

Book Reviews

Svein Ege (ed.), *Land Tenure Security. State-Peasant Relations in the Amhara Highlands, Ethiopia*, James Currey, Suffolk 2019, pp. I-XVIII – 186.

The volume edited by Svein Ege analyses one of the most critical subjects relating to the rural economy of Ethiopia: the problem of land tenure and the land rights of farmers. In particular, it focuses on the Amhara Region, the small owners who populate it, and the relationship between peasants and the State following the reforms initiated in the mid-1970s. The Amhara is a region with multiple problems rooted in the distant past: this densely populated area was afflicted by famine and civil war, but it was also the subject of powerful state intervention. Taking advantage of the specific literature and many years of experience in the field, the editor has outlined a history of land tenure rights and the problems deriving from imbalances in the relevant legislation: with a particular look at the reforms enacted since 1975, Ege has developed a reflection on the uncertainty under which the small landowners of Ethiopia have been operating for decades, in a substantially rural country where even today agriculture is the most important sector of the economy. The editor, therefore, based on ethnographic studies in various parts of the Amhara Highlands in relation to the vast economic literature on Ethiopia, has produced a study of the relationship between land ownership and investment from the mid-seventies to 2018: the methodology used, the critical approach and an unprecedented grass-roots perspective (which allows us to understand the condition of the farmers) enable him to go more deeply into a question that has

not been analysed in previous historiography and to favour the development of discussion and debate.

Because of the so-called "Amhara Paradox" or "Abyssinian Paradox", the peoples of northern Ethiopia have been and are still considered to be conquerors: the problem that is often neglected, however, is that the peasants of the north "were dirt poor" and, in reality, victims of the Emperor's policy of conquest (p. 6). Precisely because of this difficulty in grasping the history and geography of Ethiopia, which leads to numerous misunderstandings, the editor dedicates space in the first chapter to clarification of the historical origins of the contrast between north and south. In Ethiopian society, there is a fundamental interconnection between history and geography: therefore, this contrast must be considered more a historical than a geographical division. The history of Ethiopia is one of bloody conflict and conquest, and the peoples of Amhara are judged as conquerors from the moment when Emperor Menelik II started his long campaign of conquest in the second half of the nineteenth century. After World War II, however, the impoverishment of the northern lands and of the peasants became evident: the peoples of the Amhara Highlands suffered exploitation, environmental degradation and poverty. Ege observes that the history of the famine in Ethiopia is to a large extent the history of the peasants of the north: in particular the regions of Wälo, North Shäwa and Tegraï. The impoverishment of the peasants, the victims of the Emperor's conquest policy and famines, is the main theme analysed in this work, with special focus on the consequences for the people of the Amhara Highlands. These highland peasants had to face the same difficulties as other peasants throughout Ethiopia: while the south suffered the conquest directly, the peasantry of the north had to supply soldiers and direct their production to the maintenance of the state apparatus and the war. The north-south divide dominated the image of landed property until the agrarian reform of 1975: "The southern peasants are seen as subject tenants without rights to their land, while the northern peasants are presented as members of landowning kinship groups" (p.

6). The editor, however, describes this superficial view as not particularly credible: the situation was actually far more complex, because “social relations in the south varied with ecology, with the way the area was incorporated (conquest or submission) and with the number of settlers from the north”; the view of conditions in the north, on the other hand, was based above all on a simplified reading of Hoben’s study of the Gojam community in the 1960s, whose characteristics differed from those found elsewhere in the Amhara Highlands (p. 6). Basically, no two communities were shaped with the same characteristics, and there were no homologation phenomena: indeed, while “there was an undeniable north-south divide, there was also much variation within each system” (p. 7). The only common feature “was the experience of suffering, with crude exploitation in much of the south and deep poverty and more varied forms of exploitation in the north where society still had a strong feudal flavour” (p. 7). The riots of the 1960s, with the slogan “land to the tiller”, shook the government, and the feudal system that was still in force, to its roots. The reforms initiated by the self-proclaimed socialist military government (the Därg) in April 1975 were intended to improve the condition of the peasants of the south, but sparked the discontent of the peoples of the north, who were afraid of losing their rights over the land: Ege in fact asserts that the revolts were originated by local notables, with a strong social base in the upper echelons of the peasant class (p. 8). The peasants received tenure rights, which Ege defines as “conditional” rights in order “to emphasize [their] limits ... within the general framework of state landownership, but still strong enough that peasants in most ways thought of their holding as their own, indicated by the bitter conflicts between peasants over these rights” (p. 9). The problem with land reform was the conditionality of land concessions to peasants: not only did the government fail to generate the certainty of rights, it also failed complete the process, because the lands could still be expropriated for collectivization projects, afforestation plans and villagization (p. 9). The advent of the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front

