

# Awra Amba, an Ethiopian utopia, according to the web

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According to the documentation available on the web at the end of march 2010, the small Ethiopian village of Awra Amba (or Awramba) is a community with a truly extraordinary life style, especially in terms of gender equality, social security, atheism, democracy, honesty, hard work and ecology. The following is a synthesis of varied and even contradictory information available on the web, from six journalist reports (ezega.com, Addis Ababa, 2006<sup>8a</sup>; The Christian Science Monitor, Boston, 2007<sup>10</sup>; AfricaNews, Amsterdam, 2007<sup>15</sup>; Paulina Tervo, UK, 2009<sup>16</sup>; Marie Claire, Paris, 2009<sup>4,5</sup>; and France 24, Paris, 2009<sup>6</sup>), two pieces by a consultant and a regional Ethiopian civil servant, respectively written in 2003<sup>14</sup> and 2009<sup>7</sup>, of three visitors<sup>2,12,13</sup>, two international<sup>1</sup> or Ethiopian<sup>9</sup> NGOs and from the French<sup>17</sup> and English<sup>18</sup> versions of Wikipedia. Another journalist report is available on the education in Awramba, in Amharic<sup>22</sup>, and a website in Lithuanian<sup>20</sup>. A stay on site in April 2010, whose report is available<sup>11</sup>, allows us to show some obvious errors between brackets and *in italics*.

## 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." <sup>5</sup> "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 tiresome day with my father, she had to do everything at home. She was expected to cook, clean the house, and us, the children, wash my father's foot, serve the traditional meal (*in fact his mother and not the children washed the foot and served*). On the top of that, when my mother could not take care of the house on time, my father abused, insulted and sometimes harmed 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." <sup>6,8</sup>

"My family is originally Muslim. I visited my Christian neighbours and ate meat at their home (*in fact from their home*). My mother got angry and beat me (*she didn't beat him but threw it away*). She said, we can't eat meat slaughtered by Christians. I said, is it not the same animal?" <sup>10</sup>, or "are the Christians not human beings as we are?" <sup>8</sup>.



Zumra Nuru Mohammad founded this community and established its principles. Born in 1947<sup>6,8,10</sup> (or even in 1942<sup>5</sup>, 1945<sup>16</sup>, 1946<sup>15</sup> or 1948<sup>7</sup>) (*in fact in 1947*) in Tsimada<sup>8</sup>, he grew up in Este, Gojam (Nord-East of Addis Ababa, Amhara Region). He had to work in the fields instead of going to school. As a result, he was almost illiterate (or even fully). The episodes he recounts were the source of his inspiration. When he turned 4 years old, he started questioning about the behaviour of human beings<sup>8</sup>: He observed the unfairness on gender inequality, maltreatment of the elderly, 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 mentally ill person<sup>8</sup>, not only for his support for equality between the sexes but for his opposition to institutionalized religion.

At 13, instead of going to school like his friends, he was thrown out of his family house<sup>8</sup>, and

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<sup>a</sup> The numbers refer to the endnotes.

began travelling to neighbouring regions in search of answers to his questions<sup>15</sup>. In his 20s he became a wandering preacher of his own ideals. "I travelled to find people who would accept my ideas," he says<sup>8,10</sup>.

He had a dream in 1964 (*in fact in 1972, id est 1967 according to the Ethiopian calendar*) to establish this unique community<sup>13</sup>. When he was 30<sup>5</sup> (or in the early 70s<sup>16</sup>, or in 1980<sup>8</sup> or in the 80s<sup>10?</sup>), he convinced a small group of men and women (19 people<sup>8,18</sup>, or 66 households<sup>15?</sup>) (*66 people in fact*) to found the association called Awramba Community<sup>8</sup>. They settled where they are today in the Amhara region (one of the nine regions of Ethiopia), in 1972<sup>6</sup>.

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. They opposed the activities of the community<sup>15</sup>, which began to recognize that it would not be easy to turn Zumra's childhood dream into reality. Its leader Zumra was arrested and spent six months in jail without charge and without being brought to court (or for accusations of being a spy<sup>16</sup>). In the final days of the Derg regime in 1989, when they heard that people from the nearby villages were going 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 town, south-west of Addis Ababa, to save their lives<sup>15</sup>. They wandered for several years in the north of the country, where hunger and illness killed about twenty of their people. Reduced to about thirty people, they struggled fiercely to get their land back. They finally succeeded (*partially*) by contacting the local media, which put pressure on the authorities.<sup>5</sup>

After the change of government in 1991, they came back to Awra Amba in 1993<sup>6,13</sup>, only to find that all the fertile land they used to own had been taken over by those people who were against their lifestyle. They were forced to settle on the land that they are on today<sup>15</sup>. They have managed to get back only 43 acres of land (slightly more than 17 hectares) - not enough to support a growing community with farming<sup>10</sup>. By the time he was released from prison in 1993, the number of his followers had declined to 19 from 66<sup>15</sup>. Zumra Nuru, its founder and leader, still needs round-the-clock protection by an armed guard due to decades of hatred and death threats<sup>16</sup>.

