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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE EXQUISITE POLITICAL FRAGRANCE OF ENSET

Silent protest in Southern Ethiopia through culinary themes and variations

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ABSTRACT: The populations of South-central Ethiopia have for centuries based their livelihoods on the products of enset. In terms of food and economic security, enset has been described by farmers as a 'bank'. Its persistence in extreme situations, or, as put in literature, *resilience*, plays a vital role in environmental conservation. Yet outside the area of origin and current cultivation it is arbitrarily stigmatized, especially by people located in the Northern parts of the country, as a 'poor' cultivation and only suitable for marginal groups. At the backdrop of this rhetoric of distinction the following questions will be addressed: what does the fostering of competing cuisines reveal about the (carefully state-orchestrated) process of nation-building in Ethiopia? Who are the actors implicated in the promotion of 'good' and the incrimination of 'bad' cuisines? The article provides an emic approach to hunger, food security, and poverty, in contrast to the planning by bureaucrats and scientists who are likely to miss the perspective of the voiceless agents, whose everyday resistance is often exercised through silent protest, inside the kitchen and the vegetable garden, and not in the public arena.

KEYWORDS: enset agriculture, food security, infrapolitics, resilience, sustainability

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1. Introduction: Greater Ethiopia and minor traditions

The first time I set foot on an enset plantation was in November 2004. Since then I have been conducting ethnographic research in Lemu District, Hadiya zone, part of the Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples' Region (SNNPR), paying annual visits of several weeks or months each year up until the autumn of 2013.

Enset cultivation is not simply a mode of production but a way of life. Moreover, enset agriculture is a mode of production designed for subsistence and not for the market. I had the privilege of being nurtured by my host families from the very beginning with the main products of the enset plant: *wasa*, the fermented sour bread¹; *buo'ò* as porridge²; and *amicho*³, which tastes similar to potatoes. Enset [*Ensete ventricosum* (Welw.) Cheesman] is cultivated mostly by smallholders for food, fiber, animal fodder, building materials and medicines⁴, and has been a major staple food for over 20 million people in Southwestern Ethiopia. Interviews with farmers suggest that the populations who have based their livelihood on enset have never starved, even during the tragic droughts of the 1970s and 1980s (Brandt et al. 1997, 1).

The enset, symbolically linked to peasant identity, is also tightly tied to the gender variable. Personal observation in Hadiya, as well as ethnographic accounts of neighbouring areas (Sandford and Kassa 1996; Spring 1997; MacEntee et al. 2013), show that women are involved at every stage of the plant's preparation and harvesting. This symbiotic relationship becomes palpable to those who attend the weekly market in Wachamo, the chief town of the Hadiya area. If the observer looks through a cartographic eye, (s)he might have the impression that a specific discourse on modernity/tradition is taking place between genders. The area of the enset - a domestic plant par excellence, usually intended for family consumption, which does not lend itself to doing business - is entirely managed by women. They have the right to

¹ A non-dehydrated, fermented product from mixtures of decorticated pseudostems and pulverised corms. When steam-baked the flat bread is also called *wasa*.

² A small amount of water-insoluble starchy product that may be separated from *wasa* during processing by squeezing and decanting the liquid.

³ The fleshy inner portion of the enset corm which may be cooked and eaten separately.

⁴ Every single part of enset is used: to cover roofs and walls; to make containers, ropes, mats, bags, and sieves; its strong fibers are an item of barter; dried stems fuel the fireplace; fresh leaves are used as serving dishes, as protective covering inside the pits where enset is fermented, or to pave the ground where it is processed; to wrap *wasa*, honey, tobacco, butter, bread, crops, and also, in the past, newborn babies; to pack and carry goods to local markets; as fodder for animals; to treat fractures and problems related to childbirth, or for abortion.

keep for themselves the income from the sale of products and materials extracted from it; they own the tools used to transform it into food, which men are explicitly prohibited to handle. In wealthy families women are entrepreneurs and organize the workforce; the poor women, on the other hand, sell their work in the plantations. The harvesting is usually carried out by small working groups, formed by women who maintain friendships or kinships mostly along a female line. The process is controlled by an elderly woman, who wanders through the plantation ensuring that each step is done correctly. These documented activities provide evidence as to what extent women are the actors who have the richest practical and theoretical knowledge about the plant.

The activities related to enset's cultivation always involve cooperation. Rahmato (1995) defines the women's working groups in the same terms as those employed for enset's positive qualities: 'resilient', that is tenacious, covertly resistant to shocks and risks, able to provide women with a reliable and mutual support. As misleading and ideologically-loaded the term 'resilience' may be, I will nevertheless make use of the concept in this article, specifically in its political-ecological meaning of community-based management of resources in relation to market forces (Barnard and Spencer 2010, 215-16). From this perspective the concept is very effective in defining positive development under adversity or social risk factors, and in acknowledging the role of people's interactions with their environments⁵. The most recent literature on sustainable agriculture has widely described resilience as a fundamental characteristic of any strategy to redress poverty and food insecurity in developing countries, and has recognized the term as intimately connected to subsistence crops and traditional farming practices as opposed to biotechnology dominated by multinationals. In this regard enset can easily be numbered among the 'orphan crops', which might be defined as a diverse set of minor crops (such as millet, yam, cassava, cowpea, sorghum, etc.) that are simple and cost effective for poorer countries. These crops are not traded around the world and also receive little or no attention from research networks, but play nonetheless an important role in regional food security (Adenle et al. 2012, 260).

The larger bulk of this paper is dedicated to oral accounts, by Hadiya farmers, of the agricultural practices associated with enset and its implicit, subversive political value. Farmers were the key actors of my fieldwork. With them I spent most time, and it was observations on their lives that I recorded in greatest depth. As locals explicitly told me,

⁵ Recent anthropological work has problematized the universality of neoliberalism, looking at how small-scale economy is freshly formed within and resists the market, even as the market transforms it. For an incisive use of the concept of 'resilience' in relation to agricultural indigenous knowledge and sustainability see Haenn and Wilk 2006.

learning-through-doing has gained me a high level of acceptance and respect. An effort has moreover been made to examine the manner in which the past is mobilized and future possibilities are imagined and pursued by different actors in order to reaffirm their identity in a complex mix of rural and national idioms, and against a backdrop of longstanding political conflict and animosity between ethnic groups. Indeed, the bias of the paper cannot help but deliberately rest upon the obliterated and rarely recorded voices of peripheral farmers rather than middle and upper class informants, my fascination with the former beginning when I first came into contact with the Southwestern landscape, dominated by the women's *savoir-faire* on enset. This was reinforced through months of cohabitation when, by enduring physical constraints and sharing with them everyday activities, I had to slowly learn the ingredients and recipes of traditional dishes, cooking techniques, spices, patterns of production, as well as the subtle political statements underlying these concrete objects and apparently banal situations.

This overt focus on peripheral actors, and the honesty in my data, might indeed be of great benefit in fostering a more effective dialogue between sources and perspectives, considering that the more numerous elite-centered accounts only rarely state their 'high-profile' angle. As pointed out by Vaughan and Tronvoll: "There is a tendency for studies of Ethiopian political development to focus exclusively on 'the modern': the state and its projects, the formal arena of political competition, the developmental potential of civil society at the national level. It is usually easier for researchers to canvass the views of educated officials, civil servants, opposition leaders, businessmen and activists, than of the many women, hunters, pastoralists, or farmers who are fluent only in local languages, and resident far from towns and metal roads. Whilst social anthropologists and others have studied this more 'traditional sector', their findings have been under-integrated into political analysis at the level of the Ethiopian state" (2003, 24).

