

Awra Amba, an Ethiopian utopia

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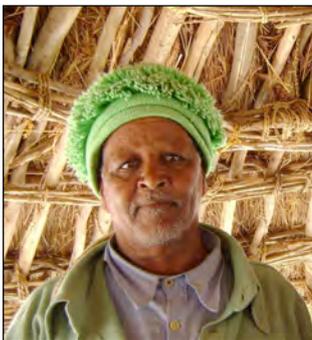
The Ethiopian village of Awra Amba is well established community with a truly extraordinary life style, especially in terms of equality between men and women, community spirit, absence of religion, honesty, hard work, democracy and even ecology. A ferment for emancipation.

The information about this community, available on the Web is disparate and sometimes contradictory (the report is available elsewhere^{7a}). After an attempt to make a synthesis of the available data we decided to enquire into this community's way of life on the spot, spending four days in the village from 13 to 17 April, 2010. Our main sources of information there were the principal guide of the community reception committee, Timbalel, and the community's leader Zumra Nuru. We first checked all the information we had found on the web with them, and we have accepted only what they confirmed (in this case the original reference is given). After that we collected additional information.

We were able to confirm the truth of only part of the information obtained, either through crosschecking or from what we saw. In particular, part of the information obtained on equality of the sexes, brotherhood, religion or economy, and all the historical information on customs and democracy come directly from our official contacts within the community and could not be checked independently. It is sometimes not easy to distinguish between the community's wishes and reality. To do that systematically would have required several months' comprehensive research. The facts and data have been reviewed by the Awra Amba community.

A visionary and difficult start

"When I was child, I was furious about what I saw around me," says Zumra Nuru. "I found it unfair that while my mother helped my father to sow and harvest, he never helped her in the home. I swore to myself that I would change things when grew up."⁴ "My parents were farmers. They both spent the whole day in the farm but when they came back home, it was time for my father to rest but never for my mother. After she has been through the same tiring day as my father, she had to do everything at home. She was expected to cook, clean the house, wash my father's feet and serve the traditional meal. On the top of that, when my mother could not do all that on time, my father abused, insulted and sometimes beat her. I just wondered why this had to happen to my mother, as if she had extra strength or something. But I realized later that this was not an isolated event that only happened in our house, rather it was happening in all families."^{4,5}



"My family is of Muslim origin. I visited my Christian neighbours and ate meat from their home. My mother got angry and threw it away. She said, we couldn't eat meat slaughtered by Christians. I asked if it was not the same animal", or "if Christians were not human beings like us"⁵.

Zumra Nuru Mohammad is the founder of this community and established its principles. Born in 1947 (on August 21st) in Tsimada, he grew up as a farmer's son in the vicinity of Wogeda, in Bahar Dar region, not far from the present location of Awra Amba (North of Addis Ababa, in Amhara region). He had to work in the fields instead of going to school. As a result, he is illiterate (later in life he learned to sign and write a few words, but is unable to read a newspaper or a book). The episodes he recounts were the source of his inspiration. From the age of four⁵, he allegedly started wondering about the unfairness of the gender inequality, the maltreatment of the elderly,

^a The numbers call the references at the end of the text.

labour exploitation, cruel punishment of children, and dishonest dealings among people. In a very religious, traditional and patriarchal society, he was ostracized from childhood by his family and his neighbours, who considered him to be mentally ill⁵, not only because of his support of equality between men and women but also because of his opposition to institutionalized religion.

At 13, instead of going to school like his friends, he was thrown out of his family house⁵, and began a five year journey in the Amhara region (in Gondar, Gojam, Wollo) in search of answers to his questions¹⁴. "I travelled to find people who would accept my ideas," he says^{5,6}. At the age of 18, he returned to his village and got married. In his 20s he became a wandering preacher of his own ideals in the neighbouring villages.

In 1972 he dreamt of setting up this unique community⁸. He convinced a small group of men and women (66 individuals). Eventually, after some defections, 19 families had established a community on about fifty hectares, none of whom were able to read or write.

