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Source: *Paideuma: Mitteilungen zur Kulturkunde*, 1986, Bd. 32 (1986), pp. 15-44

Published by: Frobenius Institute

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23076640>

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TRADITIONAL SOCIAL SETTING OF THE KISTANE (SODDO) IN CENTRAL ETHIOPIA

FECADU GADAMU

Introduction

This article is part of the larger research undertaken on Kistane including their rural and urban life, intermittently from 1963 to 67, but more intensively from 1968 to 70. The work was presented as a Ph. D. thesis in 1972 to the London School of Economic and Political Science, University of London.¹ Though the study included migration, urbanization, and integration of the ethnic group into the national life through the instrumentality of various voluntary associations, this article contains only the rural part of the study. As an outline of the rural socioeconomic system, it could stand by itself, even though it served as a basis for the broader study. Socio-cultural changes which were observed taking place at the time of the study have continued unabated, in fact at an accelerated rate as a result of the introduction of socialist measures at the local level in the course of the last eleven years. However, much of the economic and cultural life is still intact.

Several terms have been used to refer to this ethnic group. These include the following: Kistane, Aymelel, Gordena and Soddo. A brief account of the circumstances in which these terms originated and were used should be given here. The nomenclature of Soddo was adopted by the urban Kistanes during the last thirty years. The circumstances which led to this adoption is as follows. The Kistanes have been assimilating the surrounding Oromos. Oral literature recounts that the Oromos came both as conquerors and as peaceful settlers. The process of this settling took place over a century ago. The second type of relation between the existing Gurage people and the Oromos is the fact that three patrilineal groups of Oromo bordering north-east of Kistaneland, namely Malima, Abato, Acheber, have been exchanging wives with the Kistane for over a century. The three Oromo groups maintained exogamous and localized patrilineages. These groups referred to Kistane by the nomenclature of Gordena, a term which is synonymous with the wood used as framework for house construction, and they used the term Soddo for themselves. For reasons unknown to me the Kistanes also claimed the term for themselves. It seems to me that part of the reason is that they did not like the term *gordena*; but could have used the term Kistane. This issue was raised in the association in which both the Kistane and the Soddo were present in the late forties in Addis Ababa. They even went as far as government court. The conflict was resolved by adopting the term Soddo for both groups. Soddo was also used by the government as administrative unit of *wereda* at the same time. This reinforced the use of Soddo, for an individual was asked to give only territorial units as part of social background information. Thus the Kistanes and three Oromo units came to use the term of Soddo for identification in the national context, but when used in the ethnic sense as Soddo Gurage. The three units show dual identity by also identifying themselves as Oromo when they are with other Oromos. Ayimelel is the term used by other Gurage groups in reference to Kistane. This being the case, however,

1 Gadamu, 1972.

Kistane is not completely dropped; it is still used in the rural area. Since this is a description of the rural and traditional socio-cultural system the use of Kistane is preferred.

An essential point which may be raised here is the extent to which Kistane could be considered as ethnic identity. The Kistanes identify themselves as a distinct group of people and are identified by others as such; even though the generic term Gurage is used in the urban and national context. As Shack implies² the Kistanes do have much in common with other Gurages – historically, linguistically and culturally. Oral literature and some historical records point to the fact of common origin of the Gurage people. Linguists are unanimous in their conclusion of the unity of Gurage languages cluster at a higher level of relationship. The cultivation of ensete with its attendant technology as a major component of the rural economy is common to all Gurage groups. In terms of social structure, the patrilineal family system, agnatic descent groups and acephalous political organization is also common to all Gurage groups. But they do not form part of a single homogeneous culture or of segmentary type relationships with each other.

The Kistanes are all Orthodox Christians and this religion has a central place in shaping their basic morality and values. A few of the cults that Shack had described for the Sebat Bet Gurage as the main morality religions are found also among the Kistanes but clearly in a peripheral position and serving mainly a submerged caste group and a small portion of the female population. Here, in contrast these cults have no significant relationship to the basic principles of social and political structure. Again as Shack pointed out clanship was a central organizing principle in the social organization of the Sebat Gurage with territoriality playing only a minor role. The reverse is the case among the Kistanes; here the basis of social organization is territoriality. Lineage, not clanship, provides a supporting role among the Kistane. It is possible to point out many other differences between Kistane and the Sebat Gurage, but those already alluded to are sufficient to show that there is little congruity between the analysis of “Gurage Society” presented by Shack and that of the Kistane which I will attempt to present in this study.

There is no evidence of any Gurage-wide organization or any general political cooperation involving all the groups, nor has there been in the past. There may have been alliances between any related dialect groups such as the Sebat Bet Gurage or between any related groups such as Dobi and Meskan (other Gurage dialect groups). As a matter of fact, however, each dialect or linguistic group has a discrete system of social organization.

The Kistane ethnic boundary with the Amhara is also a questionable issue. At present apart from linguistic closeness in vocabulary, 80 % of the Kistane words are either Amharic or of the same root (as Professor Leslau confirmed to me in a private conversation). The Kistane speak Amharic specially in towns as fluently as the native speakers of the language. They share with Amharas and other Orthodox Christians religion, priests and used to share the monarchy not only in the secular and political sense but also in the mystical and ritual sense as well. In addition the Kistanes have emulated the culture and the behaviour of the urban and bureaucratic Amharas to such an extent that it is difficult to distinguish them from the former or from urbanized Ethiopians (e.g. Oromos, Tigres, etc.).

However, the Kistane qualify for an ethnic identity by the general ethnic criteria often used for an ethnic identity.³ They occupy a defined territory adjacent to other Gurage

² Shack, 1966.

³ Barth, 1969.

speakers; they are biologically self-perpetuating: they speak a separate language though related to other Gurage languages at a certain level of relationship; they have their own social organization separate from the adjacent groups, and finally they form a field of communication and greater interaction. At the time of this study, the Kistanes were estimated to be about 300,000.⁴

Kistaneland, which is Soddo *wereda*, is located in the middle of the central province of Ethiopia, Shoa, about fifty kilometers southwest of Addis Ababa, the capital. It is an administrative unit (*wereda*) of a sub-province (*awraja*), Haikotch and Butajera. The Kistane territory is fifty kilometers long and forty-five kilometers wide or a total of approximately 966 square kilometers. It is bounded on the north and east by the Awash River, and on the west by Mt. Zebidar.

Kistaneland forms part of the Shoan Plateau and its highest mountain, Mt. Zebidar reaches 3,718 meters; but the greater of the land falls within the range of 2500–3500 meters above sea level, which is considered as *weinadega* (literally vineland or compatible to the *tierra templada*) in indigenous ecological conception. Cut by chasms and gorges, it is a temperate highland area which is high enough to attract a mean temperature in the coolest month of between approximately 64 and 50 degrees F., but wet enough to rank as a humid rather than as an arid area, having a precipitation of over 40 inches. The general rule is higher temperature during the clear and dry period (October–May), and lower temperature under the rain and cloud cover (June–September). Several springs spaced apart throughout the district provide adequate supplies of water. In short, Kistaneland is generally favoured by climate and soils if not by land forms.

1. Aspects of the traditional economic system

1.1. *Aset* (*Ensete ventricosum*): the dominant crop

The rural Kestane economy is a subsistence economy dominated by the cultivation of a single root-crop: *aset*. It provides the main staple food and occupies a central place in economic activities. The cultivation of *aset* is an elaborate process. Theoretical and practical knowledge of cultivation is passed methodically from fathers to sons, and further knowledge is gained by observation of well-known cultivators, through constant discussion, and by personal experimentation. The processing and preparation of *aset* food is painstakingly undertaken by women who also train their daughters in such skills.

The development of an *aset* farm from scratch, which could provide a bare minimum food supply for an average nuclear family requires a period of at least ten years. Once the farm is developed it is kept intact indefinitely and passed from generation to generation. This is made possible by constantly replenishing the farm by rotation planting.

Aset propagates vegetatively. This is done by means of the shoots which are obtained from a mature plant when cut to the main root, uprooted, trimmed, and buried into a well-manured soil again. It is left here to grow for a year. After a year this plant (the stage is referred to as *neduwe*) may yield from 100 to 250 tiny plants. These plants are uprooted and

4 In 1970 the Awraja office gives the figure 154,190 for the rural Kistane. But this leaves out a sizeable portion of Kistane namely Wegeram, Shershera and Sost Amba which I estimate would number about 50,000. Thus the total number of population of the rural Kistane should be a little over 200,000. There is no estimation of the size of the Kistanes in towns apart from the given for the whole of Gurage language speakers. I estimate this to be about 100,000.

after cutting off the leaves, the dried bark, and the secondary roots, are replanted in a row and close to each other on a different site. They stay at this second stage (*summa*) for a year but in some cases if they have not reached a standard size they may be left here for a second year to mature further. At the completion of this stage the plants are transferred to the third designated ground exactly in the same manner as from the first to the second stage, that is cutting leaves, dried bark, secondary roots are planted in a well-manured soil. But in this stage (*kivlba*) they are planted about half a metre apart from each other; and they continue to grow here for two years before they are moved to their final site after thorough preparation which are carried out every time *aset* is moved from one site to another.

On this ground *aset* is allowed to grow until the harvest which is undertaken after a minimum of three years. While the first three stages are preparatory, it is at this stage that the plants are considered as “*real aset*”, and a man is said to possess a certain number of them when his wealth is assessed. In this field *aset* is planted three metres apart, and the “pit” designated for each of them is permanent, i.e., when the *aset* is harvested the new plant is planted exactly in the same pit which is geometrically spaced in all dimensions. Each year three or four mature *aset* trees are dug out and transplanted in stage one (*nedew*). This completes the cycle of *aset* propagation and development from stage one to four and from four back to one, two, and so forth.

The *aset* field is dug at least once in a year, and is constantly fertilized by manure. There is a symbiotic relationship between *aset* and domestic animals (mostly cattle). The animals eat *aset* leaves and in return their manure fertilizes the *aset*. During the first three stages *aset* requires more intensive care, but once it has reached the fourth stage it can even withstand several years of curtailment of labour. If left uncultivated for two or three years its growth may be affected temporarily, but can be revived by resuming intensive labour and fertilization soon. Similarly, climatic fluctuations, such as lack of rain or hail storm are not fatal to *aset*. They may retard its growth; but that is all they do to it.

Aset is only vulnerable to a certain disease which visits it occasionally. When this happens it is often possible to get rid of it by isolating the diseased *aset* and destroying its products. But sometimes the whole farm has to be destroyed in order to eradicate the disease permanently.

