# Ethiopian Village Studies: Shumsheha, Lasta, Wollo

[Locating the Site in Time and Space 2](#_Toc437525837)

[Geography and and Ecology 2](#_Toc437525838)

[Social Structure 3](#_Toc437525839)

[History 4](#_Toc437525840)

[Seasonal Activities and Events 5](#_Toc437525841)

[The Farm Economy 6](#_Toc437525842)

[Crops 6](#_Toc437525843)

[Livestock 6](#_Toc437525844)

[Land 7](#_Toc437525845)

[Labour 8](#_Toc437525846)

[Interlinkages 9](#_Toc437525847)

[Technology 9](#_Toc437525848)

[Innovations 10](#_Toc437525849)

[Common Property Resources 10](#_Toc437525850)

[The Environment 10](#_Toc437525851)

[Off-farm Income Activities 11](#_Toc437525852)

[Within the Community 11](#_Toc437525853)

[Occupational Structure 11](#_Toc437525854)

[Migration 11](#_Toc437525855)

[Reproductive Activity 11](#_Toc437525856)

[Fuel and Lighting 11](#_Toc437525857)

[Water 12](#_Toc437525858)

[Sanitation 12](#_Toc437525859)

[Fertility 12](#_Toc437525860)

[Childbirth and Childcare 12](#_Toc437525861)

[Socialisation 12](#_Toc437525862)

[Education 13](#_Toc437525863)

[Health 14](#_Toc437525864)

[Consumption 15](#_Toc437525865)

[Food and other day-to-day goods 15](#_Toc437525866)

[Saving and Investment 16](#_Toc437525867)

[Housing 16](#_Toc437525868)

[Household Assets 16](#_Toc437525869)

[Local Services 16](#_Toc437525870)

[Local Institutions and Organisations 17](#_Toc437525871)

[Households 17](#_Toc437525872)

[Marriage, Divorce and Widowhood 17](#_Toc437525873)

[Inheritance 18](#_Toc437525874)

[Kinship and Lineage 18](#_Toc437525875)

[Age Grading, Life Cycle Changes and Rites of Passage 19](#_Toc437525876)

[Markets 19](#_Toc437525877)

[Credit and Social Security 19](#_Toc437525878)

[Community Decision‑making 20](#_Toc437525879)

[Local Organisations 20](#_Toc437525880)

[Redistributive Mechanisms 21](#_Toc437525881)

[Beliefs and Values 21](#_Toc437525882)

[Land 21](#_Toc437525883)

[Religion 21](#_Toc437525884)

[Explanations of Misfortune and Illness 23](#_Toc437525885)

[The Community 23](#_Toc437525886)

[Community Organisation 23](#_Toc437525887)

[Politics 23](#_Toc437525888)

[Poverty and Wealth 24](#_Toc437525889)

[Social Mobility 24](#_Toc437525890)

[Status 25](#_Toc437525891)

[Social Stratification 25](#_Toc437525892)

[Relationships with other Communities and the Wider Society 25](#_Toc437525893)

[Relationships with Wider Ethiopia 25](#_Toc437525894)

[Effects of Government Policies 25](#_Toc437525895)

[Government Activities in the Community 27](#_Toc437525896)

[NGO Activities in the Community 27](#_Toc437525897)

[Future Provision to the Community 28](#_Toc437525898)

[Bibliography 28](#_Toc437525899)

[Glossary 28](#_Toc437525900)

[Acronyms 29](#_Toc437525901)

## Locating the Site in Time and Space

### Geography and Ecology

Shumsheha is one of 32 peasant associations in Bugna *Wereda,* North Wollo Zone. It is about 630 kms north of Addis Ababa, about 110 kms from Woldia the zonal town, 335 kms from Bahir Dar the regional town and 12 kms south of the *Wereda* town Lalibela, and has about 6000 inhabitants. The PA is situated on a plain that is surrounded by a chain of mountains that are bare and devoid of plant life; there are no trees in the whole *Wereda* in some churchyards such as Yemrah, Neakutelcab and Ayena Eyesus. The main forms of wild life include hyena, baboons, monkeys, foxes and duikers. No mineral products are as yet reported. The main river used for drinking water and very insignificant irrigation projects is Kechin Abeba.

Bugna *wereda* has a population of 126,000. In 1993 the MoA Office recorded 35,406 households, 26,687 male-headed and 8,719 female-headed. Shumsheha is divided into 9 *got*: Shumsheha, Aba Aregay, Tewala, Durge, Enkoyberet, Tisho, Lawober, Kentomender, and Ketef. In 1993 the population was 2,583 living in 896 households (249 female-headed).

The general quality of the land is *tef*. About 40% of the total area of the *wereda* is not arable and only 10% of the total area is cultivated. About 70% of the soil is *giracha* while 25% is black and 5% red. Shumsheha is situated between 1500m and 2000m in one of the drought prone areas in the country; the *kolla* to *weyna dega* ratio is 3:1. It is fairly hot and most farmers consider the area *kolla*. If they do not fail *belg* rains fall in March/April; *meher* rains fall in July/August. During the last three decades the rain has become increasingly unpredictable. Like most parts of the northern regions, Shumsheha was a victim of the major droughts of 1972, 1984 and 1994.

Agriculture is the dominant economic sector. *Meher*, the major harvesting season, extends from August to October. *Tef*, sorghum, chickpeas, flax, lentils, millet, peas, sunflower and wheat are harvested. During the *belg* season, from March to June, maize is cultivated if there is enough rain. Recently farmers have become almost totally dependent on the *meher* rains. Although MoA extension agents in the area are encouraging farmers to practice small-scale irrigation farming, it has not yet been developed for Kechin Abeba: the flow of this river is weak during the dry season when it is most needed. An insignificant amount of produce is sold at the market. Even in good years the amount sold is usually less than 10% of total production. Because of frequent droughts and rain failure the site is a serious food deficit area, both in crop and livestock terms.

Until recently there were no roads connecting the community with big towns. Even now there is no means of transport: people have to walk about for about a day and a half to get to Woldia. The land is highly eroded: farmers use the traditional farming system and no modern agricultural inputs. There are various kinds of animal diseases. As a result people produce less than they consume. There is no kind of off-farm activity. People live below the poverty line. There has been a serious famine in the community for the last 10 years. In most years many people are forced to migrate between February to June, sometimes as far as Addis Ababa, to look for a job. Sometimes they are helped by the Orthodox Church and the government. If you compare a farmer from this community with one from, say Debre Berhan, there is a big difference. In this community even better-off farmers sometimes migrate. Children leave their schools during the migration season.

Last year's *meher* harvest was the worse in five years, mainly due to the failure of the rains and the prevalence of pests and weeds which caused substantial crop loss. Sorghum is described as a *belg* crop because it is sown and harvested earlier than other crops (from May to October). Last year would have been a good harvest for sorghum but for a weed known locally as *akenchira* which destroyed the whole harvest.

Lowland Shumsheha, with its predominantly female-headed households, is poorer than surrounding *kebeles*, owing mostly to its hot climate, lack of water, sparse vegetation, and disease and pest prevalence.

The 80km dry-weather road linking Lalibela with the Woldia-Woreta all-weather road built by the Chinese cuts across 6 of the 9 *Got* of Shumsheha. A dirt track connects Shumsheha to Ayna, the former capital. The road to Sekota on the same line is under construction. Lack of well-constructed bridges, muddy roads, and the rugged terrain make roads impassable during the rainy season. In relative terms, however, Shumsheha is more accessible than other *Kebeles* in the *Wereda*.

Lalibela airport is located on the most fertile *walka* farmland and operates during the dry season (October to June). In 1994 the Civil Aviation Authority decided to upgrade it to an all-weather airport. As this will result in 101 farmers currently farming the area becoming totally landless and 90 farmers partially losing land, the Authority is offering compensation in the range of 100 to 9,000 *birr* per farmer.

Poor road access is the main reason for the high prices of consumer goods in Lalibela. The local grain and livestock market is not affected by the poor linkages with neighbouring regions and the main marketing constraint appears to be one of low local production and low purchasing power of farmers in the area.

### Social Structure

Almost all the residents of the PA belong to the same ethnic group, the Amhara. An insignificant number of Falashas, "black Jews", also live in the area. More than 95% of the people are Christians with some Muslims and Falashas, who follow Judaism syncretised with Christianity. Though the Christian Amharas seem to look down upon the Muslims and Jews, all live fairly harmoniously. The 1974 Revolution seems in theory to have done away with social stratification by levelling everybody so that they are equally poor. The Muslims, who use to make their living by weaving, and the Falasha, who were blacksmiths, potters and tanners, and who were not allowed to own land, were given the right to land, though they still stick to their former handicrafts. However, there seem to be social stratification along religious lines as the Christian Amhara see inter-marriage with Muslims, the Falasha and former slaves as degrading. The Falasha, according to the long standing legendary tradition, are said to be *buda* (evil-eyed). It is even believed that these people change themselves into hyena at night. The slaves used to be labelled as "donkeys". A respected old man of the Peasant Association told the story of *Ato* Kassaw Beze (a Christian Amhara) who had an illegitimate child from a former slave women and his brother who had a child from a Falasha. When the news of these brothers was made public the following verse was composed by an anonymous poet:

*Ato Kassaw had got a beautiful "donkey child"; unfortunately his brother got a "hyena child" endangering Ato Kassaw's son*

It should be noted, however, that no-one dares to say such things in front of the so called "caste" groups.

### History

Shumsheha is situated in Lasta which used to be the seat of the Zague dynasty that ruled Ethiopia from the 11th to the 13th century. In fact, according to some historians, the rise of the Zague dynasty itself did not represent a break in the Axumite tradition. For over three centuries the centre of the Christian kingdom was on the doorsteps of Wag and Lasta and it was from here that it controlled its extensive sphere of influence. It is then apparent that, by the eve of the rise of the Zague dynasty, many of the local people had already taken an active part in the religious, political and military leadership of the kingdom. (Taddesse Tamrat 1972)

From what is said above it is evident that settlement in Lasta must have been ongoing for many centuries. Indeed the antiquity of Lasta's rockhewn churches (from the 12th century), that are located in Lalibela only 12 kms north of Shumsheha, suggests early settlement patterns in the area.

This long standing settlement, coupled with the rudimentary traditional way of production that does not give attention to soil and water conservation, can be seen as contributing to the extreme exhaustion of soil in the area. According to McCann (1987) the exhaustion of soil fertility and erosion, which necessarily entails deterioration of agricultural produce, accelerated during the years 1900-35 and especially in the final decade and a half of that period setting the stage for rural crisis.

