

# **Militias and Warriors: Revolution and capturing peasants as Modern Political Subjects in Eritrea (1961-1991)**

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## **Abstract**

The Eritrean state has been capturing peasants through National Service Scheme for the last two decades. Militarism, which merges academic, civic and military trainings, produces political power and converts peasants and pastoralists into modern citizen. This paper investigates the origin of this process during the revolutionary movement (1961-1991). It examines to what extent the Eritrean revolution did make the incorporation of peasants as revolutionary force possible. Most importantly, it analyzes how militarization, as viable method of incorporation come to solve the challenge emerged due to lack of maturely developed proletariat class. The process was not an act of simple incorporation. It was also a rout to modernity, a process of emancipation from backwardness. Therefore, the massive flow of peasants into the revolution was not only attracted by the intensive political indoctrination and military culture but also by their aspiration for modernity. Hence, the Eritrean revolution involved some form of subjection whereby the peasants conformed a centralized power wrapped in revolutionary zeal. Without such confirmation, the revolution would have hardly survived, for most of its survival relied on peasants for qualitative and quantitative contribution of manpower and material. Seeing this as historical process of statecraft, it was simultaneously a process of changing the decentralized system of governance to centralized one, where an aspiring state, a revolution that sought to capture state's power by mobilizing the mass, was struggling to master the art of governance.

## 1. Introduction

The Eritrean state has been capturing peasants through National Service Scheme for the last two decades. Militarism, which merges academic, civic and military trainings, produces political power and converts peasants and pastoralists into modern citizen. However, critiques have so far concluded that this scheme is counter-productive and so is a failed process. The critiques chorus around one characterization of the scheme, that is, it is an embodiment of violence and instrument of control. Herpner and O’kane argue that the National Service Scheme has hampered the formation of “imagined community.”<sup>1</sup> Tronvoll also concluded that the national service scheme did not only narrow the political space of subjects, but also shattered the flow of capital that drags subjects into poverty.<sup>2</sup> Andeberhan and Gaim farther elaborated it and concluded that state in Eritrea is an array of failures due to out right reliance on militaristic approach of governing society.<sup>3</sup> This has been a regime of scholarship known for its claim to have mastered the perspective of contemporary realities in Eritrea.

Even though it seems to be controversial scheme, the current approach of capturing peasants through national service scheme is not a new phenomenon in Eritrea. It has a deep historical root that goes back to the launching of Eritrean revolutionary movement, which this paper sets off to investigate. The Eritrean revolution (1961-1991) was commonly viewed as a revolution of subaltern groups, for peasants and pastoralists constituted majority of revolutionary forces. Launched by a handful of pastoralists in 1961, the Eritrean liberation movement gradually evolved from guerrilla movement to revolutionary movement to encompass socio-economic transformation of the rural society. By 1991, when the revolution had come to a

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<sup>1</sup> O’Kane, David & Hepner, Tricia Redeker (Ed.), *Biopolitics, Militarism and Development: Eritrea in the Twenty-First Century*, 2009, Berghahn Books

<sup>2</sup> Tronvoll, Kjetil (2009). *The Lasting Struggle for Freedom in Eritrea: Human Rights and Political Development, 1991-2009*, The Oslo Center

<sup>3</sup> Andeberhan Welde Giorgis (2014). *Eritrea at a Crossroads: A Narrative of Triumph Betrayal and Hope*, Strategic Book Publishing and Rights Co.; Gaim Kibreab, *Critical Reflections: On the Eritrean War of Independence, Social Capital, Associational Life, Religion, Ethnicity and Sowing Seeds of Dictatorship*, (Trenton: Red Sea Press, 2008) ... 2016

ceremonious end, that is, the formation of post-independent Eritrea, peasants claimed the victory and regarded themselves as transformed agents. Majority who had left their villages, now, as they came back alive from the revolution, reluctance have overwhelmed their feeling: a dilemma between returning to the agrarian mode of living or staying in the urban centers. In spite of it, majority preferred to continue pursuing modernization by staying in the urban area or in the semi-rural area where they could maintain their visibility to the state, where the power of state reaches them easily.

Massive participation of peasants in a revolutionary movement is not new in Eritrea. Historically, peasants provided the basic ingredients of any state formation by being the source of surplus accumulation economically<sup>4</sup> and agents of revolution politically.<sup>5</sup> This is because, according to Engles, peasants are “very essential factor of the population, production and political power.”<sup>6</sup> In light of this, the Eritrea revolution had additional reason to focus on peasants. The absence of maturely developed proletariat class necessitated the incorporation of peasants as important force of the revolution as in most semi-colonial and colonial countries. In those regions where neither the bourgeoisie nor the proletariat classes were fully developed, according to Mao Tse-Tung, Amlicar Cabral and Frantz Fanon, peasants remained the sustainable source for revolutionary movements.<sup>7</sup> Nationalist parties should stop, according to Cabral, imitating the European mode of bourgeoisie or proletariat revolution where there was no one of them. Instead, converting peasants from physical force to revolutionary force would be viable method.<sup>8</sup> After all, peasants have nothing to lose but something to gain.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Karle Marx, *Capital: A critique of Political Economy*, Volume One, translated by Ben Fowkes, (Penguin Books, 1976); Engles, Friedrich, *The Peasant Question in France and Germany*, (Frankfurt Congress of German Social- Democrats, 1894); T.J Byres, *Capitalism from Above and Capitalism from Below: An Essay in Comparative Political Economy*, (London: Macmillan, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> Eric Wolf, *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1969); James C.Scott, *Decoding Subaltern Politics. Ideology, Disguise and Resistance in Agrarian Politics*, (Oxon: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> Friedrich Engles, *The Peasant Question in France and Germany* (Frankfurt Congress of German Social- Democrats 1894), 1.

<sup>7</sup> Mao Tse-Tung, *Collective Works* (The Foreign language Press 1967), 13-14; Amlicar Cabral, *Brief Analysis of the Social Structure in Guinea* (1969); Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Penguin Books, 1963),

<sup>8</sup> Amlicar Cabral, *Brief Analysis of the Social Structure in Guinea* (1969), 50.

<sup>9</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Penguin Books, 1963), 47.

This paper investigates to what extent the Eritrean revolution did make the incorporation of peasants as revolutionary force possible. Most importantly, it analyzes how militarization, as viable method of incorporation come to solve the challenge emerged due to lack of maturely developed proletariat class. In other word, it shows how how revolutionary movement incorporated rural society as modern political subjects. However, the process was not an act of simple incorporation. It was also a rout to modernity, a process of emancipation from backwardness as Eugen Weber would put.<sup>10</sup> While from the peasants' stand point this process was a rescuing opportunity from the harsh peasantry living condition, from the revolution's stand point it was a means of producing agents of revolution if the objective of the revolution was to be reached.

Therefore, the massive flow of peasants into the revolution was not only attracted by the intensive political indoctrination and military culture but also by their aspiration for modernity. The success of the revolutionary civic education was not just to bring them to understand what their enemy was capable of but to be able to imprint in their minds a future with bliss where there would be a classless society. This in turn gave a great deal of advantage for the revolution to gradually elevate the peasants from subjects to agents. Seeing this as historical process of statecraft, it was simultaneously a process of changing the decentralized system of governance to centralized one, where an aspiring state, a revolution that sought to capture state's power by mobilizing the mass, was struggling to master the art of governance.

Understandably, assuring peasants agency in any revolution was indirectly the process of making them subjects to certain power structure, perhaps in many cases very centralized. Its ultimate goal was to discipline them to conform to the evolving power of a state in the revolution. Hence, like any other revolution, the Eritrean revolution involved some form of subjection whereby the peasants conformed a centralized power wrapped in revolutionary zeal. Without such confirmation, the revolution would have hardly survived, for most of its survival relied on peasants for qualitative and quantitative contribution of manpower and material. The question, however, is, in such prematurely evolved institutions of power, where there were no market, civil society and customary law how could such subjects be made?

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<sup>10</sup> Eugen Weber, *Peasants Into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (California: Stanford University Press, 1976) p. 294-302,

Structurally, the Army institution carried out this responsibility. In what follows, the discussion uncovers how this process happened. In short, it shows how the Eritrean revolutionary movement tried to master the art of incorporating rural society without the conventional institutions. In so doing, it reveals the historical foundation of the current mode of making citizens in Eritrea.