The *aset* farm invariably surrounds the compound. The Kistane say that *aset* requires the smoke and rubbish that come out of the hut as fertilizers. Each family owns 200 to 600 *aset*s (i.e. those of stage four) and many hundred of those in the seeding stages which occupy only a small fraction of the total farm. The maturity of *aset* is judged by a group of three or four men. However, when it produces a single pod of seeds it becomes too obvious that it has reached the peak of its development. At this point, unless it is dug up and processed at once it will deteriorate and eventually dry up.

The processing of *aset* into food is undertaken by women. During the harvesting months (October–February) two or three men dig a pit in the ground (about 3 metres in diameter and 1/2 in depth) for the depositing of the processed food. Then they uproot from fifteen to twenty *aset* for the years supply. They cut the leaves and the dried barks, scrape the roots, separate the stalk, and finally carry them to the pit. From here on women take over, in point of fact, it is a taboo for a man to touch the processed *aset*.

To start with the women cover up the pit carefully with well prepared leaves of *aset*. Then before resuming work they perform a ritual on the pit. They throw some prepared food, sprinkle coffee on it and pray to the spirits of *aset* so that the processed food will be

of good quality (it should be noted here that the processed food is not of consistent quality). Then women sit in front of the scraping boards, with one foot propped high on it, place a split piece of *aset* on the board, and scrape it using both hands to move up and down to separate the edible pulp from the fibres. Teenage girls and younger women whittle the roots into small pieces with wooden implements. All these are accumulated in the pit and after adding some yeast it is covered up to ferment. After some weeks this pit is opened up in order to air it and add some more fermenting agent and then it is covered up. But after six months the pit is again opened and all the processed stuff is taken out for further processing – with a wooden hand axe and flat board it is worked into a dough and remaining fibres removed. The result is buried in a different pit which is covered with a finer type of dried bark of the *aset*. By this stage all the inedible portions of *aset* (which may be 3/4) such as water, fibre, bark and leaves are removed. From this pit women take what is required for the daily bread.

It should be noted that women have absolute control in rationing the food; in doing so they have to be judicious and able to make it last for a year. If a wife, for instance, uses up the allotted supply before the year is over the husband could demand an explanation. Inability to manage such supplies could be a sufficient cause for divorce.

However, when the *aset* farm has expanded enough and is yielding more than the amount required for consumption the head of a household would own his own pit(s). Such deposits are needed for special public feasts (e.g. weddings, funerals, and those given for rituals and the enhancement of status) that a man has to give when he reaches about middle age, and also for extra cash. The man's pit is never used except on these occasions. It is permanently preserved. *Aset* is an extraordinary plant in this respect. The period of time beyond which the processed *aset* dough cannot be preserved is not yet determined. There are many records of families who have kept dough for three generations (i.e. about 70 years), though the pit should be opened once a year to air it and to add a few processed *aset* pieces to it in order to refresh it. A few men own several such pits.

This is a form of preserving wealth which ensures the owner against famine and to a limited extent even theft. But their resources never exceed a few pits for they have to distribute them in many socially required feasts. If a man accumulates too much wealth and does not give enough to his kinsmen, friends, and the public at large, he will not only lose prestige but could be, in some instances, accused of practising witchcraft, i.e. forming an alliance with the devil in which the devil is said to take property of a neighbour and give it to his client.

The by-products of *aset* provide the necessary materials for the Kistane rural technology and small cash. The fibres extracted from scraping and dried leaves and bark are used in building houses and many of the items of utensils and furniture such as chairs, rugs, bags, sacks, ropes and so forth. The fibre is also exported to Addis Ababa which is processed in a modern factory that produces sacks for national consumption and for the export of national agricultural products abroad. However, Kistane country provides only a small portion of the fibre required by the company.

Aset bread is an insufficient diet without some other subsidiary crops such as cabbage, potatoes and peas. These are locally produced but not in sufficient quantity. Subsidiary crops could not be produced in large quantities for several reasons: 1) the land is densely populated and what is left from *aset* farm is used for cattle grazing, 2) the land, particularly the middle latitude (*weinadega*), is extremely difficult for farming ploughing because it is covered by a type of grass which is too hard to cut through, 3) since Kistane men concentrate

on the use of the digging stick (one is used in a standing position and a second used in a scraping position) and most men have inadequate knowledge of ploughing, 4) and finally even if the above conditions were fulfilled the scarcity of oxen causes the amount of grain production to remain at a minimum. Despite such limitations a small amount of grain is produced locally by the use of digging sticks, but much of the grain requirement is obtained from the neighbouring areas particularly from the areas to the north and south which concentrate on the production of a grain. The grain producers are in need of *aset* food during the time of crop failure.

Each household owns a few head of cattle. Only a handful are able to possess a dozen or more owing to the fact of population density. At least one lactating cow is kept for its milk for the children and for butter and cheese. Some goats, sheep, chickens are kept for meat. Some households also manage to keep beasts of burden such as donkeys, mules and horses. The scarcity of grass and grazing land has kept the number of domestic animals at a minimum. The leaves of *aset* keep the cattle nourished during the dry seasons.

1.2. Former aspects of land and property

The most durable form of property was land. Surplus cash was invested in it. The selling of land was legally restricted; in other words, an individual could only sell his land to certain members of the community who had priority (in certain cases exclusive rights) to the purchase of his land. Land was a status symbol, and its ownership or lack of ownership maintained the caste system. There were six types of land ownership.

1) The personal land

Every adult Kistane male owned a personal land. It is on this type of land that the individual built his house and planted his *aset*. Over three-fourths of Kistane land was individually owned. The rest of the land which was used for other purposes was collectively owned.

2) The group land

Some land used for grazing and forest was jointly owned by several men who were linked agnatically particularly at the minimal lineage level. Such land was usually acquired through inheritance and also to a limited extent through joint purchase (men who had equal claims to purchase a parcel of land could buy it jointly). The owners of group property were reluctant to divide it for they feared that their kinship ties might weaken; nevertheless, they demanded an equal share of its use.

3) The village land

Some villages collectively owned grazing or forest land, to which all the members had equal access. This was the least common type of ownership.

4) Lineage land

Each patrilineage within the territorial organizations (*ager*) held a comparatively small piece of land. All the members had theoretical rights of use but it was so small that its usufruct right was given to a few who lived close to such land and had asked for it first.

There was no economic return for the lineage from such land. Therefore, the sole function of such land ownership was the contribution it made to the integration of the lineage. It provided the symbol of “corporateness” (i.e. partnership in land ownership just as brothers and members of the minimal lineage own grazing land).

5) The community (*ager*) land

The major grazing and forestry land was held by the territorial community (*ager* see below). The *ager* collectively administered and paid tax on it. The forest was guarded by a warden who was remunerated for his services. The cutting of important timber trees was strictly forbidden to individuals except by special permission.

The *ager* also held the proprietorship of bodies of water (e.g. springs, rivers etc.) big roads, market places, and playgrounds.

6) The church land

The administrators of the churches (*gebez*) were allocated usufructory rights over several parcels of land in return for their services to the parishioners.

All other forms of property were individually owned. These included *aset*, houses, furniture, tools, weapons, clothing etc., and cash. The concept of individual ownership was so highly emphasized that even little children were taught from their early years to own chickens, goats, and even cattle and a few *aset* plants as their own personal property. They were encouraged to spend such property on themselves and give to friends and relatives at appropriate occasions.

Adult men underlined the concept of private ownership by the blessing maxim: “Let us unite in brotherly love, but maintain our separate property.” Among other things the worth of the individual was assessed by the amount and quality of his personal property; by the way in which he strove to produce high quality *aset*, cattle, build a house etc., and added to his land and other forms of property by purchase. Thus achievement was measured in terms of expansion and production of wealth. Any man who sold the land he had inherited was not only rated low in the prestige scale, but discussed with contempt as one who had “sold the name of his father,” and also the name of his lineage. A person who expanded his inheritance by such means as purchase was said to have “raised his father’s name.” Such a man could be given a prestige title. When he died, a special, “honorary,” funeral might be held for him.⁵

The individual was encouraged to accumulate wealth⁶; he was also encouraged to spend it. He might spend it on himself during the frequent holidays or festivals, he might give gifts to his friends or relatives, and (most significantly) he might spend lavishly on public feasts. This was aside from what he spent on imported necessities, and what was taken away in tax. He might also contribute to friends and the community when a misfortune struck, or a new

⁵ Men and women performed a special dance and sang songs in honour of a distinguished man at the time of his death in a funeral ceremony. In the songs this clause – “what a distinguished man” – was repeated several times. One of the criteria of distinction is the evidence of one’s property – specifically the way in which the individual had preserved his inherited property, has amassed more land, and used it.

⁶ I mean in the Weberian sense of term (*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*) that the Kistane had a “capitalistic orientation” of attitude for acquisition.

project was to be commenced. Thus, there was a balance between, on the one hand, the acquisition and retention of wealth, and on the other distribution of wealth.

However, despite the great emphasis placed upon productivity and the social value of wealth, both as an end in itself and for distribution, production reached a ceiling. Production was stagnant in quality and volume. Several factors accounted for this. Some of these had already been mentioned in connection with *aset* production i.e., over-intensive cultivation and too much fertilization, the lack of power other than that of the human muscle, and high population density. To these causes fragmentation of land, an excessive number of feast days, and lack of specializations, should be added.

An average individual might own five or six pieces of land all scattered in the local community (*ager*). Since they were situated far from each other, a single farmer could not cultivate them all. In fact, nine out of ten individuals could only manage to cultivate *aset* on one parcel of land. Many fields could not be used even for grass or trees by the owners. They were used by relatives and friends for a nominal fee.

A very low degree of specialization existed. There were a few ritual experts (priests and those of peripheral cults), herbalists, and craftsmen, who performed special services on a part-time basis. But on the whole each family produced most of its subsistence requirements.

1.3. Systems of exchange and trade

There were three types of exchange: reciprocal, barter and monetary. A greater volume of goods and services were exchanged reciprocally than in any other way. When a man built a house he requested his friends, neighbours and kinsmen for materials and services. It was possible for a man to get at least three-fourth of the total labour and material that were invested in the building from such resources. There were many other occasions — e.g. visits, weddings, sickness, funerals, crop-failures when the individual, family or any social group received goods and services from those with whom they had social ties. Such services and goods were received without any immediate precondition as to repayment by specific amounts, or at a set time. However, those who had received must reciprocate eventually in one way or another. If an individual failed to do so he would in the long run lose social credit and hence, be placed in a precarious economic position. On the whole the principle of equality of transactions operated — the individual receiving as much as he gave.