(EPRDF) in 1989 did not produce any new reform, and land legislation under it remained substantially unchanged, so the peasants were still unable to obtain the security of land tenure.

The volume consists of nine chapters plus a postface, in good measure written by the editor himself and partly the result of research by other scholars of Ethiopian history, society and economy. The aim is to provide a reading from the standpoint of the peasants, who during the last thirty years of the twentieth century were not favoured by legislation guaranteeing the security of land tenure. Those who contributed to the work are: Harald Aspen, who wrote two chapters and the conclusions; Yigremew Adal (who died in 2011), left research that is published here in a revised version; and Kjelle Havnevik, who wrote the postface. Most of the volume (chapters 3, 4, 5, 6, 7) are the final product of studies forming part of research projects for presentations at international conferences on Ethiopian society held in 2011 and 2012.

The second chapter presents a critical review of the literature, exemplifying the issues dealt with in the volume. Chapters 3 to 7 are the core of the work, setting out the findings of ethnographic field research in specific areas of the Amhara Highlands (Northern Shoa, Gojam, Baba Sāat and Mäqēt in North Wālo, Arbit). The purpose is to clear up points not yet resolved by previous studies, as anticipated in the early chapters. The management and application of land rules in Ethiopia varied, not only between north and south, but also between one area and another within each region, based on history, culture, social conditions and local customs. Furthermore, the degree and forms of variation of the land tenure reforms, in their application to different local contexts, have not yet been analysed sufficiently to yield a clear picture of their nuances (p. 9). In chapter 8 Professor Ege proposes some hypotheses on future developments in land tenure arrangements in Ethiopia and indicates possible interpretations and solutions, starting from the assumption that we are talking about a highly unstable system. The author, essentially, argues that only the creation of a market in land can change the future of Ethiopian farmers:

this is because “despite the recent success in agricultural development and widespread praise for the land certification programme, the current system of land tenure is unstable” (p. 151). The problem of land and peasantry, indeed, has not yet been solved and so could easily recur in the future as it has so often in the past. Ege argues that “the Ethiopian land tenure is probably heading for privatization, which in some ways returns it to the trajectory it followed half a century ago, but now operating under very different conditions due to the equalizing effect of the 1975 land reform” (p. 151). The editor’s idea is that a market in land, even a neoliberal one, could favour the development of “vibrant peasant communities”: to achieve this, however, it is necessary to grant peasants the right to buy and sell their land (p. 151). The consequences – perhaps the greatest drawback to the creation of a free market – could be a concentration of land ownership and rural exodus. But Ege argues that considering the benefits that could be obtained, these consequences are acceptable, and the potential problems can be solved by specific legislation.

The conclusions, entrusted to Harald Aspen, are a recapitulation of the reforms implemented by the Därg and the EPRDF. The author explains that the efforts to reform the pre-existing feudal system had sought to improve the living and working conditions of the peasantry and reduce famine, but many of the decisions proved unpopular and sparked a series of protests and uprisings. The efforts of the Empire in the last years before the overthrow of the regime were continued under the Därg, which made them the cornerstone of its interventions, and, later, in the EPRDF period as well. Aspen observes that it is the common opinion that the Empire had done “too little, too late,” whereas the reforms of the Därg were generally unpopular (p. 153).

This volume edited by Svein Ege, in short, furnishes elements for a debate on land tenure in a country that is currently enjoying rapid development, but which, with an almost purely rural economy, is still one of the world’s poorest. The 1995 reform succeeded only in part in providing answers and certainties, while the certifications of usufruct

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rights granted to farmers in 1997 did not protect them against adverse future developments. The authoritarian turn of 2005 made the situation even worse, eventually provoking rebellions that led, in 2018, to a takeover by a new government that has promised more inclusive policies (p. 158).

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