## **2. Integrating Peasants in the Eritrean National Liberation Movement**

The Eritrean armed National Liberation Movement was a dual movement for the peasants. On one hand it was a process of capturing peasants as subjects to some form of centralized power, and on the other hand it was a means of depeasantization. Before proceeding to the discussion on how the armed struggle made the peasants subjects and agents of the revolution, it is necessary to look at the ideological nature of the liberation movement under which the peasants' were mobilized. The first decade of the armed struggle (1961-1971), dominated by an organization named Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), was a stage of growth characterized by internal political turmoil. At this stage, peasants had no valuable contribution. Their active contribution began in the second decade when another organization called Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) was established by a group of reformists split from ELF. EPLF set its ideological roadmap as soon as it was created in 1971 where it established its relationship with the peasants. According to the political texts published by EPLF, the objective of the revolution was to create a classless society under the guidance of proletariat ideology. "Any revolution which intends to establish a classless society at the end of the revolution must rely on the proletariat ideology. In other words, it must follow Marxist-Leninist ideology."<sup>11</sup>

The three dominant thinkers who largely influenced the Eritrea revolution were Karl Marx, V. I. Lenin and Mao Tsu-tang. Based on several official documents—regular seminar paper, political texts, pamphlets, editorials of the periodicals and Magazines—issued since 1975 by the revolutionary organization, guided by the political department of EPLF, the debate on peasant question greatly affected the liberation movement in Eritrea. Ideologically, EPLF identified itself with Marxist oriented anti-imperialist revolution. One of its Seminar papers where the

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<sup>11</sup> *Emamat Kadr ab nay Hafash Qalsi (Roles of Cadres in People's Struggle)* (1979 EPLF), Seminar Paper No. 28, 1.

official position of the organization was regularly stated and disseminated to the ranks-and-files claims, “Eritrean revolution under the leadership of EPLF guided by the proletariat [Marxist] ideology is fighting against all forms of oppression and exploitation that Eritrean proletariat and peasants have been enduring...”<sup>12</sup>

Despite all kinds of ideological makeups to conduct proletariat revolutions, in practice, peasants remained the major force for two stark realities. First, the social class, namely the working class, was very tiny in Eritrea. It neither had the ability nor the motive to conduct such grand revolutionary objective. Capitalism was underdeveloped where qualitatively and quantitatively developed proletariat class could not manage revolution. Moreover, the small embryonic bourgeoisie owned very small capital that much of this capital belonged to non-Eritreans who were remnants of the European colonialism. Above all, not only were they integral part of the Ethiopian ruling classes, but also composed of comprador capitalists and bureaucrat-military capitalists.<sup>13</sup> Hence, qualitatively, the proletariat was less mature to carry on revolution. More so that the different sub-classes within the proletariat did not have unified understanding about the revolution. They have developed different interests either with the existing system or yearned the old one to come back and continue carry on its capitalist project.

Second, peasants were the majority, and were important material foundation of the revolution. Yet culturally, they had been perceived as anti progress. In EPLF’s political view, peasants’ culture was conceived against the interest of the majority of the peasants, as it still was governed by several marital religious believes and rituals which contained some feudal elements.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, EPLF’s clear understanding of the reality and the intimate physical contact with the peasants led to a change in the attitude of the revolutionary leadership. It reached to a conclusion that no one but the peasants could be the source of fighting forces and material supplies. With time, it became clear that without peasants, the fate of the revolution was unknown. Such an attitudinal change soon translated into practice, which began to extensively involve

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<sup>12</sup> “Eritrean revolution under the leadership of EPLF is fighting against all forms of oppression and exploitation by the guidance of proletariat ideology. It fights for the emancipation of proletariat and peasants in Eritrea and this makes it part of the international struggle against imperialist domination” See. EPLF, *Nay Sheqalo Ahgurawent (Proletariat Internationalism)*, (EPLF,1980), Seminar Paper No. 11, 21.

<sup>13</sup> ELF 1975: 27

<sup>14</sup> *Bahlawi Swera (Cultural Revolution)* Seminar Paper No. 52he, & 52 le, EPLF,

them in political education about the revolution and their contribution. Hence, it made every effort to ensure solidarity between the small proletariat force and the peasants.<sup>15</sup>

But this was not possible without having adequate knowledge about the class composition of the peasantry. In pursuance of this objective, once Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) was principally convinced that the victory of the revolution was unattainable without the peasants, the first step it took to materialize this theoretical understanding was conducting an extensive class analysis of the Eritrean society in general and the peasants in particular. Using historical materialism as a methodological foundation, the study concluded, "the class structure of the Eritrean people is feudal-capitalist society...EPLF is fighting to install progressive socialist system by overthrowing the feudal system in the rural area and capitalist structure in the urban."<sup>16</sup> While feudalism is dissolved in many part of the world, it is still lively in Eritrea. "Landlords are still exploiting the tenants."<sup>17</sup> Hence, the objective was "to be nationalist democratic revolution with an intention to install a proletariat government whose benefit extends to the peasants and other oppressed sections of the society."<sup>18</sup> From this explanation, the "feudal-capitalist" implies that there are two systems based on the rural and urban settings. Such a conceptualization of Eritrean society enabled the revolution to put the largest section of the society under the oppressed category, depicting them as friends of the revolution.

Furthermore, the EPLF divided the peasants into four classes on the bases of their economic differentiations, according to which their relationship to the revolution was defined. These were: the landlords, the rich peasants, the middle and the poor peasants.<sup>19</sup> The classification was more of politically orientated than economic. Thus, it undermined facts that could disprove the feudalist characterization of the peasantry. However, whatever theoretical flaws this class analysis might have reflected, this

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<sup>15</sup> *Kidan Sheqallon Gebaron (Alliance between peasants and proletariat)*, Seminar paper No. 30

<sup>16</sup> Mahta Vo. 1(19): 3 Nov. 1976... class consciousness and revolutionary conscious.. EPLF defined the Eritrean society in general mixed system— Feudal-capitalist system. the urban is under capitalist system and the rural area is under feudal, the majority are exploited by the strong alliance between these two class. Hence to win the revolution, there must be a unity between the two class...peasants and proletariat (Mahta vol 5 (5) oct.- nov. 1979).

<sup>17</sup> *Political education: Textbook* (EPLF 1982) 27-28.

<sup>18</sup> "In short, the economic project of the democratic revolution in the free Eritrea, in addition to be progressive, is that it will be a bridge to the socialist system lead by the working class." *Mahta* vol. 1 (17): sept 1976: 1-7

<sup>19</sup> *Derbawi Tntanie hbretezeb ab Geter (Class Analysis of Rural Society)* (EPLF, June 1975, EPLF), 4.

theorization generated strength for the revolution because such characterization changed the largest section of society, categorized as oppressed, to be major players in the revolution. Only small section was perceived as reactionaries. These were the ‘petty bourgeoisie’ in the urban centers and the so-called ‘landlords’ in the rural area. Accordingly, in the view of the revolution, these classes opposed any change and were always ready to serve any political group that would maintain the status quo.

### **3. Capturing the Peasants**

After systematic but politically charged classification of peasants, EPLF took tremendous efforts on the ground to have peasants played their revolutionary role. Although the armed liberation movement started in 1961, the role of peasants was articulated by EPLF as late as in the early 1970s. Hence, peasants emerged as major social and political force in the revolution as of this period. During the first decade, an era dominated by Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and which gave birth to Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF), membership of the revolution constituted three social classes: the conscious member of bourgeoisie in Exile, and the proletariat in the urban centers and the pastoralists in the rural areas. During this initial period of the struggle, most fighters, if not pastoralist, were petty bourgeoisie, whose educational background was high school and university levels, as well as people around the region that the organization operated.

The reasons behind the absence of peasants during the early periods of the revolution were related to political priority and partly geographical proximity. Firstly, politically, ELF excluded class struggle as part of the objectives of the armed liberation movement. It fully focused on getting rid of the Ethiopian army out of Eritrean territory thereby achieving national independence.<sup>20</sup> Under this circumstance, class struggle lacked revolutionary interest. Such prioritization automatically disqualified the necessity of conducting class analysis of the Eritrean society. Therefore, let alone to address the peasant question, ELF had never raised the question at all. “Unlike in the EPLF, in ELF, a conscript is viewed as a fighter. It does not care his/her class origin. However in EPLF, every conscript should first be identified to one of the given classes; sometimes class struggle commanded central

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<sup>20</sup> Jordan Gebre-medhin, *Peasant and Nationalism in Eritrea: a Critique of Ethiopian Studies* (New Jersey: Red Sea Press 1989), 174-75.

consideration.”<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, ideologically, ELF had unclear as well as unconsolidated ideas. It did not have clear ideology that guides the organization, and if it existed it was not strictly followed. In ELF, things were very decentralized; cadres were free to operate contextually, and conscripts were shaped when they joined to the fighting forces not in the training period.<sup>22</sup> The ideological untidiness in ELF might have been related to internal crisis generated by the consistent power-struggle within the leadership that spilled over down to the ranks-and-files. This preoccupied the ELF leadership and consumed the energy and focus of the national struggle.

