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## Awra Amba, a utopia between myth and reality

Robert Joumard

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**Robert JOUMARD**

**Awra Amba,  
a utopia between myth and reality**



**May 2021**

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### **Summary**

This is mainly a review of the 30 available research works on the Ethiopian utopian community of Awra Amba, complemented by the analysis of information provided by the community itself. It allows us to present the seeds and then the tormented historical evolution of this community founded in 1972 by a small group of illiterate peasants around one of them. Then, we present the main features of its culture, its values, the mechanisms implemented in order to respect them and the degree to which these values are respected: its well known gender equality, solidarity, golden rule (honesty, refusal of addictions, mutual respect, children's rights), democracy, and eventually the value of work. Then we debate the highly controversial issue of religion in Awra Amba. Finally, we present other characteristics of its social organisation: training and education, marriage, funerals, conflict management, economy, before dealing with the external relations with neighbouring communities, authorities and media, as well as foreigners. In conclusion, we assess the myth and reality of this utopian experience.

### **Résumé**

#### **Awra Amba, une utopie entre mythe et réalité**

Cette étude est essentiellement une synthèse des 30 travaux de recherche disponibles sur la communauté utopique d'Awra Amba en Éthiopie, complétée par l'analyse de données issues de la communauté elle-même. Cela permet de présenter les racines puis l'évolution historique tourmentée de cette communauté créée en 1972 par un petit groupe de paysans analphabètes autour de l'un des leurs. Nous présentons ensuite les principaux traits de sa culture, ses valeurs, les mécanismes mis en œuvre pour les respecter et le degré de respect de ces valeurs : l'égalité des sexes qui a fait sa renommée, la solidarité, la règle d'or (honnêteté, refus des addictions, respect mutuel, droits des enfants), la démocratie, et enfin la valeur travail. Nous traitons par la suite du thème très controversé du rapport d'Awra Amba à la religion. Dans un troisième temps, nous présentons d'autres caractéristiques de son organisation sociale : formation et éducation, mariage, funérailles, gestion des conflits, économie, avant de traiter des relations de la communauté avec ses voisins, la presse et les autorités, et enfin l'étranger. En conclusion, nous évaluons les parts de mythe et de réalité de cette expérience utopique.

### **Acknowledgements**

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*Photo of the title page: F. Pastor.*

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## Executive summary

The Ethiopian village of Awra Amba is a utopian community in the Amhara Region built on humanist values that it partly implements through its way of life. The purpose of this study is to assess the state of knowledge on this community, essentially from the 30 available research works of wide variety, and secondarily from information provided by the community itself, while attempting to compare it fairly systematically with rural Amhara society.

Awra Amba is located at an altitude of nearly 1900 m in the Ethiopian Highlands, near Lake Tana. The climate is characterized by a rainy season from June to September and a dry season the rest of the year, with fairly constant temperatures around 21°C. The village of about 500 inhabitants differs from traditional villages in the layout of the houses and their interior design.

The community was founded by Zumra Nuru in 1972. From a young age, this activist born in a family of relatively well-off farmers rebelled against the injustice, mistreatment and dishonesty he saw at home and around him in the traditional, patriarchal, and religious Amhara community. Rejected by his relatives who considered him insane and deviant, he traveled around the region to find people who shared his ideas. He then met the Alayhim Sufi community which was to play a decisive role. Finally, he brought together a few dozen people who founded the Awra Amba farming community on some fifty hectares. But the neighbours were outraged by gender equality, children's rights and their lack of religion. A troubled period followed for the community, mixing prison for its leader and exile several hundred kilometres away. The community finally restarted in 1993 on a reduced territory of nowadays 17.5 ha. They are still facing neighbours' hostility while gaining the support of the new authorities. In the early 2000s, journalists discovered this unique community and made it known. This is the beginning of success: visitors are starting to pour in, help from public bodies and NGOs, but always in support of the community's many projects. Population has been steadily increasing, up to 551 people in 2020.

In Awra Amba, people share a strong ideology and culture, which differentiates them from the Amhara society. The various sources studied show the wide spectrum of values advocated by the community: gender equality, children's rights, solidarity, the golden rule (treat others as you would like to be treated yourself), the value of work, absence of religion or institutionalized religion, and democracy. We detail each of these values from a conceptual point of view and in terms of their concrete translation – more or less real – through standards, behaviours and institutions.

Roles are not assigned on the basis of gender or age, but on the basis of ability alone. Women therefore participate in all tasks, the behaviour of women or men is similar, and more fundamentally the perception of roles is egalitarian and androgynous. We show that girls' access to university, which was lower than that of boys a few years ago, is now at the same level. But women's access to Awra Amba institutions remains slightly lower than that of men.

Solidarity is expressed on the one hand by the establishment of a social security system that seems to take care of the poorest, the sick or the elderly, on the other hand by an equal sharing of income within the cooperative which brings together most of the members. The golden rule is expressed more specifically in honesty, refusal of addictions, mutual respect, respect for children who have specific rights, and dignity. Honesty is claimed as one of the values, and is respected in everyday life, but transparency is lacking on some major events. Democracy results in an institutional system complex enough, the different instances of which we detail. We analyse the reality of power sharing, which seems to remain rather autocratic. Many exclusions have taken place, which are however denied.. The extreme importance given to work, considered as the mean to flourish, for all adults and throughout the year, leaves little room for leisure and pleasure.

We pay special attention to the relationships of the Awra Amba community with religion. In fact, they do not follow any religious rite and do not believe in any supernatural power which would govern life on Earth. Nevertheless, they believe in a creator god and behave accordingly, respecting the precepts of this original religion and acting in a good manner. The comparison of this “religion” with the main characteristics of religions shows that Awra Amba is very close to rationalist and atheistic conception of existence.

Then, we present other characteristics of their social organization: training and education, marriage, funerals, conflict management, economy, before dealing with the external relations of the community.

Education and training for young people and adults is a priority. The investment of time and material in education is therefore extremely high. As a result, the adult illiteracy rate is much lower than that of other rural communities of the region, and all children attend school for as long as their ability allows; the proportion of university students and graduated adults is about six times higher than in the general population. Health education and access to healthcare mean that the health level of residents is significantly better than that of their neighbours. We then present the rules of marriage, divorce, and funerals, reduced to their simplest form. Conflict management is the subject of special and sustained attention in the community: very early detection of potential conflicts and conflict management with the help of dedicated institutions make minor conflicts ruled out. Some major conflicts, however, end in exclusions.

We analyse the economy of the community through its structures, economic flows, activities and income. Economic activity is essentially the result of the cooperative which brings together most of the activities and services, and a minor part of private activity. There have been quite a lot of institutional aids, from Ethiopian and foreign public bodies, and even from NGOs, but they are left in the shadows without being denied. This material or training aid is not decided by the donors but only helps to carry out community projects. Economic activities have diversified a lot, from traditional agriculture and weaving to market gardening, modern weaving, flour milling and noug oil production, trade and tourism. As a result, per capita income has increased significantly, by a factor of nearly twenty in fifteen years, but disparities appear to remain.

Finally, we describe Awra Amba’s relationship with their near and far environment. Relations with their close neighbours remained conflictual for a long time, but now seem to have calmed down. Duplication of such a model in Ethiopia seems possible, despite the limitation of the religious question: a small village, Lulista Mariam, seems to have adopted the principles of Awra Amba. Relations with the authorities, initially deplorable, have been excellent for the past twenty years: local and regional authorities show Awra Amba as an example, organize numerous visits and provide help to the community. The number of Ethiopian visitors is impressive, with a peak of nearly 9000 visitors in 2007. Foreign visitors are constantly increasing, even surpassing nationals in recent years. International relations are therefore quite strong, with some additional trips by Awra Amba representatives to Europe.

In conclusion, we emphasise the factors which, in our opinion, explain Awra Amba's power of attraction: a utopia of popular origin, its widely implemented values, and the somewhat mythical narrative constructed by its leaders. After assessing the myth and reality of this utopian experience, we suggest possible avenues for research.

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## Synthèse

### **Awra Amba, une utopie entre mythe et réalité** (*une version française est disponible*)

Le village éthiopien d'Awra Amba est une communauté utopique de la Région Amhara construite sur les valeurs humanistes qu'elle met en partie en œuvre à travers son mode de vie. L'objet de cette étude est de faire l'état des connaissances sur cette communauté, essentiellement à partir des 30 travaux de recherche disponibles d'une grande variété, et secondairement à partir d'informations fournies par la communauté elle-même, tout en tentant de la comparer assez systématiquement à la société rurale amhara.

Awra Amba est situé sur les hauts plateaux éthiopiens, à proximité du lac Tana. Le climat se caractérise par une saison des pluies de juin à septembre et une saison sèche le reste de l'année, avec des températures assez constantes autour de 21°C. Le village d'environ 500 habitants est différent des villages traditionnels par le plan des habitations et leur aménagement intérieur.

La communauté a été fondée par Zumra Nuru en 1972. Dès son jeune âge, ce militant issu d'une famille de paysans relativement aisés se rebella contre l'injustice, les mauvais traitements et la malhonnêteté qu'il voyait dans sa propre famille et autour de lui dans la société amhara traditionnelle, patriarcale et croyante. Rejeté par ses proches car considéré anormal et déviant, il voyage dans la région pour trouver des gens qui partagent ses idées et rencontre alors la communauté soufie Alayhim qui va jouer un rôle déterminant. Finalement il réunit quelques dizaines de personnes qui fondent la communauté de paysans d'Awra Amba sur une cinquantaine d'hectares. Mais les voisins sont scandalisés par l'égalité entre les sexes, les droits des enfants et leur absence de religion. S'ensuit une période troublée pour la communauté, mêlant prison pour son leader et exil à plusieurs centaines de kilomètres. La communauté redémarre finalement en 1993 sur son site actuel, mais ne dispose plus que de 17,5 ha. Elle fait toujours face à l'hostilité des voisins mais gagne le soutien des nouvelles autorités. Au début des années 2000, des journalistes découvrent cette communauté unique et la font connaître. C'est le début du succès : les visiteurs affluent, les aides aussi, mais toujours en appui aux nombreux projets de la communauté. La population augmente constamment, pour atteindre 551 personnes en 2020.

Awra Amba est un village très fortement uni par une idéologie et une culture, qui le distinguent de la société amhara. Les sources montrent que les valeurs peuvent être regroupées en l'égalité des genres, les droits des enfants, la solidarité, la règle d'or (traiter les autres comme on voudrait être traité soi-même), la valeur travail, l'absence de religion ou de religion institutionnalisée, et la démocratie. Nous détaillons chacune de ces valeurs sur le plan conceptuel et quant à leur traduction concrète, plus ou moins réelle, à travers les normes, comportements et institutions.

Les rôles de chacun ne sont pas attribués en fonction du sexe ou de l'âge, mais en fonction des seules capacités. Les femmes participent donc à toutes les tâches, les comportements des femmes ou des hommes sont similaires, et plus fondamentalement la perception des rôles est égalitaire et androgyne. Nous montrons que l'accès des filles à l'université, qui était inférieur à celui des garçons il y a quelques années, est aujourd'hui au même niveau. Mais l'accès des femmes aux institutions d'Awra Amba demeure légèrement inférieur à celui des hommes.

La solidarité s'exprime d'une part par la mise en place d'un système de sécurité sociale qui semble prendre en charge les plus pauvres, les malades ou les personnes âgées, d'autre part par un partage égalitaire des revenus au sein de la coopérative qui regroupe l'essentiel des membres. La règle d'or se décline plus précisément en l'honnêteté, le refus des addictions, le respect mutuel, le respect des enfants qui ont des droits spécifiques, et la dignité. L'honnêteté est revendiquée comme l'une des va-



leurs, et est respectée dans la vie quotidienne, mais la transparence fait défaut sur certains événements majeurs. La démocratie se traduit par un système institutionnel assez complexe dont nous détaillons les différentes instances. Nous analysons la réalité du partage du pouvoir, qui semble rester assez autocratique. De nombreuses exclusions ont eu lieu, qui sont cependant niées. La place extrême accordée au travail, considéré comme le moyen de s'épanouir, pour tous les adultes et tout au long de l'année, laisse peu de place aux loisirs et plaisirs.

Nous accordons une attention particulière au rapport d'Awra Amba avec la religion. La communauté ne suit en effet aucun rite religieux et ne croit en aucun pouvoir surnaturel qui régirait la vie sur terre ; mais elle croit en un Dieu créateur et assure respecter la religion première par ses bonnes actions concrètes. La comparaison de cette "religion" avec les principales caractéristiques des religions montre qu'Awra Amba est très proche des conceptions rationalistes et athées de l'existence.

L'éducation et la formation des jeunes comme des adultes est une priorité. L'investissement en temps comme en matériel dans l'éducation est donc extrêmement élevé. En conséquence, le taux d'analphabétisme des adultes est très inférieur à celui des communautés rurales de la région, et tous les enfants sont scolarisés aussi longtemps que leurs capacités le permettent ; la proportion d'étudiants à l'université et d'adultes de formation universitaire est environ six fois plus élevée que dans la population générale. L'éducation à la santé et l'accès aux soins font que le niveau sanitaire des habitants est très significativement meilleur que celui de leurs proches voisins. Nous présentons ensuite les règles du mariage, du divorce, et des funérailles, réduites à leur plus simple expression. La gestion des conflits fait l'objet d'une attention particulière et soutenue dans la communauté : détection très précoce des conflits potentiels et gestion des conflits à l'aide d'institutions dédiées font que les conflits mineurs semblent écartés, certains conflits majeurs se terminant en revanche par des exclusions.

Nous analysons l'économie de la communauté à travers ses structures, ses flux économiques, ses activités et ses revenus. L'activité économique est le fait essentiellement de la coopérative qui regroupe la plupart des activités et des services, et d'une part mineure d'activité privée. Les aides institutionnelles ont été très nombreuses, d'organismes publics éthiopiens ou étrangers, voire d'ONG, mais sont laissées dans l'ombre sans être niées. Ces aides matérielles ou en formation ne sont pas décidées par les donateurs mais viennent seulement aider à la réalisation des projets de la communauté. Les activités économiques se sont beaucoup diversifiées, de l'agriculture et du tissage traditionnels au maraîchage, au tissage moderne, à la minoterie et la production d'huile de noug, au commerce et au tourisme. En conséquence, le revenu par habitant a beaucoup augmenté, d'un facteur proche de vingt en quinze ans, mais des disparités demeurent semble-t-il.

Enfin nous décrivons les relations d'Awra Amba avec son environnement proche ou lointain. Les relations avec ses proches voisins sont restées longtemps conflictuelles, mais semblent aujourd'hui apaisées. La duplication du modèle en Éthiopie semble possible, malgré le frein de la question religieuse : un petit village, Lulista Mariam, semble d'ailleurs avoir repris les principes d'Awra Amba. Les relations avec les autorités, déplorables au début, sont excellentes depuis une vingtaine d'années : les autorités locales et régionales montrent en exemple Awra Amba, organisent de nombreuses visites et aident la communauté. Le nombre de visiteurs éthiopiens est impressionnant, avec une pointe de près de 9000 visiteurs en 2007. Les visiteurs étrangers sont en constante augmentation, dépassant même les nationaux depuis quelques années. Les relations internationales sont donc assez fortes, avec en outre quelques déplacements de représentants d'Awra Amba en Europe.

En conclusion, nous insistons sur les facteurs qui expliquent à notre avis le pouvoir d'attraction d'Awra Amba : une utopie d'origine populaire, ses valeurs largement mises en œuvre, et le récit quelque peu mythique construit par ses leaders. Après avoir évalué les parts de mythe et de réalité de cette expérience utopique, nous proposons quelques pistes de recherche.

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## Introduction

In one of the poorest countries in the world, Ethiopia, men and women of peasant origin have created and made prosper for nearly fifty years a community that presents itself as a model of gender equality, respect for children, solidarity, absence of religious rites, honesty, work and democracy.

This utopian community, after several decades of conflicts with Ethiopian society and more particularly Amhara, has attracted Ethiopian journalists and officials and, following them, many domestic and foreign visitors, and researchers, mainly Ethiopians. More documented than press articles, dealing with a wide variety of subjects, the scientific publications that have resulted are quite numerous. They provide the most exhaustive view possible of this experience. This is the purpose of this study: to assess the state of knowledge about the Awra Amba community, mainly from available research work, and secondarily from information provided by the community itself.

We first present our own method – the way we operated, and then situate Awra Amba in time and geography. Its history indeed begins long before its creation, during the youth of its founder whose reflection nourished its values. We follow it until today. Then we present, still based on scientific literature, the main features of its culture, its values: gender equality which made its fame, solidarity, the golden rule (honesty, refusal of addictions, mutual respect, respect for children who have specific rights, dignity), democracy, and finally the value of work. We then deal with the highly controversial theme of Awra Amba's relationship to religion. In a third part, we present other characteristics of its social organisation: training and education, marriage, funerals, conflict management, economy, before dealing with the community's relationship with its close or distant environment. In each case, we seek to assess the extent to which reality corresponds to the stated values, with the inherent limitations of a synthesis of the scientific literature.

For the foreign reader who knows little Ethiopian situation, it seemed useful to us to present, in parallel to each point on Awra Amba, the situation of traditional rural Ethiopia within which Awra Amba was created and is still largely evolving, in order to better appreciate the contribution of this utopia that has largely become a reality.

However, the information we present is only a reflection of the information and data from the scientific work we synthesize. We have hardly been able to verify all this information, which would go far beyond a synthesis of the literature. Instead, we have tried to make full use of the information obtained from the publications and the community itself.

The information and data on Awra Amba, on traditional rural society and on Ethiopia that we analyse in this study run over decades. As both Awra Amba and Ethiopia evolve over the years, the date of observations is an important parameter to take into account, as old situations are only partially present after a few years or decades. This is all the more important as the community is almost fifty years old, as the description of rural areas by its founder describes the situation in the 1950s and 1960s, as do several analyses of Ethiopian society to which we refer.