After the transference of the throne to Shewa, Lasta became a more or less autonomous region ruled by *wagshum* (local chiefs). After the death of Emperor Theodros, *Wagshum* Gobeze proclaimed himself as the legitimate heir to the throne and announced himself as king of kings of Ethiopia until he was defeated by Bezbiz Kassa of Tigray. During the Haile Selassie and the *Derg* regimes Lasta became an *Awraja* of Wollo. Now Lasta is divided into three *wereda*, one of which is Bugna, whose administrative centre is Lalibela and in which Shumsheha is found.

Due to the decrease of agricultural productivity at an alarming rate during the last decades, the people of Bugna, and in particular those of Shumsheha, have become victims of extreme poverty. As we shall see later the living conditions of the peasants of Shumsheha is extremely agonising.

A group of older people were asked to remember important events and times in the life of the community. They could remember 1935 when the Italians invaded Ethiopia and the people had to go to fight for their independence. Because of this they had to stop farming and take their livestock with them. Five years later the Italians were defeated and left Ethiopia. At this time the community was highly affected by drought. Between 1952 and 1968 there was surplus production of various grains and the people used to find causes to prepare ceremonies. They used to be able to maintain a two-year stock of grain. The cost of a quintal of *tef* was not more than ten *birr*. In 1975 land was nationalised and distributed among farmers. No-one had more than ten hectares of land and the government organised a Producers' Cooperative. This killed the competitive spirit among farmers and due to these two main factors production declined. In 1984 there was a strong and high drought leading to a great famine. Many people and livestock died, while thousands migrated, some as far as Addis Ababa to look for jobs and food. It was only after 3 years of starvation, and after the mobilisation of massive national and international support, that this disaster was overcome. In 1994 there was excessive rainfall which destroyed the crop. They are harvesting a very small amount and some of them are planning to migrate in February.

There was no villagisation in the area. There was no resettlement from other areas in the site, but people were forced by the government to leave their homes, property and land and resettle in other parts of the country. In 1979 and 1985 thousands were taken for resettlement in Wollega (Assossa) and Bale regions. Beginning in 1991 these settlers have been coming back in large numbers (about 500) with no land, homes, or property waiting for them. Some land was allotted to them in 1993 and seeds, oxen and relief were given to some settlers (mostly in Tewala, Tisho, Ketef, Shumsheha and Aba Aregay).

Bugna *wereda* has been an important centre of political events in the last 2 decades. The western half of the *wereda*, including Ayna (the former capital), was for long a strategic base for EPDM fighters, owing to its hostile topography which made it inaccessible to the central government. This part of the *wereda* was controlled by EPDM (now EPRDF) in 1981, a decade before the fall of the *Derg*, while the eastern part of the *wereda*, including Lalibela and Shumsheha, fell to EPRDF forces in 1988.

There was fierce fighting in 1985 and 1988, when government troops tried to regain parts of the *wereda* controlled by EPDM fighters. Since most of the fighting occurred in the western part of the *wereda* there was not much fighting or damage around Shumsheha.

Although their actual numbers are not known many young people were conscripted for the army during the *Derg*. Some were conscripted from the resettlement sites in Wollega and Bale. After the war a total of 685 ex-soldiers returned to Bugna, 557 of whom were covered by the *Tehadso* programme. Those from rural areas were given 220 oxen, 220 ploughs and plots of land. Those from urban areas (Lalibela) got a monthly payment of 50 *birr* for a period of 8 months. Ex-fighters were given land when the EPRDF redistributed land during the fighting but have not benefitted from any other support programme.

In the PA there are 30 to 40 demobilised soldiers about 5 of whom are landless. Even those with land do not consider themselves as owning land because of the poor quality of the soil and the small size of the holding. The situation is even worse for settlers who have returned from Wollega and Bale after 10 - 15 years and who feel that they are seen as second-class citizens by the villagers and the PA committee. Most of these people are dependent on relief from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

## Seasonal Activities and Events

In this section some of the most important aspects of seasonality are summarised.

*Rain:* It usually (but not always) rains a little in March/April and quite heavily in July and August.

*Farmwork*: The crops grown are *tef*, chickpeas, sorghum, barley, linseed and lentils. Most crops are grown in the *meher* season as the *belg* rains frequently fail. January and February are seasons of relative leisure during which people enjoy all sorts of feasts especially weddings. During these months the peasants are engaged in house and fence building and repairing. Land preparation begins in April and this is followed by the cycle of planting, weeding, harvesting and processing which lasts until December: this cycle is slightly different for different crops (see calendar). Men work particularly hard at harvesting time (October/November). Women are involved in soil preparation for chickpeas, and weeding and harvesting of all crops. They grow cucumber in March and *gommen* in July.

*Off-farm work*: There is no local off-farm work, but men and whole families migrate between February and the end of June.

*Consumption* *and credit*: People eat *tef* between December and February and sorghum between December and May. The hungry season is from June to September and they eat wheat (bought or provided as food aid or food for work) between June and December. They require credit in July, August and September. They eat chicken at festivals (1 day in each of September, December, January, February, April, July and August).

*Livestock sales and diseases*: People sell livestock between December and June. Animal diseases occur between February and May.

*Health*: Malaria occurs in September and October and in June.

## The Farm Economy

### Crops

The crops grown are *tef*, sorghum, barley, chickpeas, peas, linseed and lentils. All of these were grown in 1935. Cowpeas were abandoned by many ten years ago, due to a pest called *degeza* which attacks the flower.

The deterioration of the ecology has been accompanied by changes in the weather and rainfall patterns, rendering the rainy season unpredictable and unreliable. The area was exposed to recurrent drought and thus famine. The people therefore, have been victims of hunger and shortage of food.

In addition to the irregularity and scarcity of rain, different kinds of pests and crop diseases also affect production. Baboons are a serious problem. Protecting crops from baboons is an arduous task demanding much of the adult male labour in the production process. Despite the infertility of the soil, the peasants of Shumsheha (in fact the whole *wereda*), have never used fertilisers, not only because they cannot afford them but also due to their belief that if they start using fertilisers their land will get used to it and will never give any yield without it. This reaction was observed when the Ethiopian Orthodox Church Development Unit offered fertilisers free of charge in order to encourage the peasants' use of it. It was reported, that, after taking the bags of fertilisers, the peasants dumped the contents on their way home and took only the bags. Some were reported to have white- washed their huts with the urea given to them.

One important factor affecting the farm economy, as we shall see below, is the number of holidays whose observance are obligatory. These and other factors have resulted in the dwindling of agricultural production over time rendering the population prone to chronic shortage of food.

### Livestock

In 1935 the ideal livestock ownership was 10 cows, 10-12 oxen, 100 goats, 50 sheep and 4 donkeys. Today the ideal is 2 cows, 4 oxen, 15 goats, 20 sheep and 3-4 donkeys. This change mainly occurred after 1984. The land became arid and the amount of grazing land and the availability of fodder decreased. Though livestock comprises the major form of household investment, animal diseases, particularly those of cattle, recurrently endanger agricultural production. Thus there is a very serious scarcity of cattle, especially of oxen, that play the essential role in cultivation. In practice, few, if any, farmers attain the ideal described above. In 1993 oxen ownership in Bugna *wereda* as reported by the MoA was:

No of oxen % of farmers

0 50

1 35

2 10

3 5

4 and above 0

Generally there is a serious shortage of grazing land and animal fodder. Rental, sale and purchase of livestock are common. Farmers are more dependent on hay (60%) as livestock feed, and to a lesser extent, on crop residue. The major livestock diseases reported by officials are anthrax and blackleg. Farmers described 5 diseases that affected their animals:

*Kolsam*: makes the cattle skinny; sometimes they cure them by cutting their bodies with a blade. The blood is dark red.

*Gogobsa*: their body swells; they do not have traditional medicine for this.

*Entit*: this usually kills goats and sheep; if they catch it they die immediately.

*Kookny*: all over their body wounds appear.

*Ajil*: the oesophagus and stomach swell but this is not usually discovered until the animal has died.

It was reported that approximately one-third of the population own three cattle and some goats and there are many who have none. Besides the prevalence of major epizootic diseases such as rinderpest, bovine pleuropneumonia and anthrax, shortage of fodder and pasture land contribute to the shortage of livestock in the PA. Moreover, the drought that visits the area in cycles has either killed the cattle or forced peasants to sell or consume them. In 1981 the vaccination of livestock started. In 1935 people used to trade livestock in Lalibela and Woldia but this is no longer the case.

Animal products are generally not sold at the site. When farmers need cash to buy household or other items they sell eggs and occasionally butter. One egg is currently sold for 25 cents but the price can go down to 10 cents. An ox sells for about 800 *birr* but can be got for 500-600 *birr* when cheap.

### Land

Before the 1974 revolution the *rist* system was prevalent, with landlords constituting about three quarters of the population, tenants about a quarter, and a minority of craftsmen and Muslims. In the remote past it is said that the entire PA was owned by three brothers Timar, Tidrak and Negesta, who came from Tigray. Until the 1975 revolution and the nationalisation of land the inhabitants of Shumsheha used to trace their genealogy to either one of these men to claim a plot of land. The number of landless farmers was higher than during the time of the *Derg*. In 1935 the average size of landholding was about two *gasha* which is about 80 hectares. This figure was relevant mainly for landowners. Many of the farmers were either tenants or has access to land by sharecropping (*megazo*). Just before the Revolution the average size of landholding was 8 to 9 hectares; after the redistribution it was 5 to 6 hectares per household. There was no redistribution of land after this except in 1983 when the Producers' Cooperative was disbanded and the land held distributed. Now all people living in the area have the right to get land from the government, Since land is owned by the government they can distribute it to the people equally. One person said that now the average size of landholding is 2 hectares and sometimes less. In Mengistu's time only household heads or farmers used to get land but now, during the Transitional Government, everybody, whether he is a farmer or not, women, disabled people, and everyone who is capable of farming, gets land. After the area was controlled by EPRDF forces in 1991 a major land allocation was carried out. The *wereda* was subdivided into 32 lower level administrative units (*got*) and land in each one was distributed to men over 18 and women over 24, including jobless town dwellers. Land tenure with regard to women has undergone significant change since the EPRDF's control. After the redistribution women got entitlements to own land regardless of whether they were married or not (this had never been the case before). Now men and women, married, single or widowed, have equal rights of access to land. The redistribution was fair but recently returned demobilised soldiers and settlers are now unable to acquire land. A second respondent said that the average landholding size is currently 1 hectare per household. Because of this there is a high scarcity of land. Everyone feels that his landholding is too small. Though inequality in landholding has increased compared to the *Derg*'s time the maximum landholding size is currently around 6 to 7 *timad* while the minimum goes down to 1 to 0.5 *timad* per household. As the number of the population grows the land to be distributed decreases. So there are quite a large number of people who are engaged in the sharecropping system.