At the barter level economic exchange was well defined and structured. Goods and services were measured when transacted, and paid back or compensated within a defined time limit. For instance, the cultivation of *aset* was undertaken by several men working together on each other's field in rotation. They did this because the work required uniformity as in harvesting which must be done in one day. When men worked together they could concentrate better and work consistently for a fixed number of hours (i.e. 10 hours). Furthermore, this provided enjoyable conditions as they often sang together and were provided with better food and drinks. Such exchanges of labour were well regulated in number of hours, days, and the amount and quality of work provided. There was also the cash angle. Poorer men who owned a smaller size of *aset* plantation and were in need of cash sold such labour at a rate of Eth. \$ 1.00 per man per day plus at least two meals and beer⁷ when their

⁷ When one considers the cost of the meal and beer which might amount to at least Eth. \$ 1.00 such wages for unskilled day labour was higher than the national average.

turn came. Similarly, women too worked together in rotation, for example when processing the *aset* food and weaving rugs.

Barter exchanges of goods took place in many contexts. In limited circumstances men exchanged parcels of land with each other. And in the periodical local market both men and women exchanged small items for which they disliked employing small currency, i.e. Eth. \$ 0.01 and .05.

The third system of exchange was that involving money. Here, I shall only give a sketch of the local Kistane trade. Kistane bought and sold goods, and to a limited extent specialized services every day among themselves at currently fixed prices. The local markets, each of which was held once in a week provided more goods. These markets formed a kind of network but were spaced apart and each was held on a separate day; so that if a man needed to go to a market on any given day he would find one functioning. There were some traders who constantly travelled from one to another.

The most important Kistane local trade took place between the different zones which lie within and outside the country of the Kistane. The three zones – the highlands, the land of middle latitude, and the lowlands – produce different crops and domestic animals which were exchanged between them. The highlands produces sheep, barley and cabbage. The middle latitude, which comprises about 85 % of Kistane, produces *aset*. The lowlands produces *tef*, red pepper and maize. Each zone required the produce of the others. These were transported by traders who were engaged in interzonal trades. These traders bought their goods from the periodical markets but used a network of friendship which they had established through gift exchanges for accommodation – food, sleeping, deposit of goods, and safety of travel. Kistane economy was not dependent on the rural resources alone. Items such as clothing, tools, iron for tool making, salt were imported from the towns. But most significantly the advent of urbanization has absorbed the excessive population.

2. Social structure

Kistane social structure was based on three main principles: kinship, territoriality, friendship and contract. Territoriality was the most important of these. The others operated within the territorially defined social structure, particularly within the *ager* (the significant territorial unit which was a component of Kistane culture).

These social relationships were articulated at all levels by secular and ritual contracts and economic exchanges.

Since the family was the building block of Kistane social structure, our description must begin here. In many social contexts, they consider the family as though it were a “person” – usually referred to as “a man” in reckoning the size of membership of the village or lineage assembly. Yet an individual had his own identity and was considered as such in many other social contexts.

2.1. Marriage and family

The nuclear patrilineal family was formed by marriage. Marriage among the Kistane was an extremely serious affair. Rules of exogamy, public display in lavish feasts and ceremony, a long period of honey moon, the alliance it established between two minimal segments of two patrilineages – were some of the most important features that were strictly observed.

Marriage was strictly prohibited within the patrilineage, and on the maternal side up to three generations. In addition other categories of dyadic relationships, such as godfatherhood, best man, close friendship and neighbourliness restricted marriage at least up to two generations. Breaking the rules of exogamy in all these cases could bring public disapproval. But it was in the case of the patrilineage that the guilty party would face social sanctions. In this case the elders of the patrilineage visited the newly-weds and asked them to dissolve their marriage before any children were born. If refused they placed a curse upon them: "You have broken our bone and cut our intestine⁸. May you bear a black dog and a white cat." Moreover, as a secular sanction, the newly-weds could be totally ostracised from the lineage. Therefore, parents spent a considerable time in selecting appropriate spouses for their children first of all, who were free from impediments of kinship. In addition to kinship there were other important criteria considered in selecting a partner. The spouse should be of equal lineage standing (i.e. for the majority of the Kistane, free from ex-slave or lower caste status). Finally, the characters of the spouses were considered. A girl was expected to have feminine qualities (e.g. to be shy and obedient to older people), to have a good upbringing, skills in crafts, and home management, and beauty etc. Among the essential attributes of a boy was the amount of land that he was likely to inherit, his skill in farming or trade, strength of character (e.g. bravery, discipline) etc. Such conditions created a scarcity of marriageable girls and of men as well. Since most people were related in one way or another, the family of the boy was forced to travel outside the *ager*, sometimes even outside Kistane to get a bride for their son.

Engagement was an arduous process; it required the observation of meticulous rules of etiquette. Having decided upon a specific girl the father of a boy began asking or "begging" (*tokessem*)⁹. The first contact was made through a mediator. A date was fixed when the father of a boy could formally meet the father of the girl. The father of the boy accompanied by two or three men visited the father of the girl; and on this occasion he asked: "I have come to seek kinship relation with your family." To this the father of the girl replied, "It is my pleasure to accept such relation," and would ask for another appointment during which time he could consult with relatives about the eligibility of the boy. On the second occasion if the father of the girl was to reject the proposal he would do so at once. But if he was inclined to accept it, he would give a further appointment or two giving the excuses that many more kinsmen needed to be consulted. On the third visit he might accept the proposal but again making it conditional, that if any of the close relatives would reject the proposal it could be called off. Such a state of uncertainty about the engagement might be kept right up to the time of marriage.

The engagement period was prolonged for two main reasons. First as I have said earlier, so that the girl's parents in their turn might have sufficient time to assess the suitability of the boy for their daughter. And secondly, it was to underline the fact that their daughter was of high value and in demand. When finally the proposal was accepted, an engagement feast was given by the parents of the girl to the father of the boy and the men who had accompanied him. The boy's father gave a new dress to the girl and paid Eth. \$ 40 which

8 The Kistane say that "he is of our wood and intestine" in order to express both patrilineal and matrilineal kinship relations. This is in a way synonymous with the English equivalent of "blood relations".

9 This term which means "begging" is intentionally used in the fullest sense of the term. The available term which stands for asking is consciously avoided.

was said to be the cost of the blanket for her mother; he also made some contribution towards the cost of the feast. At least a minimum of one year passed between the time of engagement and wedding. During this time the parents of the boy prepared for the wedding feast.

During the engagement period a strict rule of avoidance had to be observed by the betrothed. First of all they had to avoid each other, but the onus was on the girl. While the bridegroom-to-be pretended to be looking for his fiancée and beaten her up whenever and wherever he could catch her, the bride-to-be had to be always watching her step lest she should stumble on him. If she sighted her fiancé at any distance, she had to flee from the scene, for not doing so could really offend him, in which case he would be entitled to inflict punishment on her. Secondly, both had to avoid their in-laws, primarily each other's parents, but to a limited extent distant in-laws as well. If by accident they happened to meet their in-laws they had to display great embarrassment by hiding or running away. Failure to do so could anger in-laws to the point where they could report such actions symbolically, "he/she was going to beat me up," and could seriously affect their relationship.

The preparation of the bride-to-be started three months ahead of the actual wedding and was the most significant. This consisted of the cutting of her nails, relieving her from all house chores and providing her with unusual luxuries and leisure. After the wedding date was fixed, the parents of the boy would specifically request her parents, "to cut her nails to them." So her mother acting on such instructions, would gang up with a few neighbouring women, seize her one fine morning and cut by sheer force all her finger and toe nails to their roots, while she was struggling to free herself and crying. But later on she herself kept her finger nails to their roots by methodically cutting them with bleeding. During her convalescence which took about a week young men and girls assembled to dance in her honour at her house.

The functions of the nail cutting ordeal was three-fold: first, it was to end her service to her parents. The cutting of her nails physically limited her movements and activities, even if there was some temptation to require her services for some chores. Secondly, the ordeal signified the first rite of passage enacted in order to bestow a new status upon her. This was accompanied at once with a new attitude and behaviour towards her. She was no longer ordered around, but treated gently, and more like an adult than a teenager. In fact her status was similar to that of an honoured guest. Thirdly, during this time she was given luxury treatment because she was, as will be shown later, deprived of the inheritance of the main items of property (i.e. *aset*, cattle and land), and no wedding feast was given in her honour. Thus, this was part of such compensation. Accompanied by a best friend (*yegoste*)¹⁰ and a younger sister she received formal hospitality¹¹ from each of her adult cognates and friends of the family. A special dress and ornaments were provided for her. The effect of such treatment was that she noticeably gained weight and looked beautiful.

The bride-groom-to-be with his bond-friend¹² and younger brother received a similar type of hospitality during the same period, but no ordeal was applied to him, nor was he exempted from labour.

10 This is a childhood friend formally established during childhood. All children are encouraged to choose one best friend of the same age and sex preferably from unrelated or distantly related family. The friendship is strengthened and maintained by eating and playing together throughout childhood.

11 This hospitality was referred to as "eating of the nail".

12 This is similar to that of the girl's best friend as described in footnote 10.

Starting three days before the wedding day the bride-to-be underwent the second ordeal. This consisted of the bride-to-be taking a laxative¹³ and in fasting for four days. Her best friends and younger sisters might accompany her in laxative taking and fasting for two days in order to show their sympathy, and share her ordeal. Meanwhile, a public dance was held during the evenings which started a week before the wedding day.

The wedding day witnessed the culmination of many activities – the display of the feast, the formalization of the marriage contract, exchange of gifts, festivity and dance. This was a day when the father and mother of the bridegroom gave a lavish feast to the public. For a certain number of the guests, particularly the heads of the households of the village the feast was compulsory. The wedding feast required the expenditure of hundreds of dollars which had been saved for this purpose by the parents for years. At least two oxen were slaughtered, several barrels of beer were brewed, and several pots of butter provided for consumption. Not providing a bare minimum for the feast might result in a loss of prestige for the parents, in fact a public utterance of ridicule in songs, just as providing a more than average feast could boost their prestige and eulogy in the same popular medium. In the meantime, while adult male guests were feasting, the bridegroom dressed in a priest's ceremonial robe, accompanied by about fifty of his friends, rode on horse-back to fetch his bride after being blessed by the elders.