The people from the neighbouring villages were outraged by the fact that the men, women and children of Awra Amba had the same rights, and by the absence of religion in the community. The Derg regime tried vainly to integrate the community in its system. The community began to recognize that it would not be easy to turn Zumra's childhood dream into reality. In 1986, under the pressure of neighbours their leader was arrested and spent six months in jail without charge and without trial. In the final days of the Derg regime in 1989, when they heard that people from the nearby villages were planning to massacre Zumra and all of his followers, everyone in Awra Amba left their homes in the middle of the night and fled to Bonga, a quiet town near Jimma (south-west of Addis Ababa), to save their lives¹⁴. They wandered for several years in the north of the country, where hunger and illness killed off about twenty of their people.

In 1993-94, after the change of government in 1991, reduced to about thirty people, they came back to Awra Amba, only to find that all the fertile land they used to own had been taken over by those people who were opposed to their way of life. They struggled fiercely to get their land back and they finally succeeded by contacting the local media, which put pressure on the authorities³. They have managed to get back only 17.5 hectares of land out of the original fifty – not enough to feed their growing community. In 1993, the number of his followers had declined from 66 to 19¹⁴. Nowadays their founder and leader still needs round-the-clock protection by an armed guard due to decades of hatred and death threats¹⁵. During the night the village is guarded by villagers by rotation in four guardhouses, an unusual phenomenon in Ethiopia.



General view of the village.

In the foreground on the left, the weaving workshop.

The community had 340 inhabitants in 2003⁹, 400 in 2006⁸, 403 members and 109 families in 2009⁵, and 412 inhabitants and 119 households in 2010, coming mainly from different parts of the Amhara region. They are from various cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds, although the majority are of Muslim origin. Zumra Nuru said more people want to join, but there is not enough space to work^{5,6}. Some community members also live in other locations.

The Awra Amba community has its own rules and regulations. These concern gender equality, children's rights, helping the poorer members, the aged and the sick, and the rejection of dishonesty⁵.

Geography

Awra Amba (sometimes written Awramba or Awura Amba) is located 74 km from the town of Bahar Dar (itself at 631 km north-west of the capital Addis Ababa), in the Debub Gondar (or South Gondar) Zone in



Amhara region, about 1900 m above sea level (Addis Ababa is more than 2300 m asl). To go here, you have to leave the good Bahir Dar – Gondar road and after Woreta drive 11 kilometres over a road paved in 2010 in the direction of Debre Tabor and then a 2-kilometre track to the South. The community can be contacted by phone (+251 (0)58 231 0108), and the cooperative by post (Awra Amba association, PO Box 36, Woreta, Ethiopia).

Within this region of 17.2 million inhabitants, the zone had an estimated total population in 2005 of 2.426 millions. 99.9 % are Amhara, 95.5 and 4.4 % are Ethiopian Orthodox and Muslim respectively. In 2004, 4 % of the inhabitants of Debu Gondar had access to electricity, 49 % of all eligible children were enrolled in primary school, and 9 % in secondary schools¹⁷. Debu Gondar is made up of 10 woredas (districts). Among these is Fogera, on the eastern shore of Lake Tana. It is here that Awra Amba is located. Fogera covers an area of 1095 km² and had a population of 185 000 in 1994, 256 000 in 2005 which gives a population increase of 3 % per year.

Equality between men and women

In a country where, 15 years ago, a husband was still authorized to “discipline” his wife⁴, and where gender and age are the chief parameters concerning work (women and the youngest do most of the work), in Awra Amba, children and women are respected and equal to male adults. "Firstly, we introduced equality at work. In our community, tasks are not assigned according to sex but according to individual abilities and preferences. Only pregnancy and breast-feeding are the prerogative of women", says Zumra Nuru³, who adds: "Men do women's work, and women do men's work"¹⁴. So Awra Amba is known as a community where men care for children, cook and spin, and where women plough and weave. Men and women perform all these tasks side by side, while in Ethiopia (and elsewhere...), these occupations are assigned to the other sex.