The community had 340 inhabitants in 2003<sup>14</sup>, 400 in 2006<sup>13</sup>, 388 in 2007 (*in fact, more, as the population grew continuously*) with 96<sup>10</sup> or 104<sup>15</sup> families, and in 2009 had 403 members and 109 families<sup>8</sup>, coming from different parts of the country, from various cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds<sup>16</sup>. Zumra Nuru said more people want to join, but there is not enough space to work<sup>8,10</sup>.

The Awra Amba community has its own rules and regulations: These are gender equity; the right of children; the principle of helping the less fortunate, ill and old; and the principle of discouraging dishonesty, lying, murder and stealing<sup>8</sup>.

## Geography

Awra Amba (meaning 'top of the hill' - *this meaning is an error*) is located 62<sup>14</sup> km from the town of Bahir Dar (or 73 km<sup>17?</sup>) (*in fact 74 km*), in the Debub Gondar (or South Gondar) Zone in Amhara region. To go here, you have to leave the good road Bahir Dar – Gondar and to drive after Woreta 11 kilometres over a potholed gravel road in the direction of Debre Tabor and then a 2-kilometre track to the South<sup>12,13</sup>.

Within this region of 17.2 millions, 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 Debub Gondar had access to electricity, 49 % of all eligible children were enrolled in primary school, and 9 % in secondary schools<sup>19</sup>. Debub 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 had a population of 185 000 in 1994, 256 000 in 2005. It covers an area of 1095 km<sup>2</sup>. Each woreda is composed of a number of kebeles, or neighbourhood associations, which are the smallest unit of local government in Ethiopia.<sup>18</sup>

## **Equality between the sexes**

In a country where, 15 years ago, it was still legal to discipline your wife<sup>6</sup>, in Awra Amba, children and women are respected and equal to male adults<sup>8</sup>. "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 Nuru<sup>5</sup>, who adds: "Men do women's work, and women do men's work"<sup>1</sup>. So Awra Amba is known as a community where men care for children, cook and weave, and where women plough. Men and women perform all these tasks side by side, while in Ethiopia (and elsewhere...), these occupations are assigned to the other sex.

"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 to apply for divorce, which is nevertheless frequent in Ethiopia. Here women rights are respected, when in the rest of this poor country, traditions and traditional practices are followed, not the law. Melkenesh Seid, a woman of Awra Amba happy with this situation, said: "Being a member of Awra Amba means I am respected within the family and treated as an equal. I am able to discuss my rights and if I am no longer happy in my marriage, I know that if I divorce, I get 50 % of our belonging." <sup>6</sup>

## **Sexuality and morals**

Girls in Awra Amba are not forced to undergo genital excision, a traditional practice that was almost universal twenty years ago in Ethiopia. It has since been outlawed, but is still commonly practised.

Early and forced marriages are forbidden. Girls are not allowed to marry before the age of 18, boys not before 22 (*the limits are in fact 19 and 20 resp.*). Contraception is encouraged and widely used.

The young people of the community are uncompromising in matters of sexuality, even when they leave to attend university in the nearest town: while prostitution is widespread and 15 % of the Ethiopian population is HIV positive (*the rate seems much lower according to UNICEF*), no one from Awra Amba has tested positive in the health check required before marriage<sup>5</sup>.

"I saw people hurting, killing, and stealing from one another. I knew that we as people were doing something to others that we would hate if it happened to us. But, how do we differ from animals if we don't think and behave humanly?"<sup>8</sup>, said Zumra.

The honesty of the people and their outlook on promoting only the good of humankind are also among the unique characteristics of the Awra Amba community<sup>15</sup>. There is no theft in Awra Amba, and children do not beg – almost unimaginable in a country where begging is common place<sup>4</sup>.

Members of the community must abstain from alcohol, cigarettes, chat and even coffee, the national drink, which is considered addictive and a threat to mental well-being<sup>5</sup>. In order to join the community one has in addition not to lie, to steal, to curse, not to have conflict or immoral conduct<sup>16</sup>.