On arrival at his bride's house he was deliberately kept outside waiting for several hours. The girls ridiculed him in their songs (e.g. mentioning how ugly, poorly dressed, and poverty stricken he was). His negotiator, an older man whom he had brought with him, was allowed to enter the house where the elders had assembled and he gave the dress and the ornament he had brought for the bride. This was carefully inspected by the elders and very often belittled, even rejected at first as being insufficient and of poor quality. The haggling and bargaining went on for hours. The groom was allowed to enter the house but not given any hospitality (he and his followers might be allowed to drink some beer but this was far below the normal provisions for such an occasion). Finally, after the bride's cloth and ornaments were received gifts were exchanged¹⁴, the marriage contract was finalized, and the bride was blessed¹⁵, the groom was allowed to take his bride. The bride completely covered (blindfolded) was carried to the house of the groom and there she was placed in seclusion, in a curtained, or separate room or a house. The groom, the bride and their entourage were received with great pomp and ceremony. The bride was given a new first name (but she could retain her second name). At midnight the groom was allowed to enter her room and have sexual relations with his bride, while parents and friends waited outside for the good news i.e. the proof of virginity. Such an announcement was made by flashing some blood on a tip of a handkerchief which was received with applause singing and drinking.

13 The laxative is what is locally referred to as *Koso*. The flower of a tree which is used by people for removing the tapeworm parasite.

14 The groom's gift consisted of one sheep and six bottles of butter for the bride's mother and a bottle of butter and a sheep for each of the grandparents (the amount of which depends on the number of these who are alive). The gift from the bride was much more extensive. These were one big lamb and a pot of butter for the groom's father; a big pot of butter, a sheep and a load (on donkey's back) of barley flour for porridge for the groom's father; a sheep for each of the grandparents, i.e. the groom's father's father; a bottle of butter for each of the best men; a bottle of butter for each of the groom's brothers and sisters. Some of these gifts were consumed by the neighbours of both parents.

15 The blessing was done by bringing her before the assembly of men and pouring milk on her breasts, to make her fertile, and verbal statements – “may you have a good marriage . . . be fertile . . . be thoroughly united with your husband . . .” etc.

Now the bride began her two years honeymoon. During the first week she was completely secluded and no one was allowed to visit her except her best men who took charge of her during this time and her husband at night, in privacy. But she was gradually introduced to her in-laws, first to her mother-in-law and father-in-law who had to promise her a substantial gift for being introduced to her which she collected when she established a new residence. Then other relatives and friends came and got introduced to her in exchange for small gifts. During the first year, a specially selected good food was prepared for her. She was treated with the utmost care, courtesy, love, generosity – a treatment unequalled to any category of person in any other social context. She was also expected to be extraordinarily gentle and sweet, kissing and addressing with terms father, mother, brother and sister and referring to her in-laws and neighbours with the pronoun *dehim*¹⁶. She spent her days beautifying herself and playing games with the children and young men as her room was the centre of recreation in the village. Her movements were mostly confined to her mother-in-law to step out to other rooms and outside. The bride showed bizarre behaviour towards her husband. She showed extreme timidity towards him in public; for example, when he approached the house she fled to her room and closed the curtain, as not to do so could be interpreted as an offence to him which could give him a cause to strike her or to punish her at night. She never called him by name or recognized him in public. But at night when they went to bed together they were intimate, though the husband still showed physical aggressiveness and might attempt to intimidate her.

After a year the newly-weds were invited by the bride's parents for a three-week period of hospitality, in which, among other things, an ox was slaughtered and 30 bottles of butter were provided for them and their guests. In sharp contrast to the wedding day, the groom was received warmly and given the highest respect by his in-laws. A change of attitude and behaviour was also made between the bride and the groom – they now sat, talked, played together in public. Such hospitality was repeated for a day or two at later occasions in order to provide greater opportunities for better acquaintance between the groom and his in-laws.

During the second year the newly-weds prepared for a new residence. The wife wove rugs and baskets and collected all other utensils while the husband built a house, planted *aset*, and acquired cattle. During this time she also shared in household chores. And thus towards the end of the second year the couple moved out into their own residence. Often a conflict might then arise between the new and the old family – i.e. between the mother and daughter-in-law, and between the father and son. This arose from the fact that the latter demanded to take more property while the former tried to retain it. From here on in most cases, relations between the mother and the daughter-in-law continued to be strained.

The husband-wife relationship gradually attained more of a partnership character in sharp contrast to the honeymoon period, though the wife never achieved equality with the husband. Except in special circumstances a woman was barred from owning important types of property (i.e. land, *aset*, cattle). She was also excluded from participating in political activities. She did not enjoy as many public feasts, times of ceremony and leisure. She had no protection against untimely divorce; in the event of such divorce, all that she could claim was a new dress. If she did not bear children after a few years of marriage, she did not stand a chance of retaining her marriage: as kinsmen would tend to put pressure on the husband to divorce her and marry another woman who was more likely to bear him children. However, she acquired

16 This is similar to the French polite or formal pronoun “vous”.

a relatively higher status and security when she proved to be a good wife. This was judged by the way she prepared public feasts for her husband, bore several children, preferably sons, and fulfilled the role of a good mother (e.g. giving a good honeymoon for a daughter).

Despite such deprivations and lower status given to women, there were situations when a woman who had reached middle age was given special treatment. She could join a feast club (*mahber*)¹⁷ and could enjoy a feast once in a month, when men were given the back seat, so to speak. If she was slow in bearing children, the husband was urged to sacrifice for her latent or manifested spirit so that she could have children and at the same time she was honoured, given leisure and feasts for a few days.

2.2 Spirit possession

A spirit possession, particularly that by *Demamit*¹⁸, enabled a woman to command extraordinary power and privilege over her husband and other men. Two categories of women were possessed by *Demamit*: late teenage girls and women in the early period of their marriage particularly during honeymoon. By far the most frequent possession was that of teenage girls (at least four-fifths, I estimate). Possession in later stages of a woman's life, say after three years of marriage, was extremely rare though not ideologically ruled out. Even barren women who were the most deprived did not, as a rule, get possessed. Thus in general three years before and three years after marriage was the period of possession. This is the time when women were supposed to be given the best treatment, before marriage in partial leisure, new clothes and ornaments for the preparations of betrothal and marriage, and after marriage, the two years of honeymoon. The reduction of such privileges increased the incidence of *Demamit* possession. *Meyet* and laymen alike gave this rationale especially in the case of what was considered the abduction of a woman by a leopard. The general purpose was to increase the privilege of women possessed by *Demamit*.

Spirit possession was initiated in two different ways: first, a segment of *meyet* society as a whole might be possessed and come to a house of the girl unannounced and snatch her away, if opposed by a threat of direct force and supernatural retribution (e.g. destruction of the roof of the house by the male *meyet*). The second method is that which is believed that the "girl is taken by a leopard secretly and hidden in a jungle or in an empty house". When the disappearance of a girl was suspected to be caused by a leopard, the "*meyet* society" undertook an intensive search for days. During this time they required from the parents of the girl food supplies and a young bull which they claimed would be offered to the leopard in exchange for the girl. In both cases the initiate was taken to the house of the chief to start the long period of initiation.

Initiation took about six months during which time a different pattern of attitude, behaviour and language were inculcated. During the first week the initiate (except from the

17 *Mahber* is a ritual and feast club formed by ten to twenty women in the name of one of the Saints of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The feast is provided by each woman in rotation. The women enjoyed their feast and performed a folk version of the Church ritual assisted at certain stages by a single priest – all in seclusion. Members of *mahber* may aid each other in other contexts, such as over brides, weddings, etc.

18 *Demamit* is a female deity which is believed to descend from heaven and "land" on a person, *meyet*, the name of a possessed person during such possession. The deity is believed to come right under God (that is conceived in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church) but does not collaborate with the saints or angels. On the whole the deity is more associated with the peripheral spirits.

chief and an adult *meyet* to take care of her) was completely secluded and was considered unconscious. But after a few weeks she started seeing relatives though she would not recognize them as such nor could communicate with them verbally for she was pronounced “dumb” (*dundum*). This was the first stage in which she was not allowed to leave the premises of the chief. This lasted about three months during which time the *dumdum meyet* might be allowed to go to the local market with an escort and beg for money, grain, and spices for her initiation feast. On the third month an initiation feast was given by her parents to all the *meyet* of the locality (*ager*). After a ritual was performed, she was allowed to become a fully-fledged member of the *meyet* group and allowed to speak in the special dialect as well as return to her parents.

During this stage (which was referred to as the ‘stick stage’) which might last until marriage (about three or four years), the *meyet* lived a much more indulgent and unrestricted life. She had a privileged position in the household – she was clothed and fed better; she was treated very gently. She might service the family by doing light work, but only according to her whims and discretions. Any attempt to discipline or compel her like other children would be met by physical retaliation or it was assumed that the guilty would be punished by supernatural retribution¹⁹. Parents were ambivalent about their daughter becoming *meyet*. On the one hand they liked the fact that being possessed by *Demamit* provided their daughter with special treatment, luxury and leisure which enabled her to grow up faster and more attractive; this also provided her with better marriage prospects. On the other hand, they resented the fact of the loss of absolute control over their daughter, the reduction of the family labour force and unsolicited expenditure. But since there was nothing they could do about it they accepted it and looked at its positive contribution to the welfare of their daughter. This stage ended just a few months before marriage when she was depossessed by the chief (expressed indigenously, “the stick is taken away from her”). She passed to the third, adult stage.