Secondly, geographically, ELF did not have physical access to peasants, because the peasant regions were under the strict control of Ethiopian state, as explained in the previous chapter. Practically, ELF was born and raised in the region dwelled by pastoralist society. Thus, in its toddler stage, majority of its members came from the non-peasantry society.<sup>23</sup> The brief encounter between peasants and ELF was during the wilayat (zonal)<sup>24</sup> period during which the fighting forces of the ELF dispersed all over Eritrea as a strategy of increasing public influences. But this was short-lived as the news of internal strife and division within the organization engulfed the revolution. In addition to this, peasants had no mature political consciousness to overcome the geographical barrier, so that join the revolution voluntarily. Because it needed some level of political consciousness, which ELF had failed to attain as a result of its vague ideological make up.

To the contrary, EPLF found shelter in the peasants ever since its split from ELF in the early 1970s and kept on transforming them as its major source of power and authority. Even though geographical proximity created a great deal of opportunity, EPLF's ability to formulate clear and consolidated ideology had more

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<sup>21</sup> “In ELF, any conscript was viewed as a fighter. It did not care about his class origin, which class he/she was from was not part of the question in the official registration form. There was nothing like that. However, tribe or clan was subtly the force that affected the hierarchy in the revolution. This was not official, of course, but the feeling begins at the top leadership. To some extent, merit used to appear as a criterion. Otherwise, class was absent” Fisseha Abrha, Interview, 28.4. 2017, Asmara

<sup>22</sup> Political consciousness of the fighter, after compulsory conscription, was more in the fighting than in the training period. In ELF, it was very decentralized, however, in EPLF, it was very centralized, and the melting pot was in the training period. Daniel Siyum, interview, 24.1. 2017, Asmara

<sup>23</sup> David Pool, “Revolutionary Crisis and Revolutionary Vanguard: the Emergence of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front”, *Review of African Political Economy*, No. 19, Consciousness & Class (Sep.- Dec., 1980), 35

<sup>24</sup> Redie Berekteab, *Revisiting Eritrean National Liberation Movement, 1961-1991* (New Jersey: Red Sea Press, 2016).

practical reason in capturing peasants as important elements of the revolution. Their political apathy, however, was a barrier that EPLF first scientifically conceptualized and devised a political tool. To this end, it launched an extensive program of politicizing, mobilizing and eventually conscripting the peasants. All its efforts meant to revolutionize peasants' political consciousness into the proletariat level, though materially it appeared to be difficult.<sup>25</sup> It charged them with proletariat ideology and the personal characteristics of proletariats. In the report of the first congress held in 1977, EPLF confirmed that the project of befriending the peasants and tiny proletariat class, who joined the revolution, was successful. The report says, "today, the revolution is footing on strong foundation, as it has ensured a strong alliance between the proletariat and peasants."<sup>26</sup> In doing so, EPLF has tried to create a bridge between urban and rural, peasants and proletariat.

EPLF realized that peasants did not have the political awareness that grasps the magnitude of the state formation; the idea of nation state or forging territorial nation-state was politically remote to the peasants. Hence, it launched dual struggles, class and political liberation, out of necessity. It approached the peasants through their daily demands and politicized these demands. Such approach was not only a *sin qua non*, but also the *modus operandi* of that period as in China, Vietnam, etc. The materialist analysis of the peasants allowed EPLF to know the immediate demands of the peasants, among which were lack of social services, land reform and the aspiration for modernity. As we shall see later in detail manner, these factors were the most important elements in winning the hearts and minds of the peasants. Using the basic needs EPLF, had at least proved the peasants that it was different from the other power that it was fighting against. In response to such approach peasants viewed EPLF as a partner. No matter what construed the class analysis of Eritrean society made by EPLF, it successfully organized the entire struggle around that analysis. As a result, it did not only give EPLF an advantage over the ELF, but also empowered it to overcome the barriers that would have been caused by cultural and religious heterogeneity of the society.

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<sup>25</sup> *Emamat Kadr ab nay Hafash Qalsi (Roles of Cadres in People's Struggle)* (1979 EPLF,), Seminar Paper No. 28..

<sup>26</sup> *Mahtat* 2(1), February-March 1977. EPLF

### **3.1 Political Means**

Once the revolution had determined to rely on peasants, it deployed military and non-military means to capture them. In the non-military means, in addition to civic education, it approached the peasants through their daily demands. They came sequentially. Usually, it started by political indoctrination of its ideology then followed by agrarian reforms and provision of modern social services simultaneously. When these steps had activated their political apathy by shaping their attitude to be cordial to the revolution, then the military means took the lead in the form of conscription.

#### **3.1.1 Civic Education**

Politically, before any action was taken, EPLF regularly used to conduct campaigns to introduce its ideology to the peasants through civic education. EPLF cadres who were regionally stationed and knew the vernacular language bridged the distance between the revolution and the masses through formal and informal ways of civic education. They organized public meetings where they were able to introduce the revolution's political as well as socio-economic objectives. Cadres' role was not limited in civic education, they were also the ones who conducted surveys on the socio-economic status of the population. Usually, the surveys had two purposes: first, to understand the society, and second, to adjust their political education with the local demands.<sup>27</sup> In other words, cadres were supposed to understand and closely acquainted with the people they were mobilizing before they begin to indoctrinate the ideology of the revolutionary undertaking.

The program of civic education took place in both formal and informal styles. The formal one was a way by which the cadres called public gatherings where they taught political ideology and general program of the revolution. Other than this, few selected peasants who had the potential to head different civic associations—peasant, youth and women—were sent to the cadre school of the revolution to study the ideology's, Marxist in orientation, rectitude and practicality.<sup>28</sup> However, the most successful method was the informal. Cadres use any public gatherings such as wedding ceremony, baptism, village meeting and church rituals to disseminate

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<sup>27</sup> Mahari Haile, Interview, 10<sup>th</sup> February 2017, Asmara; Habte Eyob, Interview, 5<sup>th</sup> February 2017, Keren; Mebrat Berhe, Interview, 19<sup>th</sup> May 2017, Asmara

<sup>28</sup> Sbhat Efrem, member of political bureau and head of public department, Interview with 3.2. 1978, ACC00105, RDC, Asmara

objectives of the revolution.<sup>29</sup> Textbooks published by the revolution's political department guided all political educations. They also had guidelines on how, the ways and means, could cadres incorporate the contents of the textbooks with the daily living condition of the peasants they were teaching. Textbook contents usually begin by an introduction to Eritrea's ancient history, revolutionary ideology and its socio-economic objectives as well as the tactics and strategies of the armed struggle. One of factors that enabled this teaching to be successful in attracting peasants was, while peasants were engaged in the soft version of the discussion, it allowed them to contribute on the contents and teaching methods. In other words, the adaptive nature of the civic education enriched the process with techniques of attracting peasants to the revolutionary cause.

When the peasants, who received theoretical indoctrination, were elevated to village cadres, they were expected to infiltrate the customary village institution namely the *baito* (Popular Assembly) where deliberations of village matters took place. Traditionally, Popular Assembly was a customary institution composed of an assembly of notables elected by direct male suffrage of the village whose responsibility was assisting the *Chika* (chief). Each member of the assembly was assumed to be a descendant of the village ancestors; usually, members were believed to be equipped with virtues of wisdom and fairness. In short, they had to have uncontested knowledge and understanding of the customary laws, social values and norms.<sup>30</sup> Even though these qualities remained prime criterion of election under the revolution, the *chika* system was totally removed, because the *chika* was categorized as being among the class of exploiters in the class analysis. Instead, the revolution strengthened the Popular Assembly. Now with expanded range of responsibilities, the Popular Assembly turned into a vehicle of revolution. Readjustment was not confined in the tasks and responsibilities of *baito*, but also extended to the procedures of the election.<sup>31</sup>

Under the new procedure, members of Popular Assembly constituted a combination of heads of the secret cells of peasants, women, and youth associations. The village was first vertically and horizontally divided into different interest groups.

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<sup>29</sup> Mebrat Berhe, Interview, 19<sup>th</sup> May 2017, Asmara.

<sup>30</sup> Mahari Haile, Interview, 10<sup>th</sup> February 2017, Asmara.

<sup>31</sup> Mebrat Berhe, Interview, 19<sup>th</sup> May 2017, Asmara.