Female and male water carriers back from spring

Nevertheless a limited count shows that, for the traditionally female tasks, out of 51 people carrying water from the spring (and therefore carrying about fifteen kilograms), 35 are still women, that out of ten spinners in the cooperative, eight are women (and out of fourteen spinners during the development day, twelve were women). For the traditionally male trades, out of eleven weavers, eight are men, and the five ploughmen we saw were all men. Gender equality in the various tasks seems therefore not fully reached, but we also have to consider that the tasks are also attributed according to capacity: Spinning is an easy task, ploughing is physically very difficult. At least half of the objectives are reached, which is considerable.

"At home, we share authority with our husband, and we are happy and proud of that", says a woman of the village. It is easy for either of them to apply for divorce, which is nevertheless frequent in Ethiopia. Here women rights are respected, whereas in the rest of this poor country, traditions and traditional practices are followed, not the law. Melkenesh Seid, one of the women living in Awra Amba is happy with this situation. She said: "Being a member of Awra Amba means I am respected within the family

and treated as an equal. I am able to claim my rights and if I am no longer happy in my marriage, I know than if I divorce, I get 50 % of our property." ⁴

Zumra fought excision of young girls, a traditional practice that was almost universal twenty years ago in Ethiopia. It has since been outlawed, but is still commonly practised. Evolution on this subject has been gradual in Awra Amba, but there have not been any excisions for 25 years.

Early and forced marriages are forbidden (they concern usually half of the children in rural communities ¹⁶). Girls are not allowed to marry before the age of 19, boys not before 20. Contraception is encouraged and widely used, as everywhere in Ethiopia. Women have three to four children, while the Ethiopian average was 5.3 in 2008 ¹⁶. Zumra himself had six children by two successive wives. The community considers that a woman older than 45 should no longer have children.

Nevertheless, the right to abortion, illegal but openly discussed in Ethiopia, is not demanded by the community. They think that abortion remains a private affair, always possible in a private clinic in town. It shows how the community deliberately keeps out of the national political debate.

Honesty

"I have seen people injure, kill and steal from one another. I knew that we as people were doing things to others that we would hate if they happened to us. But, how do we differ from animals if we don't think and behave humanly?" ⁵, said Zumra.

Honesty is one of the core values of the Awra Amba community. In order to join the community, you have to be honest and to live peacefully: you should not lie, steal, swear, quarrel or behave immorally ¹⁴. These rules are written down in a document of about twenty pages in Amharic. This line of conduct is assessed daily. If a community member does not comply with it, the other members first talk with him in order to put him back on the right track. If he does not change his ways, he is isolated from the others, which makes him think about his actions. He can eventually be expelled from the community, but this has never happened. Awra Amba is therefore not a community open to all.

There is no theft in Awra Amba, and children do not beg – almost unimaginable in a country where begging is widespread ². Nevertheless, houses are all locked in order to be protected against outsiders (many people from the neighbouring villages come to Awra Amba for the mill, the shop or the café).

Members of the community must abstain from alcohol, cigarettes, khat and even coffee, the national drink, which is considered addictive and a threat to mental well-being ³. Only tea is allowed as it is considered less dangerous, and it is drunk a lot in the local café.

The community is uncompromising in sexual matters; sexual relations are forbidden before marriage, as is adultery after marriage.

Religion

The Awramba Community does not follow any religion, and they believe in honesty and love for all human beings – this is their religion ⁵. "At the beginning, we were Christians or Muslims", says Zumra. "But today, we believe in the same creator. He is everywhere around us and in us. There is no need to shut him in a church or in a mosque. We don't give him a name, because that is the way to divide humans. We don't believe in life after death, as we have no proof of that. We build our paradise in this life, by working and showing solidarity to others." Timbalel, the community guide, says: "we have no Bible, but we put into practice the main principles we found in the holy books: no theory, but practice". The people of Awra Amba do not observe the country's many religious holidays and not even its public holidays. The only holiday the village takes is on the first day of the New Year according to the national calendar, the 11th of September ³. Funerals are carried out quickly, without ceremony, because "if we have something to tell somebody, we have to do while they are alive". However, in case of death, the whole village stops working until the funeral. Work doesn't stop even for weddings ².