The material for this article is mostly taken from my first-hand participant observations made during fieldwork in the village community, as well as semi-structured interviews, administration of a dietary diary, and mapping of fruits, plants and animals which are considered traditionally useful in the local diet. Farmers, both male and female, including members of the older as well as of the succeeding generations, represent the core of my sample. Informal investigation was conducted on the discourses that emerged through casual conversations and group discussions in urban spaces such as cafes, street corners, or restaurants, where students and government workers from a variety of backgrounds in terms of class, ethnicity, and religions, usually congregated or chose to invite me for a meeting.

The secondary source used in this chapter is Ethiopian Studies literature dealing with the classical debate on core and periphery relations, and the correlated sedimentation of historical structures of power and inequality that have been operating in Ethiopia for centuries. The vexed issue of national integration rests in between the policy of cultural assimilation and political centralization that Ethiopian elites have assiduously followed on the one hand, and the enduring centrifugal tendencies that have mushroomed in the peripheries and undermined the unifying project of nation-building on the other. Markakis recounts this ambivalent relationship between centre and periphery by pointing out that the crux of the problem is the reluctance of what he calls an 'Abyssinian elite' to share political power with the peripheral elites to any meaningful extent (2011, 7-12). Jalata and Schaffer argue that the modern Ethiopian state, through its leadership, has attempted to construct itself using the particularistic ideological foundations of Semitic ancestry, Orthodox Christianity, and Abyssinian (Amhara-Tigray) political culture; and go further in their analysis by claiming that successive state leaders have maintained order through authoritarian structures and even state terrorism when necessary (2010, 161). 'Abyssinian' political culture has traditionally emphasised a strict hierarchical understanding of society; and therefore, since the control of the Ethiopian state has historically been associated with the Abyssinian, or Amhara/Tigrayan, socio-political tradition, it may be argued that it provides the context for the formation of dominant trends in the 'political culture' of contemporary Ethiopia (Vaughan and Tronvoll 2003, 32).

The divisiveness of the core-periphery has affected the political landscape of Ethiopia with variable intensity since the ascension to the throne of Emperor Menelik II in 1889. Instead of mapping the legacy of this division in formal-historical terms, here I investigate the mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion created by this unequal distribution of power and resources through the lens of agricultural practices and food preferences, which, in very concrete terms, provide an intriguing insight into how the Hadiya vindicate their indigeneness and keep their ancestors' memory alive within and beyond state power.

Before moving to the countryside and collecting fresh voices from inside the farmers' village community, I spent time exploring the literature in the library of Addis Ababa University, where I frequently happened to have discussions with students from Hadiya. As a result of the dominant 'Abyssinian' political culture, which has permeated the education system by emphasising a strict hierarchical understanding of society⁶, they

⁶ Both formal and everyday interaction is guided by an elaborate set of norms and rules, which establish order on the basis of a rigid system of deference and sanction. "Ideas about, and norms of

have deeply absorbed the clichés which the core unrelentingly produces with regard to the periphery. According to the traditional dominant narrative of highland cultures, Ethiopia represents a privileged object of study precisely because it is not African. In fact the country has been crossed by flowing streams of people, resources and ideas from the Arabian Peninsula; which is why – Amhara and Tigrayan interlocutors argue – the physical traits are not negroid but oriental; the body shape is thin and twiggy, not massive and muscular; and the appearance considered aesthetically pleasing, especially in women. A certain influential discourse, namely that from within the core trying to impose hegemony onto the periphery, proclaims that only Ethiopia among all African countries boasts centuries of history, ceremonies and traditions, for example codified ways to serve coffee and antique religious festivals in the north. Not to mention the prestige of a literary system of transmission and the heroic resistance against the Italian colonial occupation. Excluding Ethiopia, and according to this narrative, Africa is a clouded hotch potch of people without a past or memories, sunk in orality and forced to live in an eternal present (Tibebu 1996, 427-28).

Many Amhara students believe that Addis Ababa is emblematic of the entire country. In the words of most city dwellers - and despite the fact they have never experienced the reality they talk about – rural areas are hastily summarised as being an unfortunate combination of dust, unpaved roads, mud, lack of books and transportation. While in the presence of a heterogeneous public, and especially in front of urban residents, those who come from the countryside rarely dare to delve into the issue of their origins, in an attempt to cover up the lower status of their own social identity. The relationship between centres and peripheries is one of great ambiguity, being omnivorously fed by peripheral actors with morsels of attraction for, as well as rejection

political culture and behaviour (i.e. that system of knowledge which [...] itself 'constitutes' the distribution of power) are transmitted to new generations first and foremost through the general pattern of socialisation. [...] A system of social classification along these lines continues to be widely reproduced, imbuing new generations with cultural notions that people are *not* equal and the world is *not* egalitarian. Individuals are ranked according to a set of criteria which invests some people with greater 'value' than others – both in social and political terms – and determines, moreover, that one should always be subservient to any individual regarded as superior to oneself" (Vaughan and Tronvoll 2003, 33). The uses and abuses of politicised ethnicity have arguably constituted a primary focus of ammunition during recent clashes on university campuses all over the country, when student protesters ended up being silenced, arbitrarily detained or shot dead (<http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/poverty-matters/2014/may/22/ethiopia-crackdown-student-protest-education>). While seeking to neutralise the discrimination historically associated with ethnicity, the ethnic federal constitution has also rendered ethnic identity more relevant in any social, political or economic interaction.

of, the hegemonic cultures. Youths who have come from the Southern areas to seize the opportunity of higher education at the core are keen to adopt socially valuable patterns of behaviour, distinct from what they have learned at home and which is now perceived with an intense sense of shame. Youths who daydream about the 'centre' from a remote town in rural areas would more likely indulge in grumbling speeches; along the lines of "how technology, infrastructure, and American-style democracy would help to overcome unemployment", as it was expressed by two teachers in their thirties, who lived in Wachamo but were wishing to take a leap into the urban space, and then ended up with winning the longed-for DV lottery⁷. Others eventually convert exclusion from modernity into political strategy to relaunch their peculiar cultural identity; while most Hadiya farmers try to hold on to their 'tradition' and sense of community through specific patterns of cultivation and cuisine.