The benefits and privileges of *meyet* continued throughout adult life. These were in the form of occasional feasts, leisure, and special treatment by all laymen during possession. Feasts were provided for the adult *meyet* group at the time of the initiation and death of a *meyet*. There were three occasions during a year when individual *meyet* contributed in cash and food and assembled for a feast at the house of the chief. Feasts were also provided for them when a non-*meyet* was sick with chronic stomach illness and this was diagnosed as having been caused by *Demamit*. But what was most beneficial to all *meyet* was the biannual possession. During this month all adult *meyet* got possessed, i.e. became “stick” *meyet*, i.e. returned to the premarital stage. They spoke in “*meyetigna*” (the language of *meyet*) and carried a specially fashioned stick. They quitted their normal activities and drastically altered all their relationships. They even abandoned their maternal and wifely roles by refusing to recognize them. To state it in somehow general terms, they became oblivious of anything that had happened in their former non-*meyet* experience and reconstructed a new social universe. Thus, they addressed everyone, including their children and husbands, as brothers

19 If for example she was slapped or hit with a stick or insulted strongly (e.g.: may you eat a frog or snake) she might go into a trance state in which she starts singing at the top of her voice and walks to the house of the chief. The chief might return her to the second stage if he saw fit; if not he could assemble other *meyets* who would also undergo a trance and destroy the house of the defaulter. The supernatural retribution was assumed to consist of certain types of internal illness and thunder stroke on property or people in extreme cases. In both cases the cure of such afflictions was administered by the *meyets* as a group.

and sisters (the only exception were infants which they might acknowledge as their own children claiming that they were gifts from *gawye*). They tended to relate to people on the basis of what happened in their temporary *meyet* experience – they praised those who had given them hospitality and gifts and scandalized those who had not. Though they pretended that they built their social relationships from scratch, they did indeed select those nearest to them in kinship relations to demand substantial gifts in kind and cash. To sum up their privileges, having relinquished their normal social responsibility and dressed up in their best clothes, they spent the whole month in leisure and luxury. They laughed, teased and played as they did during their honeymoon or during the “stick” period. After each had collected sufficient money and other gifts, they combined their resources and feasted together at the house of the chief. This period ended when the chief got them “depossession” (this is the closest term I can find since ‘exorcism’ does not correspond to the actor’s concept).

The leadership of the *meyet* was dominated by a few men from the upper caste, *zera*, which constituted over 98 % of the population.²⁰ Most of the chiefs were also diviners and were much more engaged in divining from which they got cash remunerations. (But two out of seven from my sample of *meyet* chiefs held their positions simply by being *meyet*). There was a tendency of hereditary succession to chieftainship – if not strictly lineally at least there was an attempt to keep it within the minimal segment of the patrilineage. The benefits of the *meyet* chiefs was proportionally higher than the ordinary *meyet*. They got cash for their services from the laymen and *meyet* alike. In all feasts they got a special share of food and drinks of substantial size to take home and consume with their own families. Furthermore, they got high respect and obedience from laymen and obedience from *meyets*.

In sum the *meyet* “society” was the only organized semi-secret group of the peripheral cults; headed by a chief it was a centralized and hierarchically organized group. It was contained within the territorial unit (*ager*). It had a membership of between 50–100 men and women. It had its own dialect which was only partially intelligible to the layman. It had also an extensive code of behaviour.

20 I.M. Lewis (1966, 1969) has expounded a general theory that the possession by “peripheral spirits”, such as *meyet*, had the function of enhancing the social position of the down-trodden women, submerged caste groups, and I would add children. William Shack has reported for Sabat Bet Gurage that *meyet* served only the women and the *fuga* (the lower submerged caste group). My finding corroborates both Lewis’s general theory and Shack’s ethnographic report. In Kistane children were exploited, sometimes over-exploited; however, some have compensations – inheritance of property and participation in the politics of the community. Adult women did not own property, nor participated in politics, moreover they did not have as much leisure as men. Lower caste groups like the *Fugas* and *Ijamas* did not own property (land, houses, asset) nor did they participate in politics. The incidence of spirit possession, particularly *meyet* is overwhelmingly higher among these categories of persons in Kistane population; and as I have shown here, it did not provide them with unprecedented power to manipulate social situations to acquire “esteem”, goods and leisure. I could have said that “meyet” spirit possession was entirely monopolized by these categories of the population. But it was not. In Kistane a few men from the upper caste, *zera*, dominated the top leadership of the *meyet* organization. Does this negate Lewis’s general theory? I don’t think so. *Meyet* was a power largely exploited by the down-trodden. But should there be anything that would prevent some of the members of the privileged caste from being interested in such power resources and seize it for themselves? (E.g. feudal lords could exploit serfs or capitalists could exploit the workers to any extreme degree.) In Kistane I was told by *meyets* themselves (in unpossessed state) that the leadership of their organization was in the hands of *fuga* caste men, but it was taken away from them by *zera* in the course of time. Were these *zera* men deprived in any way? No, I have examined the situation of seven leaders (three dead and four alive) and found them economically and politically as secured as others. Their psychological position? It is beyond the scope of this research.

2.3. Parent-children relationships

Children were considered as gifts from supernatural beings, particularly from the Virgin Mary. It was believed that children were fashioned by her while they were in the womb. After they were born a host of spirits belonging to peripheral cult spirits (i.e. those other than the Ethiopian Orthodox Church), it was believed, threatened them with sickness and sometimes death, unless this was averted by offering to the spirit. Parents also attempted to solicit the aid of the Saints of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church against the afflictions that might be inflicted by peripheral spirits.

Parents value children for love, investment in the family, labour force and old age insurance. After about the age of six parents begin to train their children to take up minor chores. As children grow up they take up more important tasks, eventually replacing their parents. In this respect boys are regarded more valuable as they will engage in *aset*, and subsidiary crop productions. In every day conversations, when Kistane talk of each other's wealth, they mention children among the main indicators, land, *aset* and cattle. Men wait anxiously for the time when they can be relieved by their sons from regular labour so that they may engage in leisure, petty local trades and community politics. Kestane underline the desire and justification of child labour in these words: "a donkey retires when relieved by its offspring."

The obedience and services of children to their parents was socially enforced and it was believed that their behaviour had mystical consequences. It was believed that the blessings of parents were essential for general well-being and success in life. On the other hand, withholding blessings or in the extreme case being cursed was conceived to bring disastrous effect on the individual. Therefore, children were strongly socialized to avoid cursing and to meet the expectations and demands of their parents starting from their early years. But it was during their adulthood (decidedly in the case of sons) when they had inherited a good portion of their parent's property and parents were in their declining years, that they were required to support them and make them happy.

There was a formal public sanction against adult sons who failed to support their parents during their old age²¹. When kinsmen, friends and neighbours detected a man failing to support his parents they saw fit to advise him and even embarrass him in public. Parents could bring social pressure on their children by withholding their blessings or complaining in public, in extreme cases by cursing them. A cursed son could lose popularity as a result of such curse. But while parents were alive there was a chance to be blessed and reverse the adverse effect of a curse. However, if despite such public warnings a man did not support his parents to the satisfaction of the public a final sanction was carried out against him. During the funeral ceremony of a parent the attendants, who were composed of members of his patrilineage and territorial organizations, formed themselves as an assembly with jural rights to judge the bereaved son. Right after the burial the son was asked to stand up before the assembly to receive the verdict. Two reliable witnesses were called to testify whether the bereaved son was "blessed" or "cursed". Others were obliged to speak out if their observations were contrary to those of the two witnesses. If a verdict given by the assembly to the bereaved son was a curse, he would be told to leave the assembly and walk home alone, and was immediately deserted by the funeral attendants. In addition, the soul of the dead parent

21 The demand on daughters was usually minimal since they did not inherit property. But in the absence of sons and if they were in a good economic position, they might be expected to take the place of the son in supporting their parents.

was believed to haunt the accursed and bring misfortune upon him throughout life. But what was most devastating were its social consequences. The cursed person lost social credit. He was considered a social liability since he was feared, that he might bring misfortune upon the family and his descendants.

Therefore, individuals made sure that the community knew what they were doing for and giving their parents. Gifts in clothes or prepared food were often displayed before a few invited neighbours and kinsmen when parents were asked to bless in public who might be joined by the guests as well. This was to make sure that if the parents cursed their children out of sadism or senility, the community would not take arbitrary action against them. The community did take into consideration this and other factors in passing the judgment of cursing and blessing. There was a degree of "blessedness". Thus in describing individuals one was said to be very well blessed or moderately so, or not at all. One could also be in a neutral state of not being blessed, but not being cursed either.

2.4. Inheritance of the main forms of property

The main items of property were transmitted from father to son. Land was equally divided among sons, but the first-born took an extra share for his eldership. For instance if a man had three sons, the plot would be divided into four equal parts. The elder was asked to pick the first two shares, while the remaining two went to the second and third sons.

There was only one way in which daughters could inherit property. Daughters who had no brothers or if a man had married two or more wives those who did not have full brothers (*yetenet gered*) were entitled to inherit a share of their father's land. But members of the minimal segment of the patrilineage who were responsible for dividing the land among them were so biased in favour of sons that such daughters in practice inherited a very small piece of land. Since divorce and polygamy were not too prevalent (from a survey of 400 families about one out of three men had married two or more times; and one out of the eight had two or more wives) only a small percentage of land was transmitted in this manner. Eventually in about three generation's time such land right was passed to the patrilineal group through purchase or eviction because of lack of utilization for a long period of time. The government tax system favoured this since whoever paid tax owned the land. But the main reason for abandoning it was that it gave a lower status to a husband or son to live or cultivate such land. In cultivating such land one would be required to align to his wife's patrilineage or his mother's. However, a son was relatively more respected if he lived on his mother's land than the husband, though he would still be referred to as "a son of a woman", *yegered bay*.

2.5. Divorce

Though there are no significant structural impediments, divorce is not frequent. If a man divorces his wife without sufficient reason he will lose some prestige as a worthy husband, especially if she had borne children for him and if she was a good housekeeper. He will also have a slight fear of supernatural retribution for doing injustice to a woman, for she could solicit the aid of Saints or the spirits of peripheral cults to bring afflictions on him. There was a general conception that, "what ever injustice you do unto others will be done unto you", (the law of *ture*) even if the injured party did not solicit it. The only difference was that soliciting aids from the agents made it more immediate. The inconvenience men would

suffer without a wife was also a restraining factor. There was a taboo against men cooking food. The only exception was the cooking of fresh meat, which was only very occasionally eaten (i.e. about once a month and on four holidays – New Year, *maskal*, Christmas and Easter).

Grounds for divorce were barrenness, general unfitness or spiritual incompatibility of a wife. If a wife did not bear children within three years pressure started mounting up. In the fifth and sixth years kinsmen and friends openly harassed the man verbally as this metaphorical rebuke shows “you are eating children’s fingers”.²² If a wife was ineffective as a housekeeper and entertainer of guests especially on the occasion of public feasts, he would also be entitled to divorce her. But what was usually considered intolerable was “the mystical incompatibility” of a husband and wife. If either or both were generally unwell and had met too many misfortunes a diviner might reveal that the cause of such afflictions was that the “spirit”²³ of one was not compatible with that of the other. When checking with other diviners, if such was confirmed, divorce then would become inevitable.

During the third year of marriage divorce was more frequent than any other times. This was because after two years of honeymoon when the newly-weds established a new residence they passed through such a trying period. By now as pointed out earlier parents had exhausted their resources on the wedding and honeymoon, and the “grace period” for the bride was over. As the new family was trying to reduce the resources of the former one, friction was created between the two. Very often the young wife found it impossible to cope with, and as a result left her husband. But elders strove to mend the marriage. Nowadays such strife is considerably reduced by the chance provided for the couples to move to towns.