Ethiopia is at the same time socially and spatially heterogeneous. It is therefore advisable not to generalise observations made in a particular environment. We have therefore tried to specify as necessary the type of environment to which a particular characteristic is attached.



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# 1. Method

This work is mainly a bibliographical synthesis of academic work, supplemented by elements from our own surveys and cross-referencing of data. Data sources therefore play an essential role. We primarily use three types of sources:

- Documents from the Awra Amba community (Awra Amba community, 2014a; 2014b; 2015a; 2020b).
- Personal observations or the results of personal surveys carried out either during a stay on site from 13 to 17 April 2010 <sup>1</sup>, or during the stay in France of the community leader and two other members that we organised and monitored from 4 to 13 April 2014 (Awra Amba community, 2014c), and supplemented by email exchanges with Awra Amba (Awra Amba community, 2013; 2015b; 2020a; 2021) and exchanges with Europeans who periodically visit Awra Amba.
- Above all, the 32 scientific publications on Awra Amba to which we have had access, presenting the results of 30 original research projects. We present the main ones below and make a statistical analysis of all of them in Annex 1. It should be noted that our bibliographical research ended in early 2021.

Here is a quick presentation of the most serious and interesting research consulted, in chronological order:

- Mussa (2004) and Pratt & Earle (2004) carried out a survey on the economic development of Awra Amba for a British NGO.
- Solomon (2005) carried out the first major sociological survey of Awra Amba, interviewing people in the village and neighbouring villages at length by using a questionnaire to 80 heads of household in Awra Amba.
- Asnake (2005) conducted a psychological survey among adolescents and adults in Awra Amba to analyse the construction of the gender identity of male adolescents.
- Abebaw (2007) took a very serious look at the intercultural experience of the children of Awra Amba through interviews and focus groups.
- Genet (2009) compared the expected roles of women in Awra Amba and in a farming community, Ater Midir, 83 km to the west-southwest, particularly during literacy classes.
- Psychologist Seid (2009; 2015) studied social roles as a function of gender.
- Alene (2011) methodically studied the empowerment or self-development of Awra Amba and the possibilities of replication.
- Tilahun C. (2012) studied internal community communication with a critical eye.
- Eskinder (2013) and Guday and Eskinder (2013) looked at the role of gender equality in peace building with a very thorough investigation.
- Yihene *et al.* (2014) measured the prevalence of malaria and intestinal parasites in Awra Amba

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<sup>1</sup> Joumard (2010b). We then carried out a first bibliographical synthesis on Awra Amba from a few bibliographical references: Joumard (2012).

and in neighbouring villages, allowing them to see the impact of community organisation on health, with great statistical rigour.

- Chekole (2014) studied the community's livelihoods using a large number of interviews and a lot of methodological rigour.
- Solomon (2015) examined women's decision-making power within families through a large number of interviews.
- Arvidsson and Sandgren (2015) studied health policy towards women.
- Seid (2015) studied gender roles.
- Tesfaye (2017) compared three villages, including Awra Amba, in terms of their propensity to create income-generating activities.
- Barnes (2019) examined the values promoted by teachers in Awra Amba schools.
- Østebø (2021) studied Awra Amba as a model and shows, after a thorough investigation, the distortions between image and reality.

Only a third of the scientific publications on Awra Amba are the result of research carried out by academic researchers, most of them by master's students for whom this is the first real research experience. Their duration is therefore fairly short (from one day to seven weeks *in situ*, less than a month on average; probably a few months to a year of work all included). They therefore sometimes suffer from methodological weaknesses such as non-respect for research ethics, baseless allegations, induction of answers in the interviews by questions, bias in the choice of interviewees, lack of description of the method followed, etc. Moreover, as most studies are based on interviews with community members, reality is often confused with the perception of reality by community members interviewed, which is an interesting but different fact: several authors do not take a critical look at the statements of the interviewees, for example by interviewing outsiders or by highlighting realities which hardly correspond to the discourse. We detail these methodological criticisms in Annex 1.

Despite these few weaknesses, the mass of data presented by the publications consulted is significant on the one hand because a number of works are very seriously carried out, and on the other hand because most of the studies provide a lot of information on the most diverse subjects, that go far beyond their main subject. The researchers have indeed tried to get a view as broad as possible of the context of their study, which is very positive.

In order to avoid factual errors, misunderstandings or misinterpretations, and out of honesty towards the Awra Amba community, we submitted a first version of this report to them at the end of December 2020, which did not yet take into account the very critical work of Østebø (2021) published later. The community gave us many comments correcting small inaccuracies, or clarifying their views, which we took into account as one source among others. In addition, we asked the community a great many questions, mostly of a detailed nature, by email in 2020-2021, more than a hundred. At first, the community replied systematically and sometimes in great detail, but then the replies became rather rare: overall, only a small half of our questions were answered. Finally, at the end of March 2021, we asked the community to comment on the passages in Østebø's book (2021) that directly concerned them and that sometimes undermined their narrative, but we did not receive any feedback.

In all cases, we have tried to indicate the source of the information in a precise manner for the sake of transparency, which results in the large number of references. In general, we have not quoted the excerpts copied from the various references, in order to make reading easier. Nevertheless, the bulk of this report merely reproduces data and information from the literature: a paragraph including a reference can generally be attributed to that reference, even if we have modified the expression.

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References are indicated in footnotes with the following formalism:

- A footnote call after an expression or at the end of a sentence (but before the full stop) concerns the expression or sentence.
- A footnote call after the full stop at the end of a sentence concerns the whole paragraph or all sentences since the previous footnote call of the same type within the paragraph.
- Paragraphs and sentences without reference are the result of our own work and analysis, as well as text elements introduced by expressions such as "it seems to us that...".
- The reference indicates the author, the year of publication and if possible the page in the publication: author (year: page). Bibliographical references are listed at the end of the book in alphabetical order.

Furthermore, in the presentation of data and references, we systematically use the Gregorian calendar to avoid any confusion with the Ethiopian calendar<sup>1</sup>, unless explicitly stated otherwise ("E.C."). Since year  $n$  of the Ethiopian calendar corresponds to 3.5 months of year  $n+7$  of the Gregorian calendar and 8.5 months of year  $n+8$  of the Gregorian calendar, statistical data coming in particular from the community of Awra Amba are indicated as corresponding to year  $n + 8$  of the Gregorian calendar for simplification. But the year indicated as  $n + 8$  actually straddles the years  $n + 7$  and  $n + 8$ . Thus a data corresponding to the year 2010 according to the Ethiopian calendar is indicated in this report as corresponding to the year 2018 of the Gregorian calendar, but it actually corresponds to a little more than three months of the year 2017 and a little more than eight months of the year 2018.

Finally, the social transformations introduced in Awra Amba cannot be understood without reference to Ethiopian society and more particularly to the Amhara society in which Awra Amba is part of and from which it originates. For this reason, we therefore try to present at the beginning of each theme the situation in Ethiopian or traditional Amhara society with the help of official Ethiopian documents, documents from United Nations organisations or various scientific articles, before focusing on the situation in Awra Amba.

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<sup>1</sup> The Ethiopian calendar differs from the Gregorian calendar used in all but seven countries. It is used in Ethiopia and Eritrea. The year begins on 11 September in the Gregorian calendar; there is an 8-year gap with the usual count from 1 January to 10 September, then 7 years later: thus in January 2020 in Europe, it is 2012 according to the Ethiopian calendar and it is 2013 in September 2020. This mismatch is sometimes a source of confusion in the data. The year also has 12 months of 30 days and a 13<sup>th</sup> month of 5 or 6 days.



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## 2. Geographical location and history

Awra Amba's <sup>1</sup> location is easy to obtain, the village is now a tourist destination mentioned in international travel guides. Its physical environment as well as its architecture are well documented.

After a brief presentation of these characteristics, we turn to the history of the creation and development of this utopian achievement. However, in spite of the great diversity of disciplines called for by the various research works, no historical research has been conducted or at least published <sup>2</sup> to date on Awra Amba. Most studies nevertheless present the history of the founder, Zumra, and of the community, but essentially on the basis of interviews with Zumra or those close to him, without generally looking for other witnesses to this history <sup>3</sup> or even possible written sources. As these studies present some contradictions in detail, we prefer to take as our main source the two texts produced by the Awra Amba community and published in March 2014 and October 2015: the first presents in a few pages the main events (in Amharic and in English); the second, longer, presents Awra Amba and in particular its history. These sources are supplemented by an interview with Zumra and his wife conducted during their stay in France in April 2014, by written exchanges with the community, and finally above all by the original historical elements mentioned by some research works.

In the third part we present the evolution of the population of Awra Amba as well as some sociological data concerning it.



*Picture 1: Arrival at the village of Awra Amba by a path paved by the inhabitants, in the middle of fields and bush, here in the dry season (April 2010). In the distance, the first houses. (Photo of the author)*

### 2.1. Geographical location

To get to Awra Amba from Addis Ababa the capital, first go north-northwest to Bahir Dar, capital of the Amhara Region, on the shores of Lake Tana, 550 km by road. Then, leave Bahir Dar by the road leading to Gondar, leave it in Woreta, then drive 11 km east towards Debre Tabor, and take the path on the right that leads 2 km further to the village of Awra Amba: See Picture 1 and Figure 1. Awra Amba is thus 68 km from Bahir Dar and 620 km from Addis Ababa by road. We then discover a small village on the Ethiopian plateau with about 500 inhabitants, at an altitude of 1920 m, in the middle of the hills : see Picture 2 and Picture 3.

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<sup>1</sup> Written also Awramba, Awura Amba, Awuramba or Awora Amba: see Annex 1.

<sup>2</sup> According to Zumra, a student from Addis Ababa conducted a historical study, but no report is available (Awra Amba community, 2014c).

<sup>3</sup> With the exception of Solomon (2005) for the Alayhim community and of Østebø (2021).



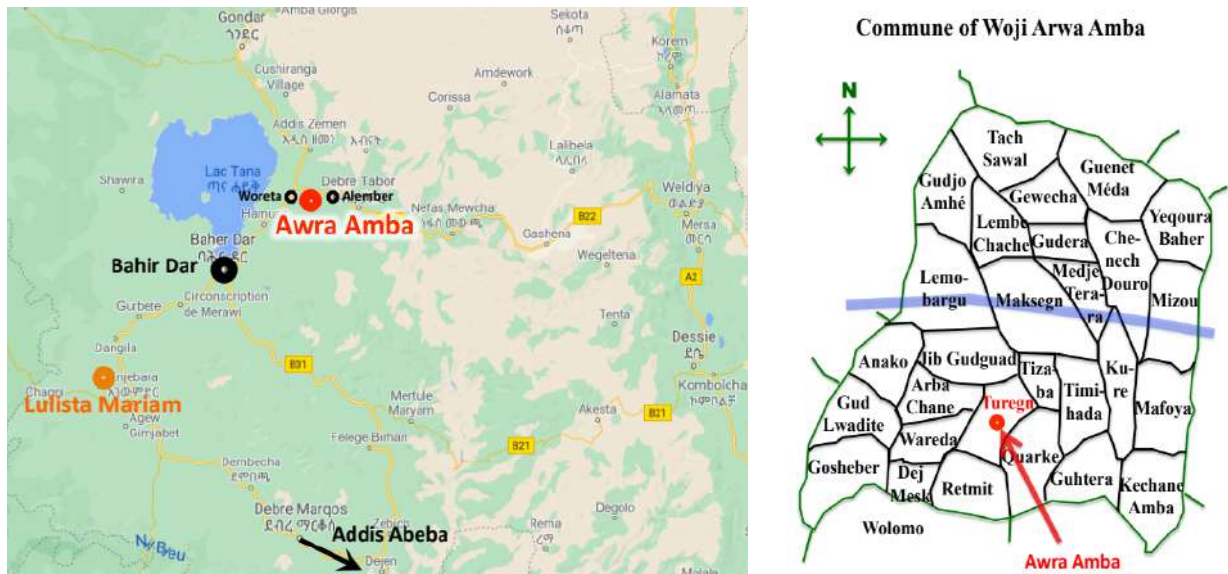


Figure 1: Position of Awra Amba (in red) and Lulista Mariam (in orange) in Ethiopia, and map of the commune of Woji Arwa Amba to which Awra Amba belongs, crossed by a river, as displayed in Awra Amba.

The origin of the name "Awra Amba" is said to be according to Zumra, the founder of the community, of the following legend: a wild aquatic animal named *awra* would have come from the nearby river (or from the sea) and settled on the site (*awra* signifies an adult male animal which has a big leadership role in its family, as for instance a bumble bee (*awra nib*) or a cock (*awra doru*). The villagers living there would have tried to get him to leave, without success. They then would have said "*awraw embi ale*" which means "*awra* refused to be dismissed", hence the name Awra Amba.<sup>1</sup> According to another researcher<sup>2</sup>, this animal would be a bull coming from the sea, and it is this animal that said no (*embi*); the legend would come from an ancient ... The people of the community used to call the place Arba Amba until, according to Zumra, an Orthodox official told them in 1998 that this was not the historical name, which was Awra Amba. They then changed the name to Awra Amba.

However, according to Abebaw's (2007: 45) 2006 survey of several nearby villagers and a teacher from their school, this legend is a myth invented by Zumra. They all claim that no place was ever called Awra Amba before the community called it that in 1998. These accounts are all the more credible because Zumra sometimes claims that Awra Amba is the historical name, sometimes that it is the name given by visitors.

### **Climate**

Rainfall averages 1320 mm per year as measured from 1990 to 2016 at weather stations near Woreta and Alemnber<sup>3</sup>. Rainfall is highly variable during the year as shown in Figure 2, with a rainy season lasting from June to September and a dry season the rest of the year, illustrated in Picture 3 and Pic-

<sup>1</sup> Abebaw (2007: 44), Genet (2009: 43), Awra Amba community (2021).

<sup>2</sup> Teshager (2010: 33).

<sup>3</sup> Dawit *et al.* (2019). As Awra Amba is located almost exactly between Woreta and Alemnber, 10 km from each, including in terms of altitude, this figure is the average of the two measuring stations. For comparison, annual rainfall average close to 900 mm in metropolitan France, and 635 mm in Paris, i.e. an average of 75 and 53 mm per month respectively.

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ture 2 respectively.



*Picture 2: The village of Awra Amba in the dry season in April 2010. (Photo of the author)*



*Picture 3: One side of the village of Awra Amba in the rainy season (July 2019). (Photo Vermet)*

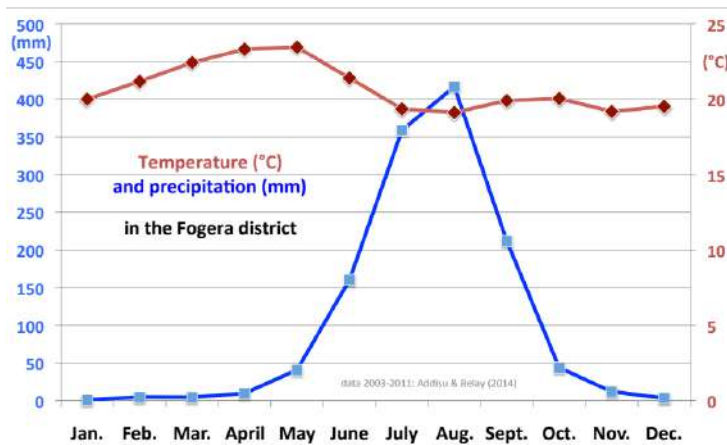


Figure 2: 2003-2011 averages of monthly temperatures and rainfall in the Fogera district to which Woreta, Alember and Awra Amba belong <sup>1</sup>.

### Ethiopia

Located in the Horn of Africa, between Eritrea to the north, Sudan and South Sudan to the west, Kenya to the south, Somalia, Somaliland and Djibouti to the east, Ethiopia has no access to the sea. The country has a population of nearly 110 million inhabitants in 2020 with a population growth of 2.8% per year <sup>2</sup>, for a surface area of 1,127,000 km<sup>2</sup>, i.e. about twice the size of France. Its altitude varies from -120 m to 4,543 m. The country's relief combines high plateaus (notably the central plateau located at an altitude of between 1,800 and 3,000 m where Awra Amba is located), massifs and steep canyons, volcanic regions, savannahs, desert areas and high green plains. It is a federal republic, made up of nine regions, including the Amhara Region, and two city-regions (the capital Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa): see Table 1.

From a socio-economic perspective, Ethiopia has one of the lowest HDI human development indices (which combines indicators of economic wealth, education and health) in the world, placing it at 173<sup>rd</sup> out of 189 countries in 2018. However, its HDI increased significantly, from 0.28 in 2000 to 0.47 in 2018 without without any significant change in Ethiopia's ranking <sup>3</sup>. If only economic wealth is considered, Ethiopia's GDP per capita at purchasing power parity is equivalent to 12% of the world average, placing the country in 180<sup>th</sup> position out of 197 countries <sup>4</sup>. In terms of income equality between individuals, in 2015 it ranks 93<sup>rd</sup> out of 161 countries <sup>5</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Based on 2003-2011 data from Addisu & Belay (2014) for the district. Compared to average rainfall in Woreta and Alember from 1990 to 2016 according to Dawit *et al.* (2019), the rainfall is slightly lower over the year (1266 / 1318 mm) and especially with a difference between the dry and wet seasons a little more marked (+15 and -66 mm respectively).

<sup>2</sup> UN-DESA (2019).

<sup>3</sup> PNUD (2019). In 2018, France is in 27<sup>th</sup> place with an HDI of 0.89.

<sup>4</sup> <https://tradingeconomics.com/ethiopia/gdp-per-capita-ppp>. France's GDP per capita at purchasing power parity is equivalent to 260% of the world average in 2019.

<sup>5</sup> <https://atlasocio.com/classements/economie/inegalites/classement-etats-par-coefficient-de-gini-monde.php>. This ranking is based on the Gini index, which measures inequality of income distribution between individuals, according to which Ethiopia is in 69<sup>th</sup> place out of 161. France is in 123<sup>rd</sup> place, i.e. in terms of equality at the 161-123+1=39<sup>th</sup> place.