During my first stay in the capital city, a violinist from a well-off family took me around to see the symbols of this hyper-typical Ethiopia: the zoo, where the Emperor's lions are exhibited - two or three exhausted animals, unable to roar, but huge enough to catch the attention of children; and the Sheraton Hotel, immersed in luxury and popular among wealthy foreigners. Students at the University as well as the petty urban bourgeoisie were suspicious of my intentions to move to rural areas for carrying out fieldwork, and made a mockery of my set purpose of dealing with groups devoted to enset cultivation. Why on earth would I select an administrative centre about 230 km from the capital as a place of study? It is not uncommon to come across informants who deliberately describe Ethiopia, to the disoriented researcher, as a poor and backward country and of no interest from an ethnographic point of view. The capital city and the rest of the country seem to have been divorced a long time ago, each living an independent life from the other; as if rural areas were a vegetative burden that modernity will, sooner rather than later, sweep away. I heard the violinist and his family, most of whom were masters in traditional Ethiopian music, along with several government officials in the Hadiya countryside, express a dream that Addis Ababa

⁷ Frantic statements of this nature equally characterise the discourses surrounding progress, boredom, and migration of unemployed young men in Jimma, Southwestern Ethiopia: "In response to my attempts to provide a more complete picture of life in the United States, one of the young men shouted, 'Listen Danny, the life of a dog in America is better than a human in Ethiopia!' [...]. These narratives are similar to Charles Piot's (2005) notion of 'living in exile' within one's own country – isolated from the modern life that one desires" (Mains 2007, 669). In this context the rise of the U.S. Diversity Visa (DV) Lottery should be understood as a means of experiencing change or progress. Every year, 50.000 winners from countries around the world are selected to receive a U.S. visa: "In the absence of a temporal process of becoming, the DV Lottery is a spacial strategy that instantly allows one to be modern" (*ivi*, 668).

should become, in every corner, like the above-mentioned five-star hotel, or be transformed into an extension of Churchill Road (the main tourist retail centre)⁸. Those same interlocutors were equally prone to regret that Ethiopians had foolishly struck back against the Italian invasion, because, as it was put by one of them, “if Italians had remained, now Ethiopia would be a rich and modern country”.

This stereotypical mode of representation, ingrained in common sense⁹ and in certain branches of academia, will be put into dialogue with the historical and empirical data I collected between 2004 and 2009. The primary purpose of this article is to present a description of a highly peculiar agro-ecological niche taking the enset and the Hadiya, the enset cultivators of Southwestern Ethiopia, as an example of subaltern politics and indigenous resilience. The farming system based on enset cultivation is undoubtedly able to sustain a vast area of high population density (Brandt et al. 1997, 41-47). In addition, enset has diverse uses as a typical multipurpose crop. Yet, only few attempts have been made to elucidate its feature as a high-potential resource and as a culturally esteemed plant, so it has remained one of the most unknown crops in Africa.

The Hadiya people have a sophisticated way of manipulating the environment, and are therefore able to adjust and withstand external shocks from policies forced upon them by the Ethiopian state. Instead of employing general theories of neoliberal capitalism, I will on the contrary take into account local cultural and economic dynamics. Diverse economies need to be investigated on their own terms rather than through grand theories of capitalism. The ethnographic method of analysis, which

⁸ Addis Ababa is expanding at a dramatically rapid rate. This escalated growth has not been controlled by appropriate planning intervention. The capital city skyline is under relentless transformation. Tower cranes are a common sight, with low-cost apartments, malls and office blocks shooting up; to make way, old residences and slums are torn down. According to Ethiopia’s Central Statistical Office, by 2020 the country is expected to have an urban population of around 30 per cent of the total population (Ministry of Finance and Economic Development 2002, 125). The most recent plan for the city’s development was inaugurated in 2001. To date, Addis Ababa’s most notable achievements have been large infrastructure projects, such as a ring road and a new dam. For an overview of this combination of growth, neoliberal economic restyling, road construction, hydropower, foreign investments, and renewal projects see Bues and Theesfeld 2012, Mains 2012.

⁹ We should recall here the Gramscian definition of ‘common sense’ as being inherently fragmented, disorganized, diffuse and uncoordinated, and therefore functioning as a penetrating ideological prison which infiltrates like a virus. The multitude, for reasons of submission and intellectual subordination, would therefore be led to adopt a perspective which is not its own but has been borrowed from another group (1971, 327). Equally pertinent is Bourdieu’s analysis of the roots of symbolic domination as resting upon the bodily inculcation of social structure and the formation of a deep unconscious habitus (1977, 189).

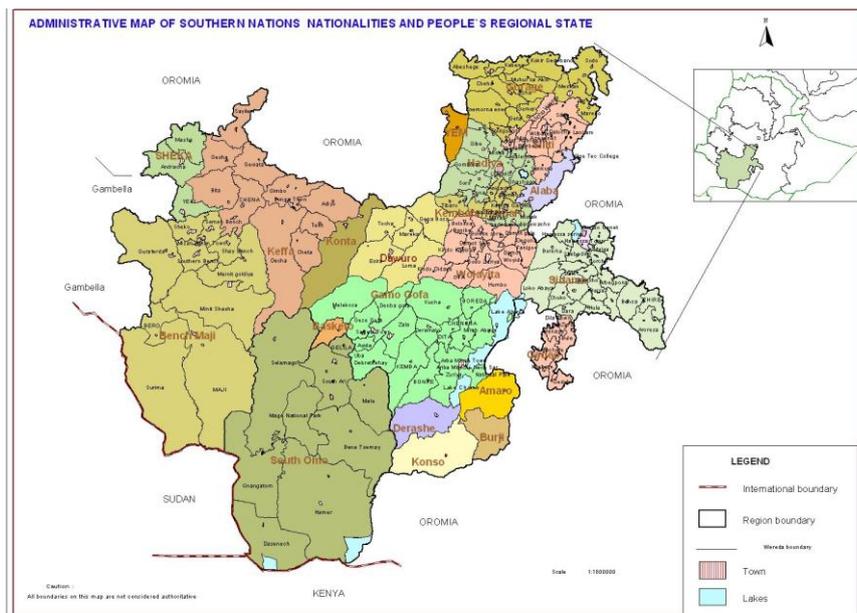
Delving into food stereotypes enables us to grasp how the symbolic meaning of food in any given context may be seen as sedimentation of historical structures of subordination, governance and domination that have been operating through generations. The politics of food is also and foremost a 'politics of discourse', particularly when this discourse is translated into small rituals of resistance, minor acts of opposition, or secret codes; the advantage of such 'culinary syntax' resting on its implicitness (Appadurai 1988). As stated by Lien: "many relations that are constituted by and through the medium of food are also power relations, and should be analysed as such. [...] a focus on policies, bureaucracies and politicians would simply be too narrow to grasp significant issues and changes. Politics, like food, is embedded in social practice, discourse, controversy and conventions that are not always labeled 'political'. Thus, our approach to the politics of food is based on the premise that 'action which contests existing power relations may take many forms', and that much of this is 'in constant danger of slipping from view, simply because of its everyday and inchoate quality' [...]" (2004, 9). Let us therefore observe the case of the Hadiya in the light of this perspective, according to which food has not only taste, aroma, and texture, but also historical meaning and political fragrance¹⁰.

According to Braukämper (2002, 152-169), the Hadiya were also known by the name of *gudélla*, which in the past has been used by groups of Semitic origin as an epithet to describe their degree of ferocity. The Hadiya went to war several times with the Christian empire: during the reigns of Amda S'eyon (1314-1344), Dawit (1382-1413), Yishak (1414-1429) and Zara Yacob (1434-1468). Several accounts of Arab historians confirm that the Hadiya started to pay taxes in the fourteenth century, and throughout the following century repeatedly fought for independence. Their loyalty to the Empire was merely lip service. Even with their closest neighbours, the Kambata, there were open conflicts (Grenstedt 2000, 39-50). The tensions grew when the Kambata kingdom, around 1810, and the Christian kingdom of Shoa, around 1870, began to expand. The

¹⁰ Swyngedouw (2014), writing in the tradition of James Scott and drawing on the French philosopher Alain Badiou, distinguishes between 'politics'/'policy-making' (*la politique*) and 'the political' (*le politique*) as categories to understand our contemporary institutionalized society and the insurgent movements which are proliferating within its constrictive boundaries. According to his analysis, 'the political' is increasingly returning through rebellious and insurrectional movements (where heterogeneous groups and individuals have found room for an egalitarian public encounter) rather than through the managerial procedures of an instituted, apparently democratic, order. 'The political' stands as an emergent phenomenon and performative practice by which each and everyone could claim the capacity of acting politically, irrespective of the place (s)he occupies within the social hierarchy. In this perspective, the act of participating in the political event operates at a distance from both state and theory.