The actual divorce took a little time and there was not much entanglement after the dissolution of marriage. At the time of divorce a man had to give a woman a new dress in the presence of the elders. She might keep the breast-feeding child with her, but the rest stayed with their fathers. Otherwise, once the marriage was dissolved the woman returned to her parents empty-handed, without any share of property. She could not even take the things that she had made. The only consolation she might have was that if she had children they would inherit property from their father (this is obvious indirect inheritance by her)²⁴ and she would expect to be supported by them during old age.

2.6. Lineage: kinship relations

The key to the Kistane kinship system was the system of agnatic exogamous lineages. The patrilineage was one of the organizing principles of the politico-jural system of the Kistane, the others being territorial organizations, and the network of friendship. Patriline-

22 The statement expressed that a man was keeping his barren wife because she was feeding him exceptionally well and as a result he was foregoing the need to have children. In short, the metaphor expressed the sense that a man was exchanging children (potentiality) for food. In the long run such a deal deprived the lineage of the chance to increase its number and perpetuate itself as a viable social unit. That is why kinsmen spoke out.

23 This was not a manifested “spirit”, nor did it refer to spirit possession. It was what everybody was supposed to have. I think the nearest equivalent to it is “psychic” and the incompatibility must be that of a psychological one. The equivalents for spirit (peripheral ones) are *ayana*, *demamit*, *seitan* (the devil).

24 Kistane were aware of such “indirect inheritance”. In fact they stated it, “Mrs. X. has a share of her husband’s property because she has children”. If she had sons of course she “inherited” more and was entitled to have greater chance for support during old age.

ages were contained within each territorial division, *ager*, though they radiated but to a few neighbouring *agers*. The oral literature of Kistane revealed that the lineages of each territory were founded by a group of men who occupied that territory in the distant past. For instance, in one *ager* (Damu) I was told by the wise elders that there were fifty men who came to this territory, but in the course of time only the descendants of the twenty-five survived. With the addition of one lineage (an Oromo one) there are now twenty-six lineages, which is the largest number in any one *ager*, the smallest number being eight.

Lineages are of similar generation depth (eight to eleven depending on which of the three living generations one starts reckoning from). Lineages vary in their population strength (i.e. 100–1000). Large lineages were considered politically strong and their members had political advantages in their everyday interaction *vis-à-vis* members of smaller lineages. A lineage is said to have a character (similar to a personality), such as “hardheadedness, shrewdness, gullibility” etc. Such characterizations were used in everyday behaviour more for a joking relationship rather than as an absolute explanation of the causes of a person’s action.

Three levels of segmentation are recognized and used for delimiting social activities. The maximal lineage is called *tib* and constitutes the whole descent group. The major segments of the lineage, *kers*, are founded by the sons of the maximal lineage. Four to five generations constitute the minimal lineage, referred to as *ge*, a term which is also used to refer to a family.

These levels of segmentation mark social distance and intensity of social interaction – the lower the level the more intense and frequent the interaction. Integration at the minimal level was maintained by gift exchange and more frequent getting together in feasts; at this level there were no formal sanctions for non-compliance to certain norms, but there would be withdrawal of co-operation and gifts from the deviant individual(s).

Lineages had economic, jural, political and ritual functions. In the economic sphere, as I stated earlier, first, the lineage controlled the lineage land. The *ager* land was also theoretically owned by lineages (by the founders) and it is through them that individuals are said to have had rights over such land. But the most significant control was that the lineage had over the property of individuals. Members of a lineage were not allowed to sell their personal property to any outsider. It was forbidden to sell land to a more distantly related person before it had been offered to those who were more nearly related. When a person had the intention of selling his land first he had to offer it to his brothers; if they were not in a position to buy it, to those in the minimal segment of the lineage, following precisely the kinship distance from the nearest to the maximal lineage. Then only then could he sell it to members of other lineages which reside within that particular *ager*.

As I have stated earlier lineages regulated marriage. Lineage members considered the prohibition of marriage within the lineage as one of their important obligations. When it took place either defiantly or unknowingly, other lineage members would not hesitate to carry out punitive measures.

The lineage formed the most effective protective system for its members. Agnates believed that one of their primary duties was to protect each other against external attack at all times; thus even in minor fights during the yearly games or market days if two individuals of different lineages fought their agnates might take sides and soon there could be a confrontation of two lineages.

A lineage paid and received blood compensation: For instance if a member of lineage A killed a member of lineage B, then enmity was created between the two lineages, and con-

sequently their members avoided each other. They did not partake food in the same house or in the same feast, since “they have blood on their hands” as they put it, until blood compensation was paid and ritual of purification was performed. Since such incidence made everyday interaction very difficult because residences of the members of the lineages were juxtaposed in each village, there was pressing need for settlement and reconciliation.

Certain conditions must be fulfilled for negotiations to begin. First of all, the murderer and his lineage must demonstrate regret and grief for the murder. Among other things, the murderer has to flee the Kistane territory, even though some of his kinsmen might know his whereabouts. Meanwhile his property had to be destroyed; his kinsmen had to show shame and guilt in their attitude and behaviour towards the kinsmen of the victim. Seven years had to pass before a formal negotiation began. After years of begging and appealing in the name of angels and to the saints in private and public by the lineage of the murderer, serious negotiation might start. When the lineage of the killer received encouraging signs from the lineage of the victim, it might start collecting contributions from its members. When the two lineages had gradually reached an agreement a date was fixed, and on this day they assembled on an open ground. Lineage A paid lineage B the blood compensation in terms of many heads of cattle (thirty was the usual number). Half these were consumed there on the spot by both parties: the rest was given to the close kinsmen, preferably to the bereaved family. A ritual was performed in order “to wash away the blood stain”. The slaughtering of cattle, particularly the shedding of the blood as a symbolic representation of the blood of the murdered person formed the most important part of the ritual. The consumption of food (particularly eating out of the same spoon by the close relatives of the murdered and the victim) and several hours of blessing were the other acts of the ritual.

A lineage formed an effective jural unit. The assembly held once in a month is the basic court, the other being an *ad hoc* assembly of elders. Disputes between members and other cases were brought before the assembly and settled there or referred to the *ad hoc* committee of elders who might settle them outside. However, only the assembly could apply sanctions. Cases brought to the lineage assembly were of a special category. Individuals referred other cases to the territorial assemblies. Court cases related to land dispute and appropriations to inheritors, personal damage especially harm done to one’s “bones and flesh” were referred to such assembly. The sanctions applied here were the same as those used in the territorial context and these would be discussed further later (i.e., *veka*, cursing and ostracism in this order).

Finally the lineage constituted for its members a “mystical” and ritual arena. Individuals sought the blessing of the whole or any representatives of the lineage. In order to receive such blessings individuals gave a big feast to the whole lineage or any of its segments. Blessings were uttered in the name of the founder of the lineage and its major segments, as for example, “may the nine segments of Ganz give you health, children, . . . etc.”²⁵

2.7. The language of kinship

Kistane kinship terms represent a combination of classificatory and descriptive terms. As Shack noted for the Sabat Bet Gurage, the terminology placed more emphasis on the role of

²⁵ The founder of the lineage in this case is not conceived as being a deity or spirit. Nevertheless, he is thought to have mystical power as representing the “collective conscience” and God is likely to listen to such a collectivity rather than individuals.

the individuals within the structure of kin relations than on the classification of kin *per se* (Shack, 1966: 88).

In ego's generation only siblings are distinguished. A sister is referred to as *atit*, but if she is addressed as a senior the reference term changes its suffix and she is called an *atito*. A brother is referred to as *zemi*, but if ego is senior, he is addressed as *zemilo*. Thus ego indicates subordinate status to those he addresses as *atito* and *zemilo*.

Eight ascending and descending generations have definite terms. Four of these have two sets of terms, the reference and the address term as indicated by sex, seniority and generation. A particular feature of Kistane kinship terminology is its special emphasis on lineal definition.

2.8. Kinship behaviour

The most significant and binding relationship at the personal level is that between agnates. Though kinship relations of all categories are used in everyday social interaction, there are differences in the ways in which demands are made upon them. The first distinction which is made is that between matrilineal and patrilineal relatives. Matrilineal relationships require "reactivation" through gifts and feasts. Interaction is comparatively timid and restrained. But relationships of the patrilineal type depend more on "obligations" and behaviour is more characterized by boldness and "straightforwardness". Here the comparison is that of degree not of type. The second important distinction is that of distance of relationships. Theoretically and to some extent practically as well (if one considers it quantitatively) the closer the relationship the more frequent their interaction. In general in the kinship context all interpersonal conflicts are supposed to eventually be resolved and normal relations restored. The Kistane emphasized this ideology, "you cross the corpse of a kinsman seven times".²⁶

There are many occasions when an individual brings together his kinsmen (both patrilineal and matrilineal) as well as neighbours and friends. Feasts, funeral, ritual (especially of purification from curses), are major occasions. In this case it is ego who is the organizing principle, not so much the relations among the men and women who have come together.

2.9. Village: *sabugnet*

This was the lowest territorial organization which consisted of a number of continuous households. Table 1 shows the distributions of households in seventeen sample *sabugnet*. *Sabugnet(s)* were segments of the *ager* — the most significant territorial units — and as such were regulated by them. Thus, each *ager* of Kistane has a number of *sabugnet* which it regulates (see Table 2). All households within a certain geographical boundary become members of the *sabugnet*. Natural barriers such as rivers, hills and grazing lands were defining factors, and when homesteads formed a cluster with such a boundary they formed a village. In short it was the geographical distance that determined the social distance. Kinship, religion and caste²⁷ criteria were disregarded in recruiting membership.

26 This is to say that even if a kinsman wrongs one seven times one is supposed to forgive and forget. Here corpse is used as a symbol for a wrongdoer.

27 The only exceptions are the *fuga* caste who were "pagan". Other caste groups, the blacksmiths, and the leather tanners who were either adherents of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church or of Islam (who are very few) were not included. The *Fugas* were excluded mainly because they were considered "polluting" since they did not fast and ate animals which had not been killed properly, i.e. without uttering the name of God.

