric of Me'en society. This is most evident in the substantial lowering of the actual bridewealth transfer from approximately thirty-two head to a third or fourth of this amount (cf. Klausberger 1981: 260 on the Bodi). (Only much later was the norm itself lowered and the consequent distribution pattern modified). This was forced upon them by the lack of cattle and could not be compensated for by raids on neighboring groups (the cattle per capita ration was below 1:1, which is even below their subsistence requirements).²⁴ As few Me'en were initially inclined to accept this low amount, a pattern of intermarriage with non-Me'en groups emerged. Me'en men who took women from indigenous groups (especially Bencho Gimira) had to hand over less cattle to the family of such a bride. By this process they affinally incorporated increasing numbers of non-Me'en women. The reverse, Me'en women taken by Gimira men was at least in the first half of this century much rarer, and through such women they increased their technological expertise from these better developed agricultural subsistence economies.

In this way they expanded their numbers, remained dominant and maintained pastoralist ideology and its idiom of cattle.²⁵

The move into the highlands was effected within the framework of patrilineal descent groups. Among the Bodi-Me'en these units are called *gayna*, best translated as 'clan,' or sometimes also *habučoč* (consanguinal relatives). These are exogamous units laying claim to a certain territory. The Tishana-Me'en now use the word *habučoč* for a small number of 'ancient clans'. Today, most Tishana do not recall the meaning of this word. Their term for the localized patri-clans or lineages became *du'ut*, meaning 'seed.' When I asked a Bodi informant about this term he said: "What kind of a term is this for people? It is for plants, for the fields." He has a point there. Tishana use of the word precisely reflects the complete change in orientation of the Tishana-Me'en patri-clans which fanned out into the new areas, where, as the Me'en emphasize, there was never any land shortage; they had become corporate land-holders, no longer cattle-holding units. Land and its potential productivity define the continuity of the descent-group itself, in addition to the labor force of a preferably large number of wives and children within the polygamous household. The *du'uts* have remained exogamous and figure as the custodians of a more or less defined territory within which male members have rights to land.²⁶ The *du'uts* have fissioned from the originally much smaller number of clans (*habučoč*), but any segmentary structure (which defined marriage groups and political-ritual authority) is no longer deemed relevant. (Only the *komorut*-clans are important in this respect. One of them is still in the lowlands near the Omo-Shorum.) The number of *du'uts* of the Me'en is at least eighty while according to Klausberger the Bodi-clans number eighteen (1981: 243). It should be kept in mind that the term *du'ut* has been extended to the lineage segments split off from the traditional clans and not counting more than three generations. Senior male household heads split away from the clan area to form nuclei to these new lineages, relatively autonomous from the old *habučoč* framework. Such men often became a kind of 'big man,' a phenomenon not known in the pastoral days, and providing evidence for the diminishing role of the genealogical criterion in the process of territorial expansion. Another significant change is the disappearance of age- and generation-set organizations still present among the Bodi (Klausberger 1981: 245-46; Fukui 1979: 167-69), which suggests that this was not a strong cross-cutting 'tribal' mechanism uniting the various heterogeneous and territorially dispersed groups.

These changes in social organization show the socio-cultural transformation of the Tishana, who have had to gear themselves to the external forces influencing the southwest Ethiopian fringe, and pushed them to create a new basis of social reproduction.²⁷ In this process, the paradoxical aspect is that

their ideology of expansion and of cattle as the medium of social life had adaptive value: it supplied cultural models for behavior through which even in the highland setting they could achieve regional dominance and retain partial political-economic autonomy from the encroaching Abyssinian groups who were casting their quasi-feudal mode of production over the Ethiopian southwest.

Tishana-Me'en productive arrangements and interactions were realigned within the general framework of highland societies based on sedentary agriculture and trade. Not only new people, but new cultural materials from neighboring groups were incorporated—as is evident from an analysis of, for example, their religious life, folk healing methods, agricultural rites, and chiefly burial customs. This cannot be demonstrated in detail here²⁸ but one example is the fact that the Me'en have become much more dependent upon diviners and healers who do not originate from their own group, but mainly from the Käfä and Gimira, from whose territories the 'cult leaders' originate. Such magical mediators²⁹ emerged alongside the traditional ritual chieftainship of the *komorut*, who traditionally observed the rain rites and sacrifices in connection with the sky-god, the bridewealth exchanges, mediated between the different clans, and thus guarded the internal order of the community. While they were in name recognized as the real chiefs, their influence was superseded by that of the newly incorporated healers. But 'culture' strives toward consistency, toward an integrative pattern of meaning and this continued to be provided by the pastoral ideology of cattle as part of the human social world. The pastoral ideology set the terms for the male-dominated exchange of 'women for cattle,' of the initial equal standing of household heads within the clan structure, and of the idea of the superiority of Me'en above the 'pure farmers'—which they were nevertheless destined to become.