There is therefore no religious rite and practically no religious beliefs. The only exception is the belief that mankind was created from an initial couple: the evolution of species is therefore not recognised...

Solidarity

Solidarity is another essential value of the community. "In Ethiopian society, the less fortunate and the old do not have anyone to take care of them. They may not even have anything to eat or anywhere to live. But the young and the stronger ones have a good time and don't have time to look after the less fortunate ones"⁵, said Zumra.

Solidarity is put to practice on two levels in Awra Amba:

- The community, which comprises all the inhabitants sharing common values and a certain way of life. It was founded with the village, in 1972. This community is then divided in two parts: the Awra Amba inhabitants who really follow the common rules (412 people), and external members living somewhere else (Bahar Dar, Addis Ababa...), who meet up with local members once or twice a year, who form a sort of supporting and advisory committee.
- The cooperative, founded in 1986 by an initial small group of 19 people, growing continuously to today's count of 143 adult members (81 women and 62 men). With their children, the cooperative members represent 343 inhabitants of Awra Amba. It is a work collective within the community. 87 community members are therefore not members of the cooperative and work independently, usually by weaving at home. The cooperative no longer accepts new members at the moment due to lack of work.

All members of the cooperative spend five days a week doing communal work. At the end of the year, the profits are shared equally among them: In 2009, their personal income per year was 3000 birrs, i.e. 14 euro per month for each cooperative member. This income is increasing, but is yet lower than those of the neighbouring farmers. However, it should be considered higher due to the collective income which provides for welfare, education and village management. It could be also compared to the minimum advised income in Ethiopia of one birr per hour¹¹, corresponding to an income of nearly 2200 birrs a year, i.e. 120 euro. The cooperative thinks that this egalitarian sharing will always be possible, even if activities and competences are bound to diversify in the future.

The community members spend one day a week helping the elderly, the ill and the needy. It is "development day", on Tuesday. Everyone is free to work for themselves outside these working days of nine hours each. The villagers can spend the seventh day of the week as they please. Usually, they go to market, wash and clean, or collect wood. This day off is Wednesday the first week and Saturday the next week.

All in all, then, the Awra Amba inhabitants work a lot: Work is an essential value of the community, as is equality, in a basically non-egalitarian Ethiopian society.

New mothers get three months maternity leave (one month before delivery, two months after). A member of the community looks after the welfare of all the young children whose parents are working⁸. The sick are treated in a small infirmary the community completed in 2007, and in a new building built in 2009 by the State. The infirmary has a full time nurse, Aman, paid by the community and not born in the community. He lives in the village and is available 24 hours a day. The infirmary is equipped for antenatal care, birth control and the first aid.

The elderly who are no longer able to work, even a little, are not only respected, but the community takes on their expenditure. They are housed in a separate building, where they are fed three times a day⁸, washed (volunteers give them three baths a week⁸) and receive free medical care³, 24 hours a day⁶. "The elderly are everybody's elderly, they are part of the family". At first a small building with two or three beds was reserved for their use. This was replaced by a new one with twelve small individual rooms which are maintained by the community. In 2010 eight of these were used by people between the ages of 75 and 90, two of them being outsiders to the community. The community no longer takes old people from outside due to lack of means.

Another rule at Awra Amba is that of universal brotherhood. Black or white, all are equal. When Zumra is asked about ethnic affiliations, he simply says "we belong to every ethnic group, not one or the other"⁵. For this reason, foreign visitors pay the same rates as their Ethiopian counterparts, which is rarely the case in Ethiopia.