The local land unit used is the *timad* which is between 0.16 and 0.2 hectares depending on soil type. A *timad* is the amount a man can plough in a day. Thus

*deba* soil 50 x 75 *gemed* = 1 *timad*

*walka* soil 50 x 50 *gemed* = 1 *timad*

*chincha* soil 50 x 100 *gemed* = 1 *timad*

A *gemed* varies with the length of the rope.

Land, the most important factor of production, is extremely scarce, especially these days, due to the unabated growth of the population and new claimants such as ex-soldiers, ex-guerrilla fighters, displaced people from resettlement areas etc. Moreover the airfield which is under construction has appropriated quite a considerable portion of the cultivated land, though the civil aviation office has paid compensation to the owners. The peasants who received compensation money do not seem to have the knowledge and experience in handling so much money so as to invest it in a profitable venture. The fieldworker was told that some unwisely squandered it within a few days thus becoming penniless and landless at the same time which implies that they are now empty-handed

Besides there is a great deal of complaining about injustice and corruption on the side of the PA officials. The peasants complain that land is unfairly given to the wrong people such as women who reside in Lalibela town and ex-Tagays. Relatively fertile plots are given to individuals who are either relatives and/or friends of the PA and *wereda* officials or those who can afford to bribe them.

When children come of age they have the right, at least theoretically, to claim land on their own. However, such claimants have to wait until land is available due to the death of a PA member who has no inheritors or someone leaving the area for good.

Women who own land contract it to an adult male who owns oxen. The contract is in accordance with the fertility of the soil. If the plot is fairly fertile the contract would be *yekul* (50% share of the harvest), if it is less fertile *siso* (1/3 to the owner) or *irbo* (1/4 to the landowner). Someone who wants to contract a plot of land on this basis would, in line with the longstanding tradition, offer *mofermetaya* (a sheep, or money not more than 20 *birr*, or grain worth that money) to the landholder.

Land rental for cash is generally not practised in the area. There are some cases of land contracted to the government.

When disagreement or disputes occur among people because of land first the village elders would see to it. If the matter is not solved it would go to the PA officials and finally to the *wereda*. The *wereda* decision is final concerning such cases.

One observer said there is an acute shortage of land in the community Youngsters over 17 years of age cannot find land to farm. Landholdings are not compatible with family size.

### Labour

Traditionally labour tasks are divided on the bases of gender, age and social status. Women are responsible for household activities such as milling, food preparation and cooking, buying household items from the market, and fetching fuel and water, while men and boys are engaged in ploughing and taking care of livestock. Both women and men participate in some agricultural labour such as harrowing (*gulgwalo*), weeding, and harvesting, while others are specific either to women or men.

The socially based division of labour in the household determines relationships within the unit. Decisions of every sort concerning the household are taken by household heads who are usually male. Woman-headed households tend to be short-lived because of the fact that adult male labour is needed for the male-specific work, notably ploughing.

Among the Lastans there is a tradition of mutual exchange of labour called *wabara* (*debo*) used for demanding agricultural tasks such as ploughing and harvesting, or other tasks like house or fence building. *Wabara* takes the form of large parties where neighbours, relatives and others contribute their labour to help a household accomplish a given task within a short period of time. In turn, the household will work for those who contributed their labour, when required. Food and *tella* (local beer) is served by the host who called for the *wabara*. In 1935 about 30 people participated in work parties. Now they consist of between 10 and 15 people. Besides *wabara* there is also a one-to-one exchange of labour called *debayat* (*wonfel*). In this case a man may ask another individual to lend him a hand for a given task, and he in turn will engage himself in the work of that person. There is no need to prepare food and drink as in the case of the *wabara*. The length of the working day is 12 hours during harvesting, ploughing and weeding seasons.

It was during Mengistu's time that people started hiring labour for farmwork, mainly for harvesting. They used to pay 3 *birr* a day; now the rate is 6 *birr*. A significant number of households, especially labour-constrained and female-headed households, use casual agricultural labour. The terms of hire are of two types:

1. Households who are totally dependent on casual labour hire labour for the whole production season (May to January) for ploughing, weeding and harvesting. The wage usually consists of 4 *akumada* of the harvest, plus 30 *birr*, food being provided during the work.

2. Households who use casual labour occasionally, especially at harvest, pay hired labour 4 to 5 *birr* and provide food and drinks.

Since all the inhabitants of Shumsheha claim to be the descendants of either of the three families mentioned above, no one wants to serve as a wage labourer to anyone in the PA. Indeed people who have to supplement their income by wage labour prefer to go away to the neighbouring regions so as not to work as labourers in their PA. People have been employed as daily labourers working on the upgrading of the airport earning 5 *birr* a day. Local people call such labourers *shekay* which means a person who will grab any kind of job for small payment.

### Interlinkages

Share-cropping is common at the site and is known as *megazo*. There are 3 types of arrangement:

1. *Ekuleta*: equal sharing - where both parties contribute seeds and participate in weeding and ploughing equally. The landowner helps the share tenant in weeding and harvesting and the harvest is shared equally.

2. *Siso*: where the share tenant covers all the seed costs and the landowner may or may not help with labour (often (s)he helps with weeding); the share tenant gets two-thirds of the harvest.

3. *Erbo* and *arat*: where the share tenant covers all the seed and labour costs and gets three quarters of the harvest.

These arrangements may vary according to land quality. The duration of the arrangement is usually or one cropping season, due to the increasing risks of crop failure and rainfall unreliability.

There is a tradition of much sharing and mutual assistance in the area. *Mekenajo* (lit. pairing) is one form of mutual cooperation. A man who owns a single ox pairs it with another owned by a farmer who also has only one ox and they work on each other's field taking turns. There is also a tradition of exchanging labour for oxen. *Yesiso berie* is an arrangement where a farmer with only 1 ox rents an additional ox from another farmer and ploughs 1 day for himself and 2 days for the farmer from whom he rented the ox.

### Technology

In Shumsheha, as is the case in the entire *wereda*, the single-tine, ox-drawn plough is the most usual implement of cultivation. The traditional way of production has remained unchanged or unimproved. The ploughs, saws, axes and hoes are the same as those used in 1935. Soil and water conservation mechanisms, if at all practised, were rudimentary and negligible. Thus, given the exhaustion of soil fertility and erosion, deterioration of agricultural produce inevitably followed. One can say that Lastans generally are, at best, very slow to appropriate new ways of life, including mechanisms of production. This is observed by their refusal to use fertilisers. There has not been any fertiliser supply in the area since 1983. The same is true of their reactions to the extension workers of the Ministry of Agriculture and their attempts to educate the peasants about methods of soil and water conservation, vaccination for their cattle and the like. They stick to the traditional forms of production, transportation (some use donkeys or mules while others carry themselves) and storage of produce. Despite the extreme shortage of firewood the peasants still use open fire hearths that are uneconomical.

### Innovations

Only one innovation in the community was reported: vaccination of livestock. This started in 1981 as a result of animal diseases in the area. It was introduced by the Ministry of Agriculture and reduced the animal death rate by 40%. Now farmers are well aware of the advantages of vaccination.

### Common Property Resources

The forest is common property and everybody has equal access to it. People used to cut trees for firewood and accelerated deforestation. Due to this the government stopped them from cutting and started planting more trees. Nobody has access to cut the trees now, but it is still their common property. The most widely used tree is the acacia (*girar*) which is sold as firewood , as charcoal, and is collected from woodlands which can be as far as 10 - 15 km from the village. Nowadays Sesbania is becoming an important tree crop used for house construction. *Gesho* and eucalyptus can be found in other PAs.

There is one river in the PA which is common property. People use it for everything: drinking, livestock, washing clothes and washing themselves.

There is no natural grazing land in the area. Formerly enclosed areas (protected for afforestation by the *Derg*) are now used by farmers as communal grazing land when the rains come in July. In *dega* areas of the *wereda* communal grazing is practised on rugged, uncultivable (often mountainous) territory.

### The Environment

Besides the ever-declining state of the ecology, due to factors mentioned earlier, population pressure has become a major factor contributing to the imbalance between crop land and pasture (see the discussion below on fertility). This situation pressurised the peasants to clear and plough what uncleared land there was and encouraged the cultivation of mountain sides, thereby aggravating deforestation and minimising pasture. This in turn accelerated erosion and further exhaustion of soil fertility, resulting in dramatic ecological and weather change. Afforestation or reforestation activities are insignificant.

Local people reported that the fertility of the area has decreased since 1974. The people said the soil was rich during the time of Haile Selassie and gave two reasons why the soil became infertile. The first is the high erosion during the rainy season and the second the high rate of deforestation. In 1935 almost 85% of the land was covered with trees. When the land was covered with trees there were different kinds of wild animal living in the forest, including hyenas, foxes and tigers. The deforestation rate increased after the land was nationalised by Mengistu; before the forests were privately owned and no-one was allowed to cut trees. After nationalisation people started cutting trees and selling firewood. No measures were taken until recently. However, they have started planting trees this year.

A key informant reports that there is a serious problem of soil erosion at the site resulting from the poor slope of the land and inappropriate farming techniques. As reported below World Vision and the Ministries of Natural Resources and Agriculture have been engaged in terracing, tree planting and soil conservation activities. Except for some sparse trees in 2 other *Kebele* there are no forests left in the area. The remaining scanty bushes and shrubs are now being cut for charcoal- making or firewood. The MNRDEP's afforestation programme has had limited coverage and has not coped with the rapid rate of deforestation.

## Off-farm Income Activities

### Within the Community

Activities supplementing the income of the peasants are very few and limited. Trade, which in most parts of Ethiopia, including south Wollo, is one of the most common extra-farming activities which peasants practice in non-agricultural seasons, is not viewed favourably by Lastan peasants. Indeed the traditional view of looking down upon traders seems to be still lingering in the minds of most residents of Shumsheha. Families engaged in trade are referred to as *shekach* (lit. retailer) with a derogative connotation. In Lasta trade has always been the occupation of Muslims whose number in the PA is very few.

Blacksmithing, pottery, tannery etc. are occupations despised by the society and are exclusively the work of the Falasha who had no right to own land until the 1974 revolution.

*Meftel* (spinning) and *mesfat* (basket work), which are exclusively women's work, are two extra-farming activities that are positively valued by the society. However, these were never a means of supplementary income until recently. Selling local beverages such as *tella* (local beer) and *areki* are the most common income-generating activities. Selling of firewood is another common off-farm activity.