The vertical division constituted, the landlords and rich, the poor and the middle classes of peasants whereas the horizontal category included, peasants, women, youth, and similar other social groups.<sup>32</sup> Membership of the Popular Assembly had to include from each interest group. Usually members of the secret cells took the position of leadership in the open group organization. On the account of one cadre, “what we normally do was, we first finish the programs and plans with the members of secret cells... in this meeting we conduct all kinds of surveillance over the candidate and craft answers for any public disapproval. Then we call public meeting of the entire village for election.”<sup>33</sup> This process produces Popular Assembly. Then, it elects executive body consists of a chairman, a secretary and a finance officer. The rest of the members share the responsibilities by engaging into the tasks of committees. Usually, majority of Popular Assemblies sanction four committees. These are Economic, Social Welfare, Justice and Revolutionary Guard. Responsibilities of each committee might have been reduced or increased on the basis of local demands. Nevertheless, under normal circumstance, while the economic committee managed the economic aspects, such as providing service of land, grazing, tree protection, livestock, and church income, the Social Affairs committee took care of health, education, issues of disability, social ceremonies and control public properties. The Justice Committee, a form of court, handles all non-criminal disputes within a village and between villages. Finally, the Revolutionary Guard committee is a security office. It conducts intelligence and surveillance activities and issues permits for movements of individual within its territory.<sup>34</sup>

However, this was different under the ELF. It approached the village as a political unit and divided it horizontally. Since the class struggle was not part of its objective, ELF had no intention to restructure the village institution. It accepted the *chika* system and put some aids through democratic methods. Usually, the procedure was simple. When ELF cadres arrive in a village, they democratically elect a committee of five members keeping the institution of *chika* as it is. The elected

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<sup>32</sup> Sbhat Efrem, member of political bureau and head of public department, Interview with 3.2. 1978, ACC00105, RDC, Asmara; Chialand, Interview (MERIP, 1978) 14.

<sup>33</sup> Sbhat Efrem, member of political bureau and head of public department, Interview with 3.2. 1978, ACC00105, RDC, Asmara

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

committee is Sire'et.<sup>35</sup> “Our system was a reflection of the structure of a state that we intended to form. Hence we rejected the old system of election and instead we insisted elections to be modern, that is, secrete ballot, while normally we accepted the existing *chika* to be a chairman of the committee; in ELF, the process was spontaneous democracy.”<sup>36</sup> From the elected five, one holds the *dagna* position, the rest take the positions of security, economic, environment and hospitality (*quandre*) heads.<sup>37</sup> Since 1974 until its withdrawal in 1981, ELF extensively applied this system in the territories it controlled.<sup>38</sup>

The major tactic of indoctrination that allowed the revolutionary movement, particularly EPLF, to successfully penetrate into the peasantry was that it avoided a palpable imposition. The Eritrean peasantry was one of the most conservative sections of the society. In most cases, imposing new ideas encountered resistance. In order to avoid such encounters, professional cadres of the revolution, conversely, considered themselves as learners, not as imposers. “Our approach was very simple...First, we studied who the notables of the village were. Then, we contacted them for casual conversation concerning the objectives and programs of the armed struggle...then we discussed on serious matters of the village. When we encountered, in the process, a bigger problem beyond our reach, we preferred to consult them and let them handle the matter under our supervision.”<sup>39</sup> “When we arrived in a certain village for the first time, we used to meet the notables or influential personalities and tried to convince them to send their children to the revolution until we recruit our cells.”<sup>40</sup> Moreover when the revolutionary cadres arrived in a certain village, they used to make all sorts of efforts to persuade the masses that they were pro-oppressed elements of the society, that they represent pro-mass revolution...<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Fisseha Abraha, Interview 28<sup>th</sup> April, 2017, Asmara; Daniel Siyum, Interview, 24<sup>th</sup> January, 2017, Decamhare,

<sup>36</sup> Daniel Siyum, Interview, 24<sup>th</sup> January 2017, Decamhare.

<sup>37</sup> Tsegay Weldemariam, Interview, 26<sup>th</sup> January 2017, Mendefera.

<sup>38</sup> “ELF came here (Muraguze) around 1974 and instantly began to give political teachings and formed youth association and formed the five members Sireet which consists of Dagna (Chief), environment (tree), economy (Finance), security (*xetita*) and hospitality (*quandre*).” Tekle Tesfaghiorghis, 6<sup>th</sup> April 2017, Argzana.

<sup>39</sup> Mahari Haile, Interview, 10<sup>th</sup> February 2017, Asmara.

<sup>40</sup> Habte Eyob, Interview, 5<sup>th</sup> February 2017, Keren

<sup>41</sup> Fisseha Abraha, Interview 28<sup>th</sup> April, 2017, Asmara;

In a nutshell, the change of procedures and expansion of the responsibilities of Popular Assembly on one hand, and the cadre's commitment to the revolutionary cause on the other hand made the civic education an effective tool of winning the peasants support. Even though such change, in particular the transformation of Popular Assembly, the fact that it became more inclusive institution, was radical transformation from the peasants' standpoint, to EPLF, it was a mode of governance. One of the advantages was that all decisions made through this institution instantly earned respect and legitimacy, no matter whose directives were they. Turned into a modern institution, the Popular Assembly, in many respects, became a microcosm of the revolution's future project. Nevertheless, giving that the revolution earned considerable public support, it was not resistance free process. Had it not been for the intensive underground work by the secret cell, public resistance was common incident because part of the social forces, particular rich peasants were deprived of their old status.<sup>42</sup> To avoid such encounters, EPLF cadres recruited individuals from the poor peasants, women and youth to gather information about all social elements, who stood against changes, and to have had them eradicated before they publicly cause obstacle.

### **3.1.2 Modern Social Services**

When the civic education paved the ground, the revolutionary cadres proceeded to introduce modern social services and agrarian reforms. Accordingly, villages were organized to form cooperatives whereby services could be rendered to the masses. Some of the common cooperatives used to be public shops, public pharmacies, smith works, mills and swing machines, and farming associations. Such form of mass organization began in 1978 in the region called Karneshim, a region where EPLF grew, in 1980s this approach expanded all over Dembezan, Shilalo, Tokombia, Adi-keyh, Mereta Seben and Tsorona sub regions.<sup>43</sup> In support of these services, revolutionary cadres, educationalists and human and animal health professionals, travelled to villages to conduct literacy and vaccination campaigns.

The overall purpose of the public shops was to ease the availability of basic consumer goods such as coffee, sugar, tea, cooking oil, kerosene, clothes, utensils, farming implement and the likes. These cooperatives slowly added public borrowing

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<sup>42</sup> Mahari Haile, Interview, 10<sup>th</sup> February 2017, Asmara

<sup>43</sup> Estifanos Habtay and Oqbazgi Habtetsion, representatives of The Peasant Association of Tahtay Anseba and Dembezan, Interview, 5.2.1988 AC00735-6; Members Peasants' Association From Tsorona and Adi-Keyh, Interview, AC00933, RDC, Asmara

opportunities in small scale. When in 1984 severe famine and drought hit the rural areas, villages with such cooperatives used them as mitigation strategies. Since then, borrowing became regular so long as the users proved to have endured critical food shortage. Later on, this system was reorganized into long term investment borrowing such as buying ox, transportation animals etc. instead of consumer goods. Nevertheless, let alone borrowing all other services were through strict controlling mechanism. Every villager needed a registration certificate prepared by the local representative of the revolution to buy items in accordance with the names and the number of family members enlisted in the card. Yet, it did not discriminate according to political allegiance; this was a matter of policing the population under its influence.

Since the end of 1986, cooperatives had been diminished to the point that some of them could not function anymore for reasons directly or indirectly related to the military situation. Many of these regions were contested territories between the fighting forces of the revolution and Ethiopian regular troops. When revolutionary fighting forces withdrew from them, state regular troops raided the cooperatives as enemy property. On top of that the coming of famine and drought in 1984 severely affected the source of capital. In addition to these two major factors, in some places treasury managers and indebted individuals runaway to the enemy controlled towns in search of safe heaven. This was common in the Karneshim sub-region.<sup>44</sup> Some also failed to pay their debt, for they could not afford; others migrated, for they could find better ploughing condition and relatively better jobs. The last condition was common in Adi-Keyh sub-region.<sup>45</sup> Weakened by such condition, inadequate supply source eventually pushed many cooperatives to stop operations. Because most of the items used to be imported from neighboring countries of Sudan and Saudi, only few items were available in the country and had to be sneaked into the villages from the enemy controlled territories.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Qeshi Kidane, PA representative of Mereta Sebene, interviewed in 10.3.1988, AC 00731-34. RDC, Asmara

<sup>45</sup> Araya, Representative of Peasants' Association of Adi-Keyh, interviewed in 10.3.1988, AC 00731-34, RDC, Asmara.

<sup>46</sup> “ they [EPLF] set up ‘people’s Stores’ similar to those in Guinea Bissau. The movement buys staple goods like sugar, oil, rice and textiles in Sudan, brings them in trucks across the border and sells them to the population at the standard low price. Every villager or head of family has a paper recording the name and number of people in the family, which permits purchase of a set amount from the store.” Chialand, Interview (MERIP, 1978), 14.