On the other hand, the country has a very low per capita ecological footprint (which combines indicators of non-renewable energy consumption, greenhouse gas emissions and space consumption), and is therefore very ecological, placing it in 173<sup>rd</sup> place out of 188 countries in 2012. However, Ethiopia has a biocapacity deficit of 0.44 gha/p (the deficit is 2.04 gha/p in France), as the country is not very rich from a biological point of view in relation to its population <sup>1</sup>.

So a very poor country, not very developed, fairly unequal, very ecological but nevertheless consuming more than its own biological capacity.

Ethiopia has experienced strong economic growth over the last twenty years, averaging 11% per year from 1999 to 2019 and since 2010, one of the highest, if not the highest, among African countries <sup>2</sup>. On a per capita basis and at purchasing power parity, growth is naturally lower, for example 7% per year on average from 2010 to 2019 <sup>3</sup>.

Temperatures, on the other hand, are not very variable from one month to another, averaging 21°C, with the highest temperatures from February to June. <sup>4</sup>

Administrative level	Amharic word	Administrative level to which belongs Awra Amba		
		name	population	
			2007 <sup>5</sup>	2020 <sup>6</sup>
FDR Ethiopia			81 million	110 million
Region		Amhara	17.2 million	21.8 million
zone		South Gondar	2.1 million	2.6 million
district	<i>woreda</i> or <i>wereda</i>	Fogera	228 000	297 000
commune	<i>kebele</i>	Woji Arwa Amba	8 908	

Table 1: Ethiopian administrative structure and position of Awra Amba.

## Territory and planning

Administratively, Awra Amba is part of the commune (*kebele*) of Woji Arwa Amba (sometimes called Wej Arba Amba or Woji Arba Amba) in the locality of Turegn, called now Taika. This commune is made up of several villages or hamlets (*gotoch* in Amharic) <sup>7</sup>: see Figure 1. It is part of the

<sup>1</sup> GFN (2019). gha = global hectare, or one hectare of average productivity worldwide.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/455080/gross-domestic-product-gdp-in-ethiopia/>.

<sup>3</sup> <https://tradingeconomics.com/ethiopia/gdp-per-capita-ppp>.

<sup>4</sup> Addisu & Belay (2014)

<sup>5</sup> CSA (2007).

<sup>6</sup> UN-DESA (2019) and <https://www.qotera.org/en-US/amhara/>.

<sup>7</sup> Turegn was called Taika (or Tayka) before the 1950s (Awra Amba community, 2014c). The village of Awra Amba borders the villages of Quarke in the south, Tizaba (or Tizab) in the east, Maksegn (or Maksegnit) in the north, Jib Gudguad in the northwest, Arba Chane in the west (Solomon, 2005: 28; Abebaw, 2007: 44; Genet, 2009: 43).

district of Fogera, in the South Gondar zone (*Dehub Gondar*) within the Amhara Region: see Table 1. In 2007, the population of the Fogera district was 89% rural, 95.8% Orthodox and 3.6% Muslim <sup>1</sup>.

The village of Awra Amba does not look the same as the neighbouring villages. Traditionally in the region, a farm consists, depending on the wealth of the owner, of one to six round houses with conical thatched roofs <sup>2</sup>. In Awra Amba, the houses, all on the same model, are rectangular, with two independent rooms, and made of a frame of eucalyptus wood usually laid on stone foundations and covered with cob of straw and clay. Their roofs were systematically thatched in 2004, or even in 2008, and gradually replaced by corrugated iron sheeting, which covered all the houses ten years later: see Picture 4. The houses are built collectively by the men and women of the community. <sup>3</sup> For those arriving from the busy and noisy cities of Ethiopia, as well as from the small villages, Awra Amba stands out for its serenity, its calm, especially during the night when no orthodox church or mosque imposes its preaching or calls to prayer through loudspeakers<sup>4</sup>.



*Picture 4: Houses with thatched roofs in 2010 (photo of the author) and with tin roofs in 2013 (Photo J. Boocock).*

Inside the dwellings, the beds, stools and shelves are made of earth, bricks and wood. Beds and chairs are made of crossed branches with leather straps, most of the houses having (in 2004) a leather bench built into the wall which serves as a seat and bed. <sup>5</sup>

Electricity was installed in 2006, and each house, and even each room, has electricity quickly, making Awra Amba an exception among its neighbours. Electricity is also used for business premises such as the cafeteria, the mills or the computer room. In 2014, the latter provided more than ten PCs, a printer, a camera and two photocopiers. However, internet access is mainly via mobile phones, which have a very good connection. <sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> CSA (2007).

<sup>2</sup> Levine (1965 : 56) cited by Solomon (2005: 44). Each of the houses on the richest farms has a specific function (housing, animals, storage, children, guests, etc.), but most farms combine all these functions in one slightly larger house.

<sup>3</sup> Solomon (2005: 37), Genet (2009: 41), Chekole (2014: 65).

<sup>4</sup> Østebø (2021: 29).

<sup>5</sup> Mussa (2004: 39), Solomon (2005: 37).

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In 1971, the community leader designed an improved *injera*<sup>1</sup> stove which is fitted to all the dwellings: see Picture 5. Unlike the traditional stove, it is elevated and has an almost closed hearth, which prevents burns. It has two fireplaces which makes cooking easier and saves time, and has a flue to evacuate the smoke, which avoids smoking the room and is used to heat water. Compared to the traditional stove, it reduces wood consumption by 35% and cooking time by 5%.<sup>2</sup>

The water used comes from four diesel-powered wells, except for the oldest, which is manual (in 2014). The three newest ones provide drinking water, which is periodically checked. Each household is equipped with dry toilets, with the possibility of washing hands nearby; they were grouped together and located 50 to 100 metres outside the village, but are now next to each dwelling. In 2010-2011, the village has several wooden bins (see Picture 6) – which is exceptional in the villages of the Amhara Region, whose rubbish is burned outside the village. Unlike neighbouring villages, the houses and the village are very clean, which limits infectious diseases such as malaria. Maintenance is carried out by all the inhabitants of the village, under the supervision of the water, hygiene and sanitation committee.<sup>3</sup>



Picture 5: Improved injera baking stove.  
(Photo J. Boocock).



Picture 6: Waste bin in the village in 2011.  
(Photo Teshale T.).

## 2.2. At the origin of Awra Amba, protesters

The story of Awra Amba's creation and development is inextricably linked to that of its founder and leader Zumra Nuru Muhammed, systematically referred to as Zumra (Picture 7), and arguably to that of a Sufi sheik.

Zumra was born on 21 August 1947 in the Este (or Estie) district about fifty kilometres as the crow flies south-east of Awra Amba, one of the 105 districts (*woreda* or *wereda*) of the Amhara Region, in South Gondar zone. His mother Tirusew Kasaye was born in Simada district (in the same zone), his father Nuru Muhammad in Ambaa Mariam Tenta district (South Wollo or *Debub Wollo* zone) about

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<sup>6</sup> Chekole (2014: 65).

<sup>1</sup> Large spongy pancake, made with *teff* flour, a local cereal, which is covered with a variety of sauces and is the main course.

<sup>2</sup> Mussa (2004: 39), Tilahun C. (2012: 92), Walelign *et al.* (2013) cited by Dino & Alemu (2017: 71).

<sup>3</sup> Solomon (2005: 39), Seid (2008: 89), Joumard (2012: 59), Seifu *et al.* (2012: 46-47), Chekole (2014: 66), Yihnew *et al.* (2014: 3), Arvidsson & Sandgren (2015: 20).

170 km as the crow flies south-east of Awra Amba, also in the Amhara Region. His parents met and married in Simada. They are well-off and highly respected peasants, Muslims, who dominate the local orthodox.<sup>1</sup>

His Christian maternal grandmother was from Este district, while his paternal grandmother, also Christian, was from Simada district, both in South Gondar zone.

According to his mother<sup>2</sup>, he would have walked at six months, and at the age of two he would have started asking questions to those around him about the world around him, like an adult<sup>3</sup>.

In the very early 1950s, when he was about five years old, his parents moved to Yesho Michael in the same district of Este, about fifty kilometres south-south-east of Awra Amba.

From the age of four, he would have wondered about the injustice of gender inequality, abuse of the elderly, exploitation at work, cruel punishment of children and dishonesty, thinking of the first four principles of the future Awra Amba community, which he would have formulated at six: equality of women and men, respect for children's rights, helping the elderly unable to work because of health problems or their age, and refusing bad deeds and bad words. These ideas are not appreciated by those around him, who reject him<sup>4</sup>. Another version states that he asked himself these questions only when he was about ten years old<sup>5</sup>.



*Picture 7: Zumra in 2007 (Photo Seid Y.), and in April 2010, accompanied by his armed guard in the background (Photo of the author).*

Zumra, for example, tells us<sup>6</sup>:

*“My parents were Muslims but they had Christian relatives. They were living in the same village. They drank coffee together; worked together; their children played together. So once I went to my Christian neighbours' house and found the children eating. Their parents didn't give me any of the*

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<sup>1</sup> Solomon (2005: 29), Awra Amba community (2020a; 2021), Østebø (2021: 174).

<sup>2</sup> His mother, who died in 1995, reported his behaviour as a child to other members of the young community.

<sup>3</sup> Awra Amba community (2015a : 5, 28).

<sup>4</sup> Awra Amba community (2015a: 5).

<sup>5</sup> Asnake (2005: 29).

<sup>6</sup> Awra Amba community (2015a: 28).

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food because they knew that I was a Muslim. But their children didn't know about this. The food was meat; I knew what meat was but I didn't know about Muslims and Christians. The meat was delicious and I ate it. If I had finished eating all the meat before I returned home, it would have been better. But I returned to my house carrying the remaining meat. As my mother saw me she said:

- Where did you get this meat?

I replied:

- I found it at our neighbour's house and the children gave it to me. (I thought it would be as delicious to her as it was to me)

My mother cried:

- Oh! It is Christian's meat.

Even though I told her I liked it, she snatched the meat from my hand, holding it with a leaf in order not to touch it and threw the meat away. As my eyes stared at the meat, a hen picked it up and then a dog snatched it and took it away. My mother washed my hands as I had touched Christian meat, in order not to get her utensils dirty.

I asked:

-Mother, why did you snatch my meat? (While she was washing my hands)

- Since it is Christian meat.

- What is meant by a Christian?

- A Christian is a human being.

- What about us? Aren't we human beings?

- We are Muslims.

- Isn't a Muslim also a human being?

- Yes, we are also human beings.

- So I ate what human beings eat. Why did you snatch my meat?

- I told you Christian meat is not to be eaten! (With a little anger)

- What meat do Christians eat? (By shifting my question)

- Christians eat cow's meat.

- What meat do we eat?

- Muslims also eat cow's meat.

- If all human beings eat cow's meat, and if all of us are human beings, why did you snatch my meat?

She didn't give any response to me. My father, who had learnt about Muslim religion a little bit, stayed listening to our conversation said to my mother: "Now you have been asked a question that even we can't answer." And he went on, saying to her: "Give him an answer to his question." After that I didn't ask her again."

Zumra also tells about gender inequality, children's rights, lack of solidarity or bad deeds <sup>1</sup>:

"My parents were farmers. They both spent the whole day in the farm but when they came back home it was time for my father to rest but never for my mother. After she has been through the same tiresome day with my father, she had to do everything at home. She was expected to [nurse the children,] prepare food, make coffee, wash my father's feet, and serve the traditional meal. On the top of that,

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<sup>1</sup> Interview of Zumra in Addis Ababa in April-May 2009 by Eden Habtamu (Habtamu, 2009). Genet (2009: 44, 46) reproduces similar statements by adding "nurse the children".



*when my mother could not take care of the house on time, my father abused, insulted and sometimes harmed her. I just wondered why this had to happen to my mother as if she had extra strength or something. But I realised later that this was not an isolated event that only happened in our house, rather it was happening in all families. At the time, I believed (as I do now) that the man as a father and the women as a mother should be engaged in duties in accordance to their capacities and should both be respected and treated equally.*

*The second thing I noticed was that the right of children is not respected in our society as it should be. Too often, children are engaged on duties that do not take into account their capacities for doing things.*

*The third issue I have is, all too often, the less fortunate and the old do not have anyone to take care of them. They may not even have anything to eat and a place to live. But the young and the stronger ones are having the good time and don't have time to look after the less fortunate ones in our society.*

*Fourth, I saw people hurting, killing, and stealing from one another. I knew that we as people were doing something to others that we would hate if it happened to us. I kept asking why? How do we differ from animals if we don't think and behave humanly? When I asked my parents such questions, my parents thought I was mentally ill person. But I could not get answers for my questions, nor proof that I was indeed mentally ill."*

At the age of six, following the death of his father and the remarriage of his mother, he lived with his grandparents. In the absence of school and given his social background, he does not attend any school and will remain practically illiterate<sup>1</sup>. From six to twelve years of age he has to work beyond his strength, and when he couldn't, he was beaten<sup>2</sup>.

From 1959 to 1963 (or from 1960 to 1964) he went from place to place, in Debremarkos (East Gojam), Simada (South Gondar), Sedie Muja (Gayint, South Gondar), Feres Bet (West Gojam), Fogera and Dera (Sud Gondar), Belesa (Nord Gondar) and Dessie (Sud Wello)<sup>3</sup>, thus in Gojam, Wollo and Gondar<sup>4</sup>, within a 250 km radius around Awra Amba. He searches in vain for people who share his ideas, while training to weave to support people in need. At thirteen years old, he even spends a fortnight without eating between deserts, mountains, jungle and caves<sup>5</sup>. He is an itinerant activist of his ideas, traveling to share his ideas and find supporters, and he begins to help people.

He then returns to his village in Este and becomes a farmer like his parents. The latter found him a fiancée and in 1963 he married Zeyda Muhammad, with whom he stayed for 17 years<sup>6</sup>. He formulated the fifth future principle of Awra Amba (all brothers and sisters), and continued to look for people who shared his ideas in nearby districts, outside the farming season<sup>7</sup>.

In 1965/66, he moved to the village of Michael Debire (Libo Kemkem district in the North-South Gondar) before coming back to Este. At the age of 19, he quarrels with his close family, because he uses his income to help the poor and the elderly in the village.

According to several researchers<sup>8</sup>, one of whom interviewed three sons of Sheikh Saide Hassan in

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<sup>1</sup> Merhatsidk (2009: 31), Awra Amba community (2021).

<sup>2</sup> Awra Amba community (2014a: 7; 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Solomon (2005: 29).

<sup>4</sup> Genet (2009: 44), Awra Amba community (2021).

<sup>5</sup> Awra Amba community (2014a: 7; 2021).

<sup>6</sup> Solomon (2005: 29), Awra Amba community (2015a: 5; 2020a).

<sup>7</sup> Genet (2009: 44).

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Alembet<sup>1</sup> and another who interviewed several former Alayhim members of Awra Amba at length, Zumra met the Alayhim Muslim community who played a decisive role.

The Alayhim community was founded in 1949 by Sheikh Saide Hassan Bashir around Alembet (Fogera district), about ten kilometres from Awra Amba. His followers lived in Grar Minch, a lush and peaceful village above Alembet where Sheikh Saide lived and had built a mosque, and in Sinko a few kilometres from Alembet.

This community would represent today some 200 people in Alembet and in villages near Awra Amba. Inspired by Sufism, it differs from other Muslim movements by its liberalism and does not observe the essential rules of Islam, which are fasting and the five daily prayers. Its doctrine and practices are radically different from those of the Muslims and orthodox in the region. It defends ideals such as love, mutual respect, honesty, brotherhood, solidarity with the poor and needy, a kindness towards one's parents that is close to a cult, respect and friendship towards women, equal rights between men and women (especially in the case of divorce), equality between humans regardless of their ethnicity or religion, inter-religious unity and peace, or the importance of working together.<sup>2</sup> An elder of the community puts it this way<sup>3</sup>:

*"Sheik Saide asked – what is the meaning of fasting? What is the meaning of prayer? Fasting in Alayhim is not for one month. Every person has to fast, but it is not time dependent. Fasting in Alayhim is not connected with food – it is about living a good life – not to steal, lie, or do bad things. Prayer is not something to be done five times a day. Every action is connected with prayer – when you wake up, eat, or walk, you should pray. Through life you have to pray – prayer is about being conscious in all what you do. According to Sheik Saide – there is no difference between Muslims and Christians. We are all the same."*

These values earned Sheikh Saide a lot of opposition, especially among Muslims in the region. Accused of not following the true Muslim religion, or of supporting the political opposition, he was imprisoned many times under both the Haile Selassie and Derg regimes.<sup>4</sup>

We can see how close his ideas are to those of Zumra, as an elderly woman from this community testifies today<sup>5</sup>: *"What you see and hear about Awra Amba today are ideas derived from Alayhim. It is Sheik Saide's philosophy."* Solomon (2005) also believes that Zumra was quite influenced by the ideas of this Muslim community<sup>6</sup>.

In 1966, Zumra met members of this Alayhim community in Sinko. He became not only a member of the community, but also a trusted disciple of Sheikh Saide, and even the closest to him, according to the same elderly woman. However, this period remains rather vague and controversial between Zumra's later speech and the few testimonies of the current Alayhim disciples.

For several years Zumra stayed at home in the Este district during the rainy season, but resumed his

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<sup>8</sup> Solomon (2005: 30) who interviewed the sheikh's sons, Asnake (2005: 30), Seid (2008: 60-61) who echoed Solomon's words, and finally Østebø (2021: 87-91, 157-160) who in 2018 interviewed former members of Awra Amba.

<sup>1</sup> Sheikh Saide Hassan is also written Seid Hassen. Alembet (or Alem Ber) was once called Amedber (or Amed Ber or Amed Bar).

<sup>2</sup> Solomon (2005: 30), Østebø (2021: 88-89).

<sup>3</sup> Østebø (2021: 88).

<sup>4</sup> Solomon (2005: 30), Østebø (2021: 88).