Hadiya groups were defeated between 1889 and 1894. Emperor Menelik II, spurred on by a fierce ambition of empire-building, embarked on a campaign of expanding his rule from the Central highland regions to the South, West and East of the country and thereby established the current map of Ethiopia. Following his successful campaigns of expansion, if not conquest, to the periphery, Menelik sent governors from the centre to administer the periphery. The land was regarded as confiscated by the crown, various proportions being allotted to reward or maintain Amhara, and especially Shoa soldiers, officials and notables. As a result, the subjected people were literally reduced to become tenants, and victims of national oppression: “from the viewpoint of the subjugated groups, such as the Hadiyya, it was considered as an act of colonialist expansion, which in its degree of oppression apparently surpassed European imperialism in Northeast Africa” (Braukämper and Mishago 1999, 22).

Figure 2 – Administrative map of Southern Nations Nationalities and People’s Regional State.



Source: <http://www.zehabesha.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/MapOfSNNPR.jpg>

Already famous as warriors, the Hadiya were called to the fore by the Amhara expansion into the South. Ethiopian rulers made frequent incursions into the South with the aim of subjugating and Christianizing the populations and spreading Amharic culture. Around 1903, the region of Kambata/Hadiya became known as the 'Province of

Kambata', although the Kambata were in the minority. Because of its hierarchical structure, the Kambata social system was more vulnerable to being conquered than was the egalitarian Hadiya structure. Because of their semi-nomadic lifestyle the Hadiya were less obedient to the new regime imposed by the colonizers.

The Hadiya were perceived as perfidious and unfaithful and treated more harshly by the Amhara. The Kambata, on the other hand, who had been practicing an enset-based agriculture for a long time, benefitted from the trust of their new lords. The period up until the Italian invasion was characterized by a consolidation of Amhara rules, even if this takeover was greatly opposed by the Hadiya. Since then they have been labelled and recognized as hereditary enemies of the Christian empire (Haberland 1964, 236; Braukämper and Mishago 1999, 16). The Amhara settlers contributed over time to the spreading and establishing of the legend of their ferocity. The Gurage, until recently, referred to the subgroup Lemu with the term *wokuonteb* (savages); the Wollamo called them *märäqo* (arabs). Even today, the Ethiopians condemn the Hadiya's proverbial indomitability, describing them as having a reluctance to obedience, as being averse to school participation and to any type of education dictated from the outside. It is no coincidence that these images of hostility in some way call to mind their ancient ferocity.

At the end of the nineteenth century, after being conquered by Emperor Menelik II, the Hadiya, herdsmen and breeders, semi-nomadic warmongers, were forced to shift to a sedentary way of life in order to easily pay taxes and to be kept under state control. Later on, around 1950, a large number of people converted to Orthodox Christianity, which bore the stamp of the seizing conquerors. By then the Hadiya were mostly *Fandaano*, an autochthonous religion blended with Muslim elements. Since the 1970s, in an act of unspoken criticism, they have massively turned to Neo-Pentecostal churches¹¹.

Contemporary Hadiya society is characterised by a predominant commitment to

¹¹ Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements are on the rise in Ethiopia and account for much of the explosive Protestant growth in this predominantly Orthodox country (<https://www.glopent.net/Members/jhaustein/ethiopia/pentecostal-and-charismatic-movements-in-ethiopia>). Pentecostalism projects a new vision of the world, responding in particular to processes and promises of 'modernity' and 'modernisation'. As put by Corten and Marshall-Fratani: "Transnational communities in general pose new challenges to the nation-state, and Pentecostalism is no exception. Access to 'resources of extraversion' are particularly important in African societies, and have typically been monopolised by the nation-state. Via their transnational networks Pentecostals have such access and put it at the centre of their public identity, placing themselves in a new position of strength *vis-à-vis* the state, and enabling them to present themselves as offering an 'alternative' route to modernity" (2001, 15).

agricultural activities, especially the growing of *ensete ventricosum*, as well as the breeding of domestic animals. Enset cultivation/culture plays a key role in both economic and family life, and generates many distinctions at regional and national levels. The enset-growing peasants are accustomed to saying, with evident self-awareness, that “enset is our food, our clothes, our beds, our homes, the food for our animals, our dishes” (Brandt et al. 1997, 11).

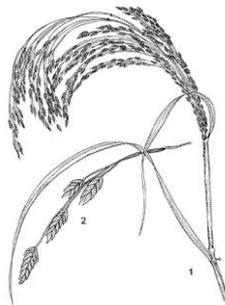
Over the centuries writers and scientists have, despite its importance, overlooked the significance of enset-based foods. Enset is probably the least studied domesticated plant in Africa. The available literature only reports case studies from Wolayta, Gamo Highland, Gurage and Sidama (Rahmato 1995, 41). Since the early nineties multidisciplinary teams of agronomists and social scientists have begun to conduct pilot studies on it. Only as recently as July 1997 did the Ethiopian Ministry of Agriculture recognize enset as a source of national wealth (Brandt et al. 1997, 2). In the view of agronomists who are committed to promoting the integration of enset into agricultural systems based on cereals, it is remarkable that some local groups prefer to endure famine, and refuse the food security of enset, rather than adopt a hated plant and change their food preference. We do not know why exactly enset has lost its dietary value for peoples in the North and yet continued to be a much cherished food source for peoples in Southwestern Ethiopia until today. What we may conjecture is that a multiplicity of factors played roles in this process. Some cereal crops such as t’eff and wheat have gradually taken on the status of ‘elite food items’, while other root and tuber crops appear to be given secondary and inferior status in the country. Once again, the neglect of the South-central peoples might be accounted for as a minor variation within the on-going debate about centres and peripheries.

The Hadiya have a pastoralist background and have only recently adopted agriculture from neighbouring communities. What is the logic of place-making (and how does a sense of belonging develop) for people whose move was forcibly blocked? I argue that it is by means of a spirit of improvisation and an artful political discourse that the Hadiya cleverly cruise through the nationalising logic of the Ethiopian state, and create parallel and unofficial paths into the interstices of the edifice. Masters of multimodality, mavericks yet remaining faithful to themselves, they make the best of available resources to navigate between tradition and bureaucracy. As is true for many other groups deemed resistant to progress and a threat to the state, the Hadiya adopt a flexible and pluralistic ethos, and do as a good chameleon would do: they seek power by assuming the appearance of their surroundings, wrapping themselves in successive layers of protection.

3. They have come to call this plant ‘tree of the poor’

Three plants have characterised the diverse Ethiopian landscape: t'eff [*Eragrostis tef* (Zucc.) Trotter] in the Northern highlands; enset in the South; and the dyad corn/sorghum in the Eastern and Western areas (Westphal 1975). Since plants are related to specific symbolic structures, it should be possible to map the perceived differences between the North and the South in pragmatic terms, as a set of both agricultural practices and social projects. Growing different plants means to cultivate different forms of humanity¹².