## **Education**

"The right of children is not respected in our society as it should be. Too often, children are engaged on duties that do not take into account their capacities for doing things." <sup>8</sup>

"Our sons and daughters have the right to education and to play". The first school is located in the village centre, beside both libraries, the original and the new one<sup>12</sup>. Priority is given to the youngest children before 7 (or between 3 and 5<sup>10?</sup>) (*in fact between 3 and 7*), but there are also adults who want to learn more. They are taught by other village residents who have knowledge to share. They teach Amharic (the official Ethiopian language), English, geography and mathematics. (*Adults can in fact learn in the public school with its teachers*)

The older ones continued at the public school of the nearby town. In 2008, another school was open

for grades 1-9 (*it is in fact a public school for grades 1-8, open in 2009*) where also children from neighbouring communities study<sup>16</sup>.



*The new library  
photo Kristen<sup>12</sup>*

All residents of the village can read and write - a considerable achievement in a country where half the population is illiterate (*two thirds according to UNICEF*). In addition to basic education, much time is spent learning about "the nature of human beings, women's rights and respect for others"<sup>5</sup>. All children go to school until the age of 18<sup>16</sup> (*in fact as far as possible according to their capacity*). "To be educated means respecting and helping each other in order to establish a brotherhood", said Zumra<sup>1</sup>. Children play instead of working<sup>10</sup> but help their parents after the school and are encouraged to continue studying after coming home from school each day<sup>17</sup>.

In 2007, two students from Awra Amba graduated from university, while nine others were attending university in different parts of the country<sup>15</sup>. In 2009, they were respectively five and eleven<sup>8</sup>.

## **Religion**

The Awramba Community does not follow any religion, and they believe in honesty and love for all human beings – this is their religion<sup>8</sup>. "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." The people of Awra Amba do not observe the country's many religious holidays and not even its public holidays. The only holiday is the village takes is on the first day of the New Year according to the national calendar, the 11<sup>th</sup> of September.<sup>5</sup> Funerals are carried out quickly, without ceremony, because "if we have something to tell to somebody, we have to do while they are alive". If someone dies, only 2 – 3 people bury the deceased and get on with their work<sup>16</sup> (*no: the whole village stops their work till the funeral*). Work doesn't stop even for weddings<sup>4</sup>. It is not pure atheism, but it is not far from it...

## **Solidarity**

In our society, the less fortunate and the old do not have anyone to take care of them. They may not even have anything to eat and a place to live. But the young and the stronger ones are having the good time and don't have time to look after the less fortunate ones"<sup>8</sup>, said Zumra.

All members of the village (*in fact only the members of the co-operative, which meets around 80 % of the people*) spend five days a week doing communal work. At the end of the year, the profits are shared equally among about a hundred families, regardless of the number of children (*the sharing is made in fact between the co-operative members*). The sixth day of the week is dedicated to helping the elderly, the ill and the needy. Everyone is free to work for themselves outside these six communal 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, collect wood, or cultivate their own plot land (*in fact there is no private cultivated land*).<sup>4,5</sup>

New mothers get three months of maternity leave and are helped by a special committee<sup>7</sup>. An assigned attendant looks after the welfare of all the young children whose parents are working<sup>13</sup>. The sick are treated in a small infirmary the community has just completed. While it still lacks some medicines, there is no shortage of qualified staff: it is run by a doctor and two nurses, all of them born in the village<sup>5</sup> (*in fact only a nurse not born in the village*). Contrary to African traditions, the elderly are here not only respected (as is true in the rest of Africa)<sup>12</sup>, but are housed

in a separate building, where they are fed, washed and nursed for free<sup>5</sup>, 24 hours a day<sup>10</sup>.

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."<sup>8</sup> For this reason, foreign visitors pay the same rates as their Ethiopian counterparts, for a change. This is a quarter of the usual rate, for accommodation, meals or locally made clothes<sup>4</sup> (*in fact prices are equivalent outside Awra Amba, for similar service*).

## Economy

As they cannot live on farm activities, given the soil poverty and the scarcity, they have diversified into the weaving business, using both traditional and modern weaving machines<sup>18</sup>, and the milling service to neighbouring farmers, as they own one small grain mill donated by the Amhara Development Association<sup>14</sup>. "Neighbouring farmers prefer to use our mills because they trust us not to cheat them", according to a native of the village<sup>10</sup>.