Table 1: Number of households in the 17 *Sabugnet* (villages) of one *ager*

No.	Name of <i>Sabugnet</i>	Number of Households	No.	Name of <i>Sabugnet</i>	Number of Households
1.	Sukie	9	10.	Meter	43
2.	Islam Amba	11	11.	Garó	43
3.	Atati	14	12.	Jigena	47
4.	Ketchin Afer	20	13.	Dembel	53
5.	Dobi	21	14.	Gibe	54
6.	Fisebar	25	15.	Shello	57
7.	Damu Yetebo	34	16.	Foshit	60
8.	Degnu	38	17.	Arwa	60
Total in <i>ager</i>					639

Table 2: Distribution of *Sabugnet* in Kistane country.

No.	Name of <i>Sabugnet</i>	Number of <i>Sabugnet</i>	No.	Name of <i>Sabugnet</i>	Number of <i>Sabugnet</i>
1.	Gutege	4	13.	Ayimelel	7
2.	Zugan	4	14.	Indebuye	8
3.	Zemute	4	15.	Eshigedie	8
4.	Ayigedo	4	16.	Amoute	8
5.	Gimise	5	17.	Nurena	9
6.	Anetige	5	18.	Wacho	10
7.	Keshitna Amare	5	19.	Malima	10
8.	Kenz	6	20.	Acheber	11
9.	Gereno	6	21.	Aratige	11
10.	Bekna Inegidir	6	22.	Abado	11
11.	Melko	6	23.	Wegeram	12
12.	Geia	6	24.	Damu	26
Total in Kistane					233

Note: Table 1 shows the households in one *ager* and Table 2 shows *Sabugnets* in all Kistane *agers*. From this it is possible to have a rough idea of the size of the population in one *ager*.

The members of the *sabugnet* were bounded by contractual and egalitarian relationships. A chairman who had a *primus inter pares* status conducted the monthly meetings, collected dues, and reported delinquencies in payment of dues and performance of compulsory services. The chairman served for a small remuneration, exemption from dues payment, the skin of sacrificed animals, and also for some prestige. A chairman was elected by acclaim, and should he prove to be incompetent he could be replaced at any time.

The function of *sabugnet* were mainly threefold: economic, juro-political, and ritual. There was a wide range of exchange of goods and services in the contexts of *sabugnet*, but three were contractually binding and compulsory. The first was burial gifts and services. The bereaved household received several items starting from the burial day to up to two months from each of the member households of the *sabugnet*.²⁸ Furthermore, services in funeral

²⁸ One basket of grain, one cup of coffee beans, a prepared special meal enough for one dinner, one basket of prepared grain (for beer), a bundle of dry wood – these goods in standard measurement and quality were paid by each family.

attendance, preparing feasts and comforting the bereaved was compulsory for all members. Secondly, each member household had to provide a compulsory feast for all adult males and teenage boys, and voluntarily women and teenage girls on the occasion of the first marriage of a son. Thirdly, some *sabugnet* owned grazing lands which were exploited by all members equally.

It was the politico-jural and ritual function that gave *sabugnet* its cohesion. In the absence of any real or fictive overarching kinship relations, or any strong chief, it would have been for the conceptually highly developed and practised legal and ritual system. The term, *ture*, sums up the "collective conscience" of *sabugnet*; it united both the secular and contractual, and the mystical and ritual aspects of the law. Laws were made at any time when their needs were felt. The adherence of members to such laws were effected through an oath on *ture*. Once in a year on *Meskel* day²⁹ all the members assembled and each explicitly stated under oath certain things he would do and those he would not do in order to uphold the laws of *sabugnet*. The following were examples of such statements:

"I will not steal or fail to report when I see any one stealing;

I will not bewitch anyone or fail to report when I see anyone bewitching others;

I will not worship the devil instead of the angels;

I will never bear false witness;

I will speak out against anyone who tries to undermine the integrity and the rules of *sabugnet*;

If I break any of these oaths, let me be burnt up like these ashes and charcoal (holding the charcoal left over from the bone fire in his teeth) and let my descendants get burnt up too."

When new members joined the *sagugnet* they also took such an oath.

The monthly assembly of the *sabugnet* was also a secular court, in which any elaborate court procedure was followed in adjudicating disputes, grievances, claims and counter-claims, and personal damage among its members. In one *sabugnet* court I attended, for example ten cases were presented. Of these four concerned rights to use neighbours' land as roads (i.e. to drive cattle from a house to the grazing land), three concerned debts, and the rest were on lack of discipline in the organization. Cases were presented to the assembly; depending on their complexity they were thoroughly examined by calling witnesses and accumulating evidence. Verdicts were reached by a consensus of the assembly. In most cases, an *ad hoc* committee of elders was appointed to settle disputes between individual members outside the assembly or in case of failure to report its findings. Certain cases (e.g. murder which was settled by lineages) were beyond the jurisdictions of the *sabugnet* assembly. Some cases might be introduced to *sabugnet*, but if they became impossible to handle they might be referred to the *ager* assembly.

The formal sanctions which were most frequently used were of two types: *veka*³⁰ and ostracism. For instance, for a minor offence to *sabugnet*, such as failure to keep a promise,

29 This is a holiday celebrated in commemoration of the founding of the true cross of Christ according to the legend of the Ethiopian Church.

30 *Veka* is a fine extracted in terms of hospitality. Since there was no public treasury where fines could be deposited or a chief who could take it for himself, all fines in Kistane were spontaneously consumed by the members who constituted the jural arena. *Veka* also provided the opportunity of applying mystical sanctions (cursing the guilty individual); it also made it possible for applying ritual (commensality and blessing) to reduce conflict. *Veka* was graded by a number of men and the amount of expenditure and this was proportionate to the degree of guilt.

a member might be penalized by a two-man *veka*. If he refused to give hospitality to these men, the number was doubled during the next session, on the third occasion it was again increased four times the original number, and so forth until the whole assembly was sent. This means that the *veka* fine had now piled up to such an extent that it would cost the offender the preparation of elaborate feasts in which he had to slaughter at least an ox, and prepare one barrel of beer. If he did not pay the *veka* at this point of time, the offender was ostracised, i.e. barred from all social intercourse, and exchange of goods and services. Even in many small matters he was barred, for instance — he could not borrow fire from his neighbours; nor could he enter their house for any other purpose. If he wished to be readmitted to the *sabugnet* he would have to plead guilty first. He did this by carrying a stone on his head and standing before an assembly until he was recognized and allowed to speak. When he gave *veka* and complied with the order of the *sabugnet* he was readmitted.

2.10. The *ager*

The *ager* was the most significant territorially based unit of social structure. An *ager* might contain a population between 1000–6000 (see Tables 1 and 2). It subsumed the *sabugnet* and lineage organizations and was a reference point for its members in ethnic, regional and national level social interactions. I shall discuss the structure and function of the *ager* under the following headings: (1) property ownership; (2) the administration of church and control over other religious cults; (3) law and sanctions; (4) dyadic relations and interactions; (5) prestige and status.

(1) An *ager* owned a portion of the community's land set apart from the share allotted to individuals for various types of uses. The uses to which such land was put by individuals and groups were: forestry, cattle grazing, markets, church yards, assembly places, games grounds and roads. The *ager* exercised absolute rights over such land and paid tax to the national government. The *ager* prohibited the selling of any piece of land lying within its boundary including personal sales to any person(s) outside its boundary. I have observed one instance in which two *agers* were involved in a government court in Addis Ababa for seven years because some members of *ager* bought a piece of land from individuals in *ager* D. *Ager* D, not being supported by the national law lost the case. Thus the *ager* was a corporate entity in this respect.

(2) An *ager* was a parish. It owned and administered a number of churches (belonging to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church) and partially regulated their activities. The *ager* owned up to five “active”³¹ churches — the buildings and its surrounding land which is full of trees, the “arc of covenant” (*tabot*)³² and all the other items of the paraphernalia. The *ager* administered these churches. It hired the priests who were needed to conduct services. The *ager* assigned a certain number of households to each church to pay cash, grain and prepared food

31 There were many church grounds which were full of trees (trees grow and last permanently because it was a taboo to cut and use them for any purpose other than those of the church) but which were not used for services. But it was assumed that they would be “reactivated” in the distant future and the ground was regarded as a holy land. Oral literature recounts that these churches were devastated during the time of *Ahmed Gragn* (16th century).

32 Piece of marble tablet or wooden board on which the Ten Commandments are carved. This tablet, *tabot*, is the most sacred object in the church. Its material nature is not revealed to laymen. When it is taken outside for a procession, it is all covered in the best of the church garments and carried on the head by a priest.

to be eaten during services and for the services of the priests. The *ager* also provided land to the chief priest for usufructory use.

Priests had a high status in all social contexts in the *ager* and they were invited to bless many public feasts.

The *ager* controlled the activities of its churches. The weekly (Sundays) and the monthly (each church has one extra day every month) services of the churches had to be conducted regularly. The annual and biennial holidays of the churches had to be attended and celebrated by most members of the *ager*. Furthermore, all these holidays (which average to about 10 days out of the month) had to be respected by everybody, i.e. men and women had to abstain from the main types of basic economic activities, such as cultivating and processing *aset*, tilling the land for other grains, cutting grass, and trade. Not ensuring the regularity of such services and observing the holidays was considered to be detrimental to the welfare of the *ager*. The saints and the angels were feared lest they might bring plague, sickness and death upon the members of the *ager*. In fact natural disasters such as drought, thunder and hailstorms were directly attributed to manifestations of the anger of the saints and angels and consequently as retribution for the wrong acts committed by some members of the *ager*. Therefore, wrong acts against these saints and angels were also offences to the *ager*. *Ager* believed that what is intended for one sinner could harm many innocents. Rules were continuously made to punish such defaulters. For instance, about twenty years ago an unusually heavy hailstorm fell over one *ager* (namely Damu) on Saint Michel's day and devastated vegetables, grain and young *aset*. After some time it was reasoned that the hailstorm was caused by the angel because somebody had worked on that day. This matter was brought to the *ager* assembly in which it was unanimously resolved hence forth that if anybody worked on any of the major Sabbath days he was to be punished by *veka*.

What did the *ager* get out of maintaining so many churches and patron saints? On the one hand the *ager* did not have any choice but to go on maintaining them. Ever since these churches were founded there in the distant past, there had been no way of either getting rid of them or neglecting them. Even the "inactive churches" were threats to the *ager*, for they could bring disaster at any time. An event that took place in one church fifteen years ago illustrates this point. Thunder struck one church during a hailstorm and killed many head of cattle which had taken shelter during the rain and destroyed many trees. This was interpreted as an act by the patron saint of the church against the members of the *ager* in order to punish them for negligence.³³ The *ager* could not sleep until it had re-established the normal activity of the church.