Figure 3 - [*Eragrostis tef* (Zucc.) Trotter]. Upper part of flowering culm (1); part of inflorescence with spikelets (2). Redrawn and adapted by Iskak Syamsudin



Source: http://database.prota.org/PROTAhtml/Eragrostis%20tef_En.htm

The ambiguity in the history of enset sheds light on the extraordinary variety that is said to form the ‘cultural mosaic’ of Ethiopia (Abbink 2000; Freeman 2000). It is no coincidence that Donham defines the country as “a structuralist’s delight” (2000, 21). In the specific case of enset, we are dealing with a plant - and human groups - which are highly visible in the neighbourhood and yet systematically forgotten at scientific and political levels.

¹² One of my informants would reassert at every meeting the link between political and food wars. He never explicitly affirmed that the northerners perceive themselves as superior, and opted instead for expressing his opinion quietly but harshly: “the peasants, in front of you, will always swear they prefer cereals. But they would never get rid of enset. The Amhara, on the contrary, prefer starving or begging on the street than cultivating it. They save face, but in the meantime their children are starving”.

Figure 4 - [*Ensete ventricosum* (Welw.) Cheesman]. Habit of flowering plant (1); inflorescence (2); fruit (3); seed (4).
Redrawn and adapted by M.M. Spitteler



Source: http://database.prota.org/PROTAhtml/Ensete%20ventricosum_En.htm

One of the first European travellers to note its economic and cultural relevance was James Bruce (1804, 149-153). Murdock (1959) pointed out that enset was cultivated as a staple food only in Southwestern Ethiopia, being almost unknown in the rest of Africa. In the past some historians and botanists have argued that its origin can be traced back to ancient Egypt, whilst others have maintained that it is almost certainly a native plant of Ethiopia (Smeds 1955, 4; Stanley 1966). According to authoritative sources, the original area of cultivation might have been the Western side of the Rift Valley, particularly the plateau of the Wollamo-Kambata-Gurage area (Brandt 1997, 846-47). According to Pankhurst (1996), an isolated reference to enset can be found in the royal chronicles of the late sixteenth century. In addition there is the evidence of two seventeenth-century Portuguese Jesuits, Manoel de Almeida and Jerome Lobo. The latter handed down the first outstanding description of the plant, in words which were destined to last for centuries and used by detractors and admirers alike: "When cooked it resembles the flesh of our turnips, so that they have come to call this plant 'tree of the poor', even though wealthy people avail themselves of it as a delicacy, or 'tree against hunger', since anyone who has one of these trees is not in fear of hunger" (Lockart 1984, cit. in *ivi*, 48).

It is certain that around 1840 enset had disappeared as a staple food in Northern Ethiopia (Beke 1884; Cecchi 1886), the reasons for which remain little studied. Brandt

(1997, 848) suggests the possibility of disease or famine but, more convincingly, traces the eclipse back to the turmoils which violently shook the North from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries. This perspective indicates a cultural war which was behind the rejection of the plant: the landowners, having to cope with debts and costs, put pressure on the farmers and forced them to emphasize prestigious plants like cereals, which enabled them to produce food surplus and income, rather than *enset*, which was considered to be a low-class plant. This would be an historical, not unique, case of intersection between the policy of a military conquest, land management, and a cultural campaign: the élites' need of publicly acceptable representative foods resulted in the manipulation of the production of specific foodstuffs (*ivi*, 849). When Menelik II made his way into the South by means of arms and combat, and finally conquered the neighbouring regions in order to create a modern map of Ethiopia, the Christian settlers, as well as the Oromo, refused *enset*, considering it a low prestige food which generated weakness. Where the Amhara have settled greater, if not exclusive, attention has been given to wheat.

Evidence that *enset* is native, the history of its origins, and its well-proven value in situations of crisis have been insufficient to gain the plant a good reputation among nationally prized foods. Its character as 'tree of the poor' or 'tree against hunger', as described by Father Jerome Lobo, is still perpetuated today¹³. It is no coincidence that this policy of foodstuffs (and of cultural dislikes) has been pursued until recently: the rule of Haile Sellassie (1930-1974) strongly insisted that the Southern peoples grow cereals at the expense of *enset*. After the revolution in 1974 the communist-inspired dictatorship (*Derg*) launched a few low-level research programs and established experimental stations on *enset*, but in the end this meritorious initiative came to nothing for lack of funding and staff (Brandt et al. 1997, 9). This policy of foodstuffs (and of cultural dislikes) raises the issue as to what extent the fostering of competing cuisines has to do with the nation-building project, and who are the actors implicated in the promotion of 'good' cuisines and the incrimination of 'bad' ones. A 'national cuisine' is usually built by appropriating and assembling a variety of regional recipes,

¹³ *Enset* has always been approached by wealthy people and urban dwellers with a paradoxical mixture of attraction and repulsion. *Wasa* and *buo'o*, its main products, have nowadays become popular in restaurants that serve *kitfo* (raw minced meat, mixed with butter and spices). The combination of *wasa* and *kitfo* is increasingly requested in the Ethiopian capital, especially by foreigners and as ethno-food for titillating the exotic tastes of 'modern' consumers. For other, more sensitive, attempts to spotlight the environmentally and economically sustainable qualities of *enset*, and to marketise it in ways which can actually benefit local farmers, see for example <http://goo.gl/1Hp2Sr>

thus reflecting complex culinary histories as well as domestic ideologies (Cusack 2000, 220). Considering the nature of the ‘cultural food war’ between *enset* in the South and *t’eff* in the North, the movement towards a national cuisine in Ethiopia might be conceived as a peculiar version of the wider politics of core-periphery relations; and it certainly points the finger at the controversial issue of what marginalised groups have perceived and still imagine in terms of internal colonisation.

4. The political policy: how the subaltern cannot (or should better avoid to) speak

Contemporary Ethiopia is very much a creation of Emperor Menilek (r. 1889-1913), who forged the Empire State with a combination of force and diplomacy. Since his military campaigns of the last quarter of the nineteenth century many Southerners have shared a strong antipathy towards the system of their conquerors. The oppositional attitude against national institutions has not yet been defused. At the time of the elections of 2000 a young man explained the progressive setting-up of a grassroots political resistance in the following way: “If they start fighting, the Hadiya people will bring their ancient weapons from their huts – swords and spears – and fight back. This is the result of the accumulation of many, many years of suppression. The Hadiya were suppressed during the Haile Sellassie and the Derg regimes, and the EPRDF [Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front] continues the same practice” (Tronvoll 2002, 169).

Scholars do not hesitate to define the political situation as it has been experienced in the Hadiya zone in terms of repression and widespread suffering: “The legacy of politics in Ethiopia is thus steeped in memories of violence and suffering. Even today, political participation is often stigmatised and shunned by ordinary people. An often-heard expression in Amharic is *poletikana korenti béruku*, ‘[keep] politics and electricity at a distance’. The meaning of the expression should be obvious: don’t go too close to politics, it will only stun and hurt you!” (ivi, 160). At the elections of 2000 the vote of the Hadiya electorate went to the opposition party (HNDO, Hadiya National Democratic Organisation). The event was enthusiastically greeted by foreign observers as a turning point in the democratization process in Ethiopia: for the first time since 1991, and only in this area, a non-aligned party challenged the Tigrayan hegemony (EPRDF), which was confirmed in other parts of the country by violence and unveiled intimidations. The post-election repression ended in a bloodbath of the Hadiya (Tronvoll 2001, 708-11).