Under such conditions, in places where there were no cooperatives, the revolution dispatched its cadres to peasant regions so as to expand the public services. The two important services were healthcare and education. Almost all EPLF controlled territories accessed education, children's or adults', and healthcare, human or animal, services. Services were allowed to all people irrespective of age, race, class, gender and political allegiance. A team of barefoot doctors travelled from village to village to educate the masses about hygiene and provided first aid service as well as vaccination against contagious and chronic diseases. Similarly, the revolution's department of agriculture provided peasants with educational training on crop farming, animal husbandry as well as crop and animal diseases protection. Mobile teams had to travel across villages to provide veterinary services. Furthermore, during drought and famine periods, the revolution supplied aid in the form of handouts through Eritrean Relief Agency (ERA). Some of the material supports were a pair of oxen, foodstuffs and cash. The aid included cash to buy oxen, farming equipment and seeds. The amount given for each peasant, a recipient, reached up to 500 birr (Ethiopia' Currency). Implements included axe, Mattock, Hayfork, Crowbar, Sickle and the likes.<sup>47</sup>

As a route to material advancement for the peasants, cooperatives were practically more effective in serving as strategy of influence. Merged with civic education, this strategy dramatically changed the view of the people towards the revolution's cause. As we shall see later, this increased voluntary inductees, because this strategy permitted peasants, mainly the poor, to tackle temporary challenges. Cooperatives stabilized local markets and increased accessibility. Poor peasants, who normally had neither the purchasing power nor transportation animal, now accessed items that were impossible to get. The aim of establishing cooperatives was to deliver consumer goods at affordable price and avoid long travel. Even if it was short-lived, it perfectly met the objective of the revolution; it portrayed the revolution as pro-mass and pro-oppressed movement. Persuaded by these activities, peasants gave their loyalty unrestrictedly. Families happily began sending their children and peasants started imagining the bright future. Practically, the revolutionary organization (EPLF) acted as a benevolent modern state by providing some form of social welfare

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<sup>47</sup>Hagos, Representative of Peasants' Association From Adi-Keyh, interviewed in 10.3.1988, AC00731-34, RDC Asmara; Estifanos Habtay and Oqbazgi Habtetsion, representatives of The Peasant Association of Tahtay Anseba and Dembezan, Interview, 5.2.1988 AC00737, RDC, Asmara.

to the masses as if this was its top institutional objective. It successfully made peasants thought of it as their only hope in the future.

### **3.1.3 Agrarian Reform**

As part of the political means, the agrarian reform that Eritrean revolution undertook included establishment of farming cooperatives and land redistribution. Agricultural cooperatives presupposed land reform, which was either directly conducted or seriously supervised by the revolutionary cadres sent by the Department of Public Administration. There were two process of land reform during the revolution that belonged to each of the organization: Eritrea Liberation Front (ELF) and Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF).

Under the ELF system, Land reform was at district level. Cadres first divided the villages into their respective districts/wereda and mixed their land as one to be redistribute again among the eligible families of the district. Accordingly, there was no more village land, but only district land. The existing sharp imbalanced land ownership among villages and among residents of a village affected the popularity of this land reform. Yet, for some it was still beneficial. "When ELF reformed land at district level, villages with small and less fertile land embraced it, because they benefited a lot from villages with big or fertile land..."<sup>48</sup> Let's see one case of the land redistribution that took place in Adi-Merkeja, a village of five hundred residents in the Muraguze sub-region. According to the law issued by ELF, the land of Adi-merkeja was combined with land of Adi-shima'lle and Argezana. While Adi-merkeja had relatively big and fertile land, Adi-shima'lle latter used to own large but less fertile land. In contrast, Argezana had smaller land than the other two villages. Once the land was redistributed, two problems emerged: While some received less land than they had had before, others also lost their fertile land. However, the serious problem was mobility problem. Peasants of Adi-merkeja, for example, must have travelled up to an hour to get their new land, because it was located far beyond Adi-shima'lle.

For this and other reasons, the reform encountered unpopularity. For example, unhappy but influential residents of Adi-Shilomon, of the same sub-region with Adi-merkeja, went to Ethiopian authorities in the nearby and requested help in order to

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<sup>48</sup> Tedla Zeweldi, Interview, 8<sup>th</sup> January, 2017, Asmara.

expel the ELF from the region, as disagreement was erupted due to the land reform.<sup>49</sup> This disrupted the reform process in the region and resulted in the expelling of ELF from the region forever. And in some villages, the reform remained short of effect, because ELF did not have enforcement mechanism for the decisions it made. Hence, owners refused to relinquish the redistributed land.<sup>50</sup> In other words, land remained under the previous owners. People shout to accept land reform at village level but not at district level. “I recall when people resist in Muraguze region... Anyway the reform did not survive because ELF could not maintain its control of the region due to the civil war between ELF and EPLF.”<sup>51</sup>

Notwithstanding that land reform under the EPLF officially began in 1977 in the Karneshim sub-region specifically in villages called Zagre and Geremi, revolutionary cadres used to settle land disputes in radical ways ahead of the official start of the reform.<sup>52</sup> According to Mehari EPLF cadre, “we were not restricted to political campaign, we try to handle serious matters particular the issue of land before the official land reform was set out.”<sup>53</sup> It was very preliminary. “Since there was no formal directives upon which we could rely, what we used to do was that we first collect the customary laws and tune it into more revolutionary notion in alliance with the Chinese and Russian land reform experiences... Our concern focuses on women and poor peasants, that to put every villager in equal status towards land.”<sup>54</sup> Similarly, according to Mebrat, an EPLF cadre from Dembezan “what we did was just give land to those who were landless, we did not make holistic land reform until the official directive reached us.”<sup>55</sup> When the official directive came from the top leadership, the method of reform was not universal; different cadres applied different techniques to persuade as well as to redistribute land, what they should have not missed was the spirit described in the class analysis. For example, according to Habte, in Tedrer sub-region of Akeleguzai a land reform was conducted in 1983, and the method was very unique.

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<sup>49</sup> Tsegay Weldemariam, 26<sup>th</sup> January, 2017, Mendefera

<sup>50</sup> Qeshi Tesfamariam Bahta, 5<sup>th</sup> April, 2017, Adi-Merkeja

<sup>51</sup> Tedla Zeweldi, Interview, 8<sup>th</sup> January, 2017, Asmara.

<sup>52</sup> Habte Eyob, Interview, 5<sup>th</sup> February 2017, Keren

<sup>53</sup> Mahari Haile, Interview, 10<sup>th</sup> February 2017, Asmara.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Mebrat Berhe, Interview, 19<sup>th</sup> May 2017, Asmara.

We first brought between one and five elected representatives from each village, Tedrer had seventeen villages. We gathered forty-seven representatives in a village called Adi-nebri and gave them regular civic education on the objectives of the reform for almost two weeks. Then, we kept ourselves as observers when the trained representatives were reconfiguring the borders of seventeen villages. Later, we called a meeting of five thousand people of the region to inform them about the reform. The reform was popular and EPLF was hailed, for us, as representative of the revolution, it was rewarding.<sup>56</sup>

Both land reform and the formation of cooperatives had economic and political objectives. Economically, whereas land reform was intended to increase productivity and to provide access of land to poor peasants, cooperatives aimed to liberate poor peasants from subjects of fellow peasants. To some extent, it worked in terms of lifting part of the peasants from economic destitution. Politically, it was an experiment for socialist mode of living. It enhanced solidarity among members, particularly poor peasants, and increased the confidence of poor peasants. On top of that it enlightened peasants about another modern economic modes of living. As to the village, the material change had more impact in changing the power structure of the village than the political indoctrination. EPLF, as revolution, gained no less than the peasant, if not more. This, needless to say, largely owed to the land reform, which was the most effective device on the process of class struggle that EPLF carried on. EPLF viewed the land reform as a fundamental answer to a series of peasant questions that it intended to answer. If the peasants were to establish trust on the revolution so that they would send their sons and daughters happily to the cause of the revolution, the issue of land needed to be addressed even without complete victory of the revolution. In one way or the other, land reform became a core objective within the class struggle because indirectly it was a springboard to the overall revolutionary cause. In a nutshell, collectively, the strategies grossly changed the picture of the revolution for good. EPLF, since then, had to come being viewed as a partner by the peasants; a revolution that guards the interest of the public.<sup>57</sup>

However, this reform was not neutral. It should be noted that this transformation had taken place at the cost of certain section of the society, in particular, the rich peasants. Even though EPLF succeeded to avoid public resistance as ELF faced, no matter the discretion of the process, it was obvious that the outcome

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<sup>56</sup> Habte Eyob, Interview, 5<sup>th</sup> February 2017, Keren.