After the Italian occupation ended in 1941, Haile Sellasie was reinstated as emperor. In principle he intended to abolish the pre-war *gäbbar* system, but often the new order hardly differed from this pre-war system. However, state sovereignty and authority were more securely established through a new local political structure of government appointed chiefs, police, tax officials, and so forth. The central state intended to prevent violent or creeping expansion of one group at the cost of another, unless it concerned the Amhara groups affiliated with the feudal order. The ethno-economical niche of the 'Tishana' was, so to speak, circumscribed. They also continued to be seen as part of the despised black populations called 'Shänqila,' and had no substantial cultural or linguistic rights. Their self-chosen name 'Me'en' was denied. Intertribal violence was suppressed. In this period any visible Tishana 'tribal unity' eroded. A process of integration into the national economy proceeded at a faster pace: the Me'en themselves began to adopt the cultivation of cash crops for sale in the regional markets (coffee, tobacco, teff, sugar cane).

However, there was no labor-migration of Me'en to other areas of Ethiopia, except in recent years to the large coffee-plantations near Bebeqa, a village at the northern fringe of the Me'en area. Here many young Me'en men went to work before their marriage in order to earn money for bridewealth payments. This quasi-feudal structure remained in force until the 1974 Ethiopian Revolution, after which the Me'en were 'recognized' as a nationality under their own name. However, the political and socio-cultural changes introduced in the wake of the revolution fall outside the scope of this paper.

8. CONCLUSION

The 'expansion strategy' of Me'en groups who became designated as Tishana was a response to their articulation with the expanding frontier of the Abyssinian empire. As a result of this process, the traditional economic and cultural patterns of Me'en society were reshaped. The new pattern of social reproduction tied them increasingly to wider political and economic processes in the region.

Their remarkable population growth despite their heavy losses in slave raids is evidence of the fact that they succeeded in adapting themselves to changing circumstances and in absorbing various non-Me'en speaking groups into their society. This particular history and social development of the Tishana-Me'en points once again to the fact that a language group is not isomorphic with a cultural or ethnic unit: in a socio-historical sense, the Me'en-speakers are to be distinguished from the so-called Me'en ethnic group, because, due to processes of migration and incorporation, they encompassed a larger entity than the ethnically 'pure' Me'en.

As hinted at by Wolf (1982) ethnic groups, cultures or societies are historical formations contained within wider processes of population movement, and conditioned, though not determined, by ecological and politico-economic processes affecting larger human aggregates. These processes received their 'meaning' from such culturally mediated groupings. In the case of the Tishana-Me'en, we see that the traditional cultural ideology stemming from the pastoral days is maintained in the process of adaptation to a new environment. The cultural material is here, in a sense, conditioning new social alignments in the regional 'ethnosystem' (Fukui's useful term: 1984: 17). This was possible because of the socio-cultural definition and workings of their kin-ordered mode of production, which proved to have political-economic advantage in times of crisis. It is on this point, concerning the social role and conception of 'ideology,' that Wolf's ideas might be further augmented and translated into a more definite and detailed research strategy.

The result of the Tishana-Me'en having become a highland people is, amongst others, a series of ideological contradictions. They feel that they

have become 'untrue' to their own cultural ideology. They continue to compare themselves with the Bodi and say that they know they are despised by them. Thus, while the Tishana-Me'en still keep the memories of the old days, when they were the well-armed and feared raiders of the Maji area, they now—perceptively—comment upon this past as if it concerned "another people."