In rural areas increased supervisory control has been entrusted to public officers and

is exercised through blackmail and pressure which aim at having tangible effects on farmers' lives: "Peasants were threatened they would lose access to fertiliser, credit or other services if they voted for an opposition party. Many of them were beaten, threatened with imprisonment, or arrested under dubious pretexts if they refused to support the ruling parties" (Pausewang 2002, 97-98). After the reaction against the ruling party, through acts of head-on public resistance, the Hadiya were punished with imprisonment and reprisals, having become the target of State control: "The events during the elections of 2000 and 2001 demonstrate that local administrative structures are again built up to control the peasants, not to give them a voice. Communications are again firmly established as command flows from top downwards, not from down upwards" (*ibid.*). The situation has suffered further regression since the controversial elections of May 2005.

In Ethiopia direct talk about politics is not common. In this regard one of the most dreaded subjects is that of peripheral peasants, who are said by government supporters "to live in the darkness" – that is literally without electricity, and symbolically buried deep in ignorance. As a matter of fact, on the contrary, they have learned how to fine-tune silence and irony when commenting upon political power dynamics. My informants explained that at the election of 2005 there were specific symbols connected to each party; the opposition party was represented by a coffee pot and a horse. The representatives of the majority party organized a pre-election celebration in the nearest town and invited the notable traditional leaders in the hope that they could affect the electoral polls in rural areas. Those who refused to join in would have been automatically counted as lining up against the government. So they all showed up, went along with the officials' incitement to vote for the EPRDF, and enjoyed the feast by profusely eating and drinking. They gave the impression of accepting, along with the banquet, the purpose for which the event had been organized. The authorities relished the idea that they would have won. But after the elders had filled their bellies, someone heard them talking to each other very much along the lines of subtle messages of subversion: "everything was good, but the meal was heavy and now I need a good *jabena* [traditional coffee pot]"; and again, "to digest all this stuff it would be time to ride a good horse".

In the Hadiya context overt internal competition would be inappropriate, and conflict is manifested via food¹⁴. These encrypted messages were meant to reaffirm resistance

¹⁴ *Qene* is a popular and ancient kind of Ethiopian poetry which is based on the ambiguity existing between an overt and a hidden meaning. The open meaning, usually quite innocuous, is referred to as 'wax', and the hidden meaning, often containing an insult or a shift of mood, is referred to as 'gold'. The

to institutional hierarchies; expressing at the same time the privilege of being located at a certain distance from the official power and its inherent perils. In such a treacherous context the subaltern who wants to speak should do it not in words, but instead through alternative tactics of communication and by way of ordinary items like food. The Hadiya peasants are resourceful, even if silent, agents. From this perspective the seeming passivity is to be understood not as apathy but as an expression of a political stance. This is precisely the core meaning of exercising resilience, which is defined here as the ability of a system to retain or attain a steady state or stable oscillation in the face of disturbance or hazard, with minimum impact and damage; and to return rapidly to it if perturbed. Community resilience is the sustained capacity to withstand and recover – in both the short and the long term – from adversity. Hadiya people have never engaged in legal action, or employed declarations and statements as a strategy to determine their own future or even express their sense of indigenosity. If this is so, where do Hadiya people create their ‘affective geographies’ of belonging, bargain their search for rights, and make room in the present for their fighting ancestors? This investigation will necessarily lead us not to a ballot box nor to a battle field; but into the enset plantations and around fireplaces, surrounded by unsophisticated materials.

Forms of resistance are reflected, often in an oblique way, through food. The food preparation, taboos and preferences are a language through which people express crucial signals of status and identity. In the Ethiopian context food and orthodoxy have always dialogued. The laws governing food rituals polarize the differences: there is usually a part which considers itself ‘pure’, and there are several social fringes - usually the conquered, invaded people - who are thought to have confused ethnic origins and transgressive dietary habits. All over Southern Ethiopia, clans show a sharp tendency to differentiate themselves from each other not only by means of genealogical and sociological criteria, but also on the basis of food avoidance. These rules may refer to domestic or wild animals, to specific colours of the single animal, to certain parts of its body - heart, liver, kidneys, lungs, stomach, intestines, hump, feet, and dewlap - or, occasionally, to plants. It is common practice to use nicknames which derive from dietary habits to identify groups of people or ethnic identities: Tigrayans are well recognized as ‘locust-eaters’ and craftsmen as ‘warthog-eaters’. A Kambata *Fuga*¹⁵ told

contrast between the open and the hidden runs through Ethiopian society; the ethos of ‘wax and gold’, which has shaped social and political interaction, consists of deception, insults, and intrigue (Levine 1965).

¹⁵ This derogatory term indicates the artisan groups who are considered by the peasants as ‘low-caste’; interestingly enough, the explanation of their miserable condition often refers to the unruly eating habits of their ancestors.

Braukämper: “We do not have religion because we eat everything” (1984, 436). ‘Eating the two meats’, that is those animals which are slaughtered by Christians and Muslims, is a standardized expression to mean not belonging to a world religion, therefore it is a declaration of ‘paganism’. The lack of compliance with some kind of avoidance is the everyday idiom through which different groups denigrate each other. Food preferences play a key role in the rise (or resurgence) of antagonism among communities. In Hadiya history national products and dishes contain painful memories of imperial conquest and evoke the power of the ‘superiors’.

The changes which have shaken Hadiya society must be contextualized in relation to the history of the neighbouring communities, from the time they were all incorporated into the central government in 1892. It is likely that today the ferocity, traditionally attributed to them, has no more connection with their pastoralist past but rather alludes to their lack of inclination towards the prestigious Orthodox Christianity, or their reluctance to comply with state political authority - which is, like it was a few centuries ago, still in the hands of Northerners.

5. Food resistance, or how to feed the indigenous spirits

Despite the ongoing hybridisation of food, coming from nearby areas or from urban and national markets, the Hadiya can be considered as a case of food resistance, making their livelihoods by largely relying on one product. The dichotomy abundance/scarcity of food is too simplistic to be acceptable. Hadiya people deliberately refuse to introduce innovations into their diet and choose to be perceived as backward in order to defend their food and political preferences. They are selective in their appropriation of things which they consider as national or alien; but also systematic in indigenising ingredients, in adulterating ‘authentic’ recipes, and merging together the traditional and the modern; while at the same time contesting the nation-building project which lies behind the official hierarchy of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ cuisines.

The ‘food of value’, which they carefully retain for household consumption, is represented by pairing enset to cattle breeding. The dish which best summarizes this blend of nostalgia for the ancient pastoralist diet and positive acceptance of enset is the much-valued *atakana*, made of the most fermented and whiter pulp of enset, cheese, milk, melted butter, onions, and salt. The Hadiya say that *atakana* “has always been with us”; which is a sign that enset products are conceived as being an integral part of their ancestral tradition, and have been fully incorporated into their cosmological and culinary system. The diet based on carbohydrates, provided by enset,

has in fact entered in strict and effective synergy with products of animal and dairy origin. In the diet of the Hadiya sedentarized nomad, meat can nowadays easily be replaced by *shana* (chopped collard greens), sometimes *dinnitcha* (potatoes), less frequently sauces with chickpeas or lentils. When butter and spices are less available, salt comes in handy. Cooking oil is cheaper and perceived as foreign, but increasingly preferred by the younger generation; it can enter into the preparation of vegetables (especially the more exotic carrots and tomatoes) but will never be employed in so-called 'cultural foods', such as cheese or raw meat, which are required in combination with butter and enset bread.