### Occupational Structure

Farming is the predominant occupation for men. However women play a very significant role in farming. During ploughing they are involved in *gulgualo*,while they are fully engaged in weeding. In harvesting time they have less work. Families who do not own donkeys or mules have to carry their products home, in which case women play an important role.

### Migration

Migration is traditionally an important means of risk management. The reasons for migration include failure of agricultural productivity and shortage of land. Since they are not used to other means of supplementary income, when conditions are unfavourable, the Shumsheha peasants are forced to migrate to the neighbouring regions of Gondar, Rayana Kobo and sometimes as far as Setit and Humera to engage in agricultural wage labour. Some go to Keffa for the coffee harvest. For example this year 260 peasants have migrated from the PA. Migration is not limited to age. Sometimes the entire family may migrate. When the whole family migrates it is difficult to find work for all, or if only the strong find work it is hard to obtain enough wages to support all. And it is reported that often the women and children are forced to engage in begging. The PA chairman reported that at this time (March) about 600 weak and handicapped persons are absolutely without anything to eat and are waiting desperately for government aid.

## Reproductive Activity

### Fuel and Lighting

People in the PA use wood for fuel though it has become increasingly scarce. Cattle dung is also an important item used for cooking and heating. Only a few well-to-do families can afford naphtha for lighting. Most people use *kitkit* (wood) or *kulkual* (cactus) for lighting. Even cow dung is scarce as the cattle population in the PA is small. The sparse vegetation, coupled with farmers' dependency on wood has put pressure on supply and raised its price, while widening the income base for many women who depend on wood sales.

### Water

The main sources of drinking water are rivers and, to a lesser extent, springs. Both the quantity and the quality of drinking water are very poor. Springs are few and found only during the wet season, and rivers are more important sources. There are two rivers *Abaragay* and *Kechin Ababa*. Many women have to travel a long distance to fetch water, especially in dry seasons. There is no piped water in the area, but exploration for ground water started in Durge *Got* in June 1994.

### Sanitation

There is no latrine in the PA at all. The *wereda* health officials suggested that most diseases in the PA are, in one form or another, related to poor sanitation.

### Fertility

The fertility rate in the PA may well be considered among the highest in the region. Among the peasantry the belief that children are "assets" is deep-rooted. Children are considered as gifts of God and families with large number of children are seen as favoured by Providence. Children are thought to be important both as labourers and as security for their parents in their old age. The labour of children in the peasant household is so significant that when parents talk of the age of their children they never mention the years (in most cases they may not know it exactly) but define it in relation to the type of work that the child currently carries out. For example they say *kebt yitebikal* (lit. he looks after the cattle) if the child is more than 5 and less than 12, or *irif chebtual* (lit. holds the handle of the plough) if he is more than 12.

Fertility control mechanisms, though propagated by public health workers, are not accepted by the people. A number of women reported that they do not want to use contraceptives because, they believed, it is harmful to women who do not get a balanced diet. Therefore, the population growth of the PA is increasing unchecked.

Infertility, usually attributed only to women, is seen as a result of a curse or the wrath of God. Infertile women usually go to *balewuqabi* to do away with the curse. Though education about family planning and usage of birth control mechanisms are being given, no-one seems to take much notice of such teaching.

### Childbirth and Childcare

Pregnant women hardly get any supplementary food or any leisure time. There is no trained birth attendant in the PA. Thus, if a woman with a complicated labour has to get any professional help, she has to be carried to Lalibela health centre 12 kms away. One can imagine what would follow if the labour might happen at night or at a time of heavy rain.

In most cases a woman is expected to resume housework in less than two weeks. An old man reported that he never knew a woman in the PA who stayed for more than 12 days without resuming her usual activities. There is no cultural justification for this practice except poverty that inhibits the peasants from employing anyone to fill the women's role in the household.

### Socialisation

To be a good farmer who is conscientious and performs his farming activity on time, is one of the most desirable qualities for men. For a woman being a good cook and being able to prepare good *tella* and *araki*, being good at spinning and basketry, and fidelity are the most appreciated qualities. Courage is also a respected quality. A man has to avenge his relatives if they are murdered. Dishonesty and lies are condemned. Theft is perceived from two directions. An informant said that "if one is caught stealing small, trivial items like a cucumber he is called *likiskis*" while one who may steal a rifle or an ox is not described as such. Though humour is positively seen, a young man who usually engages himself in jokes and singing is referred to as *setachawach* (lit woman's entertainer). *Chat* chewing and smoking are extremely condemned. Desirable qualities in men include: intelligence, hard work, courtesy, bravery, kindness and being good at arguing. Undesirable qualities include bullying, drunkenness and being lazy. Since the majority of the population are exposed to traditional church education, though to varying degrees, one with such an education and who is good at *semina* work (gold and wax sort of poetry or speech) is very much appreciated. Many people hold that to be able to write and read and do sums is very useful. Mature people with such skills are usually elected for dispute settlement and are socially respected. A good wife can represent her husband in controlling and supervising the farm in his absence, handles consumption items properly and economically, takes care of the children, and trains girls for marriage and household activities. Such a woman is referred to as *yesetwond* (lit a manly woman)

A group of men listed the desirable qualities in men as: to be a strong farmer; to have good behaviour and to be sociable; to be kind and honest. They thought these qualities are inborn but they try to teach them to their children by telling them stories and advising them. Undesirable qualities include adultery, wife-beating, and lying. A successful farmer is one who spends almost all his time in farming activity. He doesn't have any particular skills and there are no technical skills which are particularly respected. However, reading and writing are given high consideration by the people and these skills are necessary to be chosen as a PA official. The social skills most respected are honesty and respect of other people's property and rights. In primary school children learn modern education such as English, mathematics, social science and science. In church school they learn only religious education. Since there is no off-farm activity in the area, going to school does not make it easier to earn off-farm income. After primary school they will end up being a farmer. It was estimated that 30% of the boys in the community are at primary school and 7% at secondary school.

A group of women listed as desirable qualities in men: being hardworking, cleverness, a sense of humour, being brave and kind, and having a respect for his wife and house. People are born with these qualities, although they do try to train them too. Undesirable traits in women are being an adulteress, laziness, lying and theft. A successful farmer's wife is an all-rounder: she takes care of the children, does housework, helps her husband in the field, and prepares food etc. Necessary skills include making *injera*, preparing *tella* and *tej*, and preparing *doro wat*. It is important to be able to read and write since this makes it easier for people to make a living. The skills most respected include being a good farmer, being loyal to the community, and respecting the rights of others. In primary school children learn English, mathematics, Amharic, science, geography, physical education, and home economics. They also get religious education at the church school which is nine kilometres from the PA.

They do not know if education helps people to get off-farm income since there are no opportunities in the area and there is no-one from the PA who has completed high school. It doesn't make any difference how long a child stays at school unless it completes high school and goes to college. They did not know what percentage of girls were in primary school.

### Education

In Shumsheha there is one elementary school established in 1988. There are only 85 students at present. The schoolmaster reported that they were 120 at the beginning of the school year. But many left school because of poverty. The older boys are engaged in fuelwood selling. At the beginning of the school year the ratio of male-female students was 2:3 respectively. After the first semester, soon after the *meher*, the number of girls drops because many get married. It is said that at elementary level the number of male students is low because boys are wanted at home for cattle herding. In general the Lastan peasants are not willing to send their children to school, not only because of economic problems, but also because they believe that modern education results in the separation of children from their parents. Though there is no one in the PA who has completed high school, or who has been away from home because of government employment, the villagers give examples of some families in Lalibela whose children are in Addis Ababa or elsewhere and who do not regularly visit their parents. They, therefore prefer sending their children to the traditional church schools, in which case their children will eventually be serving in one of the surrounding *debirs* and will not be away from them.

The Shumsheha elementary school is not well equipped and does not have enough classrooms. There are only four classrooms and two classes have to be conducted in the open air during non-academic or vocational periods. The school property was looted during the civil war and there were no desks at all until SNV (a Dutch NGO) donated some recently. However, the main problem is that, despite the government agents' continuous encouragement, only a few people are willing to send their children to school. Of those who are willing to send at least one child, many are confused about which child should be sent. An observer was told that one person brought one of his children for a semester and in the second semester he brought the other. When asked why, he answered that he wanted to give everyone a chance.

At the beginning of the year there were 102 students registered at the primary school but when one of interviews took place less than 50% of these were attending regularly. The school covers Grades 1-6. There are 6 teachers (3 men and 3 women). Six students took the national exam last year and three of these passed (2 boys and 1 girl). They transferred to the Junior Secondary School which is 9kms from the PA. The curriculum includes Amharic, English, Mathematics, Geography, Science, Handicrafts, Home economics, Physical Education, Art and Music. Payment is not mandatory: only those who can afford it pay school fees and for books and sports. Only 30% of the students pay regularly. The total payment for students below Grade 3 is 1 *birr*, while for Grade 3 and above it is 2 *birr*. Students usually stop coming to the school by the middle of the year for the following reasons:

1. economic problems - since the people are so poor, they have to migrate from February to June, and children go with their parents;

2. marriage - girls mostly get married when they are 10-13 while men are 18-20. Girls and men immediately stop education when they are married. For this and other reasons at the end of the year less than a quarter of those registered at the beginning of the year attend for the whole year.

Grade 2 and 3 students are learning in the same classroom with the same teacher, and the same is true for grades 4 and 5. There are 2 blackboards in the room and the teacher uses one for 20 minutes for grade 2 and the other for 20 minutes for grade 3. This is because there is a shortage of classrooms.

### Health

There is no clinic in the PA. There is a non-professional and inexperienced person who charges 5 to 10 *birr* for any randomly prescribed or administered medicine. The nearest health centre is in Lalibela (12 km from Shumsheha) which has 2 doctors, 6 nurses, 10 health assistants, 3 elementary health assistants, and 1 pharmacist. About 75% of patients cannot afford to pay and get free medical services from the centre. There is one very poorly equipped private clinic in Lalibela. The nearest hospital is in Woldia (110 kms) and is inaccessible and unaffordable to most of the farmers in Shumsheha.

According to one informant the main endemic diseases are malaria, trachoma, goitre, pulmonary TB and leprosy. Major types of illnesses affecting children are whooping cough, diarrhoea and intestinal parasites, while those affecting women are diarrhoea, intestinal parasites, abdominal-infection disorders and sexually transmitted diseases. Another key informant said the most common diseases in Bugna *wereda* are bronchitis, pneumonia, STDs and TB while in Shumsheha measles and water-born malaria are frequent, their usual period of outbreak being June and October. Child delivery complications, diarrhoea, eye diseases and goitre are also common in the area. He suggests that health problems and lack of modern medical facilities remain major constraints in the site.

