

Allen Hoben, LAND TENURE AMONG THE AMHARA OF ETHIOPIA: THE DYNAMICS OF COGNATIC DESCENT. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1973. xiv + 274 pp., tables, maps, figures, note on transcription, bibliography, index.

\$9.50 (cloth)

Land Tenure among the Amhara has had a vast influence in Ethiopian studies long before its long awaited publication, through privately circulated earlier versions. The reasons for its influence in Ethiopian studies are obvious, for in it the author has shed light on one of the most misunderstood and important institutions in Ethiopia, that of land tenure. While land tenure is treated in the book as one of the central institutions of Amhara-Tigray civilization, it is not its sole concern. It also concerns itself with the relationship between social status, land tenure and peasant attitudes toward land reform, with cognatic (or omnilineal) descent and with the role of decision oriented micro-studies for understanding the functioning of societies and for development planning.

Whatever its broader implications, this study is an ethnographic description of the Amhara, who along with the culturally similar Tigray, have dominated the Christian Abyssinia plateau. since the fall of the Azumite empire. They are peasants, employing a mixed plow agriculture. They number about five million and have been traditionally organized in a "feudal" pattern of vassals and lords oriented to the imperial throne and Ethiopic Christian church. Following social anthropological tradition, the book describes local level institutions in terms of their structure and associated beliefs and values. Departing from tradition, the author has given us very little detailed description of kinship. This may be justified in part from an analytic point of view. Kinship (not to be confused with descent) holds little relevance to the author's central arguments. It may also be justified from the point of view of the phenomena under study. If the Amhara resemble the culturally very similar Tigray (whom I have studied ND and 1973) in the area of kinship, then it plays a much less central role than in most societies to which anthropology has put its attention. Nevertheless, I feel that putting that kinship material which is relevant together in a single place in the text might have been useful, especially for anthropologists interested in comparative work.

The type of micro-study that social anthropologists indulge in hold its primary significance in producing paradigms for further, and hopefully progressively more adequate, micro-studies elsewhere. The reasons for the impact of the author's micro-study seems to lie in the fact that the understanding of land tenure derived from this study has implications for understanding a number of anomalies which have existed in non-anthropological pursuits in Ethiopia. From the first traveler's accounts, through Marjery Perham's classic account of Ethiopian Government (1948), to some of the current drive behind the land reform movement in Ethiopia and the recent pronouncements of the New York Times, conceptions of what constituted "ownership" of land have been inadequate to fit the social reality. The ownership of vast estates by great lords does not necessarily mean the existence of landless peasants. The existence of "inherited" land does not necessarily mean the existence of a "hereditary" landed class. How this is possible could only be discovered through a detailed knowledge of the functioning of the land tenure system.

The major focus in this book is the rist system of land tenure as it is found in the Dega Damot region of Gojjam province. Some variation of the rist system is found in nearly all parts of the Christian highlands. In a short review such as this it is impossible to adequately discuss a system of the complexity which rist involves. I will attempt to do not more than give the briefest outline. Rist involves both inheritance from one's parents and claims to land though cognatic descent from apical ancestors. Such descent rights are in theory inextinguishable. Their recognition allows for a high degree of vertical social mobility and adjustment to changing political and ecological conditions. While there are regional variations, the system appears to always follow the same dynamic relationship between inheritance and descent.

The author's approach to understanding the functioning of this land tenure system is to examine the values associated with land and the rules of land tenure, plus how actors utilize the values and rules in making their own decisions. The distribution of land is not seen simply as the result of Amhara value or land rules, but as the cumulative result of various actors decisions. Examining actual actor's decisions would appear to be the task of historians rather than that of social anthropologists. However, the type of decisions being examined here

are quite different from those usually of interest to the historian. The historian examines the extraordinary decisions, the seminal events, whereas what is being examined here are the "ordinary" decisions, those which are repeatedly by many actors finding themselves in similar situations with similar goals. The method employed is an advance along the general lines of study suggested by Fredrik Barth (1966).

In addition to the micro-study of land tenure in Gojjam the book contains a section devoted to the 1967 revolt precipitated early government attempts at land reform in that region. We are given an understanding of some of the problems likely to be encountered in attempts at land reform in the rest of the northern plateau. The problems in the south, i.e., in the non-Amhara-Tigray areas, would appear to be quite different. Further studies similar to this one would seem to be in order.

Some issues brought up by the author are of interest primarily to social anthropologists, such as those of cognatic descent. However, others are relevant to much wider audiences. The book is of course a must for Ethiopianists, regardless of topical specialty, due to its implications for economic development, for interpreting historical events and for the probable effects of land reform legislation. It should also be of interest to those interested in development law in general both because of the conclusions reached and the methods used. It is a model of what good anthropology can be.

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