<sup>5</sup> Østebø (2021: 88).

<sup>6</sup> As Merhatsidk (2009: 33).

travels during the dry season. In 1971, on his way to Gondar, while working as a servant on a farm, he met like-minded peasants in Fogera District. He often returned to them to discuss his ideas in detail. Some of them are reluctant or even turn away for fear of being rejected by the surrounding society. <sup>1</sup> Are they other followers of Sheikh Saide, other people, or both? It is impossible to know today.

In 1972, Zumra moved with his family from Yesho-Michael (Este district) to Wudo (Demmuna Chalema commune) which is close to Sinko, and finally to Sinko at Saide <sup>2</sup>.

The Awra Amba community leaders claim that Zumra created the community in 1972 on the basis of common values, norms and principles with the disciples he met, the 66 adult founders living in different communes. <sup>3</sup> The Alayhim, on the other hand, claim that it was a cooperative initiated by Sheikh Saide and not the community that was founded in 1972 in Gibra, some six kilometres from Awra Amba, which Zumra later revitalised in response to the Derg's 1985 villagisation policy. <sup>4</sup> One of the first researchers to study Awra Amba also states, in the context of the history of the community's name, that the community had not yet been founded in 1977 <sup>5</sup>.

What appears to be fairly certain is that a structure was created in 1972 that brought together a group of people who shared certain principles. These people lived and worked in the Awra Amba region, but not particularly in Awra Amba: in fact, the various places in question, such as Garar Minch, Awra Amba, Sinko, Este or Gibra, are very close, within a radius of a few kilometres. According to Zumra, the principles were thought up by him alone during his early youth: this seems difficult to believe, especially as these same ideas were defended in parallel by a community of which Zumra was very close, even a prominent member. More probably, Zumra's thoughts and those of Sheikh Saide met, which led the two leaders to collaborate.

However, Zumra contests this influence: *“The Alayhim believers had strong brotherhood culture, though they spent much of their time for religious practices than for work. To my best knowledge, they were not different from all other neighbouring communities in terms of gender equality. Overall they were better than other communities I had met before; at least they respect and help each other. Thus, I thought that this group could understand and share my ideas. This is why I approached and frequently visited them. At the end of the day, some of the Alayhim believers became convinced by my new life style ideas and joined us when we established the farmers’ association in 1986.”* <sup>6</sup>

At the same time, the founders of Awra Amba may have been influenced by the new socialist ideas that emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s in Ethiopia. These ideas came through the cooperative movement, which was very influential in Ethiopia not only during the Derg regime but also afterwards, until today. <sup>7</sup>

It seems to us that it does not diminish Zumra's visionary character, his will and his skills to consider that his thinking was at the same time inspired by the observation of the behaviour of his fellow-citizens, but also by the fundamental values of the religions – which he claims today, moreover, the ideals of the Alayhim, and the new ideas of the time.

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<sup>1</sup> Genet (2009: 44).

<sup>2</sup> Solomon (2005: 30).

<sup>3</sup> Abebaw (2007: 47), Genet (2009: 44), Awra Amba community (2015a: 5; 2021).

<sup>4</sup> Østebø (2021: 160).

<sup>5</sup> Abebaw (2007: 45).

<sup>6</sup> Alene (201: 16).

<sup>7</sup> Solomon (2005: 98), Østebø (2021: 79).



Picture 8: Some of the founders of the Awra Amba community (Photo Awra Amba community).

### 2.3. Very difficult beginnings of the community

In the end, a dozen peasant families from Awra Amba joined forces and shared their land. In Awra Amba, some farmers disagree and keep their land. Some of them joined the community later, others did not. Therefore, there are a few people who still live in Awra Amba and who do not belong to the community, and the community's lands is therefore not continuous <sup>1</sup>.

At the creation of the joint structure, a major debate is organised by the participants to discuss the principles and rules. The discussion was long – 36 days – and extensive. All the principles and rules would have been in fact proposed by Zumra, who persuaded the participants of the importance of these norms, without the latter proposing others and all the participants approving them <sup>2</sup>. However, as we find it difficult to ignore the contribution of the Alayhim, we favour a convergence of the principles of both.

Before the creation of this structure, Zumra did not live in Awra Amba, but in another village, Este (or Sinko?), where he works. He comes and goes. He only comes to Awra Amba later. At the beginning of the common structure, it is the *debo*, a system where everyone works one day for one person, on a rotating basis. Zumra's relatives therefore work in *debo* with the others, discuss with them but are not grouped together in one place <sup>3</sup>.

In 1980, Zumra divorced his first wife, to whom he had been married since 1963. He remarried in 1989 and then three more times before divorcing over the next eight years, the details of which are not known <sup>4</sup>. He divorced his first five wives because, according to him, they disapproved of sharing their income with the needy <sup>5</sup>. He had six children with his first five wives <sup>6</sup>.

In the beginning, the common structure had only a few members, all of whom were illiterate <sup>7</sup>. It was

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<sup>1</sup> Awra Amba community (2014c).

<sup>2</sup> Tilahun C. (2012: 64), Awra Amba community (2021).

<sup>3</sup> Awra Amba community (2014c, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> Awra Amba community (2020a).

<sup>5</sup> Tilahun C. (2012: 91).

<sup>6</sup> Awra Amba community (2020a). No information is available on these children, nor on his last four wives.

<sup>7</sup> Awra Amba community (2014c). Only the number of adults founders (66) is known, but not the number of families or the total population including children according to Awra Amba community (2021). Most of the

therefore very small and close-knit.

According to the Alayhim, this common structure, a cooperative, is part of the Alayhim community. The Alayhim, a Sufi minority within the small Muslim minority (Muslims represent only 3.6% of the population of the Fogera district in 2007, see Table 3 on page 73), are badly considered by their Muslim neighbours as orthodox, which will contribute to the imprisonment of Sheikh Saide, who dies in prison, in Gondar, in 1981. This death provoked questions and conflicts, ideological and power struggles. On the one hand, the Alayhim, who could be said to be traditional, defend religious rituals such as *du'a* and *dhikr*<sup>1</sup>, i.e. repeated prayers and invocations of God; on the other hand, Zumra rejects them and insists on a strict work ethic. The community is divided, with some remaining in the Alayhim community and others following the new leader Zumra. In addition, the Derg's 1985 villagisation policy forces the Alayhim to leave Grar Minch. Some joined Aember or Sinko, others Awra Amba.<sup>2</sup>

The community charter, i.e. the set of values and rules of the community, was drawn up in 1984, without being written down. It was not written until 2001.<sup>3</sup>

Zumra then tries to unite his followers in an egalitarian cooperative<sup>4</sup>. But relations with the inhabitants of the neighbouring villages are deteriorating. On the one hand, the latter are scandalised by the equality between the sexes, the rights of children and their lack of religion. But also, according to one of the founders of the cooperative in 1986<sup>5</sup>, Zumra is very hard on them, for example wanting to fine them 100 birr if they let their cows enter a community field. The neighbours then denounced them as supporters of the opposition EPRP<sup>6</sup>, which was active in the region at that time. Relations became strained and Zumra was even thrown into prison on 17 September 1985 without charge or trial, before finally being released after six months on 9 March 1986.

The community members, few of whom were able to read and write, finally regrouped on the land given to them by the authorities on 14 February 1986<sup>7</sup>, which was more than 50 hectares.<sup>8</sup> The small community therefore had enough land to feed itself properly<sup>9</sup>.

An egalitarian cooperative was created in February 1986 by 19 members from the same commune

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founders were older than Zumra; Only 8 of them are still alive and members of the community in 2020 according to Awra Amba community (2020a).

<sup>1</sup> *Dhikr* is a spiritual exercise at the heart of Sufi practice, consisting of repeating a large number of formulas from the Koran.

<sup>2</sup> Østebø (2021: 158).

<sup>3</sup> Awra Amba community (2020a).

<sup>4</sup> Solomon (2005 : 30), Abebaw (2007: 47).

<sup>5</sup> Østebø (2021: 88, 99, 158).

<sup>6</sup> Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party.

<sup>7</sup> Since the fall of the monarchy in 1975, land in Ethiopia has belonged collectively to the Ethiopian people. It is first distributed to peasant associations, with the peasant households themselves having the usufruct. Then, after the fall of the Derg in 1991, the land remains in the public domain and is managed by the Regions, which is ratified by the new Constitution of 1995. A land is allotted in theory by the municipality to any woman of at least 18 years old and any man of at least 24 years old. In fact, land is also redistributed quite unevenly according to other criteria, such as social level or political opinion, especially in South Gondar. For example, peasants considered favourable to the government may have 3 ha, while those considered hostile may have only 1 ha. (Teklu, 2005 : 5-6).

<sup>8</sup> Awra Amba community (2014c; 2020a).

<sup>9</sup> Interview of Zumra: Chekole (2014: 84).

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under the name of "Awra Amba community cooperative association" <sup>1</sup>.

The number of members then increased, as did the production of cereals. The established rules are fully applied. The crops were stored in a common store, the meals were prepared in a common kitchen, and the food served in a common plate <sup>2</sup>. The community welcomes visitors from different towns in the country who encourage the cooperative <sup>3</sup>.

But after one year, the ruling Derg <sup>4</sup> and the local authorities stopped the project and demanded that they set up a multi-function grassroots farmers' cooperative. Such a cooperative pays its members only in proportion to their work and not in an egalitarian way as Zumra and his followers wanted <sup>5</sup>.

Although his community has no connection with opposition to the regime according to Zumra, things do not get any better, as the community continues to have disputes with the local authorities. In 1987-88, for example, the latter forced the community to separate from weak members, which was against its rules. At the same time, the villagers of the neighbourhood develop a real hatred towards the community because of its egalitarianism, gender equality, and above all the lack of religious rites and institutionalised religion. Neighbours denounce the community to local authorities as members of Tigray People's Liberation Front <sup>6</sup>, an organisation opposed to the regime and controlling parts of the territory, and threaten Zumra with death. In February 1988, neighbours with links to the authorities tried on several occasions to assassinate Zumra <sup>7</sup>.

A group of thirteen members of the community – Zumra, an entire family and some fathers – then left Awra Amba at the end of February 1988 in the middle of the night, taking all their belongings with them. Direction Bonga south-west of Addis Ababa near Jimma, 560 km as the crow flies, and more precisely to Dacha then Medifegna in the district of Ginbo (Keffa zone). Once there, they worked as domestic servants on farms and face severe economic, social and political problems. In 1989, other members of the community joined them. <sup>8</sup>

In 1989-90 they joined a cooperative of agricultural producers in the commune of Medifegna. Zumra teaches agricultural techniques to his companions and to nearby farmers, which is noticed by the local authorities who call the cooperative "Gondar cooperative". However, the leaders of the cooperative are wary of Zumra, fearing that he may want to take their place. In 1990 the Medifegna cooperative was dissolved by the authorities under a new law. The displaced people lack land. The community members who had remained in Awra Amba eventually join the others in southern Ethiopia. And among the latter, about thirty are dying of poverty. After the fall of the Derg at the end of May 1991, the inhabitants decided to plunder the community, but as soon as the new government

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<sup>1</sup> Awra Amba community (2021). One of the reasons of the small number of cooperative founders is that the local officials did not allow people from different communes (*kebele*) to be members of the cooperative and the community members were living at that time in different communes.

<sup>2</sup> Solomon (2005: 74), Awra Amba community (2021).

<sup>3</sup> Awra Amba community (2014a: 8).

<sup>4</sup> The monarchical regime of Haile Selassie was deposed in September 1974 and replaced by a military regime led by a military junta, the Derg. The Derg regime fell on 28 May 1991.

<sup>5</sup> Merhatsidk (2009: 35), Awra Amba community (2021).

<sup>6</sup> The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) will rule Ethiopia for almost 30 years after the fall of the Derg, participating in the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) which will be in power from 1991 to 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Assefa (2013: 34), Awra Amba community (2014a: 8).

<sup>8</sup> Solomon (2005: 31), Awra Amba community (2014a: 8; 2020a), Chekole (2014: 84).

was in place they abandoned the idea. <sup>1</sup>

Zumra starts working with NGOs to build a system to distribute benefits fairly between his community and the local community, but has to face opposition and jealousy from neighbours.

When a new government came to power, the community members who numbered more than 250 were therefore gradually returning from exile: a first group of 16 members including Zumra during the rainy season in August 1993, the others in February 1994 <sup>2</sup>. But the village is destroyed and the neighbouring farmers who shared the land do not welcome their return. Living himself in the middle of the village, Zumra energetically starts to rebuild the community that has been dismantled in his absence, giving new impetus. It suffers severely from a lack of housing, hostility from neighbours and a lack of response from the local authorities. A few months later, Zumra's father-in-law, Kibret Siraj, who is not a member of the community but lives with his family nearby and has fertile land, gives the community one and a half hectares of land to settle on. The community then built fifteen shelters in one day with local materials. It faces the lack of agricultural land <sup>3</sup>.

Zumra says:

*"Upon our return, we had nothing to eat; we had nothing to feed our children and elderly. We had to cancel dinner or lunch to feed children. We had a time when we ate cottonseed."* <sup>4</sup>

So they start weaving. Some of them, like Zumra and former members of the Alayhim community, have skills and experience in weaving; they build traditional looms with locally available materials and teach others how to weave. This allows them to have a small income and to be able to feed the children and elders, without however being self-sufficient. <sup>5</sup>

All households cope with scarcity by multiple methods, such as cooking whatever is available, reducing the amount of food and the number of meals, reducing the variety of food, buying the cheapest food in the markets in exchange for weavings, borrowing money from neighbours (which is not at all usual in Awra Amba) <sup>6</sup>.

It was at this time, according to the Alayhim, that Zumra introduced the rule of assigning work solely according to individual abilities and not according to gender, which became known as 'men prepare the injera, women weave'. This non-gendered division of labour attracts the attention of the authorities, the media and NGOs for the first time. <sup>7</sup>

In the years 1995-97 neighbours tried to chase the community but the community resisted. Several members die of minor illnesses as a result of economic, social and political problems <sup>8</sup>.

The community again turned to the local authorities (district, zone, region) to recover their land. In vain, as this is not possible before the next general land reallocation. In the meantime, in 1995, the district allocates 17.5 ha of land to them, far less than it needs and what it once had. Then at the time of the general reallocation, in 1997, the neighbouring villages negotiate and obtain to keep all their land... <sup>9</sup> The authorities therefore allocate the small plots obtained to the community members, which

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<sup>1</sup> Awra Amba community (2014a: 7; 2014c; 2020a).

<sup>2</sup> Awra Amba community (2014c; 2020a).

<sup>3</sup> Chekole (2014: 84), Awra Amba community (2014a: 9; 2015b; 2021), Østebø (2021: 160).

<sup>4</sup> Alene (2011: 64).

<sup>5</sup> Interview of Zumra: Alene (2011: 65), Østebø (2021: 160).

<sup>6</sup> Chekole (2014: 78).

<sup>7</sup> Østebø (2021: 160).

<sup>8</sup> Awra Amba community (2014a: 9; 2021).

<sup>9</sup> Awra Amba community (2014c; 2015b).

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are pooled in the cooperative. Of these 17.5 ha, only 6.5 ha are agricultural land, managed by the cooperative, 5 ha are woodland and 6 ha are used for the village itself<sup>1</sup>.

The Amhara Ministry of Agriculture provided them with beehives and goats on credit in 1995, while the Amhara Ministry of Disaster Prevention<sup>2</sup> provided them with oxen in 1996, still on credit<sup>3</sup>. All three experiences were failures<sup>4</sup> (see section 4.5.2). This last ministry also helps them with food during the 1996-97 food shortage, and some food the following year<sup>5</sup>.

In 1997, at the age of 50, Zumra got married again, to a 19-year-old woman, Enaney Kibret, with whom he still lives in 2021<sup>6</sup>.

In 1998, a well was dug by hand in the village, which was named Awra Amba. The cooperative acquires a sewing machine and receives a thatched roof. At the end of the decade, information about Awra Amba begins to spread, but the neighbouring village asks the local authorities (of the district, the zone and the Amhara region) to force the community to leave Awra Amba: this is the opportunity for Awra Amba to be better known to the authorities.<sup>7</sup>

## 2.4. Recognition and success

In April 2001, several journalists visited Awra Amba, which allowed the community to make itself known in the Amhara Region and nationally. The most impactful report was made by a team from the Amhara Region News Agency with journalist Mekcha Engedayehu and cameramen Getachew Mehari and Asmamaw. Their report was produced on 12 April 2001 and broadcast on national television in July 2001 during the break of a national team football match, which ensured an exceptional audience. This is the turning point for the recognition of the community, which will lead to a more stable life.<sup>8</sup>

The situation was still far from economically prosperous, as Mekcha Engedayehu testifies a few years later:

*"When we visited the community first, I saw and heard from the community members what I did not expect at all in light of the information that I had before that, it is a unique community practicing modern and new lifestyle. They had suffered from hunger; they were eating by shift; and there was single kuraz [traditional lump] only in the house of Zumra<sup>9</sup>. All infrastructures that you see today were not there, except their own kindergarten and small library both of them made of mud-brick wall and chairs, and grass roof."<sup>10</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Chekole (2014: 64), Østebø (2021: 160).

<sup>2</sup> Disaster Preparedness and Preventions Bureau (DPPB).

<sup>3</sup> Awra Amba community (2020a).

<sup>4</sup> Mussa (2004: 40).

<sup>5</sup> Awra Amba community (2020a).

<sup>6</sup> She was his sixth wife with whom he had two sons in 1997 and 1999, and two daughters in 2002 and 2006, but the dates are not precise (Awra Amba community, 2014c).

<sup>7</sup> Awra Amba community (2014a: 9).

<sup>8</sup> Alene (2011: 17, 65, 75), Tilahun C. (2012: 88), Awra Amba community (2015a: 8; 2020a), Østebø (2021: 75).

<sup>9</sup> It was only single *kuraz* in the house of Zumra as in the other ones according to Awra Amba community (2021).

<sup>10</sup> Alene (2011; 65).