The food which the Hadiya usually set aside for guests, highly representative but perceived as non-nutritious, is mainly represented by ingredients and recipes which have come from Northern Ethiopia, and which need to be made palatable before consumption. The Hadiya have added to their cultivation new crops, especially cereals, because, as they claim, "grazing land is scarce, and population has enormously increased"¹⁶. They however prefer to keep *wasä* (enset bread) for themselves and to sell grains in the market. *Injera* (fermented t'eff bread)¹⁷ is prepared only when guests from other areas or cities are present¹⁸; in that case it is actually made of t'eff, according to the authentic recipe; but if it is to be consumed at home they

¹⁶ Of course climate change and an ever-increasing population have contributed to this shortage of land all over Southern Ethiopia; to which we should add the hot topic of commercial land investment contracts between governments and investors, which frequently violate traditional tenure systems. Domestic injustice can foster land grabbing and in turn affect collective resource rights such as access to pastures or water. Resource and land ownership are hence to be seen as an instrument of power, whereby only the state authority is in charge of environmental or developmental projects. Because of state ownership, investors would not be able to obtain land through market transactions; rather investment is exclusively managed and promoted by the government, which selects investors and investments in an attempt to achieve the objectives set out in the agricultural development strategy. As with any other government policy, criticism of or resistance to investment is considered a political challenge to the ruling party.

¹⁷ Thin, round flatbread prepared by fermenting batter made from t'eff flour, and cooking it on a griddle. It originates from Northern Ethiopia but nowadays is widespread in other areas of the country. Since the beginning it has been considered as a sign of assimilation into the national culture.

¹⁸ The women's devotion to the plant is strong: "People here in the village do not eat *wasä* out of necessity, but because they prefer it to other foods, even if the latter are available. If farmers eat *wasä* it will be digested after a long time, because it gives warmth and energy, and so they will not be hungry. With *injera* you will be hungry". And again: "the work on enset is hard, but we women love it more than men do: if there is *wasä* you can eat for many months; if at home there is t'eff, it soon vanishes. Fifty kilos of t'eff go in just two weeks. Men do not think in these terms, they do not understand the value of enset. They are interested in the immediate income; the women, on the contrary, have a long-term view".

unceremoniously adulterate the dough by adding rice, sorghum, wheat, or maize. And in fact the Hadiya version of the national bread has a bumpy texture even big holes, a thick, unrefined shape, and reddish colour. The same selective logic is at work in relation to animals: sheep, chicken, as well as eggs, are destined for guests and the market. Hadiya cooks conform to the national standard twice a year (for Christmas and Easter), when the iconic *doro wet* (chicken stew with an egg in a rich crimson-coloured, buttered pepper sauce) becomes a depressing and second-choice substitute in anticipation of a more popular celebration such as *Meskel*, the beginning of the new year, when they will be feasting on a slaughtered ox. If compelled to cook low-quality meat for lack of money, they strive to recreate a combination of flavours which caricature Northern taste, by adding onions, oil, garlic, and *berberè* (hot-tasting paste); they however make clear that “this is not cultural, it comes from the Amhara people and urban areas”. They usually define the national culinary flag, *doro wet*, which has made the Ethiopian cuisine well-known all over the world, as “a small thing to cook” (simple to achieve and insignificant in terms of culinary enjoyment).

The ‘white man’s food’ (referring to foreigners) does not feed par excellence, it has no salt and no taste. Despite the efforts of the state developmental policies to endorse and disseminate, especially through schools and nutritional extension programs, the westernised rhetoric on the virtues of ‘variety’, spaghetti and macaroni as well as fruits and rice has not gained ground inside the Hadiya kitchen. The villagers have learned at formal meetings, from urban educated instructors, that foreign imported foods are good for breaking up the monotony of a rural limited diet. Nevertheless, the peasants’ taste for so-called modernity appears strongly at odds with that of the policymakers. Pasta and rice are not for family consumption or ordinary times, but conceived as a sort of food-dropping to impress the outsider. This practice could be read as an indigenous way to put modernity on stage in a localised and fashionable choreography - to which, not surprisingly, they refer by using the French word ‘buffet’. They treat the white food with an additional degree of precaution in comparison to Northern Ethiopian food, the latter being after all only slightly less strange than the former. Spaghetti and macaroni are eaten a couple of times per year inside the household, and domesticated by soaking them into the more familiar (but still non-indigenous) foodscape of onions, oil, salt, chilli pepper or turmeric, and possibly tomatoes. The strangeness of these foods is proved by the local habit of treating pasta as *wet* (stew), a side dish which requires to be eaten with equally strange *ambasha* (puffy, western-style bread) or *injera*. When I asked the Hadiya women if they had ever tried to add butter to pasta as a condiment, their reaction was of pure horror: “for goodness sake”, they replied with indignation, “why should we fritter away the most valuable of our food?” It is therefore no

coincidence that macaroni and spaghetti are sold in the local weekly market on a stall where packs of cigarettes, soap and chinoiserie are piled in a jumble.

Despite the indifference displayed by peasants when asked about the qualities of the enset, at local level people seem to constantly look for, and highly praise, repetition and redundancy, whether in cuisine or in their technical small-scale agricultural choices. Teachers, on the contrary, at school encourage children to eat different foodstuffs in order to achieve, as expressed through a standard scientific agenda, a nutritionally diverse basket of energy, protein, fat, vitamins and minerals. These promoted foods are meant to let a gentle national breeze refresh the remote rural areas: meat (possibly chicken) which the poorer cannot afford not even on a monthly, let alone on a weekly, basis; lentil sauce, a preferred staple in the North; eggs, which the Hadiya use to sell in the market; pasta and rice; fruits and fruit juices, which I have never seen in any shop in the nearest town; and high quality t'eff for making an equally 'straight' *injera* bread. This policy¹⁹ seems to provide a seed of a burgeoning agro-industry and urban middle class instead of endorsing locally adapted modes of livelihood which have already proved to be wise and productive. Yet again, this unbalanced interplay between urban and rural might appear to a pedantic observer as the umpteenth resemblance of core-periphery relations in a nutritional dressing.

6. Political cuisine, or cooking up resistance

Not only are the Hadiya reluctant to grow new crops, they are also only partially interested in purchasing 'alien' foodstuffs. Younger generations, following on from their teachers' recommendation on the globalised value of 'variety', are now striving hard to 'educate' their parents and grandparents about the benefits of a modern diet. Older women usually listen to them in compliance and nod in agreement, in the tacit conviction that once left alone in the kitchen they will continue to live as before. They do not consider these modern supplements to constitute a 'proper meal'. Rice, pasta or bread do not feed because they are not embedded in the semantic and practical activities that constitute significant Hadiya life. Typically rice and fruits are given to children, and corn kernels to chicken.