Education

“ Children’s rights are not respected in our society as they should be. Too often, children are made to do jobs that take no account of what they can really do.”⁵ "Our sons and daughters have the right to education and to play". All the children go to school as long as possible according to their ability. "To be educated means respecting and helping each other in order to establish a brotherhood", said Zumra¹⁴. Children play rather than work⁶, but help their parents after school and are encouraged to continue studying after they come home from school.

The community built a kindergarten in the centre of the village where, every day from 8 to 9 a.m. and from 2 to 3 p.m. a teacher, who is a member of the community, looks after the children from three to seven (about twenty in 2010). In addition to basic education, much time is spent learning about "the nature of human beings, women's rights and respect for others"³.



Kindergarten
and new library

The community also built its first library in 1997, no longer used but preserved as witness of the past. A new library opened in August 2007. Built, as most of the houses are, with wood and mud, its benches and tables are made of stone, wood and mud, covered with plastic. There is no electricity in the library, which is open from 5 p.m. till dusk. Run by a librarian, the books are referred to on site by the scholars and students of the village, and practically never by adults, who "have no time for reading", we were told. The library has around 500 books, of which more than 90 % concern languages and natural sciences: there is hardly any literature, and practically no social sciences. Zumra considers that technology is the most important subject and gives a lot of importance to practice: culture, social and human problems are learnt in the community itself and especially from him, whereas technology can only come from the outside. This almost exclusive fascination for the hard sciences and technology seems to be quite unusual in Ethiopia.

As elsewhere in Ethiopia, the older children continue to study in the state school, four hours a day from Monday to Friday. Since September 2009, an eleven-classroom school (level 1 to 8) has been opened near the village for children aged 7-16. There are 613 students, including 164 from Awra Amba. The latter are more hard-working than others: the attendance rate is 100 % for the community children, but only 90 % for the other students, the usual rate in Ethiopia being about 80 % according to the head master, Mohamed Alemie, 29.

In addition the children from Awra Amba study in the state school four hours a morning on Saturday and Sunday for lesson review and exercises. For that the teachers are directly paid by the community (400 birrs a month, i.e. 22 euros). The head master assures us that the students from Awra Amba succeed more than others.

The state school is also open for adults who wish to acquire extra knowledge through special lessons. We were told that all residents of the village can read and write - a considerable achievement in a country where nearly two thirds of the inhabitants are illiterate¹⁶.

In 2007, two students from the community graduated from university, while nine others were attending

university in different parts of the country¹⁴. In 2009, there were respectively five and eleven⁵, and in 2010 seven and ten. Two out of the seven graduates are health officers (between nurse and doctor), one is an agricultural technician, four are teachers (one at the faculty of medicine, one in short post-secondary school courses, one is the headmaster of the state school in the village, and one is a teacher). Most of these people, four men and three women, live in the region.

Economy

As they cannot live on agriculture alone, given the poverty and the scarcity of the soil, they have diversified into weaving, milling and trade. The cooperative owns a weaving workshop, a mill, shops and an Isuzu truck. Weaving is the first source of the cooperative's income, then trade, then milling and finally the truck.

The twenty looms, either traditional or modern, are operated by hand: six of them are made of wood, the others of metal. The cooperative would like to have electric machines, which are less tiring. The breeze-block buildings of the weaving workshops, and also five metal looms, were paid for by the Netherlands. Spinning is considered an easy job, and is done in the same building. The village produces shirts, dresses, skirts, tablecloths, scarves, hats, towels, blankets and other garments⁸, sold on site or on markets.

A first mill was donated by the regional government through the Amhara Development Association, and since then the cooperative has continued to develop this activity. Today it owns six electric mills for tef (the national cereal), maize and sorghum from the village and from neighbouring farmers. "Neighbouring farmers prefer to use our mills because they trust us not to cheat them", according to one of the villagers⁶.

Finally the cooperative owns three grocery shops: one in the village and two others in the neighbouring towns of Woreta and Aember.