Visitors began to flock in and were received free of charge, researchers were interested. In 2003, weaving looms were financed by a regional public agency <sup>1</sup>, then 27 community members received a two-month training course in spinning and weaving financed by a federal public agency <sup>2</sup> and its regional counterpart <sup>3</sup>. New design garments then come out of these more efficient looms. A national public fund for poverty reduction <sup>4</sup> also finances a small weaving workshop in 2003 <sup>5</sup>. A house is built for the elderly, with a thatched roof. In 2003, with external financing <sup>6</sup>, a fuel mill was started up <sup>7</sup>, then a fabric shop was opened. The following year the access road built by the government was paved <sup>8</sup>.

In 2004, a regional agency <sup>9</sup> finances a management training course for 5 people for 7 days <sup>10</sup>.

The infrastructures are multiplying: a deep well in 2005, electricity in 2006, a new library, a building for the weaving workshop financed by the Dutch embassy in 2007 <sup>11</sup>, a small infirmary in 2008 <sup>12</sup>, a room for tourists, still with a tin roof, guest rooms in 2008, an electric mill, a cafeteria, increasingly efficient looms served by better and better trained cooperators <sup>13</sup>, a store in nearby towns (Woreta, Aember then Bahir Dar), solar ovens...

The Amhara Ministry of Tourism helps the community to welcome tourists with equipment, training, films, etc. <sup>14</sup>.

Finally, the public authority opens in 2010 a primary school on public land (grades 1 to 8), then the community finances and builds a secondary school (grades 9 and 10) which opens in 2011, and finally half-finances a high school (grades 11 and 12) which opens in 2019. Both secondary and high schools are built on land of the community, which provided about four hectares for that. <sup>15</sup>

The status of the community has not been clear until now: a simple union of peasants and artisans as seen by the government, or a larger entity responsible for cultural renewal fighting for its official recognition, as understood by the community? Hence in 2007 the community adopted the status of an association recognised by the authorities, called "Awra Amba Community New Chapter Behaviour and Development Building Multipurpose Association". In February of the following year, the "Awra Amba community farmers and handicrafts multipurpose cooperative" is recognised by regional authorities. <sup>16</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> REMSEDA (Regional Micro and Small Enterprise Development Agency).

<sup>2</sup> FEMSEDA (Federal Micro and Small Enterprises Development Agency), according to Fantahun (2003: 5), Mussa (2004: 572) and Tilahun C. (2012: 88).

<sup>3</sup> REMSEDA. Awra Amba community (2020a).

<sup>4</sup> ESRDF (Ethiopian Social Rehabilitation and Development Fund).

<sup>5</sup> Awra Amba community (2020a).

<sup>6</sup> Funding from Amhara Development Association (ADA) and ESRDF.

<sup>7</sup> Awra Amba community (2020a).

<sup>8</sup> Solomon (2005: 28), Østebø (2021: 164).

<sup>9</sup> REMSEDA (Regional Micro and Small Enterprise Development Agency).

<sup>10</sup> Mussa (2004: 40), Awra Amba community (2020a).

<sup>11</sup> Seid (2008: 120), Alene (2011: 75), Tilahun C. (2012: 89), Awra Amba community (2020a).

<sup>12</sup> Funding from Amhara Development Association (ADA).

<sup>13</sup> In 2006 the international NGO Action Aid Ethiopia financed other looms and a training of 10 people in weaving according to Awra Amba community (2020a) and Alene (2011: 75).

<sup>14</sup> Amhara National Regional State Culture and Tourism Bureau according to Alene (2011 : 76).

<sup>15</sup> Awra Amba community (2014a: 9; 2020b; 2021).

<sup>16</sup> Awra Amba community (2014a: 10).

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In 2008, Zumra was appointed Honorary Ambassador for Peace by the Interfaith Peace-building Initiative<sup>1</sup> and the community received three gold awards for implementing the "Golden Rule" or ethics of reciprocity whose fundamental principle is "Treat others as you would like to be treated" or "Don't do to others what you wouldn't want to be done to you".<sup>2</sup> Finally on June 12, 2010 Zumra received the title of Doctor *Honoris Causa* from the University of Jimma for his original philosophy of community development and his strong and successful commitment to improve the life of his grassroots community.<sup>3</sup>

## 2.5. Community population

The members of the Awra Amba community are mostly from the Amhara Region (zones of Gondar, Gojam, Shewa and Wello) and especially from the districts close to the South Gondar zone<sup>4</sup>. A few are Oromos or Tigrayans<sup>5</sup>. They speak Amharic. They are also mostly of Muslim origin and sometimes of Orthodox origin<sup>6</sup>.

The population of Awra Amba can be expressed in different ways, corresponding to different structures:

- The members of the Awra Amba community (which is an association), who must respect values and a way of life (see section 3). They differ according to where they live:
  - between those who live and work in the village of Awra Amba: these are those who are generally called "members of the Awra Amba community" and whom we consider as such in this report;
  - and those, far fewer in number, who live elsewhere (Bahir Dar, Addis Ababa, etc.), and therefore have much freer behaviour. We do not count them here.
- The members of the Awra Amba cooperative who belong to the community but work in the cooperative, knowing that a small part of the community members are not part of it.
- A few people who rent a room in the village from the community because they work there, such as teachers from school<sup>7</sup>. They are not necessarily members of the community. They are not taken into account here in the latter case.

Data on the population of Awra Amba, understood as members of the community living on the spot, have been available from the community since 2001 (Ethiopian calendar), i.e. the year straddling 2008-2009. Previously, we have some data from different sources, but none for the first fifteen years of the joint structure created in 1972. All of these data are presented in Annex 2 and Figure 3.

Starting with 66 adults founders in 1972 (with in addition children, perhaps spouses), the community population increased sharply during the exile in the south and thereafter, passing the 500-person mark in 2015, to reach 551 in 2020. The number of households evolves in parallel, going from 90 in

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<sup>1</sup> The Interfaith Peace-building Initiative is an Ethiopian NGO participating to United Religions Initiative network.

<sup>2</sup> Awra Amba community (2014a: 10).

<sup>3</sup> Alene (2011: 17, 75), Awra Amba community (2021).

<sup>4</sup> Teshager (2010: 42), Chekole (2014: 14).

<sup>5</sup> Awra Amba community (2014c).

<sup>6</sup> Mussa (2004: 34), Solomon (2005: 11), Abebaw (2007: 56), Alene (2011: 18).

<sup>7</sup> Tilahun C. (2012) interviewed several of them.

2003 to 167 in 2020. The number of cooperative members also increases, from 19 at the creation of the cooperative in 1986 to 172 in 2020.

As can be seen in Annex 2, the gender distribution shows a slight over-representation of women of all ages. Solomon (2005) made a remarkable detailed analysis of the demographic structure in March 2005, the main results of which are presented below, and graphically in Annex 3.

In 2005, although women were over-represented (see Figure 9 in Annex 3), they were mainly adults and especially people aged over 60, as there were quite a few more boys than girls under 20. However, the over-representation of women is more homogeneous with regard to age a few years later, in 2010<sup>1</sup>, as in 2012<sup>2</sup>.

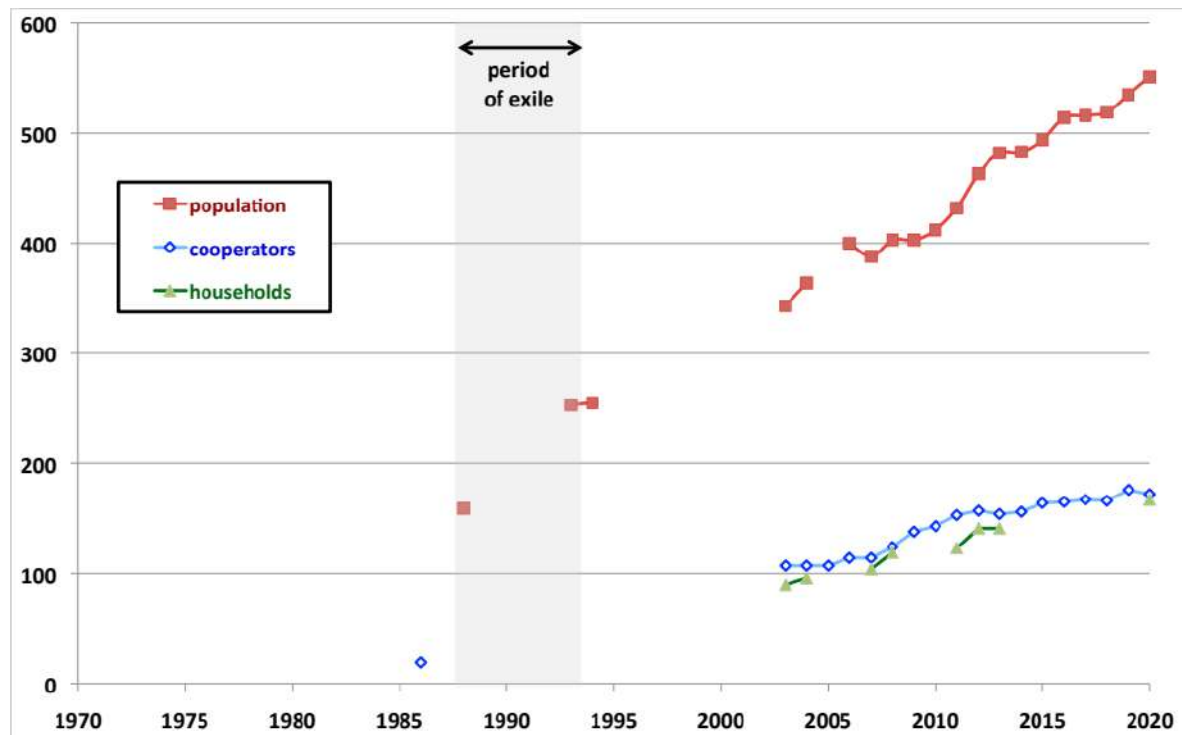


Figure 3: Evolution of the population of Awra Amba, the number of households and the number of cooperators, according to various sources (data in Annex 2).

The working age population rate, i.e. the percentage of 15-64 year olds in the total population, is 51% in 2005, 53% in 2010 and 57% in 2011 as in 2012, and 55% in 2013, which is close to the figure for the Amhara Region where it is 53% in 2010-2011<sup>3</sup>.

Looking at the distribution of the population by age group (all sexes combined) in Awra Amba and in the rural population of South Gondar zone (see Figure 10 in Annex 3), it can be seen that there are more young and older people in Awra Amba than in the zone.

The rate of married people by age group and sex, comparing Awra Amba and the rural population of the Amhara Region (cf. Figure 11 in Annex 3) shows that in the Region, 5% of boys and 8% of girls aged 10-14 are already married, these rates rise to 7 and 36% for the 15-19 age group. In Awra

<sup>1</sup> Teshager (2010: 38).

<sup>2</sup> Assefa (2013: 13).

<sup>3</sup> BoFED (2010), Teshager (2010: 38), Assefa (2013: 13), Eskinder (2013: 268), Chekole (2014: 39).

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Amba, on the other hand, there is no groom under 15 and only one married woman between 15 and 19, or 5%. Only 9% of men aged 20 to 24 are married, but 67% of women. More generally, 75% of men over 19 are married, but only 50% of women: there are therefore quite a number of single, widowed or divorced women who have not remarried. This is much less the case in the regional rural population where the differences in marriage rates between men and women are fairly small, except after the age 45, when 30% of women are widowed (and 4% of men).

Women consistently marry younger than men in Awra Amba, as shown in Figure 12 (in Annex 3), with the gap ranging from 0 to 27 years according to author<sup>1</sup>. The average is 7.3 years, with a median of 5.4 years: half of married women are more than 5.4 years older than their husbands, and half are less. A few married women are from outside Awra Amba, but no men. Among the men, several remarried after returning from exile.<sup>2</sup>

In 2005, the 96 Awra Amba households represented 143 adults, including 15 single people without children, 34 single parents with an average of 2.3 children, and 47 married couples with an average of 3.1 children. The number of living children varies from 0 to 7 per household (see Figure 13 in Annex 3), with an average of 2.3 (and 2.7 if single people without children are excluded). The death of a spouse accounts for 57% of lone parent cases<sup>3</sup>.

The average household size is therefore 3.8 people (143 adults, 222 children) in Awra Amba. According to the 2007 census of Amhara Region<sup>4</sup>, the average household size in the region is 4.3 people, with 3.3 people in urban areas and 4.5 people in rural areas<sup>5</sup>. The situation in Awra Amba is therefore intermediate.

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<sup>1</sup> However, Zumra and his wife Enaney, already married at the time of the survey, are 31 years apart and not 27 as indicated as the highest difference.

<sup>2</sup> Solomon (2005: 36).

<sup>3</sup> Solomon (2005: 34).

<sup>4</sup> CSA (2007).

<sup>5</sup> Assefa (2013: 6).



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### 3. Ideology and culture

Culture is defined as that which is common to a group of individuals, that which binds it together, that is, what is learned, transmitted, produced and created. Thus, for an international institution such as UNESCO (1982), *"In its widest sense, culture may now be said to be the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterise a society or social group. It includes not only the arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs."*

Every society is structured by a particular ideology, a set of values, ideas, concepts, beliefs and customs to which it is attached, and which are part of its culture. Let us consider the three main dimensions of an ideology: beliefs, values, and ideals.

Beliefs are assumptions we have about the world, convictions we generally accept as true, often without any real proof or evidence: they are opposed to the notion of critical thinking.

Values are principles or norms of behaviour considered useful or important. They constitute "morals" that give individuals the means to judge their actions – good or bad – and to build up a personal ethic. They can guide the actions of individuals in a society by setting goals and ideals.

Ideals are models of what everyone would like to achieve in their lifetime, if possible.

Awra Amba is a village very strongly united by culture and ideals, which distinguish it from Amhara society and the surrounding villages. It is first and foremost a community that shares values: living in Awra Amba means sharing and defending these values.<sup>1</sup> But what are the beliefs, values and ideals of this community, in other words what is its ideology? A detour through the type of founder's questions when he was a teenager allows us to understand them better<sup>2</sup>:

- Why don't women have rights to choose their partners as men do?
- Why are women perceived as care givers while men as masters?
- Why don't women equally participate and decide on issues that concern their family and their life?
- Why don't women have equal access to education, health and other opportunities?
- Why don't mothers get proper respect?
- Why are people creating differences in religion by giving different names to God while God is one irrespective of names given to him by different languages?
- Why are people considering differences of colour among human beings while we are of the same stock and the difference is the same as difference between white and black cats?
- Why are ostracised skin scraper, weavers, and blacksmiths, amongst other, regardless of the importance of their professions?
- Why are people envying each other, disliking each other on the pretext of religion or other differences, while the essence of all religions is the value of humanity?

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<sup>1</sup> Solomon (2005: 48).

<sup>2</sup> Seid (2008: 65, 78), Genet (2009: 46), Awra Amba community (2021). These questions are not citations of the young Zumra, but rather correspond to his memory, and perhaps to the understanding of the researchers.

- Can't we create a heaven in this world?
- Why to build mosques and churches, which are the field of God, while God is everywhere, in our heart, our soul, our eyes, etc? Why could we not be his church or his mosque?
- Why are old people not given due regard regardless of their considerable contribution to the society?
- Why is the culture of the society rigid and conservative without allowing individuals and especially children to think freely and to go in their own to the extent that it is reasonable?
- Why do religions define days to work and days on which people of that particular religion should not work? Why do the latter eat in these days? Working and eating are not sins. Do people suffering from poverty and hunger should take rest and abandon fields and other activities?

Typology of values according to authors	citation %	corresponding "idea" of the community	addressed in section
Gender equality	90	a) gender equality	3.1
Solidarity	70	c) caring for those unable to work	3.2
		e) all brothers and sisters	
Golden rule	60	d) avoiding bad speech and bad deeds	3.3
Work	60		3.5
Rationalism / belief in creator	50		3.6
Democracy	50		3.4
Children's rights	20	b) children's rights	3.3

Table 2: Typology of values according to the literature with the percentage of citations among the 21 authors dealing with values, and correspondence with the five ideas of Awra Amba.

For that purpose, we have tried to list the beliefs, values or ideals of Awra Amba put forward by the different authors, therefore according to their perception of the reality of this community: see Annex 4. Depending on their subject matter, the studies are more or less interested in this question, with 9 of the 30 studies remaining silent on the subject. And the most recent studies pay less attention to it. We attempt to classify these very many values into somewhat homogeneous groups, bearing in mind that any typology involves a degree of arbitrariness (see Table 2):

- *Gender equality*;
- Solidarity, fraternity, peace, cooperation, caring for others, humanity, social justice, which can be classified under the term *solidarity*;
- The golden rule ("Treat others as you would like to be treated"), honesty, loyalty, trust, transparency, refusal of addictions, respect, dignity, tolerance, conflict management, which can be classified under the generic term *golden rule*;
- Work, being conscientious, serious, confidence in oneself and in others, courage, self-discipline, which we classify under the generic term *work*;
- The absence of religion or institutionalised religion, the absence of religious rituals, belief in humanity, as opposed to the existence of a creator of the world, classified under the term

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*rationalism*, as opposed to *belief in a creator*.

- Equality, citizenship, social justice, democracy, individual rights, transparency, independence, classified under the term *democracy*;
- *Children's rights*.



(Photo F. Pastor)

Cleanliness and rigidity are also mentioned, but are difficult to classify. Gender equality is almost always mentioned. The golden rule, solidarity and work are cited by almost two out of three authors. Democracy, rationalism or its opposite the existence of a creator god are mentioned by one out of two authors, while children's rights are mentioned by one out of five authors.

For its part, what beliefs, values and ideals are proclaimed by the community itself? First of all, it should be noted that the community does not use these terms, but only the term "ideas". It puts forward and applies five fundamental ideas from Zumra <sup>1</sup>:

- a) Gender equality, the most important <sup>2</sup>;
- b) Respect for children's rights;
- c) Care for those who are unable to work because of their age or health;
- d) To avoid bad words and bad deeds (jealousy, theft, revenge, murder, etc.), i.e. to treat others as one would like to be treated or not to do to others what one would not want to do to oneself, in order to live in peace;
- e) To consider all human beings as brothers and sisters regardless of their differences and to be in solidarity with all.