Enset has always been an orphan crop and has received less attention from

¹⁹ http://www.unicef.org/ethiopia/National_Nutrition_Programme.pdf;
http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/wa_workshop/ECAfrica-caadp/Ethiopia_NCP_190213.pdf

policymakers when compared to cereals and cash crops²⁰. As with many other indigenous plants, enset is not easily marketable and prone to be transformed into a ready-made commodity. The enset resistance to industrialized, scientific agriculture may be accounted for as a reason for the lingering lack of research and investment by an ambitious government which has in fact been increasingly committed to large-scale projects. “Modernization efforts of this sort have historically been accompanied by discourses that represent ‘traditional’ social spaces as backward and stagnant, a *terra nullius* zone outside the invigorating dynamics of capitalist modernity. [...] The essential precondition for this remaking of heterogeneous social spaces in order to construct the abstract space-time of commodity production and circulation is the sweeping away of traditional customary relations and practices, which is being advanced in Ethiopia today through forced enclosures and the fixing of mobile communities in place” (Makki 2014, 94). Since its coming to power in 1991, the EPRDF has adopted a generally market-oriented developmental strategy, based on the commercialization of smallholder agriculture. State interest in foreign investment has stirred in the last few years. If no extensive expropriation of smallholders is envisioned in the highlands (the cultural core of the old empire), in the lowland peripheries state policy boldly echoes *terra nullius* narratives of unproductive and empty spaces that need to be made productive through agribusiness investments (*ivi*, 96). Government officials rightly perceive that control of the food supply is critical to their staying-power, and might therefore be motivated to take more of the best land out of food crops to produce more export crops for foreign exchange²¹. Research institutions and the funding and donor communities, in particular

²⁰ It is no coincidence that the ‘poor man’s food’ has recently been replaced by maize. Maize is now commonly incorporated into fields which are permanently modified by inorganic fertilizers and pesticides, while enset products are less available and rapidly becoming a commodity purchased at the market. If asked as to what might be the reason for their neglect towards this indigenous plant, policymakers would most likely state that enset breeding programs are bulky and lengthy, and often requiring up to ten years for an improved variety to reach the farmer. While anthropologists working on hunger and food security issues in Africa have provided a more articulate hypothesis: “Agricultural and food-related interventions from Europe and North America have tended to focus on crops and animals of interest to people in those parts of the world. Maize (corn), wheat, and rice have received far more attention until recently than indigenous African staples like sorghum and millet, let alone cowpeas or cocoyams. Research on potatoes is still far ahead of research on cassava [...]” (Messer and Shipton 2002, 238). This is precisely the topic of a Fulbright research grant which I have been recently awarded, and which aims at: (a) investigating how this infatuation for GM seeds and high yields has been fuelled by a peculiar rhetoric according to which improved types of maize (and other cash crops) appear as a mirage for progress; and (b) shedding light on the darker sides, and hidden manipulators, of this envisaged prosperity.

²¹ With reference to land and water grabbing in Ethiopia, where extensive tracts of farmland are

the World Bank, have often ignored — or even dismissed — traditional and indigenous crops for the past few decades, putting government officials under increasing pressure to favour agricultural commercialisation.

In my investigation of this resilient tree, enset has become the lens to detect why and how the Hadiya group has persistently been excluded from the dominant culinary landscape as well as from mainstream politics, since smallholder farmers appear to have no voice, either as targets of development and more inclusive policies, or as agronomic actors. The nationalisation of the Ethiopian state²² over the last two centuries – in which capitalist development, cash-crop monocultures, and the reduction of the variety of food crops and diet seem to have been privileged - has nevertheless coexisted with a dissonant subtheme: the resistance of local preferences. This opposition to the dominant structure of power has been sustained not through spectacular protesting, or organized and visible forms of dissent, but by pragmatically fostering a local, alternative economic system based on self-production, self-sufficiency, and cooperativism. For people who have undergone a constant process of change, who have struggled to make, remap and reimagine an ever fluid location, the framework of classical and vociferous activism is likely to be a less powerful lens than food-based claims to bring their sense of belonging and collective identity into focus. As Cusack states: “[f]ood may function as an example of [...] ‘banal nationalism’: everyday, unnoticed nationalism. [...] The development of a national cuisine will involve the summoning of a variety of dishes into the ambit of the discourse of the nation, and the very mention then of some national dish will quietly flag the nation. Thus, for example, the serving of *Doro Wat*, a dish of stewed chicken garnished with hard-boiled eggs, one of the national dishes of Ethiopia, will gently remind the Ethiopian diner of the nation [...]” (2000, 209).

The national rhetoric in Ethiopia appears to hierarchically organize the discourse between the pole of natural wilderness (the peasants, the women) and the pole of

being annexed, rivers redirected, and local ecosystems reconfigured in the name of expanding food production and generating the surplus necessary for industrialization, see also Lavers 2012.

²² Some commentators have observed that the Ethiopian government has become very adept at utilising neoliberal language to appease donors, while in actuality possessing no serious commitment to such ideals. The EPRDF remains a centralised and paternalistic party. Its attitude in shifting between, and making the best of, the nationalist/developmentalist discourse on one side, and the neoliberal rhetoric on the other, becomes more apparent in the field of land tenure and grabbing (Makki 2014, 86-87). Meles Zenawi, the former Prime Minister of Ethiopia, challenged the neoliberal policy prescriptions and openly stated that Africa needed a home-grown paradigm, i.e. the so called ‘democratic developmental state’, to implement investment in production and technology under strong state guidance.

civilizing progress (the townspeople, the men). According to the centre-periphery perspective, the Hadiya zone might be accounted for as a frontier zone, having accumulated a long history of marginalization²³. It therefore becomes of greater urgency to adjust the target by means of a more holistic, ethnographically inspired approach; to collect the (female) peasants' counter-memories, dissenting and yet connected to the semantic structures of the centre, which might be symbolically defined as political, modern, and masculine. The labeling of enset as 'poor people's food' should be balanced by the taste, colour and texture of valuable primary sources, that is the narratives of local actors.

The solitary and audacious researcher who aspires "to keep the world off balance, pulling out rugs, upsetting tea tables, setting off firecrackers" (Geertz 1984, 275) should feel the ethical duty of opting for conceptual frameworks which might get her/him closer to the 'vision of the losers', the immediate history, and human documents. (S)he will necessarily devote her/himself to observe the ingredients and take note of the recipes, both culinary and political. (S)he will become aware of the personal and local variations in measurements and combinations. At a slow pace, by trial and error, (s)he will realize that food and cooking are fraught with inequality and political domination. A preconceived vision of the nation is put on the scene through the selection of food; this vision in turn, in a sort of domino effect, generates contrasting culinary styles. To researchers who have investigated the salience of nationhood in everyday life it seems clear that regional variability goes far beyond *injera* as the unique flag of 'Ethiopianness'.

²³ As finely modulated by Markakis in his analysis of the loci of power: "What defines the centre is the monopoly of power and the hegemonic position it occupies in the state [...]. What defines the periphery is its marginal position in the power structure of the state, or more precisely, its exclusion from state power. Normally, exclusion from power translates into lack of access to state resources, as well as the loss of native resources appropriated by the state and transferred to the centre. Equally important is the denigration of social and cultural accomplishments of societies in the periphery, and the expectation in the name of national integration that they should give place to the superior cultural accomplishments of the centre. Powerlessness, economic exploitation and cultural discrimination add up to a severe form of marginalisation, the defining feature of the periphery [...]" (2011, 7).

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