NOTES

¹I express my gratitude to the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, to the Me'en people and to the government and police officials in Maji awraja (= province) for their cooperation, acknowledge my indebtedness to William Muldrow (Kansas City, U.S.A.) for generously providing me with additional information on the Me'en, and express my thanks to Haus Vermeulen, University of Amsterdam, for critical comments on an earlier version of this article. Fieldwork was conducted among the Me'en in 1986 and again in 1988, the latter made possible by a grant from the Wenner Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, for which I express my gratitude.

²Me'en (pl.) = human; Me'enit (sing.) = human, a man. They are often called 'Me'enito' by other Ethiopians, with the Amharic plural ending (now also used by many Me'en themselves), but I will use the correct form, Me'en.

³The /k/ consonant between vocals has developed into a glottal stop /'/. 'Meken' is no longer heard (cf. Muldrow 1976: 604; Fukui 1979: 149).

⁴It might be on the border between Sudan and Ethiopia, northwest of the Akobo river. Bulatovich, entering the 'Shuro' area from the north, mentions the crossing of the lower valley "del fiume Ciomu" (1900: 129). It is impossible to locate this river on the maps.

⁵Surma informants in Maji and Me'en near Kella, Käfa Region, February 1988. With 'Surma,' I refer here to the pastoralists living southwest from Maji in Tirma-Tid *woreda* (= sub-province). They are often called Tirma. Their leaders maintain that they migrated westward out of the Omo Valley.

⁶Other Surma-speaking groups in South Sudan (Murle, Didinga, narim, and Tenet) also claim Southern Ethiopia as their place of origin (cf. Dimmendaal 1982: 105). Most probably the proto-Surma languages were formed in the southeastern Sudan (cf. Ehret 1982). Most of its speakers later migrated toward South Ethiopia, through the low-lying areas along the Lake Turkana and the Omo and split into the present-day (Ethiopian) constituents: Mursi, Bodi-me'en, Chai, Tirma-Surma.

⁷No Me'en informant had ever heard of this 'Golda king' (Bambo Dunkurru). They say he cannot have been a Me'en, as far as they know. *Golda* was the name of a small river at the southern fringe of the territory of the 'Girma' people. Haberland (1983: 742) mentions the puzzling episode of the early nineteenth century war between the Konta king Gobe and a 'Golda-king' from the lowlands near the Omo River. It is, of course, doubtful whether these 'Golda' were Me'en speakers. After their defeat by Gobe they were probably driven westward and, moving into the highlands north of the present town of Maji, were absorbed by the Me'en.

⁸There were other terms in use for the Shuro groups: the Gimira also called them *Danm* (Conti Rossini 1913: 402). See also Muldrow (1976) for additional names.

⁹It is not entirely clear at what point the Tishana-Me'en came to adopt corn as one of their main crops. They state that they received it from the north, through the Gimira. It is now their most valued staple and the only one occasioning an extended first fruits ceremony. It is possible that the Bodi-Me'en adopted it via their Tishana-Me'en brethren.

¹⁰It is historically misleading to call Abyssinia or rather the highland civilization carried by the Amhara and Tigray a 'feudal society' (see Donham 1986: 15). Still, the country showed many feudal-like traits, and for historical-ideological reasons the epithet 'feudal' is often used. My solution is simply to speak of 'quasi-feudal.'

¹¹Much of this information is from Garretson's article (1986), although I have also consulted archival material that he used (Foreign Office documents) in the Public Record Office, Kew, England.

¹²Annual Report 1912 Ethiopia, by Thesiger, FO 371/1571/2f.

¹³Voiced for instance in the report of Captain Whalley (consul at Maji in 1932) of 24 December 1932, FO 371/16996/198-201; and letter of Barton (Addis Ababa) to Simon, June 9, 1933, FO 371/16996/193. (cf. Garretson, 1986: 206.)

¹⁴According to a former slave-dealer (a näftännä descendant from Manz) in Bachuma, December 1986.

¹⁵No Me'en I talked to remembered this name and the name does not correspond to any of the clan names I have collected.

¹⁶Darley, apparently the first European on good terms with the local population, never mentions the ethnonyms 'Tishana' or 'Mekan'; he only spoke of 'Shangallas' (Shanqila).

¹⁷Addis Ababa Monthly Intelligence Report, month ending April 30th, 1922, FO 371/7152/135.

¹⁸Cf. Hodson to Russell, 20 October 1923, FO 371/9993/131; Hodson to Russell, 27 October 1923, FO 371/9993/132.