Causes for main health problems are reported to be unclean water, lack of a balanced diet, shortage of health institutions, shortage of medicines and medical personnel, and lack of communication. Moreover, the peasants do not effectively make use of what health services there are mainly due to lack of money but also because of traditional beliefs that make them see modern medicine as undependable. The health personnel in Lalibela complained that patients are usually brought to clinics after they have "one foot in the grave" i.e. after every traditional treatment including *Tsebel* (holy water), different herbs, etc. have been tried. According to those health workers, due to this situation the peasants gain almost nothing from modern medicine. Besides the patients do not strictly follow prescriptions. There were no trained birth attendants up to last March when four traditional midwives were sent for training. However there are many *Wogeshas* (traditional healers) who deal with broken legs and other accidents. They are said to be fairly good at it. The payment for such treatments is also relatively cheaper than modern medicines. Moreover there are many *Kalicha* or *Bale wukabi*. But *Tenquay* (wizards) are most revered.

A group of men ranked diseases in order of severity as malaria, typhoid, diarrhoea, meningitis, toothache and eye problems. Malaria occurs in September, October and June; the others at any time. The group said malaria was caused by mosquito bites, typhoid by lack of hygiene, meningitis from a wound in the body, diarrhoea from drinking river water and lack of hygiene, and toothache and eye problems from not cleaning teeth after eating and not washing faces. People eat garlic to stop mosquitoes biting but have no means of prevention of the other diseases. Most people don't get treatment for malaria since the health centre is in the next town; they eat garlic and *feto*. *Feto* is a traditional medicine known in almost all Ethiopia. When farmers plant linseed they find this plant *feto*. They mill it and use it whenever they get sick. They use it for almost all kinds of disease. For diarrhoea a very few people go to the health centre; the remainder get no treatment. When people get meningitis they bleed themselves, either on the head or the arm. After they release the blood they will be cured. There is no treatment for typhoid for adults. Only children (1-9 months) can get vaccination for typhoid. The people from the health centre come once a month to give this vaccination. People did not used to be willing to take their children for vaccination. Therefore the health centre people started giving some donation only to those who brought their children for vaccination. As a result they attracted at least a quarter of the people with children up to 9 months. There is no treatment for toothache but they get eye drops for their eye problems.

A group of women ranked diseases in order of severity as diarrhoea, malaria, conjunctivitis, and whooping cough. Malaria occurs in October and June, whooping cough happens once every two or three years, while the others can occur at any time. Diarrhoea is caused by dirty water and lack of neatness in preparing food. There is no prevention and they take medicines such as ampicillin, tetracyclines and ORS to cure it. People get conjunctivitis because there is so much dust. They wash their faces two or three times a day to prevent it and use eye drops to cure it. The group did not know the cause of whooping cough; they said there was no prevention but treatment involved vaccination and cough syrup. Malaria is caused by mosquito bites; there is no prevention but they take chloroquine and vaccination. For all these illnesses they go to the health centre about 8% of the time.

The women's group ranked children's diseases in the following order of severity: diarrhoea, marasmus, conjunctivitis, and whooping cough. None of these occur at a specific time of the year. The causes, prevention and treatment for those already mentioned as affecting women are the same for children. They do not know the cause of marasmus and there is no prevention. Treatment involves vaccination at the health centre. Again they take children to the health centre in about 8% of illnesses.

## Consumption

### Food and other day-to-day goods

In Shumsheha food shortage is almost always prevalent. According to a baseline survey jointly conducted in Bugna *Wereda* by UNICEF and the TGE in 1994 the percentage of households who reported availability of sufficient food is 28.16 during the harvest season (December -June) and 0.43 during the pre-harvest season (July-November). Although this statement may sound a bit exaggerated the fact that the great majority of the population could not afford three meals a day, even during the harvest time remains true.

Traditionally the peasants do not use separate plates and no household owns more than two plates. As a matter of fact it is only in a few households that metal trays are found. In most households home-made baskets known as *lemat* are used both as trays as well as tables. In most households parents are served first and the children eat the leftovers with some more added to it.

The only festivals they celebrate are national holidays which last only for a day. They would like to celebrate many religious holidays but they are too poor. During national holidays they eat chicken and eggs.

The local measures used are as follows:

*gucheye* powder milk can = 2.75kg or 3.25litre

*akumada* goatskin sack = 50 kg

*kil (folle)* = 1 to 1.5litre

*tassa* = 0.75 to 1 litre

*birchico* = 0.25 litres

25 *gucheye* 1 large *akumada* = about 68.75 kg for 2.75 *gucheye*

1 *silicha* 8 *gucheye* = 2kg

*kunna*

*enkib/weranta*

### Saving and Investment

Saving in the form of cash is generally uncommon. Besides the fact that the majority of the peasants live in extreme poverty, the few who are relatively better-off do not usually save in the form of cash. Rather they invest whatever surplus they get in livestock. *Equb*, the traditional saving mechanism is a new phenomenon introduced only recently.

### Housing

The largest house has three rooms. There are only 6 tin-roofed houses in the entire PA. An observer was told that it costs 1,500 *birr* to build a moderate house and 2,000 *birr* to build a larger one. However, most of the houses are small huts with one room that cost no more than 500 *birr*.

Unlike the PAs in the *dega* (highland) where people and cattle share the same house, in Shumsheha cattle are not kept in the same house with people. There are only a few houses to let and the fieldworker saw a little one-room hut which was rented for 5 birr a month to a divorcee who sells *tella* to support herself and a son.

### Household Assets

There are only a few households (not more than 30) who own radios and only one person, a retired soldier, who owns a wooden bed with a fairly good mattress. All kitchen utensils pots, kettles, water jars, drinking items, are locally produced.

### Local Services

There are 6 Service Cooperatives in the *wereda*. Shumsheha is a member of Shumsheha SC (020 and 021). Not all SCs hold licenses and fulfil criteria for eligibility for bank loans. The Shumsheha SC has a membership of about 2000 and contributions stand at 7-15 *birr* per member (total capital of 15,000 *birr*). The SC has a shop in Shumsheha village with very few supplies: soap, salt, matches and batteries at the time of the research. Limited supply from the EDDC and poor road access, together with rising prices for consumer goods, have been detrimental to SCs. It was reported that Shumsheha SC had a deficit of 3000 *birr* at the end of 1993.

The peasants used to buy sugar from the SC and sell it in Lalibela for a profit of at least 1.50 *birr* per kilo. However, sugar is no longer available and the peasants seem to have lost interest in the SC. Agricultural extension agents visit the PA sporadically. The regional MoA office has planned to build a house and office in each PA and to appoint a resident extension agent. There is no grinding mill; the nearest is in Lalibela.

## Local Institutions and Organisations

### Households

The term *aba worra* is usually used to refer to two spouses and their children, possibly supplemented by orphans of close relations and grandchildren, who live in a house in which they eat, work and sleep together. However, a household may vary considerably in composition and may be headed by a father or widow - at least until a second marriage. There may also be adopted kin and individuals with no consanguinal relations. The post-marriage residence pattern is mostly patrilocal unless, rarely, the homestead land belongs to the wife.

Decision-making is vested in the father. All persons in the household are subject to his authority. A son with a wife usually sets up his own hut, but he will still be in a subordinate position to his father as long as they remain on good terms.

### Marriage, Divorce and Widowhood

Marriage in Wollo in general has always been an extremely flexible institution and Lasta is no exception. Traditionally, at least the first marriage is arranged by the parents of the would-be couple. However, these days young people of marrying age, especially males, are demanding to know their future spouse, and cases of refusal to marry paternally-chosen spouses exist. Marriage in the area is of a contractual nature and thus subject to negotiation. The contract involves a written document. Both the husband and the wife are represented by their *nagar abat* (lit. father of things) who serve as witnesses to the agreement. The contract specifies all material belongings including land and livestock each partner brings into the marriage. When a son gets married for the first time his parents give him an ox, cow, and grains (if they can afford it). His wife's parents give him a pair of trousers and a coat. He will pay back the grain after a year. When a daughter gets married her parents give her the same as a son but she will not pay back the grain. Her husband's family give her clothes, shoes, and an umbrella. These belongings remain personal throughout the marriage and if divorce occurs each partner has, in theory, the right to retain their possessions. Other kin provide food for the wedding ceremony. There is a positive relation between a good harvest season and the time of marriage. Marriages take place during the harvest season (January to April excluding the fasting period). Sometimes 2 or more children from the same family are married at the same time. People do this to repay those who have invited them to different ceremonies, particularly weddings. Until they have done so they feel in debt.

In this community every first marriage is prearranged and early. There is a big age difference between husband and wife; sometimes while the husband is 14 or 15 she is 6 or 8. Since they cannot live by themselves at this age they live in the husband's parents' house until they become mature and economically capable. Giving a dowry is common in the site. The bride's family give a dowry, consisting of a cow, an ox, or grain, to the groom's family. The bride stays with the groom's family for 2 to 4 years. When the couple build their own home the husband's family provides them with food and farming tools which need to be returned a year or so later.

Marriage is easily and frequently dissolved. Many divorcees reported that their marriage failed because of poverty. According to them, when life becomes hard and unbearable spouses are forced to break their marriage and try their chances in their own ways. Divorce may be a coping strategy. A man who owns a small plot or infertile land may divorce his wife and marry a woman who has a better plot of land or oxen. Sometimes such a person may establish a non-formal cohabitation with a relatively wealthy woman without divorcing his legal wife. On the whole as McCann says "Rates of divorce were high, arranged first marriages were not expected to last, and an individual could expect three to four marriages over a life time. Most mature households, therefore, were based on second or third marriages and were not under-written by parents." (McCann 1987: 54). One of the enumerators of the household survey reported that there was a problem identifying how many times a person has been married. "Sometimes they tell us they are married 25 to 30 times. It was very difficult for us to take this as it is."

Polygyny, as such, is not practised in the area, but it is common to have mistresses, and promiscuity is common.

A boy after marriage is independent and usually loyal to the culturally expected ways of respecting his father and listening to his advice or counsel. However, this depends on the father's good will to help the young man establish himself.

If a household head dies the responsibility falls on the wife. If both die the responsibility passes to the eldest child provided that he or she is mature enough, or to close relatives if the children are under-aged.

There is no inter-marriage between Muslims and Christians or between the "caste" groups and others, or at least it is not socially accepted. Sometimes there can be secret love affairs, and if this should result in begetting a child the event is viewed as disgracing to the Christian family and ostracism may follow.