However, there were positive rewards that *ager* expected from maintaining these churches. To begin with, it was believed that the saints and angels mediated for the individuals with the higher Christian Deity, God, so that they might go to Heaven. Individuals established their own relationship with their favourite saints for meditation. Secondly, it was believed that these saints and angels regulated natural processes and prevented the occurrence of natural calamities, such as thunder, hailstorms, plague, etc. But most significantly, they were utilized in the maintenance of social order and for resolving social conflict. Members of *ager* were afraid to do wrong because they believed, among other things, that these saints and angels would punish them individually for their wrong acts. Furthermore, when, at important

33 Each church stands for a particular patron saint or angel. In this instance the church was established in the name of an indigenous Ethiopian saint, Abuna Gabra Manfas Qedus.

annual celebrations, the *tabot* was carried out for procession, the whole *ager*, part of it, or individuals, might appeal for clemency to the sacred object. Such appeals seldom failed, even in murder cases. In this way forgiveness might be obtained and disputes resolved amicably.

The *ager* was also concerned with some control over some of the peripheral spirits and cults.³⁴ Of these only *meyet* was an organized cult. The rest was practised by individuals under cover. The *ager*, as a collective, did not recognize nor encourage any of these cults. If anything the concern of the *ager* was to discourage them and curb their activity, since they were viewed as diametrically opposed to the saints and angels. Too much overt flirtation with those spirits, it is feared, would arouse anger from the saints and angels. The aid of the angels was especially solicited to control the destructive activities of the devil. However, individuals were often permitted to make use of these spirits covertly to improve their health, increase wealth, and control the behaviour of others or retaliate on account of grievances. The occasional use of such spirits was sought because it was thought that through them one could obtain extra power, but their too frequent use might be objected to on the ground that they gave one an unfair advantage over others; for example it was believed that if the devil was worshipped he could increase wealth, but to the detriment of one's neighbours since he took it from them. Thus, there was always ambiguity as to how far to allow individuals to pay attention to these peripheral spirits.

(3) *Ager* constituted a politico-jural arena. It was not only a higher court of appeal for the cases which were not finalized in the *sabugnet* and lineage assemblies, but the most effective court in its own right. The court regulated interpersonal relationships and interactions within the context of the *ager*, and it was within this court that dues and services were exacted from individuals and sanctions applied against those who failed to comply with such demands.

The *ager* upheld the laws made in the *sabugnet*, lineage and in any dyadic bond and contractual relationship. It also introduced the laws made at the ethnic level. Furthermore, the *ager* made its own laws concerning property, family, tort, contract etc. Such laws were specifically formulated and promulgated only after thorough discussion and consensus. These were called *sera* (secular laws). Certain laws which were concerned with the integrity of the *ager* were enacted by a performance of magical ritual, *guda*.³⁵

Court cases were presented to *ager* by a man or a group in front of an assembly and asking the accused to stand up. The assembly established the nature of the matter by direct confession, witnesses, circumstantial evidence, and character assessment.³⁶ In the proceedings although theoretically speaking everyone had an equal voice, elders who were skilled in the laws tended to dominate the assembly. Especially those who were "charismatic" (they were said to have *ayana*) were feared as having special mystical power and foresight and therefore,

34 These are *meyet*, *chole* (the worship of beads), *seitan* (the devil), *atete* (a fertility cult which is practised individually by a wife) and *ayana* (if manifested it is a spirit which enables one to practice divination). I refer to these spirits as "peripheral" because they are not used in the context of upholding the morality of the *ager* (or the *sabugnet* or the lineage).

35 One example of such ritual is performed by killing a black sheep: men would make oath by tearing the intestine and making such statements as "If I ever break this contract let me be broken like this intestine". An older man was appointed as a "judge" of the *guda*. When an individual or a party broke the rule he was asked to arbitrate. *Guda* was often used for contracts between groups or sections of the *ager*.

36 The character of each person was known to others in the *ager*. For example when the incidence of theft was examined it could be pinned onto a few people who had general delinquent tendencies. And in other contexts too general credibility was taken into account in passing verdicts on men.

others hesitated to contradict or speak before them. Nevertheless, a verdict was reached by consensus after an exhaustive examination and debate on the matter. An elder man summed up the matter and when dissent subsided a conclusion was reached. The elders' agreement on matters was much more important than that of others, since the disagreement of one of them could postpone a decision indefinitely. Individuals who presented cases were skilled in litigation — they attempted to manipulate the assembly through absenteeism, acting (such as anger to show one is unjustly treated), “petty bribes” to the elders, lobbying outside the assembly in order to pull the strings of kinship links, and friendships. But in most cases men were afraid to give false witness or a wrong verdict for fear of losing their reputation and the mystical sanction of *guda*. Here too *ad hoc* committees of elders were used to settle disputes between individuals or groups.

The usual types of sanction — *veka*, blessing and cursing, and ostracism — were used in the *ager* court. But the use of blessing and cursing was not as systematic as in the *sabugnet* and lineage assemblies. In place of such it was the instant affliction of the eyes of the *ager*, *yager een*, that was feared. When anyone defied the assembly he might arouse the anger of the whole assembly which it was believed would harm him instantly, even if no curse was uttered. In rare instances, this was verbalized, “might the eyes of the *ager* eat you up”. For collecting minor dues from members a type of sanction called *zobe* was used. When a man refused to pay a due the men who went around and collected it would take his most important item of equipment or any other object. Only when he paid the dues the tool was returned to him.

(4) It was within the context of the *ager* that a greater degree of interaction took place not only in the contexts of kinship and territorial organization, but also in many dyadic contractual relations. There were many discrete forms of dyadic bond and contractual relationship which were socially recognized and, it was believed, mystically sanctioned. These were ‘best men’ (including childhood bond-friendship), adoption, godfather-godson relationship, *mahber* (a feast club in the name of a saint or angel), and joint ownership of property. Thus, the *ager* could be delimited by greater density of social relationships and interactions. Members of the *ager* considered each other as “fellow-countrymen” anywhere and felt that they had greater responsibility for one another.

(5) The *ager* was the arena within which status evaluation was made and the submerged caste order was kept intact. Though, with the exception of a few (less than three per cent) submerged caste groups, Kistane was unstratified. The activities intended to achieve such status were carried out and evaluated within the *ager*. Individuals were ranked as high or low in their behaviour and activities and style of life in accordance with the general conception of the attribute of the ideal man.

Many personal qualities such as courage, kindness, honesty and generosity were admired and might be used in evaluating the status of people. But two conspicuous public actions — public feast and political actions (especially in inter-*ager* actions) — were used as a formal means by which titles were bestowed upon individuals. Three hierarchical titles — *abegaz* (commander), *azmatch* (field marshal), *nigus* (king) — were granted to outstanding individuals upon nomination and giving an extensive public feast and ceremony. A person was nominated when he had demonstrated his skill in political leadership, especially in external relations of the *ager* and if he was capable of offering a public feast. The candidat's interest in such titles was assessed informally. A candidate was first nominated for *abegaz*, and upon acceptance he had to give a public feast in which he had to slaughter at least five oxen. He might be able

to receive financial contributions from kinsmen. Then after some years he might be nominated for the next higher title, *azmatch*, for which he had to spend double the amount of what he spent for the first title (ten oxen). For this he definitely received some compulsory contributions from his lineage. The third title which was rarely offered in the past was hereditary. It was very costly (for the feast at least 40 heads of cattle must be slaughtered). It conferred a very high authority upon the holder. However, none of these titles enabled the one to accumulate enough authority and become a “chief” of the *ager* in the sense of the word.

The best one could hope to have was high status which could be used in many social contexts. For instance, a title holder was served first in a public feast, and he was also the chief public arbitrator of the *ager* for at least two years. Otherwise, the acephalous nature of the *ager* was unaltered.

The submerged lower caste groups was differentiated from the majority, *zera* (the upper caste) by restrictions on participation in normal political activities, lack of land ownership, and engagement in certain types of crafts (i.e. blacksmithing, pottery and wood-carring) which were avoided by the upper caste; and endogamy. One of the three sub-groups, the *fuga*, was further distinguished by religion since they practiced only peripheral cults. They were avoided by the upper caste and the other groups because touching them or commensality was regarded as polluting. The other subgroups, *wukatch* and *ijama*, adhered to the same religion as the *zera*, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, and thus they were only barred from participating fully in the *ager* by those criteria mentioned above, not by pollution.

2.11. Kistane: the ethnic organization

Though the *ager* was such a self-contained and integrated unit in its own right, it was attached to other similar units, *agers*, at the ethnic level. Kistane, the ethnic group, was composed of twenty-four *ager*. These *ager* interacted with others in two fundamental ways. The first consisted of periodic conventions which were held for the purpose of revising customary laws and promulgating new ones. When the need was felt once in several years each *ager* was requested to send delegates to the Kistane assembly. Here, they debated on the timeliness and appropriateness of various aspects of Kistane laws. Laws concerning the family, inheritance, property, burial and holidays were often revised. The laws that were promulgated by consensus were introduced by these delegates to each *ager*, which might adhere to them at its discretion. In the *ager* assembly these laws were referred to from time to time recalling them specifically by the name of the place where they were enacted (e.g. one place which was often quoted was Injeri, the laws which were enacted there are referred to as *yenjeri sera*). When an individual felt that the *ager* was not correctly interpreting the laws of Kistane in the *ager* context, he could demand the right to appeal (*gefeche*) to other *agers*. Actually, this was only for reference purposes, since there was no enforcement of such appeal. However, individuals used them in order to prolong a disadvantageous decision and force a revision of the verdict in their favour.

There was no legal and political machinery which might be responsible for interpreting and enforcing such customary laws at the Kistane level. Oral literature recounts that there was a “king” who ruled over Kistane. But it does not appear that he had much power in the absence of administrative machinery and the military. In any event there was no evidence of ethnic level central authority structure since the beginning of the 19th century. Distinguished elders from several *ager* might form a central community in times of emergency, especially

during feuding with the neighbouring ethnic groups, as they did just three decades ago. In such feuds volunteers from all *ager* fought the enemy together. Such collective action was based on the principle that an attack on any *ager* by an outsider was an attack on Kistane as a whole. Hence, feud, at least in the past, provided a second integrating point. In addition, various types of cross-cutting ties, such as marriage, the distributions of kinsmen in several *ager* (though a lineage had one *ager* as a locus) further contributed to Kistane integrity.

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