¹⁹In Hodson's intelligence notes from Maji, 31 March 1925 (FO 371/9993/138), the Galla Jiba are mentioned as a "strong section of the Tishana."

²⁰Interview with Gavli Adabalcha, February 22, 1988.

²¹This move may have thus been triggered in a way comparable to that of the present-day Mursi, another Surma group described by Turton (1984, 1986). Turton has quite rightly stressed a general long-term movement of pastoral peoples towards the Ethiopian highlands in search of areas with more secure rainfall, and with greater proximity to market-centers. An additional factor may have been ecological deterioration: a drying out of the Omo Basin after 1896 may have been one more reason for them to look for an area with a better water supply (cf. Turton 1988: 8).

²²See Fukui 1984 for a remarkable reconstruction of the genesis of the Bodi. The role of the Kwegu (or Idinit) minority as described in his paper is similar among the Tishana-Me'en.

²³In one of his reports, Hodson also mentioned the "Omo River retreats" of the Tishana, impregnable for the Abyssinian soldiers, who dared not venture into the lowlands; Hodson, Intelligence Notes, October 10th, 1925, FO 371/10873/127. See also Hodson 1929: 121.

²⁴It also became soon accepted that instead of or in addition to cattle, a gun and bullets could be given as substitute for cattle. This of course marked a new dependence on market exchange for the means which secured their survival and power position in the new socio-political conditions in the Maji area after the turn of the century.

²⁵In this respect the history of the Me'en is different from that of the Nuer; cf. Kelly 1985, Chapter 6. Fukui has written on the in some respects, comparable expansion of the Bodi (Mela subgroup) at the expense of their Dime hill-farmer neighbor: "Characteristic of the Mela strategy is not just to expand territorially, but to absorb former opponents into their society in relations of submissive symbiosis, by means of affinal kinship links." (Fukui 1984: 15). This might equally be applied to the 'Tishana expansion' several decades earlier.

²⁶In recent years this structure has more or less been integrated in the revolutionary framework of the peasant associations.

²⁷The various socio-cultural and economic contradictions within Tishana-Me'en society cannot be analyzed here.

²⁸See for a first sketch, Abbink 1988.

²⁹Known as *k'lich'a* (a loan-word from Oromo through Amharic).

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GADA, BIG MAN, K'ALLU: POLITICAL SUCCESSION AMONG THE EASTERN MECH'A OROMO

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In western Shoa province the impact of the expansion of the Ethiopian Empire and "pax Amharica" led to an interesting, if quite unanticipated, series of consequences for local level politics. Whereas the conditions of trade, warfare, and local independence which prevailed during the previous half century were apparently conducive to the development of local war lords and wealthy landlords, the imposed peace and external governmental domination of the twentieth century seems to have created the circumstances which permitted a totally new political leadership to flourish. This article will focus on the Shoan Oromo spirit mediums, *k'allu*, as political figures, as they operated in the 1960s, the decade of their greatest prominence.

THE AREA AND ITS HISTORY

The region that concerns us here was known in the 1960s as Jibat and Mech'a *awrajja*, the westernmost district in Shoa province. This highland zone, beginning about 40 miles west of Addis Abeba and stretching for another 130 miles to the borders of Wellega, consists of a plateau, 6,000 to 8,000 feet high, marked by many hills and low mountains, and cut by streams and rivers. Watered quite well, it is suited to grain agriculture, and its people are sedentary plow agriculturalists, growing *t'ef*, wheat, barley, maize, and sorghum, and keeping cattle, sheep, and goats.

Since the seventeenth or eighteenth century this area has been occupied by Oromo people, who entered this and other districts of central, western, and southwestern Ethiopia as invaders at that time. Whoever the previous inhabitants may have been, they had apparently been fully absorbed into the Oromo population by the late nineteenth century, and thus throughout the countryside the only language spoken today, other than Amharic, is *afan Oromo*, the language of the Oromo.

The Oromo of Jibat and Mech'a, as do those of Wellega and the Gibe regions to the west and southwest, belong to that branch of the Oromo called the Mech'a. When they entered these districts they may or may not still have been largely pastoral, as their ancestors were when they lived in southern Ethiopia, but they were apparently still organized socially and politically through some variant of the *gada* system and its assemblies. The evidence