Male chauvinism is still prevalent. Women are always expected to respect their husbands. Almost all decisions concerning family matters are made by the household head who is usually male. There is a saying "even though a woman may be wise the final say is of the man".

Extra-marital affairs, which are not uncommon, are not looked at equally for the husband and the wife. If a man commits this "sin" the blame is not as serious as if it were committed by a woman. In fact men are hardly condemned for such an act. Regarding one's wife as inferior, beating and mistreatment are taken as resulting from the naturally ordained position of men.

If divorce takes place between spouses who have, say, two children and if both live with their mother, the father is traditionally obliged to pay an allowance large enough to support one child while responsibility for the other child would be the mother's. Only children who are less than 3 years old have to go with the mother. Older children can choose where to live.

Later marriages are possible: there are no prepared wedding ceremonies after the first marriage. If the man is entering the woman's house he brings all his property and mixes it with hers, and vice versa. Widows can get remarried unless they are too old. No-one shares a widow's dead husband's property. She gives her land to another farmer in a sharecropping arrangement.

### Inheritance

Female, male and illegitimate children have equal rights to inherit their parents' property. Inheritance takes place only when both parents die. Parents make a will before they die saying who should inherit what. They do this in order to prevent disagreement among the children. If only the father dies the mother is responsible for the children as well as the family wealth. If she remarries, when the children come of age they have the right to claim their share of their father's wealth.

### Kinship and Lineage

Kinship among the Lastans is usually limited to the great-grandchildren of siblings. Though they count their lineage up to " seven houses", mutual cooperation is based on the personal attachment of the individuals concerned. However, knowing one's lineage and kin-groups is very important to live up to the tradition of exogamy. Relatives of this level are also traditionally obliged to attend each other’s mourning or burial ceremonies, depending on geographical proximity. Relatives who reside in faraway places are morally obliged to give shelter to a kinsman, if he commits murder and has to run away from the law, until mediation and reconciliation with the relatives of the deceased takes place.

### Age Grading, Life Cycle Changes and Rites of Passage

Rites of passage are not clearly defined. There are no rituals that take place at different life stages. That children above seven have to assist their parents in accordance with gender-specific work activities, and that their roles and duties change in line with their age, is tacitly understood and accepted. Old people of 50 or above are called *Shimagele* and are active in social activities like dispute settlement and arbitration. If a family wants to ask for the hand of a certain girl in marriage for their son, it is elders who are sent to the girl's family to conduct negotiations.

Despite the government agents' attempt to educate the people against female circumcision both female and male are circumcised at an early age, usually on the 8th day after birth. The act is accompanied by a very insignificant ceremony. Infant baptism is a strictly observed ritual among the Christians. A boy is baptised at 40 days and a girl at 80 days. This takes place in accordance with the Orthodox Church rules. Baptism is followed by a feast held by the family of the children; wealthy members of the community hold a very lavish feast which could be considered as one among the many redistribution mechanisms. Their conception of female circumcision is associated with the belief that an uncircumcised girl would become *tincha* (sexually impenetrable).

### Markets

The market in Lalibela is the largest in the area and Saturday is the biggest market day. Thousands of people meet every week in Lalibela for transactions in the retail and wholesale (grain and livestock) markets. People from a long way arrive on Friday. Both highlanders and lowlanders bring produce. All sorts of cereals, livestock, clothes, kitchen utensils, spices, honey, butter and manufactured goods are exchanged. Transactions take place in cash, kind or a mixture of both. For example if 1 *puchiye* (big tin) of potatoes costs 5 *birr* the buyer may pay 3 *birr* in cash and the equivalent of 2 *birr* in kind (eg wheat or barley). Glasses (cups) are common weight measures. Honey, butter, sugar, and cereals are measured in glasses. Six glasses of honey for instance are taken as approximately equal to one kilogram. Cotton is measured with a home-made scale called *kintib*. When bartering people do not take account of the prices of items. For example, they will exchange a *kuna* of onions for a *kuna* of *gesho*, or a *kuna* of wheat for a *kuna* of *tef*, even though a *kuna* of onions costs approximately 4 to 5 *birr* while a *kuna* of *gesho* costs 1 *birr*, and a *kuna* of wheat costs 5 *birr* while a *kuna* of *tef* costs 8 *birr*.

People sometimes go to markets for non-market activities like enjoying drinks, arbitration appointments and the like. Some farmers go as far as 30 to 40km to larger markets.

### Credit and Social Security

In times of personal crisis people help each other. Friends, neighbours and kin help. Sometimes kin come from far away. If the damage is serious the victims get help from the government or an NGO. People borrow cash and grain from relatives and friends or moneylenders when they face problems.

Most of the population face acute shortage of food during the months of July-September. It is due to the benevolence of the well-to-do, who are generous enough to lend their fellow-poor cash and/or food without interest, that the poor may squeeze through these hard periods. Alternatively they borrow either cash or grain for the period from the Orthodox church, which charges interest (10% if it is cash, or 1/3 of the same kind of grain that was borrowed). If they cannot borrow they migrate.

There are seven *qire* (*idir*) in Shumsheha, with an average membership of 90 households each. Male members contribute 5 *injera* and female members 3 *injera* on the first day of mourning. There is no cash contribution. Members attend the funeral ceremony and console the family for several days.

*Mehber*, a religious association that takes the form of a get-together once a month on the day of one of the locally revered saints, is very common. Their formation can be traced back to the childhood days of the members. It is not unusual for shepherds in the fields from different villages to play and sing together and to contribute money to slaughter a goat on occasions like Christmas, Easter or New Year. This is called *Mizenet* and through time, as the shepherds grow up, marry and become parents, such gatherings evolve into stronger organisations known as *mehber*. Women usually "drink" Mariam while men "drink" Georgis or Michael. The exact number of participants in a particular *mehber* is hard to say. It is determined by consensus. However, usually the smallest number is 12 so that every member prepares the feast once in a year. There are seven *mehber* at the site with about 17 to 20 members each. They celebrate a Saint's day in each member's home in turn. Besides its religious function *mehber* is a means by which individuals strengthen friendship and mutual assistance.

The *equb* culture was introduced in Shumsheha very recently. It was reported that people of a relatively moderate income pay 2-4 *birr* per week.

### Community Decision‑making

Primary decision-makers on any issue in the community are the elders. It is only when a certain issue or dispute is not solved by the elders that it has to go to the PA or the relevant government institution. Elders are not selected to committees on a permanent level, but chosen and brought together by both sides to solve a specific problem, be it an issue of marriage and divorce, land-use dispute or personal conflict. Usually five elders attend a case, among which two are chosen by one side, two by the other, while both agree on the selection of the fifth. The one chosen by both serves as chairman to the committee. The PA decides on government matters, regulations and directives; it serves as a bridge between the government and the people in the community. Thieves and murderers are given to the government police.

### Local Organisations

The Peasant Association, and the Youth and Women's Associations were formed soon after the 1974 revolution. In 1989, when the EPRDF placed Lasta and the environs under its control, these associations were reformed in accordance with the principles of the said organisation. In 1990 the *wereda* was sub-divided into 32 administrative units called *Kebele Mestedadir*. The highest organ in each *kebele* (numbered 1 - 32) is the *Kebele* Council formed of elected representatives (1 for every 30 households). The council elects an executive committee of 9 members to carry out day-to-day administrative duties. The *Kebele* itself is divided into lower-level community units known as *Got*, which were formed for the purpose of land reallocation by the EPRDF and have now become important administrative channels. *Kebele Mestedadir* 02 (Shumsheha) had 9 *Got* with an average population of 150 to 450 in each. *Kebele Mestedadir* are wider in area and much more autonomous than the former PAs. The formal organisations are much stronger now than in earlier days. There are also Youth, Women, and Elders' associations under the *Kebele* council. Now the Women's and Youth Associations are not as active as they once used to be. In fact no one seems to take note of their importance.

People in the area inherited the local organisation of *idir*. They consider this organisation as their insurance. They do not exactly know when they started. If someone is a member of an *idir* then family funeral ceremonies are conducted in a very proper and good way. People put a high value on this ceremony and everyone is a member of an *idir* unless he is very poor. Both men and women can be members of the same *idir.*

In 1975 they started another local organisation: *equb*. There are 3 *equb* in the PA and all are found in Shumsheha *Got*. Members are usually households dependent on off-farm income sources like selling firewood and *tella* which are found in increasingly urbanising Shumsheha *Got*. They use them to collect a large amount of money (by their standards) at one time. Only people with cash can be members. Both men and women can be members of the same *equb*. The amount of money paid is 5 *birr* a week. The average membership is about 40 people.

People in the area also inherited the *mehber* from their ancestors. It is not possible for men and women to join the same *mehber*. Women usually celebrate St Mary (the 21st day of the month) while men celebrate others.

A group ranked local organisations in order of usefulness to the community as: *idir*, *mehber*, *equb*, and Peasant Association.

### Redistributive Mechanisms

There is neither an institutionalised form of redistribution mechanism nor a title for the "Big man" who redistributes his wealth. However, there are certain occasions at which the wealthy members of the community redistribute their wealth by way of preparing big feasts. The occasions are not specially meant for this. A wedding party, a *zikir* (a feast that would be prepared on the day of a saint especially revered by the individual wealthy person), *tezkar* (a feast prepared in the memory of a deceased family member), holidays (like Easter), *kiristina* ( a day of the baptism of a child) or even *debo* (*wobara*) are some occasions of redistribution. On such occasions wealthy people prepare feasts, slaughtering cattle and sheep and preparing *tella*, *tej* or other drinks. The lavishness of the feasts is a measure of both the wealth and generosity of the person who throws the party.

Not every wealthy man prepares lavish feasts. The one who does so gains fame and social respect. It was reported that prior to the 1974 revolution local administrators and nobles used to hold such feasts called *gibir*. That was expected of them: a sort of obligation. Moreover, there was competition among the feudal lords to prepare larger and more lavish feasts so as to establish one's fame as the wealthiest and the most generous person. This is no longer existent.

## Beliefs and Values

### Land

Land is the most sacred belonging among the Lastans. Even before the land proclamation by the *Derg*, people, however poor, were not willing to sell their plots. A man who did so was socially despised and it was believed that the parents of such a person were cursed. Land was not revered only for economic reasons. It was a mark of personal identity. That is why the Lastans uphold the idea of personal ownership of land.

### Religion

Though there are a handful of Muslims and a very insignificant number of Falashas, the major religion in the area is Orthodox Christianity. However, it is a syncretised form of Christianity and some of the practices seem very strange to a Christian outsider. For instance informants reported that once, when the production of *shimbra* (chickpeas) repeatedly failed, a ritual with a sacrifice of an ox was held in the church. This occasion is remembered as *Yeshimbra Tezkar* (a memorial ceremony for the death of *shimbra*). The feast and the ritual were meant to appease the spirits that caused the failure of the *shimbra* harvest for which Shumsheha was famous. The next season, it was said, *shimbra* was produced in abundance.