<sup>57</sup> Mahari Haile, Interview, 10<sup>th</sup> February 2017, Asmara; Habte Eyob, Interview, 5<sup>th</sup> February 2017,

would brew counter-revolutionary elements. One manifestation was peasants defected to the territories under the Ethiopian forces. To the poor peasants, besides to the moral discomfort they felt when they get a land used to belong someone they knew, majority embraced it. The difference in the two organizations was the way coercion was placed in the reform. Obviously, coercion sustained its existence throughout the process in a varied degree between the two organizations and within one. Whereas EPLF cleverly implemented the reform in the name of class struggle indoctrinated through gradual political process, ELF inclined to apply speedy process that relied on aggressive mechanism than political indoctrination. These two different approaches determined when and how coercion should intervene. ELF conducted the reform without making substantial transformation in the make up of the village institutions. It absorbed the village institution with minor adjustments let alone to address the class struggle. Consequently the upper class namely the rich peasants continued to hold political power. On the contrary, EPLF land reform presupposes ideological indoctrination, reform of village institution as well as the delivery of social services. Such activities neutralized, if not completely legitimize, peasants' conservative attitudes towards changes. Moreover, it awakened the dormant sections of the society such as women and youth whose political role in the village had been literally none.

### **3.2 Military Means**

As has been explained in the previous discussions, the three approaches, civic education, provisions of social services and agrarian reforms, all, endowed EPLF the ability to ensure the loyalty of the peasants to the revolution. Still, maintenance of this loyalty required an alliance with military means. Hence, the three major ways of maintaining peasants' loyalty were to make them hafash wudubat (unarmed recruits), militias (armed and part-time warriors), and tegadalti (full-time warriors). Though we shall see them in detail, briefly, hafash wudubat were militarily unequipped peasants, but politically they were well versed of the revolution's objectives and ideologies. In this stage, peasants as a hafash-wudubat, the revolution expected them to show unconditional devotion to the orders and directives. Above all, it expected them to be ready to join the revolutionary regular force upon calling, that is, to be either militias or tegadalti.

Militias were politically charged and militarily armed peasants and lived in their villages. Hence they, at the same time, cultivated their land and carried out

revolutionary tasks. Occasionally, they could engage in battles as supporting forces. Nevertheless, their real job was the maintenance of security of their villages and regions while running their peasantry life. On the other hand, tegadalti were peasants who were completely transformed into warriors. In other words, they were fully uprooted from the villages; no more responsibility to take care peasantry life. When peasants turned into tegadalti, there were no private lives, the individuals prepared themselves to be martyrs for the revolutionary causes.

### **3.2.1 hafash wudub (unarmed cadre)**

Hafash wudubat were politically integrated subjects of the revolution. EPLF had begun recruiting peasants in such form in 1975, according to its records. Initially, the responsibility of creating these subjects was rest on the armed cadres (tegadaliti) who were members of the kfli-hizbi. This continued until 1978 during which the Peasant Association was formed through the covert and overt cells. Such structure turned to be the standard approach to peasants' communities under the liberated areas. At this level, peasants were expected to be loyal subjects of the revolution and agents of increasing public awareness towards the revolution and its objectives.<sup>58</sup>

Usually, hafash wudubat operated as a bridge between the revolution and the masses who have not yet developed an affiliation to the cause. Hafash wudubat formed covert and overt cells on the basis of the military risks a region entailed. For example, in the sub-regions of Dembezan and Seharti, the popular mobilization process was through covert cells.<sup>59</sup> In the sub-regions of Adi-Keyh and Egla-Haxin, both cells were operational;<sup>60</sup> it depended on the mobility of the Ethiopian soldiers, because as was explained in the previous chapter, these peasants were periphery to the Ethiopian state. Processes of establishment varied from place to place. However, it should be understood that this revolutionary institution, though preliminary, was fundamental. The process of recruitment was very gradual but meticulous. In general, revolutionary cadres divided the residents of a village into three categories in accordance with the quality of their contribution to the revolution. These were wudub

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<sup>58</sup> Tera nay Hafash Wudubat ab Hagerawi democrasyawi sewra (The role of Hafash Wudubat in national democratic revolution) Seminar paper no. 47, 1982, .

<sup>59</sup> Mebrat Berhe, Interview, 19<sup>th</sup> May 2017, Asmara; .Mahari Haile, Interview, 10<sup>th</sup> February 2017, Asmara

<sup>60</sup> Habte Eyob, Interview, 5<sup>th</sup> February 2017, Keren.

(recruit), wufuy (devoted), and utuq (armed). A person in the category of wudub was someone who was introduced to the political agendas and showed allegiance to the revolution. A devoted peasant was a person who was politically aware and ready to accomplish all kinds of missions assigned to him largely civilian mission such as advocacy, propagation and hospitality. The third category, which is the subject of the next topic, was when a peasant was armed, that is, recruited into the militia stage.

Peasants in this category were mobilized in covert and overt cells. Normally, revolutionary cadres approached notables and elders during their first footing in a village. "Our experience tells that without the villagers no program or activity can be successful. Trying to impose orders from above was prone to instigate resistance. So it was important to first consult, then to develop rapport, and finally to influence the elders or priest."<sup>61</sup> "After twice or trice meeting with the elders...we used to identify people who were committed and secretive with the help of this elders and then...we started recruiting peasants covertly."<sup>62</sup> But doing so was not a random selection. Cadres first give civic education. Based on the assessments made during civic education, cadres conduct a thorough analysis over participants. Candidate's revolutionary spirit and his secrecy and commitment to the revolutions' cause were most important criteria of selection. It was after this process that the cadres designated who should go to which category, wudub, wufuy, or utuq, and to which cell covert or overt. Candidates categorized under covert cells were usually from the wufuy (devoted) category who exhibited secrecy and loyalty to the revolution's general objectives.<sup>63</sup>

Almost completely, the spirit of the struggle penetrated the social institutions through the aforementioned organizational elements. Members had to always meet in secrecy and receive directives from revolutionary cadres. A peasant who attained this level of political affiliation to the revolutionary cause had a clear civilian job description. Tasks were varied, but the most important were gathering information and conducting surveillance pertaining the enemy's military and political activities as well as distributing the revolution's propagandist pamphlets. In their elementary stage, the wudubat required to study and understand the objectives of the revolution,

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<sup>61</sup> Mebrat Berhe, Interview, 19<sup>th</sup> May 2017, Asmara

<sup>62</sup> Mahari Haile, Interview, 10<sup>th</sup> February 2017, Asmara.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

how to hospitalize and cooperate with the people's fighting forces upon their arrival in certain villages and or urban suburbs. Besides, they were expected to spread information about the armed revolution, identify potential recruits, deliver supplies such as food, drinks, transportation animals and to get ready to send their children or volunteer themselves to join the revolutionary struggle for independence. In addition, they had duties as members of different committees. Large part of their duties fell in the task of jurisdiction because they were the main actors of the socio-economic and political activities of their respective villages. What made them credible agents of the revolution was their participations in people's Assembly, public committees, and most importantly, in land redistribution processes. At this level, peasants lived in their respective villages and spent large parts of their time in managing revolutionary missions. The expectation of the revolution from the peasants at this stage was beyond revolutionary loyalty, they were required to show practical commitments.

### **3.2.2 Militias (part-time warriors)**

At the militia level of mobilization, peasants were enlisted in armed force whose task included defending the liberated areas and assisting the people's army (regular force) namely tegadelti; they were considered the revolution's part-time warriors. Ideally, the formation of the people's Militia was to create "counter-state" groups designed to shield the interest of the revolution in the rural areas in whatever capacity. But, their tasks covered fighting along with the regular forces of the revolution or delivering logistics, transportation of ammunitions and food supplies and the likes. During peacetime, the militias were supposed to accomplish the following tasks: (i), educating and mobilizing the mass; (ii), guarding the villages and maintaining internal security; (iii), gathering military intelligence, and (iv), coordinating the installation of public revolutionary institutions.<sup>64</sup> In other words, they were the living examples of the revolution in its entirety in the rural area. Structurally, it was part of the core body of the revolutionary army. Hence, except in the initial period, recruitment was gradual. All wudubat (unarmed recruits), unless they were physically disabled or aged, were automatically placed in the list of potential members of the militia. "I was first member of the secret cell, and then upgraded to Militia in 1985 after which I

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<sup>64</sup> *Tera Hzbawi Militia ab Nay Hafash Qalsi (The role of Militias in National Struggle)*, EPLF Seminar 14: 1, Seminar paper No.14.

became chairman of the bdho-shimaggelle [village revolutionary committee].”<sup>65</sup> This was common in all regions where the revolutionary cadres operated.