Farming is marginal in Awra Amba given the limited area which is cultivated. They produce tef, maize and sorghum, and breed cows, for which a barn was financed by the United States. Surprisingly, several fields have not been cleared of stones, which should considerably increase the work involved in ploughing and maintenance, and greatly reduce their productivity. The cooperative considers clearing the stones would take too much work. Finally, unlike the rest of Ethiopia, Awra Amba inhabitants use saws and not only axes to cut eucalyptus for timber or firewood.



Environment

The houses are built of mud with a thatch roof and increasingly with corrugated iron. They are equipped with a stove and similar furniture in all houses, and often with a private weaving machine. The stove is a closed model specific to the village, designed by Zumra in 1979⁸. It is raised off the ground to prevent young children being burnt accidentally⁸ and has a chimney which evacuates the smoke (this is not always the case in Ethiopia). The chimney has a bend in it, on which water can be boiled, and which also enables it to be cleaned. Energy consumption for cooking is half as high as elsewhere according to the German cooperation (GTZ). Each house is also equipped with a kitchen dresser made of wood and mud.

Each household has a Turkish toilet on a cesspool. These toilets are grouped together, and are located 50-100 meters outside the village.

Houses and furniture are built from the same material as every African village has: mud. The difference is that they are built attractively, while bearing energy saving in mind, and also the need for furniture which can be made of the same mud, not limiting the design to just the basic roof and walls.¹

The village has some rubbish containers, which is most unusual in Ethiopia, in which the rubbish is burnt

outside the village. All homes have electricity, and water is available at four taps installed by the State: it is free at the old manual pump, and has to be paid for at the taps connected to a diesel pump.



Stove and furniture common to all houses in the community

Democracy

The community is run by thirteen committees elected every three years by a show of hands in a general assembly:

- The development committee, supervising the twelve others
- The under-development committee responsible for the poorest
- The aged committee in charge of the elderly
- The health committee taking care of the sick and of pregnant women
- The sanitation committee, which is responsible for cleaning the communal parts of the village, encourages everyone to keep their own home clean and helps those unable to do so
- The education committee, which runs the community kindergarten and the involvement of the community in extra lessons in the public school
- The reception committee, which is in charge of contacts with visitors. It employs a chief guide, Timbalel, and a second guide, Amane, both 22 in 2010. The first one studied up to the 11th level, the second one up to the 12th (completion of secondary education)
- The economic committee
- The work assignment committee, which assigns a job to each member, mainly within the cooperative
- The complaints committee, which deals with the disputes between members, the police being called on only as a last resort,
- These security committee in charge of the village's security
- The lost property committee, which manages lost property and returns it to its owner
- The committee which prepares future rules and regulations

The founder Zumra is member of the development committee and of the reception committee. The committees meet at least once a year and vote by show of hands. The main decisions are voted by all adults (over 18): these referendums take place around once a year. Within the cooperative, the participation in decision-making should be around 90 %.

The teahouse is the heart of the village where people meet, gossip and debate about every day things as well as big philosophical matters ¹⁵.

An example?

The experimental community first came to the nation's awareness when Zumra Nuru gave an interview on national television around 2006. Since then, numerous camera crews have visited the village. They are not alone. Government officials, members of parliament, sheikhs and priests from the whole Amhara region and from elsewhere, and local and foreign non-governmental organization workers have made the trip using the road (not tarred till 2009) to see the success of the community for themselves. ⁶ Many school buses arrive every month. In 2009 the village received six thousand Ethiopian visitors and also a handful of Westerners. The village has constructed a hostel for visitors, who must first of all describe the purpose of their visit ⁸. Its founder is also invited to share his experience in different universities

throughout the country. Thus he was invited six times in 2009: twice to Addis-Abeba and Bahar Dar, once to Awasa and Mekele. He was also invited to neighbouring Kenya, but was not able to attend through lack of finance (moreover, speaking only Amharic, he would have had to be accompanied).