Local people do not tolerate Protestants. There was a case some years ago where a man who went to live in Addis Ababa became a Protestant. After a few years he returned to visit relatives. When his conversion was discovered neighbours, relatives, elders, and priests became very angry. There was an attempt to kill him but he managed to leave town secretly. His parents were expelled from their *idir* and all their neighbours quarrelled with them.

There are a number of holidays to be strictly observed which are almost 50% of the days of the month. For example non-working days in the month of *Sane* (some light farm work is allowed) were the following:

*Sane* 4 - Saturday

*Sane* 5 - *Abo* and Sunday

*Sane* 7 - *Selassie*

*Sane* 11 - Saturday

*Sane* 12 - St Michael and Sunday

*Sane* 18 - Saturday

*Sane* 19 - St Gebriel and Sunday

*Sane* 21 - St Mary

*Sane* 23 - St George

*Sane* 24 - Saturday

*Sane* 25 - Sunday

*Sane* 27 - *Medehane-alem*

*Sane* 28 - *Be-ale Egzihaber*

*Sane* 29 - *Be-ale Kirstos*

People go to church on these days to pray and attend religious ceremonies. If anyone is found working (ploughing, harvesting or weeding) on these religious holidays he is criticised by the community and must pay a fine to the church. In some cases this situation may be a fundamental obstacle in the production process. For example this year the *belg* rain, which the farmers said was already late, came on April 14th. The following days, Saturday and Sunday were the usual holidays (they celebrate two sabbaths a week). Then followed the week-long holiday of *Himamat*  (the week prior to the Ethiopian Easter). Then came what they called *Denkoro Himamat* (a holiday of four consecutive days) making the total number of holidays 16 consecutive days. That means that if the rain only lasted two weeks the Shumsheha peasants could not plough, and therefore would not get any *belg* harvest. Peasants referred to this year's *belg* as *yeslam belg* (Muslim's *belg*) indicating that only the Muslims could plough. One peasant, a sort of free thinker, resentfully spoke of the event by saying "look what the priests are doing to us. They threaten us with excommunication if we work during holidays and the holidays are many. But these are the same priests who steal the *Tabot* (the Ark) ) from the holy of holies and sell it for thousands of *birr*."

There are strict fasting rules.

There is a religious gathering at the site, known as *Senbete*, which is observed on the first Sunday of each month. On this day the villagers gather in the church and feast together. Those with religious vows and other interested persons bring bread, *tella*, coffee, and *kollo*, and serve all gathered or passing by. The feast usually lasts from morning until noon.

One ritual that takes place during threshing time, called *agmas*, is worth mentioning. *Agmas* or *Yawdma Digis* (feast of the threshing place) is a feast that consists of all sorts of food and drinks including milk and yogurt. In addition to the participants of the threshing any passer-by is invited to take part in the feast. When someone passes by he says *Haymanot Yawrid* (lit. let faith came down) and the threshers answer *Tsideku Tsideku* (bless you, bless you). Then he is invited to take some of each kind of food and drink. He cannot refuse the invitation for that would mean that he is a *Selabi* (one who, with some magical power, can take the produce).

During the threshing period, which usually lasts 2-3 days, no household utensil is lent or borrowed, and if the household has previously borrowed such things, they are not returned to the lender until the threshing is over. The people believe that, if such goods are removed from the house during the threshing period, the yield will mysteriously diminish from time to time (*yiselebal*) as if it is evaporating.

People give special respect to their ancestors but they do not have special power in the community.

### Explanations of Misfortune and Illness

The Lastans attribute most misfortunes and illnesses to God's punishment and to afflictions of the spirits. Thus, when misfortunes such as deaths of children or cattle or any sort of illness faces a family, it is common to exercise all sorts of rituals to appease the spirits. One such practice is *Wodaja*. It is practised by Muslims and Christians. *Wodaja* in Lasta is quite different from the ritual known by the same name in south Wollo. Here the household which prepares the ritual invites people, usually not more than five and less than three, who are believed to have the power of casting off evil spirits. The event takes three consecutive days. The participants drink *awza*, made from boiled *chat*, which makes them high. On the third day two roosters with specially prescribed colours are sacrificed for the spirits and the ceremony is over. Sometimes these rituals are performed as preventive action, usually in May and September.

Other traditionally assumed remedies for misfortunes are vowing to different saints and consulting *Metsehaf gelach* (lit the reader of the book) which is related to astrology. People also consult *aganintsabi* (lit. caller of the demons). There is a "witchfinder" in the neighbouring PA who charges in either cash or kind. People believe this witchfinder can predict the future and also cure some illnesses.

Though the people half-heartedly believe that everything occurs in accordance with the will of God, when misfortune repeatedly happens they tend to make peace with the spirits. Moreover, when property is stolen and the thief is unknown they go to an *Awaqi* (lit. knowledgeable) to be told who the enemy is.

## The Community

### Community Organisation

The community is orderly and harmonious since all the inhabitants of the PA are of the same ethnic group, speak the same language (Amharic), and the socio-cultural values are common to all. Despite the existence of a few Muslims the great majority of the people are Christians. The Muslims co-exist with their fellow Christians harmoniously and there is no trace of religious discrimination or persecution.

### Politics

There are no major conflicts or any sort of serious tension. There are no political factions. The only political organisation active in the area is the Amhara Nations Democratic Movement (ANDM). Whether they like it or not the people accept it as their organisation, at least officially. Concerning politics people are not sensitive. They are illiterate and poor and think about bread rather than politics. The ANDM was one of the first three political organisation that made up the EPRDF. The peasants do not seem very willing to take an active part in politics unless, in one way or another, forced to do so. For example, during the election the great majority of the people were reluctant to take election cards and the local authorities had to design a way of pressurising the people to participate in the election. One such means, to which the field worker was an eyewitness, is the fact that relief grain was transported to Lalibela from the Dessie and Gobiye Lutheran World Federation (LWF) stores and it was announced that only those who have election cards would be the beneficiaries. Thus, soon everyone went to the nearest station to get a card.

### Poverty and Wealth

The people are very poor and usually eat only once or twice a day. They have land but they do not have oxen to plough the land. The reason is that there is a severe problem of grazing land. The land is arid and the weather conditions are not favourable for grain. Sometimes there is no rain throughout the year.

The demarcation line between the poor and the wealthy in Shumsheha is thin and blurred. Since the area is one of the most infertile parts of the country and is subject to cyclic droughts and famine, 95 percent of the people belong to the category of the poor. Those who are described as wealthy are said to be so only by relative standards. In a community where there are only 6 tin-roofed houses, where the largest house has only three small rooms, where only one person owns a relatively modern bed (wooden bed), and where less than 50 persons own small two-band radios, it is difficult to speak of wealthy individuals. The wealthy are those who are able to produce enough to eat three meals a day throughout the year, maybe with some surplus. In general the life of the Lastan peasant is extremely precarious. Shumsheha is second to last in wealth among the 32 PAs in the wereda.

One informant said that the wealthiest people are those who have 2 pairs of oxen, cows, goats, sheep and donkeys. The source of this wealth is to be a hard worker or a strong farmer. The poor are those without livestock. They become poor since they do not work or are lazy. Another informant said that the poorest households are characterised by landlessness, no ownership of livestock, being disabled, being old or female-headed with no labour for farming, or being involved in illegal fuelwood collection and sale in spite of fines. A farmer with 6-8 *timad* of land and a pair of oxen is considered rich. Those in this category are usually farmers who diversify their crops, who have fertile land, who are young and strong, and who have additional skills (eg are blacksmiths or craftsmen).

In a wealth-ranking exercise households from five of the *got* were ranked by 2 groups and 1 individual. They all said there were 3 possible wealth classes, but that in Shumsheha there were no rich people: one only found people from class 2 (poor) and 3 (very poor). As one would expect the *got* are differentiated by the proportions of "poor" and "very poor" in them. Averaging over the 3 rankers the % of poor (i.e. the "richer" group) was as follows:

Twala *Got* 42%

Durghe *Got* 32%

Abaregay *Got* 31%

Enkay *Got* 22%

Shumsheha *Got* 12%

### Social Mobility

It is possible for the child of a poor person to become rich if he works hard. He can be hired to work for a rich farmer and save money. However, every person, rich or poor, has land.

As part of the wealth-ranking exercise the three rankers were asked some questions about mobility. With regard to downward mobility one respondent said that people can move very rapidly from poor to very poor, while the second said this happened frequently. The third said whether it happened or not depended on God's will. The typical reasons for downward mobility are:

(1) "Many of the people who are categorised as poor have one ox and some goats. Since the area is highly attacked by famine, these people sell their ox and purchase grain for consumption. As a result they won't have anything to plough with for the next *meher* and then become poorer."

(2) "The main reason is drought - the area is highly attacked by famine and as a result there is a high rate of animal death, there are different kinds of pest and acute shortage of water both for people and livestock."

(3) "God is punishing them for whatever reason they cannot identify it. They have been living by donation for the last ten years and more. Their livestock died every time. There is a shortage of everything ever since they were born in the area. So they believe it is God's punishment. They still strongly believe in God that one day he will have mercy on them and things will be changed to a better condition."

All agreed that those in the poorest category never move to the rich one. The reasons are that most of the people are so poor that they cannot even feed themselves. Upward mobility requires capital (an ox and a plough) . In order to survive almost everyone gets a donation from the government, an NGO, or the church. When asked how people become wealthier one answer was that they have relatives living in Addis Ababa, Dessie, or some other town who can help them financially. Otherwise it is not possible to become wealthier in this area, even if one works very hard. A second answer was that people might become wealthier if they worked day and night from the time they set up their own household, and if the weather conditions were favourable. The third answer was that when nature becomes balanced and it becomes God's will, people will be wealthier. People become poorer due to bad weather, large family size, and small size of plots of land (Informant 1). People are born poor then become poorer and poorer as the years go by (2). People become poorer if they spend whatever they get on consumption and if they become drunks (3).

### Status

The most respected people are those who are wealthy; they are respected just because they are rich. An observer said they can be considered elites because they are richer than others. They are rich because they worked harder than anyone else. There is competition and friction between them. Another said there are no educated people in the area. The local elites are those employed by the Airport who live a better life. They are not getting wealthier. Another said there are no conflicts between elites or factions.. As a result of the airport being built in the area urbanisation is in progress and there are some rich people building houses and establishing businesses. Many people are hoping that the area will develop in a few years to come.