In practice, militias were multifunctional members of the revolutionary army who were expected to simultaneously run peasantry life as well as revolutionary missions in their vicinities in multiple capacities. Generally, there were two kinds of Militias, village and regional militias whose tasks slightly vary. The former’s task was to guard the village but occasionally moved for roundups in critical periods. In addition to guarding their respective villages, village militias, were assigned to provide protection to the cooperatives, maintain public security, enforce decisions of popular Assemblies and bdho-shimaggelle, conduct night patrols and other additional tasks. The regional Militias, commonly known as zobawi serawit (regional forces), have had one fixed regional station from which they set off patrols around their regions, mainly in response to the military activities that the enemy forces might have made. The task included engagement in regular battles and assist in policing activities at regional level. Moreover, they were expected to assist in intelligence service as well as to act as pathfinders of the regular fighting forces of the revolution.<sup>66</sup> Even though they had specific jobs, during peaceful times, both forces provided free labor to families of fighters, destitute and aged families etc.<sup>67</sup> Hence, while local Militias had more time for private activities, regional Militias were little short than tegadelti in many respects.

### **3.2.3 Tegadalti (Full time Warriors)**

As soon as peasants became tegadelti (warriors) that means they had lost an agrarian status. Upon leaving the village to join the revolutionary army, one was sent to the military training to be politically and physically disciplined thereby accomplishing the missions of the revolution without giving due attention to private matters. Essentially, this was conscription of full time warrior, the revolution’s ultimate expectation out of the peasants’ mobilization process. Conscription took place in two ways: through

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<sup>65</sup> Estifanos Habtay and Oqbazgi Habtetsion, representatives of The Peasant Association of Tahtay Anseba and Dembezan, Interview, 5.2.1988 AC00737, RDC, Asmara

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> In general, in the sub-region of Karneshim, militia forces were instrumental in forming the popular Assemblies, cooperatives, public shops. Later on, they became police force of the revolution in their respective regions with tasks of maintaining peace and security, guarding properties of the village and the revolution, agents of advocacy of revolutionary awareness. Dawit, Head of Militia forces in Northern Zone, interview, 11.6.1981, ACC00192, RDC, Asmara

voluntarily and involuntary means. Until 1978, many youth of the regions of dehermesmer (behind the enemy line) inflated the fighting forces of the revolution in their vicinities, voluntarily. This was an outcome of several factors: continuous nationwide victory of the revolution, relentless efforts of the revolutionary cadres in changing the attitude of the peasants through civic education and socio economic services.<sup>68</sup>

In addition, as discussed in chapter four, in 1975, the rural area was swollen by huge number of youth due to urban-rural migration as a result of state extrajudicial killings and harassment over major Eritrean cities, towns and villages.<sup>69</sup> However, the revolution declined many youth from becoming tegadelti, because the fighting forces did not have consolidated institutional capacity and enough logistics to support a huge size of army. Especially, in 1978, when the EPLF was strategically withdrawing from the suburbs of towns and cities, the flow of voluntary conscripts reached its peak. This was an outcome of two reasons: while majority of recruits who were organized in covert and overt cells feared the danger of living in their villages after EPLF evacuated, others were driven by the nationalist cause of the revolution.<sup>70</sup>

The withdrawal of 1978 did not have uniform impact across all regions. In some place, in Dembezan and Anseba, for example, it dramatically reduced the flow of voluntarily conscripts. “After this historical stage [When the revolutionary army was pushed back by Ethiopian troops], the number of conscripts became very small, voluntarism became a rare part of the process, except those who had influences from their families or in contact with EPLF or escapees from threats of ELF or Ethiopian soldiers.”<sup>71</sup> In 1979, EPLF cadres of these regions introduced a new method of conscription after they received a circular from the top leadership allowing doing all-out efforts to increase the manpower of the fighting forces that endured significant damage by continuous attacks of the Ethiopian forces. Hence, they began involuntary conscription in more or less aggressive way through ad hoc committee of bdho-

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<sup>68</sup> From June to August of 1976, while we were staying in the Egla-Haxin region as members of fighting force, we used to help the people in ploughing, weeding and harvesting. And this dramatically changed the view of the people towards the revolution, manifested by massive volunteers to join to our fighting forces without proper training” Other actions such as handling disputes between villages. Habte Eyob, Interview, 5<sup>th</sup> February 2017, Keren; Mahari Haile, Interview, 10<sup>th</sup> February 2017, Asmara.

<sup>69</sup> Habte Eyob, Interview, 5<sup>th</sup> February 2017, Keren; Dawit, Head of Militia forces in Northern Zone, interview, 11.6.1981, ACC00192, RDC, Asmara

<sup>70</sup> Mahari Haile, Interview, 10<sup>th</sup> February 2017, Asmara.

<sup>71</sup> Mebrat Berhe, Interview, 19<sup>th</sup> May 2017, Asmara.

shimagelle [village revolutionary Committee].<sup>72</sup> When the revolution endured heavy casualties in the following years, mainly in 1982, under the “red-star” offence launched by Ethiopian forces, in 1983, the revolution issued a declaration of official application of forced national conscription (hagerawi kitet). From then onwards, voluntary conscription as a source of peasants’ mobilization gradually reduced.

The issuance of the call for involuntary conscription by the revolution was rationalized as “just call”. “The war that EPLF is conducting is a just war, a war against oppression and imperialism. So long as the demand for forced conscription is to sustain this war, the call is a just call.”<sup>73</sup> The slogan says, “he who does not join the revolution, dies in vain.” “National military conscription, [according to this call], does not mean forceful conscription, but it is one way of ensuring the commonwealth.”<sup>74</sup> However, conscription did not happen by a simple act of spontaneous roundups. The revolutionary cadres assigned by the Department of Public Administration took the responsibility. Yet, this did not happen directly by those cadres, instead by the village revolutionary committee, which gradually evolved to replace the Popular Assembly (baito) in many places. The process was systematic. It first prepared a list of all families along with their number of children, and their affiliation to the revolution. Special consideration was given to some families. For example, families of one child, families that already contributed more than three people, and families who have sent none were treated accordingly. While the first and the second group were set free, the latter and all other categories were asked to send their child or children. But, “it was the task of bdho shimagelle that decides who should go to the fighting forces and stay in the village as Militias.”<sup>75</sup>

### 3.3 Peasant Resistance

Even though this process seems to have had won the hearts and minds of the different social groups of the peasantry, it still had to encounter various forms of resistance: from open rejection to the everyday forms of resistance. In spite of the efforts of bdho

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<sup>72</sup> It conducts all kinds of studies on the village residents and calls a meeting of all villagers above 16 years old. For example, in a meeting held in 29 November 1981, in a village called Shimangus Laelay, the first incident, the recruits reached 148 youth, 36 of them female. Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> *Hagerawi Ktet (National Conscription)*, Seminar paper No. 48, (EPLF, 1983).

<sup>74</sup> Even though EPLF was very much concerned and willing to engage with peasants voluntary through its political education and imposition of proletariat consciousness in the peasants, the military condition did not allow to only focus on voluntary conscription of the peasants. Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Mahari Haile, Interview, 10<sup>th</sup> February 2017, Asmara.

shimagelle (revolutionary committee), in each village, of the Eritrea People's Liberation Front and Sre'et of the Eritrean Liberation Front to smooth out the process of conscription, resistances fluctuated with military victories of the struggle. The two serious sources of confrontation between peasants and the revolution were land reform and conscription. Land reform, particularly the one that ELF undertook, faced a serious peasant revolt in Muraguze sub-region that brought the eventuality of ELF in the region.<sup>76</sup> Under EPLF, in Karneshim, for example, peasants who lost their land by the reform preferred to take individual decisions, mainly cooperating with the enemy forces.<sup>77</sup> In response to the conscription program, the common forms of resistance were hiding in forests and migrating to urban centers. Families sent their children to urban places, which were under the control of the Ethiopian state, for study and work. Some also pursued international migration mainly to Sudan and the Middle East.<sup>78</sup> The most serious challenge would come when the nominated conscripts were females. Families could do a number of things in refusal of handing over their children, some in fact engage in open confrontation with the revolutionary cadres. However, the safest method was to arrange quick marriage.<sup>79</sup>

The everyday forms of resistance varied from region to regions. In regions under total control of the revolutionary forces, the resistance included refusing to host fighters, avoiding engagement in meetings, faking support, hiding resources, providing inaccurate family data, and abstaining from providing information about the enemy.<sup>80</sup> In the regions where peasants lived at the edge of state power, the common form of resistance was switching loyalty. Disappointed peasants looked the state as a safe heaven. This form of resistance was common in Quahyin and Anseba sub-regions, and in the vicinities of Asmara.<sup>81</sup> This did not happen only in opposition to the revolution but also as a result of agrarian crises. When drought and famine turned out to be recurrent situation in Eritrean peasantry, and the revolution seemed to lack enough resources to enable peasants mitigate it, understandably, peasants switched

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<sup>76</sup> Qeshi Tesfamariam Bahta, 5<sup>th</sup> April, 2017, Adi-Merkeja; Tekle Tesfaghiorghis, 6<sup>th</sup> April 2017, Argzana.