These five ideas are obviously found in the values cited by the authors. Point c) corresponds to solidarity within the community, while point e) corresponds to external solidarity. Point d) corresponds to the golden rule.

As for Awra Amba's ideals, it is difficult to differentiate them from their values because the latter are characterised by a high degree of implementation, with the ideals largely merging with the values, at least for what the community is responsible for. However, there are some differences between the proclaimed ideals and values and their implementation.

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<sup>1</sup> Genet (2009: 43), Awra Amba community (2015a: 4).

<sup>2</sup> Genet (2009: 46).



In addition to these five basic ideas, Awra Amba believes in the existence of a God who created heaven and earth, which is their only belief, apart from a more or less mythical origin.

Some authors further note ecology or sustainable development as a characteristic of Awra Amba, noting that the area of the forest has been significantly increased<sup>1</sup>, that according to the community its neighbours have improved their environment by emulating their greening efforts<sup>2</sup>, or that Awra Amba is seen as a model for sustainable development<sup>3</sup>. This attraction to ecological issues appears only incidentally and very rarely in the literature consulted. In 2014, ecology seemed to be quite alien to them, yet they were very open, as we visited several organic farms. The collaboration from 2012 with a Dutch solar heating foundation, the above visits, and the discussions with Slowfood in 2015-2016 may have accelerated their ecological concerns, but they are hardly displayed to our knowledge.

We examine the different principles in more detail below: sex or gender equality, solidarity, the golden rule incorporating respect for children's rights, democracy, work, and finally the very controversial issue of the relationship to religion.

### **3.1. Gender equality**

A distinction is made between sex, based on physiological characteristics, and gender, which is a cultural characteristic, specific to the society in which we live and socially constructed: the fact that a woman gives birth or breastfeeds is linked to her sex; the habit of a man not taking care of the day-to-day care of children or the housekeeping is not linked to a physiological characteristic but to his gender.

Much research suggests that all societies practice at least a gender and age-specific division of labour and roles<sup>4</sup>. Confusion between sex and gender, even to the point of refusing to talk about gender, considering that it is an aberration, is reinforced by the frequent rejection of those who do not respect the traditional distribution of roles or are not feminine enough or not masculine enough, then suspected of not being "real women" or especially "real men".

The possibility for an individual to claim a gender identity that is neither entirely male nor entirely female has led to the concept of androgyny. But these distinctions (masculine, feminine, androgynous) are based on the social definition of what is masculine and what is feminine. Then the model of transcendence does not attribute any specific psychological trait to this or that biological sex, as each person's behaviour is unique and not determined by his or her sex.<sup>5</sup>

#### **3.1.1. Situation in Ethiopia and elsewhere**

Two of the researchers who studied Awra Amba provide personal accounts of the gendered division of labour in rural Amhara society:

*"From the researcher's life experience, the peasant's wife is too busy in the morning to sit down for a regular breakfast. [...] baking injera, preparing tela<sup>6</sup>, spinning cotton, collecting dung for fuel, sweeping rubbish off the floor, carrying water from the spring, weaving straw baskets of mats. [...] If*

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<sup>1</sup> Chekole (2014: 64, 77).

<sup>2</sup> Tesfaye (2017: 40).

<sup>3</sup> Østebø (2021: 120)

<sup>4</sup> Solomon (2005: 2) cites Boserup (1970) or Bossen (1989).

<sup>5</sup> Asnake (2005: 2).

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*the peasant is working in a distant farm field, his wife carries lunch out to him or else risks being beaten with a stick. If he is not far away he comes for lunch, which he eats together with his wife. [...] At home the women continue their work, so sooner finishing one task than they attend to another. After dinner there is a washing of feet – the father's by himself or by his wife or children, the other's by them selves. [...] Food and drink must still be prepared and served. Except for a possible trip to church with her husband Sunday morning before breakfast, a woman's hours are still confining to the home compounds and its obligations."*<sup>1</sup>

"I never ever witnessed a woman farming in the farmland, a man baking injera, cooking wot<sup>2</sup>, spinning cotton outside of Awra Amba while growing up in the neighbouring community."<sup>3</sup> Cotton spinning is therefore reserved for women, but weaving is reserved for men<sup>4</sup>.

One of the authors confirms the very different status of women and their husbands with regard to tasks, in the traditional village of Ater Midir in the middle of the harvest season, in 2008: in the late afternoon, both of them come back from the fields, the wife immediately washes her husband's feet and then works late until bedtime while her husband is by the fire doing nothing and goes to bed whenever he feels like it.<sup>5</sup>

More generally, in rural areas of Amhara Region, women are usually responsible for cooking, house-keeping and childcare, while men are responsible for tasks outside the home. However, women also help their husbands with field preparation (apart from ploughing in which they do not participate because it is a male task, but they bring the meals to the ploughmen), sowing, hoeing (on equal terms with their husbands), harvesting, threshing and storage. They are responsible for weeding, the family garden and the animals. But the men cannot help their wives in domestic activities. Women therefore have more work than men: in terms of working hours, in rural Ethiopia, it is estimated that women work between thirteen and seventeen hours a day, very often more than twice as many as men<sup>6</sup>.

Moreover, women have little effective decision-making power in their families and are marginalized in all spheres of decision-making whether in personal, family or community matters. They lack confidence in their ability to intervene in what is not traditionally their responsibility. They then find it normal that they are inferior and develop low self-esteem.<sup>7</sup> Traditionally suffering from socio-cultural and economic discrimination, they have fewer opportunities than men in terms of personal development, education and employment.<sup>8</sup> Rural Amhara society has indeed traditional and stereotypical attitudes about women's ability to lead or decide<sup>9</sup>. Thus at the Ethiopian level, only 8% of women can decide on their own to visit their family or relatives according to a 2005 survey<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Traditional low-alcohol beer (when not filtered: 2 to 4°), usually made from grains of *teff*, barley or more rarely maize or sorghum, and flavoured with *gesho* leaves, a kind of local hop.

<sup>1</sup> Solomon (2005: 45).

<sup>2</sup> *Wot* or *wat*: stew.

<sup>3</sup> Chekole (2014: 81).

<sup>4</sup> With a few exceptions: thus Itagaki (2013: 50) notes that women potters in the Wolleka region near Gondar weave during the rainy season.

<sup>5</sup> Genet (2009: 50).

<sup>6</sup> According to a representative of the Department of Agriculture's Office of Women's Affairs interviewed by Frank (1999: 6) in May 1999.

<sup>7</sup> Genet (2009: 59, 63).

<sup>8</sup> Frank (1999: 5), Guday (2005: 109; 111), Alemu (2013: 69), Seid (2008: 77).

<sup>9</sup> According to Yalew (1997) cited by Seid (2015: 20).

<sup>10</sup> According to the Ethiopia Demographic Health Survey (EDHS) 2005 cited by Mabsout (2009: 15).

Popular proverbs reflect the reality of the position of women's position and society's attitude towards them, with language resources being systematically used to perpetuate inequalities. This is the case with these Ethiopian proverbs <sup>1</sup>:

*"Women and donkey do not complain about burden",*  
*"Even if woman works hard and is wise, the man makes decision and gets credit for it",*  
*"A woman may make good porridge, but cannot make a good speech",*  
*"When a woman rules, stream runs uphill",*  
*"A learned girl and a flying chicken do not go far",*  
*"The wisdom of women and the lights of stars do not take you far",*  
*"A woman may be fertile, but not knowledgeable".*

Concretely, the traditional reality is abrupt, as described by a woman from Awra Amba: *"The husbands don't give women any chance to discuss or explain, they simply beat their wives."* <sup>2</sup>

Gender inequality is instilled in Ethiopia from childhood as it is almost everywhere else. Thus, for the birth of a boy, seven shots are fired or five loud screams are uttered, but only three shots or three loud screams if it is a girl. The treatment of the placenta also gives an indication of the roles of man and woman: a boy's is buried in front of the house to show that he will be the master, while a girl's is buried in the house to show that her place will always be at home. Christians baptize their sons on their 40<sup>th</sup> day and their daughters on their 80<sup>th</sup>, the idea being that it takes longer for a girl to purify herself.<sup>3</sup>

In the countryside, if herding is well shared between girls and boys when they are very young, the Amhara girl begins to have separate activities from the boys from the age of 6-7. Around the age of 10, she abandons herding and stays at home to chop onions, grind pepper, bake *injera*, etc. Progressively she learns to become a good housewife and at the age of 12-13 she is able to manage a home on her own and is then fit to marry. The boys, on the other hand, learn to do the various farm chores, are fully responsible around the age of 15 for part of their father's estate, and when they do well are ready for marriage.<sup>4</sup>

One of the authors studied testifies from her personal experience and from what she observed in 2008 in a peasant village that girls are not allowed to go outside for playing, to sit down for reading or to stay by the fire in the evening like their brothers, because these are not socially accepted behaviours: their place is at home to help their mother <sup>5</sup>.

ILO (International Labour Organization) statistics for 2015 show that girls attend school slightly more than boys, participate more in domestic tasks, but less often have a paid activity: see Table 12 in Annex 9. In 2016, according to a World Bank study <sup>6</sup>, the difference in enrolment rates in Ethiopia between girls and boys aged 7 to 14 is extremely small, but still with a slight advantage for girls.

Later on, although this varies by region, culture, community and individual, the behaviours of adolescent males are generally marked by aggressive expressions, spirit of domination, a sense of independence, female subordination, heterosexual prowess or self-confidence <sup>7</sup>. In the Amhara Region, the male ideal is aggressiveness first, followed by courage and endurance (*wand-nat*), placed at

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<sup>1</sup> Hussein (2005); Hussein (2009: 53) cited by Eskinder (2013: 283-284).

<sup>2</sup> Interview in late 2014 of a woman from Awra Amba by Arvidsson & Sandgren (2015: 17).

<sup>3</sup> Andromeda (1968) cited by Genet (2009: 3) ; Genet (2009: 57).

<sup>4</sup> Solomon (2005: 46, 87).

<sup>5</sup> Genet (2009: 3, 53).

<sup>6</sup> World Bank (2020: 196).

<sup>7</sup> Asnake (2005).

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the top of the scale of values, on the same level as religion <sup>1</sup>. And young Ethiopian girls are traditionally educated during their childhood to be obedient, submissive, shy and imaginative <sup>2</sup>.

*“The big difference between the little girls and boys in the village can be seen in their eyes. The eyes of the little males are arrogant, demanding, the eyes of the girls are always worried and suspicious.”* <sup>3</sup>: this remark by a low caste Indian activist on the situation in her community illustrates well the construction of gender, and could undoubtedly be verified in many countries of the world, to varying degrees, in Ethiopia as well as in France.

The respective roles of women and men are inculcated in each person in the family, at school, through religion, with friends, etc. i.e. by society as a whole. The weight of what is said or of superstition is powerful. Thus a man who prepares an *injera* would be labeled by his neighbours as a woman, which would make him not to try again. A woman from the traditional Amhara village of Ater Midir testifies: *“Once up on a time, a woman, a wife of a farmer in the community was forced to plough land as her husband died and there was no one to take it over. People who saw her ploughing land not only laughed at her but also cursed her because they assumed it as the sign of bad thing that is going to happen in the village.”* <sup>4</sup>

In Amhara culture, boys are theoretically expected to arrive at marriage as virgins, but prior sexual experiences are considered natural. The girl, on the other hand, must remain a virgin. Marriage is traditionally arranged by fathers, as the groom often does not even know what his bride-to-be looks like before the wedding. <sup>5</sup>

Access to contraception is low in Ethiopia, but is increasing: it concerned 2% of women in 1981, and 6% in 2000, and even 47% of women in 2010 in North Shewa of the Amhara Region. <sup>6</sup> According to a 2005 study by the Ethiopian Ministry of Women's Affairs, in much of Ethiopia, the right of most women to access contraception is minimal as a result of, among other things, *“Male supremacy and cultural barriers, religious belief barring women from using contraception, cultural practices violating women's rights, low decision making capacity, limited decision making and negotiating power and male's non-involvement in population issues including using contraception.”* <sup>7</sup> Moreover, talking about sex is generally considered taboo and shameful <sup>8</sup>.

Maternal mortality remains high in Ethiopia with 401 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2017, although lower than the rate for sub-Saharan Africa which is 542: it was 597 in 2010, 1030 in 2000 and 1200 in 1992. <sup>9</sup> Almost a third of this maternal mortality is thought to be related to unsafe abortions. The new Ethiopian penal code allows abortion in particular in cases of rape or incest, and in cases of danger to the mother or foetus <sup>10</sup>.

With respect to women's rights and gender equality, the Ethiopian Constitution gives equal rights to

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<sup>1</sup> Levine (1966) cited by Asnake (2005: 10).

<sup>2</sup> Seid (2008: 76).

<sup>3</sup> Devi (2013: 124).

<sup>4</sup> Genet (2009: 51, 54-56, 58).

<sup>5</sup> Levine (1965) cited by Asnake (2005 : 11).

<sup>6</sup> Jelaludin *et al.* (2001: 18), Abdurahman *et al.* (2014).

<sup>7</sup> Ministry of Women's Affairs (2005) cited by Wabekbon (2006: 27).

<sup>8</sup> Solomon (2015: 59).

<sup>9</sup> MMEIG (2017); <https://knoema.fr/atlas/%c3%89thiopie/Taux-de-mortalit%c3%a9-maternelle-estimation-chaque-100-000-naissances-vivantes> et

<sup>10</sup> FMOH (2006).

men and women during marriage. The Family Code adopted in 2000 recognises the joint management of the household; it affirms the equal rights of spouses. Thus spouses have theoretically equal and joint decision-making powers. The Code also guarantees women's economic rights, particularly in terms of financial decision-making. The Amhara Family Code of 2003 is similar to the national version.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore the situation is changing, slowly, but changing, especially in rural areas: it is conceivable (in 2008) that men have traditionally female occupations, that girls have almost the same tasks as boys. Girls go to school as much or more than boys, although boys still seem to have some priority in case of problems in the family.<sup>2</sup> The picture we have drawn above reflects the usual situation in rural Ethiopia and Amhara in the last decades of the 20th century, and even in the very early 21st century. This situation of inferiority and subjugation of rural girls and women was not, however, systematic and is increasingly fading away<sup>3</sup>. For example, in another region, Arsi women of the Oromo ethnic group are highly respected – almost sacredly so – and have a certain political, economic and religious power<sup>4</sup>.



(Photo F. Pastor)

### **3.1.2. Gender equality in Awra Amba**

The situation therefore remains somewhat problematic for women's rights in Ethiopia, especially in more traditional rural areas, even if the evolution is positive. This has prompted Ethiopians to turn to Awra Amba, as one teacher said<sup>5</sup>: "*From a child I wanted to live in a place where women and men live as equals and where all of our children can go to school. I didn't want religion and tradition to dictate every aspect of our lives.*" The situation is so different in Awra Amba that when men and women from other areas visit the village and ask if the men take part in domestic chores and take their responsibilities in the home on an equal basis with women, many people in Awra Amba are shocked because they do not know or understand the marginalisation and discrimination of women in particular, and of gender in general<sup>6</sup>. Similarly, when a researcher asks women attending literacy classes in front of men if this don't bother them, they are surprised: "*Why should we be embarrassed? They are*

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<sup>1</sup> Solomon (2015: 36).

<sup>2</sup> Genet (2009: 51, 54, 63), World Bank (2020: 196).

<sup>3</sup> Østebø (2021: 63).

<sup>4</sup> Østebø (2018b). The Arsi live east of Awasa and are predominantly Muslim.

<sup>5</sup> Barnes (2019: 7).

<sup>6</sup> Alemu (2013: 69).

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*our brothers and husbands."* <sup>1</sup>

Indeed, Zumra asked himself questions about gender equality from an early age <sup>2</sup>, in addition to those mentioned above: "*Do women have an extra power that they undertaken in and out door activities of their families? Why don't they have an equal access to education, health, other resources and opportunities as men do? Why are women subject to physical harassment by their husbands? Why don't men want to share activities at home? Why don't women work farming and other activities that men can do?*"

Awra Amba's tradition of gender equality is quite unique among Ethiopian local communities. The community charter (or communal statute) states in its article 5 that both men and women must share equally all their responsibilities inside and outside the home: it is explicit that gender equality must be manifested at all times. As this charter is actually implemented in daily life, the inferior position of women in the economy, for example, is then abolished by abandoning the traditional gender-based division of labour.

This tradition includes equality in terms of production, possession and consumption of resources, including property and the home, and in terms of responsibility for tasks. <sup>3</sup> It is moreover difficult to find tasks in Awra Amba that are considered female or male. For example, male adolescents perform tasks that are traditionally considered female. And the few more feminine tasks are not less well regarded than the more masculine ones. <sup>4</sup>

Only pregnancy and breastfeeding are the prerogative of women, because they are linked to a physical reality and not to a social choice.

First of all, women are not beaten if they make a mistake in performing one of their tasks.

All the surveys carried out by the various authors show that women participate in all tasks, manual as well as intellectual. Men cook, women weave and shop, while these activities are the prerogative of the other sex in traditional Amhara society.

Solomon (2005: 76) assessed by survey of 80 of the 96 households at the time – half of which were headed by women – the gender distribution of household and agricultural work, differentiating between children and adults <sup>5</sup>: see Annex 5. The nine household tasks identified are equally distributed between the sexes, for both adults and children, except for three where there is a significant difference between men and women (see Table 8 on page 140). Women are 40% more likely than men to be responsible for fetching water and cooking (this percentage rises to about 70% for fetching water between girls and boys). In addition, men are 2.3 times more likely than women to collect wood, the reason being that men want to protect women from risks outside the village.