### Social Stratification

Villagers feel that inequality has decreased at the site since redistribution of land by the EPRDF in 1991.

## Relationships with other Communities and the Wider Society

### Relationships with Wider Ethiopia

The concepts clan and tribe are alien to the Lastan peasant. What they understand is that all Lastans, save the marginalised group, are one; they speak the same language and they share the same cultural values. And that is all. They are of course culturally affiliated to the neighbouring Agaws of Wag. Since they were both ruled under the same *Wagshum* they have a somewhat related history and a lot in common. Inter-marriage between the two people is quite common.

The Lastans strongly believe in the sovereign Ethiopian state and feel unreserved Ethiopian-ness. This attitude is expressed by their hospitality to newcomers of other ethnic groups.

### Effects of Government Policies

The policies of the present government are viewed from two angles. On the one hand the peasants are glad about the end of the civil war, at least in their area, that they are not obliged to send their children for National Military Service, that the agricultural products marketing board is done away with, and so on. On the other hand they do not see the advantage of the free market economy especially in relation to manufactured goods. The policy, they feel, does not create competition which would have been advantageous to the consumers. Rather the merchants raise the price high every time. At the same time *kebele* shops, service cooperatives and the like, which were semi-governmental institutions, are no longer active. And they feel they are exposed to serious exploitation by merchants.

An observer said that the community had a lot of problems during the *Derg* due to conscription and resettlement. However, the aid was generous and there was no discrimination like there is with the present regime. Land distribution is unfair at present: they take fertile land from people and give them uncultivated land. Tax was 42 *birr* during the *Derg* while it is 20 *birr* at present. The new regime is fair in tax collection: if a farmer cannot afford to pay now he will be allowed to pay later. During the *Derg* regime land was taken from those who could not pay the tax at that moment and given to others. He said that the people did not know about democracy or the Constitution. The reason they participated was that they were told they would get more aid than before. Another said that it is not a true democracy because it serves the people in power only and anyway democracy is not helpful to the poor in any way. He said there is a security problem in the area: people are imprisoned, beaten, and killed and their houses and assets misused. Another said that security in the area is not that bad. And another that those who sent their children to war involuntarily support democracy while returned soldiers who are unemployed dislike and oppose it. Another said that when the fertile land was allocated for use as an Airport the farmers protested by stopping the work. There are rumours that some 20-30km away in the Tekezie River area there is a group fighting government troops. In this location there is no security problem. The people do not know anything about the Constitution. During the election they did not select the people they would like. The EPRDF gave them the list of people they should choose Observers and security people were there when this happened and never protested. Another said the new government redistributed the land and their holdings have been reduced because land was allocated to everybody, including women. The economic policies are good for the rich but a disaster for the poor because they do not have the economic power to compete with the rich in competitive markets.

Another respondent reported that local people were not keen on regionalisation, since they think it removes their right to move within the country from one region to another. The land shortage and poor weather conditions mean that many people have to migrate in order to survive. Regionalisation prohibits resettlement in areas where there is plenty of land. He claimed that the people knew nothing about the new Constitution and that they were abusing the idea of democracy by interpreting it as the right to speak as one wishes. He said there are no security problems in the area. He also said that it was the opinion of "all the people" that land should be privatised. Another said that the Wollo area was hard hit by famine during Mengistu's time and farmers from the area were moved to other fertile areas in other parts of the country where they lived happily. Now these people have been told to leave their new areas and return to Wollo, where they had lost everything, including their land.

Another observer said that the community is worse off today than it was before 1991 because the cost of goods has gone up beyond the reach of the farmer and this is a general grievance. Economically, the farmer is in a dire situation because he is unable to feed himself and his family. Politically the country is divided by regionalisation so the farmer is unable to go to work outside his area. The farmers object to it because it is based on ethnicity and hence divisive. Farmers do not know about the Constitution in any depth. Because the farmers do not understand the concept of democracy fully they are unable to present their questions appropriately. The poorest members of the community have been badly affected by recent economic changes, because they do not have enough money and cannot compete for work.

Another said that the people of the area usually migrate for work to the Wollega area but now they cannot go anywhere because they are Amharas and cannot speak Oromiffa. Another said the community is worse off than it was in Mengistu's time; then there were soldiers stationed in the area who were sources of income for many people. Now they have gone. Another view was that, because of the regionalisation, educated sections of the population cannot go to other regions, which is hindering the country's progress. There are big security problems in the area. Another is that they are worse off because good farm land has been used for the Airport.

Another person said that some of the farmers say that things are no better than before while others agree that life is better than it was under Mengistu. They are pleased with the EPRDF's land redistribution and there is evidence of better times in the recent building of tin-roofed houses.

### Government Activities in the Community

The first government activity in the area started during Haile Selassie's time in 1963. He constructed an airport so that tourists started visiting and he built the road that connects this PA to Woldia. In 1975 the *Derg* nationalised land so everyone had land to plough. The *Derg*'s time was very good for them economically. In 1987 the *Derg* tried to establish a Producers' Cooperative but it was not successful since the farmers were not willing to work under the PC. Due to this it failed and the land was distributed to the farmers. In 1988 a modern school was introduced to the PA for the first time. In 1990 a literacy programme started in the *wereda*. In 1992 the government started a large-scale forestry project. A group of elders ranked these activities in order of usefulness to the community as: airport and road construction; school; peasant association; literacy programme; forestry project.

Government assistance in the economic sphere is generally insignificant. There is no bank or telecommunication even in the *wereda* town, Lalibela. The road to the zonal town, Woldia, is not all-weather. The regional town is very far away so that the transportation cost is unaffordable by any peasant if it were imperative to go there for an appeal or suchlike. The *wereda* agricultural office assists the peasants by providing insecticides, pesticides, and veterinary services when an outbreak of animal diseases is reported. However, the peasants complain that the help is usually too late. The Ministry of Natural Resources has development agents undertaking soil conservation activities in the area, mobilising farmers on a voluntary basis for terracing and tree planting. The Ministry also has a nursery site in Shumsheha which employs 20 to 30 farmers and supplies various seedlings to farmers.

The RRC started relief distribution activities in the *wereda* in 1992, prior to which relief activities were undertaken by other donor agencies. This year the RRC distributed relief aid in bulk to all farmers in the *wereda*. Farmers seem to have become dependent on relief aid and would like organisations like the RRC, which provide free and non-targeted food aid, to stay.

### NGO Activities in the Community

There are at least three NGOs which are currently engaged in development work in the *wereda*.

1. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church Development Unit. The EOC (DICAC) is engaged in development activities such as providing oxen, improved seeds and fertilisers for the peasants (though the peasants are not willing to use the latter). The EOC also has plans to build clinics and orphanages. In fact one such project (a clinic) was recently inaugurated. DICAC started relief and development activities in the *wereda* 3 years ago. They provide targeted relief assistance to the poor, the old and the disabled, and to demobilised soldiers each month (44 kg of grain per person). About 500 households in Shumsheha *kebele* are being helped by EOC which also established a nursery in January 1994. This employs 30 to 40 farmers on a "food for work" basis and supplies tree seedlings to farmers.

2. SNV (Bugna Development Association), a Netherlands NGO, is running a multifaceted development programme including rural road construction (e.g. the Shekla-Melake and Lalibela-Neakutebeab projects), water-well drilling, a mother-child health care programme, reforestation (food for work) and a loan (credit) programme. The programme began in February 1993. At present (June 1994) the SNV's activities focus on participatory planning for constraint identification, and research and development in 2 *kebeles* (not Shumsheha). However, SNV furnished Shumsheha primary school with chairs and tables.

3. Finida (the Finnish Development Agency) has undertaken the task of the preservation and maintenance of the famous rock-hewn churches and town upgrading. It has also a rehabilitation project for ex-soldiers.

Another organisation that is playing an active role in the *Wereda* development is UNICEF. In accordance with its five-year plan UNICEF is engaged in vaccination and a family planning programme, and establishing grinding mills and oil-pressing mills in different PAs. It also has plans to introduce cross-breed animals to the peasants.

World Vision undertook a soil conservation programme in the area in 1985/6 following its relief assistance activities during the 1984/5 famine. The WVI programme involved terracing, tree planting, nursery and water-diversion works which were done by farmers on a food-for-work basis.

However, in view of the extreme impoverishment of the area, it is hardly possible to imagine that these development activities will bring about significant changes in the precarious life of the Lastan peasantry. One observer reported that the community is getting worse and worse as years go by. They have reached the level of producing enough for only 3-6 months. The reason is that the land is not fertile, there is no *belg* rain, and the weather has changed to the type you find in the desert.

### Future Provision to the Community

An observer who spent some time in the community said that since the area is very remote and highly affected by nature it needs special attention from the government. The area needs infrastructure development (water, roads, electricity, telephone) and a health centre. The people need to be taught about family planning to reduce population growth and about the use of fertiliser and other modern inputs.

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## Glossary

Areki: A distilled spirit.

Ato: A respectful title for a man; mister.

Awraja: An administrative division before 1991.

Balewakabi: Witchcraft; a protective spirit.

Belg: A short rainy season usually occurring during February/March/April. The harvest from this season takes place in July and August.

Birr: The currency of Ethiopia (9 birr= approximately 1).

Chat: A plant which has leaves which contain a mild narcotic. Its leaves are chewed.

Dabo: Bread.

Debir: Monastery.

Dega: Highland country.

Derg: The name of the military government which ruled Ethiopia from 1974-1991.

Doro wat: Chicken stew.

Equb: A rotating credit and savings association.

Gasha: A measure for land equalling 40 hectares.

Gesho: A plant which is used to make beer.

Giracha: Grey.

Gommen: Spinach.

Injera: Ethiopian flat bread.

Kaleecha: Witch or witch doctor.

Kebele: A local administrative division or an urban-dwellers association.

Kolla: Lowland country.

Meher: The main rainy season - in most places from June to mid-September. Crops sown during this period are harvested from October to December.

Mengistu: The leader of the Derg government which ruled Ethiopia from 1974-1991.

Tef: A millet-like grain.

Tej: Alcoholic mead.

Weyna Dega: The temperate zone of Ethiopia an at intermediate altitude.

Wonfel: A reciprocal labour sharing arrangement.

Wereda: An administrative division.

## Acronyms

EPDM: Ethiopian People’s Democratic Movement

EPRDF: Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front

MoA: Ministry of Agriculture

ORS: Oral Rehydration Solution

RRC: Relief and Rehabilitation Commission

SC: Service Cooperative

TGE: Transitional Government of Ethiopia

WVI: World Vision International