The entrance to Awra Amba and the village square

Today the village is credited with being "an extraordinary initiative within a traditional and conservative society", "with triggering amazing change in the Amhara region", and as being "a good example for other Ethiopian communities - and even beyond Ethiopia - because of its gender equality, its work ethic, and its social security system"⁶. In addition to all this, the UN has given Zumra the title of peace ambassador, and has given the village two gold medals.

It is an amazing adventure, initiated by an almost illiterate farmer, who has never read any of the classics on emancipation, who has never drawn inspiration from the countless similar social struggles or experiments throughout the world, and who, until recently, has never had any real contact with intellectual or social movements in Ethiopia and even less with foreign ones. Contacts with the Ethiopian social movement and intellectuals are now quite numerous, although there has not yet been any real work in common, and, as far as we know, no research work on the community itself. At the same time the community insists on being independent of all political parties, whom they consider to be nothing more than tools for power and personal enrichment.

International relations are much less developed: The community knows very little about the rest of the world, despite the presence of university graduates. Zumra admits that he knows nothing about what exists outside Ethiopia. But he is ready to explain his ideas everywhere, and eager to present them himself. After reaching its first objective - peace and brotherhood in the community, Awra Amba's goal is now to make his model for society known all over the world^{4,5}, and to spread it everywhere, beyond the frontiers of Ethiopia^{4,15}. The community hopes to found brother communities, elsewhere but this has not yet been possible.

Zumra talks about him: "I am not a kind of king, or a kind of power. I have an idea I want to spread all over the world. It is the idea of peace, which is essential for all people, and the idea of the prosperity of human kind. We are all brothers and sisters. We are all from the same generation, women are our sisters, men are our brothers. Elsewhere, it is different, people steal, kill and fight. In Awra Amba, we don't just talk, we put things into practice."

Conclusion

Very far from the country's cultural and religious norms, the Awra Amba community is an exception in Ethiopia, marginalised and looked upon as social deviants by neighbouring communities.

It appears as an extraordinary experiment for its values and way of life based on solidarity, equality, absence of religion, democracy, and even ecology. The most innovative and original aspect is without doubt the importance given to honesty, explicitly proclaimed and applied. Its values are simple and could seem a bit naïve to the cynical Westerner¹. They have nonetheless modified the way of life of a community from top to bottom, in one of the poorest and most isolated countries of the world. They enable all its members to be well fed and housed, whatever their age, while there is a large number of homeless people and beggars in Ethiopia. Their children are cleaner and better dressed than elsewhere.

The women of the village rarely wear traditional clothes, unlike women of the neighbouring villages: it shows without doubt a refusal to accept the traditional customs.

Awra Amba was founded by a visionary who had decided that world brotherhood should be put into practice, and that is what he did, at the same time putting a lot of innovative ideas into practice. All this came from his own personal experience and thinking, which began in his childhood, in reaction to the aberrant behaviour he observed all around him. Children's rights, education, gender equality as well as equality in general, absence of religion, honesty, brotherhood and solidarity are not only proclaimed but applied. It is a very practical way of life, not theoretical at all, in a very hostile environment. Awra Amba stands out from most social movements, but is similar to the experiments of utopian socialism: It is a movement which aims not mainly to convince, but to act, and build a new society. The rural origin of its pioneers is surely part of the explanation.

Awra Amba is therefore in line with the long list of utopian communities like the Adamites from Bohemia in the 15th century, the Jesuit mission in Paraguay 1609-1768, Robert Owen's model factories in the 1820s in Great Britain and the United States, the Guise Familistère in France, founded by the industrialist Jean-Baptiste Godin, which ran from 1849 to 1968 and employed over 2000 workers at the end of the 19th century, the La Reunion phalanstery in Texas, 1853-1875, which was a large farm up to 5000 hectares, the Icaria communities in the US in the second half of the 19th century, and finally the hippy communities in the 1960-70s, or the Auroville adventure in India, which has attracted around 2000 people since 1968.