<sup>77</sup> Gebrebrhane, former EPLF militia, interview, 10.11.1983, AC00285, RDC, Asmara

<sup>78</sup> Mebrat Berhe, Interview, 19<sup>th</sup> May 2017, Asmara.

<sup>79</sup> Habte Eyob, Interview, 5<sup>th</sup> February 2017, Keren.

<sup>80</sup> Mahari Haile, Interview, 10<sup>th</sup> February 2017, Asmara.

<sup>81</sup> Cap. Angesom Asmelash, interview, 23.5.1987, Melezanay, AC00525, RDC, Asmara

their loyalty; they became state militias in order to obtain food as payment for their services.

Measures against such decisions varied. When peasants were caught doing any of the everyday forms of resistance, revolutionary cadres in some cases would first approach them at individual level and reeducate the revolutionary program, and in some cases they would reveal and criticize them in public gathering. But when the resistance was escaping from conscription program, the standard response was to take another sibling in place of the escapee. “When we capture families of the escapee and have proven that their parents are behind the escaping operation, first, we give them ultimatum to bring him/her back. If this is unmet, we must expose them in the public gathering for public disgrace, the worst form of punishment in the peasants’ culture. If this fails, we arrest the father and ask him to give another in place of the escapee. If he refuses, we take one who is available.”<sup>82</sup> Arresting or taking family properties such as livestock, was the last alternative of the process.<sup>83</sup>

#### **4. Subjects or Agents of Revolution**

When the revolution had realized that the proletariat class was quantitatively and qualitatively premature, it decided to rely on other sections of the society. Peasants, thus, became the target. Nevertheless, due to their weak political consciousness, let alone to be revolutionary in character, integrating them into the struggle, from the revolution’s point of view, would not only carry risk on the Marxist revolutionary agenda, but also made impossible for the revolution to march forward. Hence, they must first be politicized and that must also be proletariat consciousness. In other words, the reality necessitated some form of subjection; it required followers disciplined with some traits of modern subjects. But this must happen through consensual method for obvious practical reason, because coercion would harm the long-term relationship with them. To do so, the revolution first reformed the customary institutions in order to fit to the objectives of the revolution. So, it removed the chieftainship institution and let rest all powers on the baito (Popular Assembly) with different committees responsibility for different tasks some of which did not

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<sup>82</sup> Habte Eyob, Interview, 5<sup>th</sup> February 2017, Keren; Mahari Haile, Interview, 10<sup>th</sup> February 2017, Asmara.

<sup>83</sup> Mebrat Berhe, Interview, 19<sup>th</sup> May 2017, Asmara; Mahari Haile, Interview, 10<sup>th</sup> February 2017, Asmara; Habte Eyob, Interview, 5<sup>th</sup> February 2017, Keren.

even exist before. This institution introduced a prototype of modern state in the village through which much of the peasants' matters were governed. In this context, baito was not only purveyor of some form of modern power but also vehicle of modernity. Seeing the way it was created, the objectives it pursued and achieved, and the service it managed to deliver, by all accounts, manifest the beginning of modernization in the village.

The success of this process depended on two factors: the reformulation of new identities and the activation of dormant social forces. First, the ability of the revolution in formulating peasants' class analysis, and imprinting this construction fervently in the minds of the majority through continuous civic education was one of the opportunities that the revolution took advantage of. It placed the largest section of the peasantry as sympathizers of the revolution by giving them a new sense of identity, which was incomprehensible to them before. Prior to this period, peasants had only genealogical identities regardless of the material value. Village residents had vertically constructed identities known as *rstegnata* (first-comer) and *maekelay alet* (latecomer). These identities rarely crossed village borders. During the revolution, such identities were categorized as sub-national, so that they became unnecessary. The political means, mainly the civic education, was instrumental in breaking these old identities and replacing them with one national identity and multiple class identities beneath it. In so doing, the revolution introduced new ones that horizontally classified societies according to their material contents of the household.

Second, such a categorization activated a number of social forces, which had little or no political say in the old system. This included youth, women, the disabled, and the likes. Previously, these groups were recognized merely as social forces; they had no sound contribution in the affairs of the village. However, when the revolution had recognized them as important economic as well as political forces, they became attracted to it. This would have been impossible without a successful breaking up of the old power structure and its subsequent removal of the existing dominant social elements from possessing the old political power. In their place, the revolution put new forces, mainly poor peasants and women. Village election organized by the revolutionary cadres was one of the effective processes in abolishing of the old structure. Usually, the cadres ensured the revolutionary elements such as poor peasants, women and youth were included. In this process, the rich peasants were systematically ousted and the status quo went against their interests, for the

membership in the 'Popular Assembly' was proportional to the size of the newly created social forces; in short, their size became the source of their disadvantage.<sup>84</sup> This process started at the class analysis in which the rich peasants were treated as unfriendly class. Then, most notables and rich peasants, unless they pledged loyalty to the revolution, which took them long due of reluctance to adapt, were gradually ousted from their political as well as socio-economic privileged positions.

True, peasants' resistances were part of the process, though hardly effective to slow down the politicization process. Nevertheless there was much bigger barrier than the resistances, that was, the absence of capital.<sup>85</sup> Knowing that the process of militarization under the European rule was capital driven, now, without capital, yet the language of the cadres was progress and development, the process became complicated. Whatever depth the civic education might have gone, it could not fully replace the need for capital, for peasants usually cared much on material benefits than political ones. The introduction of social services and economic activities were only partial recovery. Particularly during agrarian crises, peasants ceased to believe in revolutionary slogans. This was manifested either through refusal to join militia or voluntarily withdraw if they were already in any.

No matter the barriers, however, from the revolution's stand point the highest stage of politicization of the peasants was when they turned into either militias or tagadelti, where the quality of agency and subjection mixed altogether. At this level, particularly being tagadelti constituted ascetic features. Intensive civic education and military discipline transformed the bodies and minds of the members to willingly sacrifice their lives to the revolutionary cause without any expectation for material rewards. Members believed that there existed no distinction between them as subjects and the power that drove them to act in such a way. In other words, there was no higher morality than the victory of the revolution. That level of consciousness made

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<sup>84</sup> It is only then that the land reform sets into motion. The elected "Popular Assembly" takes the responsibility of land redistribution under the guidance of EPLF representative in the region. Except the few middle and rich peasants, the poor peasants dominate the process. Hence the reform was largely to the benefit of the poor peasants. Here the exclusion of the rich or the landlord, as the EPLF said, was not harsh or brutal as in the Chinese revolution. Basically this was one of the indications of the difference the social structure.

<sup>85</sup> "One of the biggest problems... is finance... We do not have financial source, we could not collect tax from the people because majority of our members are from the oppressed society, and the rich is against our revolution. Hence, we could not ask the poor, unless we mean to impoverish them farther." Sbhat Efrem, member of political bureau and head of public department, Interview with 3.2. 1978, ACC00105, RDC, Asmara.

tagadelti the ideal subjects of the revolution and models to the bulk of the peasantry society.

## **5. Conclusion**

The Eritrean revolution was a movement that sought to capture state power by mobilizing the mass. It was out of this necessity that the peasants commanded central significance in the revolution. Charged by the proletariat ideology, peasants became permanent source of manpower for thirty years of armed struggle (1961-1991). But this process was a history of dual movements: firstly, it was a process of statecraft with the mission of consolidating political power over the peasants by relying on militaristic style of governance; and secondly, it was the penetration of the rural areas in non-capitalist way. Hence it was process of invention of new breeds of subjects and new practice of governance. And this relied on one institution: the Army. While the political indoctrination eroded peasants' old understanding towards their mode of living, and abstractly created attachment to modern political institutions, the militarism, as technique of power, discipline them toward the centralized authority.

In a nutshell, the revolution made the peasants governable subjects under the modern sense of governability by dissociating them from the old systems of decentralized rule. Using militarization as technique of incorporation, the village was turned into a microcosm of modern state in which peasants were transformed into modern citizen. The introduction of social services such as education, healthcare, and agrarian reforms, and its inclusive political method induced modernization. Equally, the evolution of nationalist attitude created a phenomenon, one made the revolution's leading organization EPLF as a replica of modern political entity that strove to modernity. It instilled a new nationalist imagination in the peasants that portray EPLF as a modern pro-mass movement and a relationship resembling to the one between ordinary state and peasants. Understandably, this was achieved by: one, settling the differences within the peasantry communities, and two, centralizing political power into a single entity. In other words, it was an effective way of reproducing political power of the revolution over peasants.