The eight agricultural tasks identified are on average performed by men 25% more than by women (cf. Table 9 on page 141). The difference is fairly constant between the sexes, except for two tasks, which probably require the most physical strength: plowing is done seven times more by men than by women, and threshing is done twice as much by men than by women.

Solomon's survey does not seem to measure the actual division of tasks through the time spent by

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<sup>1</sup> Genet (2009: 73).

<sup>2</sup> Seid (2008: 78).

<sup>3</sup> Merhatsidk (2009: 29), Assefa (2013: 85), Solomon (2005: 83).

<sup>4</sup> Asnake (2005: 38), Solomon (2005: 80).

<sup>5</sup> However, it is not possible to know precisely what the percentages given by the author mean in the absence of the questionnaire.

men and women on the different tasks, but rather seems to answer the question "do you participate in this or that task?", which is much vaguer and does not make it possible to differentiate between those who perform half a task and those who perform only a very small part of it. Only a few authors to our knowledge give more precise information on the division of tasks between men and women, but unfortunately they are not very representative:

- Solomon (2005: 38) notes that during his stay in Awra Amba, both men and women participate in the construction of houses and other buildings. They plan the different activities together, and carry out the manual tasks: carrying water, preparing the plaster or mud bricks with water, soil and manure, and putting up the mud bricks. But he did not precisely measure the participation of each other.
- In 2010 we carried out a limited count <sup>1</sup> on two traditionally female tasks and two traditionally male tasks, which shows a greater disparity of tasks by gender than the disparity measured by Solomon's declarative survey, but our sample and therefore the representativeness of the results are quite low (see Annex 5).
- Alemu (2013: 69) notes that in some exceptional cases only men participate in certain activities, for example burials. According to the community, this was due to the fact that the cemetery is common to several villages and other villagers did not allow women to attend burials. The situation has nevertheless changed; women and men from Awra Amba have now access to burials.<sup>2</sup>
- Eskinder (2013: 297) notes that women have great influence in the general assemblies, where their numbers slightly exceed those of men (in 2011), which could correspond to the 52 percent of women over 14 years of age at the time. Similarly Assefa (2013: 92) saw women actively participating with men in all meetings and decision-making. He did not witness any form of superiority of husbands or inferiority of wives.
- Assefa (2013: 87) observed that girls and boys have the same social or domestic activities: fetching water, cooking, cleaning home, attending school of course, spinning and weaving, farming, always according to their abilities and skills.
- Two Swedish researchers noted in 2014 that only women worked in the kitchen of restaurant <sup>3</sup>.
- Østebø (2021: 173, 184) notes that most of the weavers she saw in the cooperative's workshop were men by far, while the women were spinning or preparing the weaving. One woman, however, testifies to her – extremely tiring – work as a weaver on the large looms. And most of the food preparation is done by women. These activities seem in Østebø to be still gendered, as traditionally, except in case of need (illness, absence...).

Father and mother also share responsibility for their family. Neither has authority over the other and decisions are made together. They share responsibility for the care and upbringing of their children, taking care of them equally, with one or the other staying at home if necessary.<sup>4</sup>

The absence of a gendered role is not, however, the fundamental element of gender equality in Awra Amba, because it is the consequence of women's participation in decision-making, which is the driving force behind gender equality. It is the dynamic that can be replicated elsewhere – by first ensuring equal participation of the sexes in decision-making – and not the result of this dynamic – by first imposing equality in daily tasks<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Joumard (2010b: 4).

<sup>2</sup> Awra Amba community (2021).

<sup>3</sup> Arvidsson & Sandgren (2015: 20).

<sup>4</sup> Solomon (2005: 39), Abebaw (2007: 60), Merhatsidk (2009: 47). The survey by Solomon (2005) also shows this: see Table 8 on page 140.

<sup>5</sup> Alene (2011: 90).

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Gender equality has an important impact on economic development, on the one hand by enabling girls to get an education and thus acquire skills, and on the other hand by giving women as many opportunities for participation in economic and social life as men. A 40-year-old woman testifies: "*I participate equally in the economic activities of the community. I can get as equal share as my husband. We equally support our family without dependence on one another.*" A widow: "*I had no fear of losing my sources of income when my husband passed away, because I was not, at all, economically dependent upon him.*" This economic independence is strengthened by the abolition of the dowry or any other economic negotiation before marriage as well as expensive wedding ceremonies <sup>1</sup>. It abolishes or significantly reduces the superior position traditionally held by men because of their privileged position as breadwinners in the family. <sup>2</sup>

While few women in rural Ethiopia are free to visit their family or loved ones, in Awra Amba most women are free to come and go, provided they inform their husbands and of course have the permission of the cooperative for those who work there if it takes up their working time. The same applies for access to health centres, which are often quite far away, as a 32-year-old woman said in 2014: "*I can autonomously decide to access health care services. But I should not go alone due to different reasons such as fear of attack from surrounding communities. It is difficult even for males to go alone.*" The immediate environment and security issues can therefore interfere with women's rights (see section 4.6.1). <sup>3</sup>

In addition, the survey conducted in 2014 by Solomon (2015: 59-60) shows the absence of marital rape, as rape is condemned by the community. The limitations of his investigation, however, lead him to conclude that only most men do not force their wives to have unwanted sex. Sexual relations between spouses are therefore decided jointly in most cases.

The community's own complaint resolving committee (see section 3.4.3) has never received any complaints in this matter according to one of its members. Speaking in sexual matters seems to this investigator much freer than elsewhere, neither taboo nor shameful. For spouses, sexual relations are considered a common good.

Women have the right to contraception <sup>4</sup>, even if necessary without informing their husbands, as recognised by the community charter <sup>5</sup>. "*I accessed condoms, contraceptive methods and other medical drugs independently [of my husband]*" states a 28-year-old woman in 2014 <sup>6</sup>. However, the right to contraception for girls and unmarried women seems to be a problem because sexual relations outside marriage are prohibited. But it seems that they have the right to buy contraceptives and condoms at the village infirmary. <sup>7</sup>

As a result, as a 32-year-old woman said, "*I have never been unintentionally pregnant, which would have caused me to have an abortion, as we discuss it and freely come to an agreement in the family*". But most women can have an abortion at Awra Amba if the pregnancy endangers their health, however after discussion with their husband. <sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In the community, married couples do not organize a wedding ceremony at all.

<sup>2</sup> Solomon (2005: 81, 84, 85), Seid (2008: 105), Eskinder (2013: 287, 293).

<sup>3</sup> Solomon (2015: 62-64).

<sup>4</sup> Probably including the morning-after pill, which is being promoted in a poster in the health centre in 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Eskinder (2013: 284).

<sup>6</sup> Solomon (2015: 62).

<sup>7</sup> Awra Amba community (2014c).

<sup>8</sup> Solomon (2015: 56).



Women have three months' maternity leave (one month before childbirth, two months after) and are prohibited from doing hard work when they return to work. <sup>1</sup>

In Awra Amba, single or divorced women are not treated badly, as is the case elsewhere <sup>2</sup>. A researcher more generally compared the self-image of women and men in Awra Amba and in the village of Ater Midir in the same South Gondar zone. She concludes that both Awra Amba women and men are self-confident, develop a positive self-image and are autonomous, whereas women in Ater Midir have different roles and behaviours from men. <sup>3</sup> Moreover, a woman's prestige is not linked to her husband's prestige because of his wealth, leadership or knowledge <sup>4</sup>.

The respective roles of women and men, or girls and boys, are therefore hardly different according to the different surveys. A psychologist <sup>5</sup> specifically studied the values and behaviours that construct the identity of male adolescents and the expectations that people have of them. His survey, probably carried out in 2004, shows that these values and behaviours are those of all, that there is no masculine specificity: respect for others, sincerity, honesty, seriousness, work, solidarity, interdependence, gender equality, egalitarianism, peaceful behaviour, conformity to the community way of life, etc. Physical strength is not particularly admired: it is a gift of nature that makes certain jobs easier, but it should not be particularly valued in order to avoid any discrimination between young people. He does not note any differences between girls and boys, who, for example, do not group together by sex, but by mixed groups. The same is true of children's games that mix girls and boys, while elsewhere this is rarely the case, with girls playing with girls and boys with boys <sup>6</sup>.

Children are not considered by their parents and their entourage as boys or girls, but only as children: "*from the beginning, the idea of boys and girls is not there in our minds, rather we see them as our children and as equal.*" testifies an elder. <sup>7</sup>

The perception of male and female roles was studied ten years later by another psychologist <sup>8</sup> with the help of questions on self-perception ("I am independent", "I am emotional", "I am active", "I am tender", etc.) and on gender roles ("people are aggressive regardless of their sex", "people should be treated equally regardless of their sex", "some jobs are not for women", "girls should...", etc.), which are traditionally attributed to men or women in Amhara society <sup>9</sup>. He finds that while children have stereotypical and traditional perception of roles, adolescents and adults have an egalitarian and androgynous perception, i.e. both male and female. And men and women have the same egalitarian and androgynous perception of gender roles.

However, stereotypes or gendered behaviours have not completely disappeared. Thus Zumra considers in 2008 that women are wise by nature, that they manage money wisely and are naturally gifted in protecting the environment. This opinion seems to be shared, as one community member testifies: "*The community believes that women are good at keeping and using money properly; it will not be wasted, as they are excellent in saving.*" <sup>10</sup> These qualities could be the result of the behaviour

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<sup>1</sup> Joumard (2010b: 6), Solomon (2015: 56).

<sup>2</sup> Seid (2008: 79)

<sup>3</sup> Genet (2009: 80).

<sup>4</sup> Solomon (2005: 81).

<sup>5</sup> Asnake (2005: 47, 49, 52).

<sup>6</sup> Genet (2009: 53), Assefa (2013: 41).

<sup>7</sup> Genet (2009: 53).

<sup>8</sup> Seid (2015).

<sup>9</sup> Yalew (1997) cited by Seid (2015: 20).

<sup>10</sup> Genet (2009: 50, 62).

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of community members before they became part of the community, when they were immersed in Amhara society, but there is some contradiction in saying that men and women are equal in every way and then asserting that women have "by nature" some particular quality...

As elsewhere, the family and entourage play a crucial role in teaching and enforcing these rules: the child is educated not to differentiate between the sexes who have the same roles and the same status, and if a member of the community violates this norm, he or she is immediately mocked or frowned upon.<sup>1</sup>

As one woman summed it up: "*Here in Awra Amba it is like paradise. Here we get the women's rights.*"<sup>2</sup> They are not victims of negative expectations from society about their behaviour.

However, men's and women's views on gender equality and on their own attitudes in this area may differ widely from reality: ideology and practice are two different things. This has led us to attempt to measure gender equality in Awra Amba, i.e. the equal participation of women and men in activities where no predisposition of either sex can be invoked<sup>3</sup>, and where equality of tasks can only be the identity of tasks<sup>4</sup>. This is particularly the case for girls' access to university and women's participation in community governing bodies

We have for girls' access to university the number of female and male students in 2013, 2015 and 2020, which we compare to the corresponding number of girls and boys of the same age groups in the population a few years earlier, in 2005, 2013 and 2015: see Annex 6. For example, we compare the university student population for 2020 to the 4-8 year old population in 2005, or to the student population in grades 6-10 in 2013, or to the student population in grades 8-12 in 2015. The ratio between the percentage of female university students and the percentage of girls in the corresponding previous child population – called the female representation rate – indicates the degree of equality of access of girls to university.

This female representation rate at university is 0.46 in 2013, which means that girls are under-represented by 54% compared to boys. This rate rises to 0.81 in 2015 and reaches more or less one in 2020. Equal access to university for girls and boys is therefore far from being achieved in 2013, and then improves fast enough to be almost achieved in 2020.

To measure women's access to Awra Amba institutions and thus the theoretical institutional power equality of women and men, we have the number of women and men elected in each of the 15 committees in 2004 and 2011 and in each of the 16 committees in 2020 (see their role in section 3.4.3) which we compare with the number of women and men over 14 years old in the population of the same year. These committees are in fact elected by members over 14 years of age and administer the entire population. Details of the calculations can be found in Annex 7. The overall weight of women in all the committees is, however, quite difficult to establish because the number of elected members differs from one committee to another and some committees have more power than others (this is particularly the case of the Development committee, which is the umbrella committee for all others).

The female representation rate in the Development committee is only 0.36 in 2004, which means that women are particularly under-represented. It rises to 0.64 in 2011 and to 0.70 in 2020. For the other

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<sup>1</sup> Genet (2009: 57, 80). Awra Amba community (2021) claims he is only advised politely to comply with the norm.

<sup>2</sup> Interview in late 2014 of a woman from Awra Amba by Arvidsson & Sandgren (2015: 17).

<sup>3</sup> As may be the case for tasks requiring great physical strength, such as plowing.

<sup>4</sup> This is not the case, to some extent, for household or agricultural tasks where a balance of tasks can be sought rather than systematic equal sharing of each task.

14 or 15 committees, the female representation rate increases from about 0.85 in 2004 to about 0.90 in 2011 and then decreases to 0.81 in 2020. The situation is therefore improving only within the Development committee that oversees all the others, and tends to deteriorate in the sub-committees. Gender equality is therefore still not achieved in Awra Amba's governing bodies. This contradicts what Zumra said in 2008: "*Since the society believes that women are wise by nature, women representative outnumber men participants whenever decisions are made.*" <sup>1</sup>

Finally, what about gender equality in Awra Amba? The values and principles, the ideology, the culture are obviously very different in Awra Amaba compared to the rest of the Amhara Region and even Ethiopia. Even though the Ethiopian Constitution and laws recognise gender equality in all areas, tradition, the weight of habits and even old rules largely prevail in favour of the superiority of men and the inferior status of women, particularly in rural areas. In Awra Amba, the values and principles affirmed and above all applied for almost fifty years place women on an equal footing with men, whether in the couple, in outdoor activities or in the imagination. "*People talk about gender equality in other places, because of currently government promotion. But they don't practice it. Here [...] it is gender equality in practice and in ideas.*" <sup>2</sup>

Reality can be a little different from the principles. First of all, as Arvidsson and Sandgren (2015: 24) have pointed out, gender equality does not necessarily imply that women and men do exactly the same thing, and the meaning given to the concept may vary. If gender equality means that women have the same rights as men and that these rights are translated into reality, then equality can be said to have been achieved. Equality is then based on two principles: equality of tasks (same level of participation) and not an identity of tasks (doing the same thing) on the one hand, and on the other hand the *de jure* access to all the tasks to each sex and the equal value attributed to the tasks done by either sex. A community member explains that "*Gender equality is never ensured by letting women engaged in ploughing; and men in baking injera. It is about maintaining shared equality of assumptions among themselves. Then, they can be aware that everything concerns them.*" <sup>3</sup>

The situation in Awra Amba is therefore incomparably more favourable to women than it is in rural Ethiopia and even in most countries, including those that claim to be the most developed. Girls and boys have equal access to university, and gender equality in governing bodies is achieved at around 75%: many countries cannot say the same, France first <sup>4</sup>.

Gender relations have changed the usual perception by reducing cultural stereotypes about men and masculinity and cultural prejudices towards women and femininity <sup>5</sup>. Traditional stereotypes have thus disappeared first from language in Awra Amba, then gradually from reality, but in an extraordinarily rapid manner, if we compare with the evolution of gender equality not only in Ethiopia but in all countries of the world.

Only three behaviours remain gendered: personal name, parental name and partly dress. The personal names given to adolescents are different according to gender and are similar to those given in Amhara culture. The father's name serves as the child's parental name. As for the clothes, they are those worn by local men and women, at least in 2004. <sup>6</sup> A dozen years later, only some married women and most older women wear typical Ethiopian Muslim clothing, while men do not. The younger genera-

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<sup>1</sup> According to his comments reported by Genet (2009: 50).

<sup>2</sup> Interview in late 2014 of a woman from Awra Amba by Arvidsson & Sandgren (2015: 17).

<sup>3</sup> Tilahun C. (2012: 106).

<sup>4</sup> In France, only 31.6% and 38.7% of women are currently elected to the Senate and the National Assembly respectively. Equality is therefore only achieved at 63 and 77% in these two assemblies.

<sup>5</sup> Eskinder (2013: 286).

<sup>6</sup> Asnake (2005: 38), Abebaw (2007: 60).

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tion of both sexes follows urban fashion trends.<sup>1</sup>

Gender equality contributes greatly to the elimination of the culture of violence that is encouraged by inequalities of all kinds, and thus pacifies all human relations<sup>2</sup>. It is also essential for development: "*The most important secret which makes the Awra Ambas' developed their work habit is the abolishment of the idea of 'division of labour' based on sex. [...] They believe that development is unattainable unless women are integrated in to the development activity.*"<sup>3</sup>

## 3.2. Solidarity

Mutual aid and joint work are traditionally very present in Ethiopia and particularly in rural areas at least within communities, whether for agricultural production (*debo*, *wenfel*)<sup>4</sup>, or other activities (*idir*<sup>5</sup>, *iqub*<sup>6</sup>, *mahaber*<sup>7</sup>, etc., trade, military operations) that are carried out collectively, even if the benefits are not necessarily shared equally.<sup>8</sup>

However, despite these systems, a large percentage of older persons are economically, socially and psychologically vulnerable<sup>9</sup>, as Zumra testifies (page 24). Solidarity makes it possible to respond to this, while at the same time differentiating oneself from animals that would not help each other, according to him<sup>10</sup>.

In Awra Amba, everyone is responsible for the well-being of each individual and for the well-being of the community as a whole, with the community being responsible for everyone's well-being. Solidarity towards those in need because of their age, health or poverty and more generally between each other is the norm. Everyone does it spontaneously without having to be asked.<sup>11</sup>

Collective trust, in others, is a fundamental element based on solidarity, cooperation and reciprocity whenever possible. It is also trust in elected leaders, who are known to act for the common good and not for their personal interest. This mutual trust has undoubtedly been fostered by having long shared the same oppression of the surrounding society and having fought together.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Østebø (2021: 34).

<sup>2</sup> Eskinder (2013: 286).