The cottage industry produces shirts, dresses, skirts, table clothes, scarf, hats, towels, blankets and many other forms of garment using attractive design<sup>13</sup>, in a co-operative (tel. +251 (0) 582 206 276 - *it is in fact the phone number of an organism for small enterprises*)<sup>3</sup>.

Awra Amba will not accept donations (*false: some buildings have been financed by foreign donations for instance*), but offers its products for sale. The hand-woven scarves, clothes, and blankets are sold in the village shop. Prices are low, but so is supply (*prices are equivalent elsewhere*), partly because the village has a shortage of modern weaving machinery and training. "Weaving is not so profitable because we are not experts, we are all originally farmers".<sup>10</sup>

Their ideals have literally paid off. The villagers are well fed and clothed<sup>10</sup> (*only children are cleaner and better clothed, and not adults, who have no more traditional clothes as neighbours*).

## Environment

Houses are built by the community according to a unique scheme, by convenience and for avoid jealousy (*in fact there is no unique scheme, but only some common elements*). Erected in mud and covered with a thatched roof, they are equipped with a weaving machine, an oven and a stove. The oven is a closed model specific to the village; the stove designed by Zumra is elevated from the ground to prevent accidental burning of young children<sup>13</sup> and has a vent that makes a bend, on which a container can boil, and whose energy is used to heat the room<sup>5</sup>. It reduces the energy used by 90 % (*in fact by 50 % only*) as compared to the way the rest of the society cooks<sup>15</sup>.



*furniture in mud*  
photo Bat-Gil Merav<sup>2</sup>



*house stove*<sup>20</sup>

Houses and furniture are created from the same source every African village has: mud. The difference is that they create it aesthetically, while thinking of energy saving, of the need of furniture, and the possibility to create them from the same mud, not only the basic needs for cover and walls.<sup>2</sup>

The members of the community keep their houses and their surrounding unbelievably clean<sup>12, 14</sup> (*it is not obvious at all*).

## Democracy

The main subjects as education, food, development and hygiene are respectively managed by thirteen committees elected every three years, the founder being member only of the development committee (*but this committee is the leading one*): development committee, reception committee, complaint committee, committees for problem detectors, hygiene, security, law makers, elders'

supporters, maternity nurtures, and field work facilitators. The most important decisions are voted by the adults older than 18. In case of dispute, they turn to the complaint committee. The police is called only as a last resort.

The teahouse is the heart of the village where people meet, gossip and debate about every day things as well as big philosophical matters<sup>16</sup>.

### **An example?**

The experimental community first came to national awareness when Zumra Nuru gave an interview on national television a few years ago. Since then, numerous camera crews have visited the village. They are not alone. Government officials, members of parliament, sheikhs, priests, and local and foreign non-governmental organization workers have made the trip along a rough track suitable only for four-wheel-drive vehicles to see the success of the community for themselves.<sup>10</sup> Many school buses arrive every day (*rather every month*). There are around ten thousands Ethiopian visitors a year (*six thousands in 2009*) and some Westerners<sup>5</sup>. They've constructed a hostel for visitors<sup>12,16</sup>, who are required first to describe the purpose of their visit<sup>13</sup>. Zumra is also invited by Addis Ababa University students to share his experience<sup>8</sup>.

The village is today 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"<sup>10</sup>.

Therefore the Awra Amba community receives since the beginning of the century many visitors, mainly Ethiopians, but is still quite isolated in its country, even it is today accepted, in contrary to the start. Its founder would like his society model to be known all over the world<sup>6,8</sup>, and to expand, why not outside Ethiopia<sup>6,16</sup>.

### **Conclusion**

Very far from the Ethiopian cultural and religious norms, the Awra Amba community is marginalised and targeted as social deviants by neighbouring communities<sup>1</sup>.

According to the documentation available on the web, it appears as an extraordinary experience, for its solidarity values and lifestyle based on equality between the sexes, solidarity, absence of religion, democracy and ecology. Its values are simple and could seem a bit naive to the cynical western visitor<sup>2</sup>. They have nevertheless modified deeply the lifestyle of a community of one of the poorest and most isolated countries of the world.

Far from the famine pictures of the 1980s, far also from the food shortage present somewhere in Ethiopia today, far from Africa out of the world evolution but accumulating non-development, corrupt practice and murderous conflicts, this experience for more than twenty years could be an example for many citizens.

It is an amazing adventure, initiated by a peasant nearly illiterate, which never read any classical emancipation texts, neither was inspired by world social conflicts.

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