In Africa, social organisations similar to Awra Amba exist or have partially existed in numerous villages or small closed communities in Algeria and elsewhere in the Arab world like the Mozabits, Kabyles¹⁰, East-Algerian Chaouis or Touaregs in the Sahara. They are autonomous societies or societies who deliberately isolated themselves from their community of origin like the Mozabits. Awra Amba was constructed in reaction to its society of origin, but is still part of it.

As far as the potential for emancipation of the experiment is concerned - especially in terms of solidarity - Awra Amba is close to the minimum wage program set up in the village of Otjivero, Namibia. The basic monthly wage of about 10 euros for each citizen incredibly improved the conditions of its 1000 residents by stimulating production and demand: The percentage of people living under the poverty threshold has been reduced from 79 to 37 %. Before the experiment, about half the children suffered from malnutrition, today there are less than 10 %; 60% completed elementary school; today there are 90 %. And the crime rate has gone down...^{12, 13}.

Each of these past or present projects has its own specificities, and none of them are identical to Awra Amba. But the founding idea is the same: against the surrounding society or independent of it, to build a community which is organised according to its own rules, and which puts some of Awra Amba's values into practice. Local Society's hostility is never far off, and in many cases this has put a stop to the experiment. Assuring the continuation of the project is often difficult - a lot of experiments in utopian socialism haven't lasted more than 2 or 3 years, and the idea of spreading their influence elsewhere is only a dream. But these experiments are still examples for all present and future societies, and have an educative function, since they provide a wealth of lessons concerning the emancipation of peoples and of citizens.

At the same time, in Awra Amba there are very few intellectual openings towards other cultures, even if they hold in common a number of the ideas they put into practice. Zumra and his community are very confident in their own culture, considered as unique in Ethiopia. Paradoxically, this lack of interest in the external ideas comes with an extreme importance given to education. But education is seen as a tool and is mainly technical: it concerns both main languages in Ethiopia (Amharic and English), hard sciences and ethics. Literature and most parts of social sciences are almost entirely absent. Politics and the political parties are seen as tools for getting personal power and are not to be trusted at all.

Zumra, the founder and leader, is almost seen as a prophet, an extraordinary man revered by the community, and whose heroic childhood deeds have no doubt been slightly embellished (this behaviour could be closer to the religious veneration so widespread in Ethiopian culture). It is astonishing that he

has not learnt to read like other adults of Awra Amba: His answer to that is that he did try, but was unable to concentrate in class, and later suffered from eye problems. These arguments are not very convincing. Although the Awra Amba culture is extremely advanced - in a deeply entrenched peasant environment - it has also amazingly reactionary sides, which seem to them as natural as the progressive ones: the belief in a universal creator who created the human race from an original couple, or the absence of any position on abortion, which remains a private business. It is no doubt important for community members to become more aware of debates on social matters, this will enable their project to go on after the founder is no longer there, by basing their reflexion on other experiments and being inspired by other ideas.



The community is a remarkable example of citizens taking responsibility themselves, and therefore a remarkable example of development, around a leader who seems not to be interested in power, but keeps to his inspirational role. Far from the famine of the 1980s, far also from the food shortage present in parts of Ethiopia today, far from the Africa which seems to have been left out of world development, but in which the problems associated with under-development, corruption and murderous conflicts continue to pile up, this experiment, which has been going on for more than thirty years, provides a wealth of lessons for other communities:

- It is founded on values (honesty, solidarity, gender equality, children rights) which it promotes and applies;
- It rejects religious obscurantism and above all submission to a divine order outside humanity, by asserting everybody's responsibility, individually and collectively, for building a better life. It takes its own destiny in its hands, and constructs its own freedom;
- It has shown great determination and great courage, firstly by rebelling against unacceptable practices, then by facing up to the hostility of many opponents who wish to exterminate it.

Even if the Awra Amba experiment finds it difficult to extend and be adopted in other countries, or even survive after the departure of its charismatic leader, it is still an extraordinary African example of a social emancipation and a real catalyst for development.

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