<sup>3</sup> Chekole (2014: 81).

<sup>4</sup> *debo/wenfel* is the pooling of the work of a group of people to build a house, carry out agricultural work, etc.: everyone works for one person, on a rotating basis.

<sup>5</sup> *Idir* is first of all a kind of cooperative insurance or community life insurance designed to cover the burial costs of a family member. The purpose can be extended to other exceptional events such as illness, destruction of one's house, loss of livestock, etc.

<sup>6</sup> *Iqub* (also written *iquib*, *equb* or *equub*) is a savings system within a group: each person periodically saves an amount according to his means, and the amount is distributed in turn according to a rule defined at the beginning.

<sup>7</sup> *Mahaber* brings together small groups of villagers to celebrate the patron saint of the village, but also serves as a socio-economic welfare network.

<sup>8</sup> Seid (2008: 126), Alene (2011: 13).

<sup>9</sup> MoLSA (2006) cited by Missaye *et al.* (2014: 180).

<sup>10</sup> Abebaw (2007: 81). This belief is largely mistaken, with many animals engaging in cooperative behaviours, as one recent university graduate from the community will point out to me.

<sup>11</sup> Solomon (2005: 57), Asnake (2005: 45, 47).

<sup>12</sup> Alemu (2013: 67-68).

In its early days, the community was small, a few dozen adults (see section 2.5) and was very close-knit. "Our agricultural produce was stored in a common store. Our cooking was done in the common kitchen. Meals were eaten in the common plate." Zumra recalls. Later, in the early 2000s, the families are still very close, sharing a few wooden mortars and stone mills for cooking. They take care of each other's children. But this closeness does not prevent them from being discreet and not bothering their neighbours. Every year the community members buy their food products in the markets, but the cooperative members do so collectively after finding the cheapest, sometimes distant markets. Land is allocated individually to the different family heads by the government through its land redistribution policy, but in practice neither individuals nor families enjoy it individually, as the enjoyment is collective: it is pooled within the cooperative, managed and worked collectively. The benefits are shared equally, even if the cooperators do not contribute equally due to differences in capacity. These rules are valid for other common activities such as weaving, milling, etc. Everything that is used or produced by the community belongs to the community by right. Houses are generally built collectively. And many issues that elsewhere are dealt with within each family are discussed collectively: children to be sent to town for their studies, the elderly or sick to be helped, etc. Seeing families building their houses next to each other, coming and going together, working together, discussing and deciding together, indicates a great emotional cohesion between the different families, the community finally forming one big family. And a large family that seeks to create a quality kindergarten, a good school, an efficient clinic, good infrastructures, efficient workshops, etc. <sup>1</sup>

The problems of each are therefore the problems of all. In theory, no one has to fear age, illness, lack of food, clothing, or any other need as long as the community can provide for them. Older and disabled persons are cared for by the community (Articles 5 and 6 of the community charter), as older persons are considered to have contributed through their work not only to their families, but to the whole community. <sup>2</sup>

Taking care of them means giving them a room, feeding them, bathing them every three days, cleaning their house and compound every day, washing their clothes every week. <sup>3</sup> The community was already providing this solidarity when it was exiled in the south, and soon after their return to Awra Amba, a retirement home was built to accommodate and care for the elderly: see Picture 9. A woman is in charge of this care. The residents are chosen from among those with health problems and low income, but the limiting factor is the available budget. The number of boarders is 7 in 2010, including 2 from neighbouring villages, 8 in 2016 <sup>4</sup>. Relations between boarders seem very good, they receive visits from community members, especially children, but hardly pass on their experience and hardly participate in community life, which is regretted by one author, even though they are invited to the meetings. <sup>5</sup>

Elderly parents can, however, live in the home of one of their children if that is possible <sup>6</sup>.

This solidarity extends to patients whose care is covered, to orphans up to the age of 18, to children for school materials, to university students whose parents cannot provide for their needs, to those who have no roof over their heads either because of poverty or because of exceptional circumstances, etc. It can sometimes even reach people outside the community, as it is conceived as a global charity

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<sup>1</sup> Solomon (2005: 38-40, 51, 57, 60,74), Chekole (2014: 62).

<sup>2</sup> Solomon (2005: 57), Merhatsidk (2009: 45).

<sup>3</sup> Abebaw (2007: 53), Awra Amba community (2015a: 24).

<sup>4</sup> Missaye *et al.* (2014: 182), Tesfaye (2017: 34). In 2010, there are 5 men and 2 women, with 2 between 60 and 69 years old, 2 between 70 and 79, one between 80 and 89, and 2 between 90 and 99 years old.

<sup>5</sup> Missaye *et al.* (2014: 182-183), Awra Amba community (2021).

<sup>6</sup> Awra Amba community (2014c).

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fund, even if the means are very far from the initial ambitions.<sup>1</sup>



*Picture 9: Retirement home:  
indoor in 2010 and 2019  
(comfort has improved)  
and outdoor in 2018.  
(Photos of the author, F. Pastor, F.  
Pastor)*



The situation of the elderly is therefore much safer than it is in general in Amhara society. While they are traditionally respected by society and supported by their extended family, many are in distress due to the economic situation of their relatives or the dissolution of family ties. Sometimes it is churches and mosques that welcome them.<sup>2</sup>

However, welfare benefits are not automatic regardless of the beneficiary's situation. For example, it seems that a head of household had to leave the cooperative because of a serious health problem which made him disabled. He does his best to survive by renting his land, with the community only providing him with the complement<sup>3</sup>. The community claims nevertheless that a patient with an incurable disease is taken over by the elderly care centre<sup>4</sup>. According to the nurses of Awra Amba, if hospitalisation is necessary and the patient cannot pay for it, the community takes care of it...<sup>5</sup> But, given the small size of the community and therefore of the solidarity budget, could an exceptionally long and expensive hospitalisation, of several months for example, be covered?

Most researchers' view of community solidarity is, however, perhaps a little too idyllic, according to one observer. This is a teacher at Awra Amba high school, who like all teachers is a civil servant, and not a member of the community: "*I came to Awra Amba two years ago. Before I arrived in Awra Amba I thought of it as an amazing place. I had heard about the community and considered their*

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<sup>1</sup> Awra Amba community (2015a: 23).

<sup>2</sup> Seid (2008: 86).

<sup>3</sup> Chekole (2014: 45).

<sup>4</sup> Awra Amba community (2021).

<sup>5</sup> Arvidsson & Sandgren (2015: 19).

activities and accomplishments to be very impressive. But after living here and observing and interacting with people, I have become increasingly critical. I have seen the inequalities, the differences in living standard, and the unfair distribution of work. Zumra acts as if he is a manager, and the weavers, who are positioned at the lowest level in the hierarchy and who are not from well-off families, have many problems. Some of them live in absolute poverty." Several other teachers noted the inequitable distribution of wealth and resources. <sup>1</sup>



*Picture 10: Tuesday solidarity meeting under the big tree in the centre of the village, while spinning cotton, in April 2010. (Photo of the author)*

This social security is provided through a fund, so called *Lewegen Derash*, supplemented by one working day a week, the solidarity day, usually on Tuesday. The creation of this solidarity Tuesday responded to a need, even if it was set out at a special occasion, according to Zumra's previous wife: "It was when my daughter has died that the Awra Ambas collectively spin cotton and provide me just to express their sister/brotherhood. That day was Tuesday. Since then they continue the Tuesday program of spinning cotton so as to create a social security fund for our welfare activities." <sup>2</sup> Solidarity also consists, for example, in building or repairing the old people's home for adolescents, helping the elderly to wash themselves, doing their laundry, taking them to the health centre when they are sick, and so on. For others, it will be spinning cotton every Tuesday in the village square (see Picture 10), weaving or fetching wood, etc. Of course, it is not only the fifteen or so people who meet on Tuesday to spin cotton who abound in this fund. This social security is supplemented mainly by the indirect salary of the cooperative members – the social security contribution – and by visitors' entrance fees (see sections 4.5 and 4.6). As the social contribution of the cooperative is extremely variable from one year to the next (see Annex 11), the supplements are probably also very variable and a multi-year fund should allow to smooth the whole. <sup>3</sup>

Recipients of aid are identified by the social welfare committee (so called problem identifying committee), which refers cases to the weekly development committee, which has become the solidarity committee (so called charity committee), which decides what and how to give, and gives. The elderly and orphans care committee, later extended to include patients and young mothers, manages what concerns the latter (the role of the different committees can be found in section 3.4.3). Thus in 2016,

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<sup>1</sup> Østebø (2021: 176).

<sup>2</sup> Solomon (2005: 60).

<sup>3</sup> Asnake (2005: 46), Awra Amba community (2014c; 2015c: 4).

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8 elderly people are being cared for, and 47 children from the community and one from a neighbouring village, among others, have received help. <sup>1</sup>

Solidarity is part of the principle "from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs" which sums up in a general way the principles of a socialist – or communist society in the first sense of the term. All members of the community thus theoretically have an equal right to what belongs to the community although they do not contribute equally to it, for reasons that are collectively accepted. <sup>2</sup> This principle is opposed to both the capitalist and the socialist conception that prevailed in Ethiopia under the Derg regime, both of which push for individual performance, whereas Awra Amba pushes for collective performance through respect for common values, as long as these values are respected.

Solidarity is associated with equality, which requires respect for differences in religion, colour, race, ethnic group, occupation, physical or intellectual capacity etc., each being a member of humanity <sup>3</sup>. This value of equality and fraternity is extended to universal brotherhood. White or black, we are all equal. When Zumra is asked which ethnic group he belongs to, he answers that he belongs to humanity and not to this or that ethnic group <sup>4</sup>. This is why foreign visitors pay the same rates as their Ethiopian counterparts, which is rarely the case in Ethiopia (see section 4.6.3).

### 3.3. Golden rule

*"I often bring my grains for grinding here, leave all with them, they get it ground, put in safe place until I come. I will come back a day or so, and collect all my stuff safe and protected. I cannot do this with other private owners."* says a resident of a neighbouring village, afraid of having his grain stolen from other millers. <sup>5</sup> A member of the social office of Woji Arwa Amba commune continues: *"I am jealous of their habit of telling the truth. They do hate straight lies and strongly condemn thievery."* <sup>6</sup>

The refusal to steal, lie and beg are indeed absolute *a priori* rules of the community. And in terms of values, honesty and fraternity are the fundamental social values; Zumra explains it this way: *"Honesty and fraternity are the basis for peace, love and good relationships between human beings. If there is no honesty in our relationships, we cannot trust each other. If we cannot trust each other, we cannot love and respect each other. If we cannot respect and love each other, we cannot live in peace with each other."* <sup>7</sup> A slogan in Amharic is displayed everywhere, in kindergarten, elementary and secondary school, in the library, etc., it is even a hymn:

*"We, the children and teenagers of Awra Amba do not steal  
If we find something lost somewhere, we will turn it back to the owner  
We develop ourselves by working in collaboration and sympathy  
Our peaceful life will progress."* <sup>8</sup>

So there is no theft in Awra Amba and, inconceivably in this country where begging is omnipresent,

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<sup>1</sup> Chekole (2014: 57), Awra Amba community (2015c: 23; 2020b), Tesfaye (2017: 34).

<sup>2</sup> Solomon (2005: 53).

<sup>3</sup> Seid (2008: 68).

<sup>4</sup> Habtamu (2009).

<sup>5</sup> Tesfaye (2017: 37).

<sup>6</sup> Merhatsidk (2009: 71).

<sup>7</sup> Assefa (2013: 75).



no child asks for anything. However, the houses are all locked to protect themselves from strangers to the community, as the village sees many neighbours passing by for the mills, groceries or cafeterias.

The fundamental place of honesty as a value is quite unique. Elsewhere, in France for example, the movements fighting for emancipation generally place at the top of their commitment values such as human dignity, human rights, freedom, equality, democracy, and even more recently preservation of the Earth and its ecosystems for future generations. But honesty is not claimed as one of their values, even though it belongs to the moral basis of all societies. No one, of course, claims dishonesty, but the reality of behaviour sometimes leaves little room for honesty. Yet in social life, dishonesty ultimately consists in deceiving others to make them believe what is not, in order to gain an advantage, material or power. This is therefore fundamentally contrary to democracy, because anyone who does not have the most accurate information possible, whose choice has been altered by cunning or deception, cannot exercise his power as an individual or a citizen in everyday life as at the political level.

And in Awra Amba, honesty is not just a value but a constant feature of everyday behaviour. While honesty has a secondary place in the values and behaviours of many societies, Awra Amba could be compared to some on this point: this is the case of Mozabite society, a Muslim sect that went into exile in the Sahara several centuries ago, whose doctrine prescribes, among other things, honesty<sup>1</sup>. Or the model of 'living well' (*Sumak Kawsay* in Quechua, *Buen Vivir* in Spanish), promoted by the leaders of the Ecuadorian indigenous movement and integrated into the constitutions of Ecuador and Bolivia, which is based on the principles of honesty, humility, truth, love, wisdom, courage and respect for living in harmony and balance between men and women, between communities, and above all between human beings and nature, of which they are part<sup>2</sup>: we can see that this model is quite close to the Awra Amba model, even if it also covers respect for nature and all living beings that makes it appreciated also in the Western world.

However, we have seen in paragraphs 2.2 and 2.3 that the account of the creation of the community is questionable, partly mythologised and concealed, which does not seem to us to be very honest. We will see later that some of the realities of Awra Amba are denied or concealed, which is also contrary to the value of honesty. The honesty claimed by Awra Amba is therefore rather an everyday honesty, i.e. reduced to the refusal of theft, small lies and begging. But as we will see in more detail in paragraph 3.4.5, transparency is not always respected.

For his contribution to the 'Golden Rule' or ethic of reciprocity, Zumra has been an honorary peace ambassador for the Interfaith Peace Initiative of the Universal Peace Federation<sup>3</sup> since 2008. The fundamental principle of the Golden Rule is 'Treat others as you would like to be treated' or 'Don't do to others what you would not like to be done to you', which Awra Amba translates, at least in part, into its values of equality, brotherhood and honesty and which Zumra justifies as we have seen on page 24.

Like theft or lying, other behaviours are considered dangerous for peaceful coexistence between individuals and therefore prohibited, such as prostitution, waste of time and resources, backbiting,

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<sup>8</sup> Eskinder (2013: 303). Awra Amba community (2021) gives a slightly different translation: "*We growing children don't take anyone's property. If we find an item that does not belong to us, we will return it to the owner. We develop ourselves by working collaboratively and sympathetically. Our peaceful life will progress.*"

<sup>1</sup> Bourdieu (1958).

<sup>2</sup> Flamand (2017: 30).

<sup>3</sup> This organisation brings together the efforts of various people and organisations to build "a family united in God".

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corruption, crime and provocative behaviour<sup>1</sup>. Nor does the golden rule allow for the tolerance of traditional habits, beliefs and practices that are dangerous to the individual, such as early marriage, female genital mutilation<sup>2</sup>, sharing of wives (*warsa*), consumption of drugs such as alcohol, tobacco, khat or coffee. Initiation rites, corporal or severe punishment, insults or offences, humiliation in public are also not allowed, especially towards children, contrary to the behaviour of neighbouring traditional communities<sup>3</sup>. Thus in the Amhara Region, children are considered inferior to adults as they are governed by ignorance and passion. An Amhara proverb even says that "*infants and cattle are the same*".<sup>4</sup>

But in Awra Amba, many observers have noticed the particular attachment of parents to their children: no sacrifice is too great, and they often benefit from better conditions than their parents (food, clothes, rest)<sup>5</sup>.

The smallest children spend a lot of time playing, and then as they get older, school and work take over. In terms of priority, education takes precedence over work, which in turn takes precedence over play. In 2012, a neighbour testified: "*Children of the Awra Amba community are different from children of my community. For instance, children of my community spend most of their lives looking after cattle. They are also forced to carry out activities which are beyond their abilities. They rarely go to school and they have lesser time for studies. Corporal punishment applies when they fail to accomplish even things that exceed their potentials. But in Awra Amba, children are encouraged to go to school and spend most of their times studying. They do only things they are able to do. Their parents do not punish them.*"<sup>6</sup>

Children are constantly encouraged to express their opinions and complaints. They participate and speak at all community meetings relevant to them and are listened to by adults.<sup>7</sup> Children respect adults and adults respect children; there is no discrimination on the basis of age, but only on the basis of ability.

Respect for children – and respect for their rights – is therefore a key principle of Awra Amba that distinguishes it from rural Ethiopia in particular.



(Photo Vermet)

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<sup>1</sup> Seid (2008: 85).

<sup>2</sup> The excision of young girls is a traditional practice that was still almost systematic in Ethiopia some thirty years ago, and has been banned ever since, but is still present.

<sup>3</sup> Solomon (2005: 89), Seid (2008: 71), Merhatsidk (2009: 51, 76), Assefa (2013: 69).

<sup>4</sup> Solomon (2005: 46, 91).

<sup>5</sup> Solomon (2005: 88).

<sup>6</sup> Assefa (2013: 42).

<sup>7</sup> Solomon (2005: 89), Assefa (2013: 69), Awra Amba community (2021).

### **3.4. Democracy**

In a country with a rather hierarchical political culture, Awra Amba displays democracy as an essential value which translates into a theoretically democratic functioning, with general assemblies and, above all, elected institutions composed of a high proportion of the adults and adolescents of the village.

#### **3.4.1. Ethiopian political culture**

According to Vaughan and Tronvoll (2003: 38), power relations have remained largely unchanged for centuries in most rural areas of Ethiopia and run counter to democratic practices. Religious authority, traditional authority, age and gender are still the key factors in understanding these relationships. Thus the Highlands are known for their strict hierarchical order where social behaviour is defined and delimited by a person's rank, which is related to kinship, age, gender, social and material resources, religion, etc. One of the researchers from rural Amhara origin testifies that the head of the family (i.e. the father) has absolute power in the household, while at the higher level, the priest, the sheik or traditional leaders as well as older people have uncontested power over their village <sup>1</sup>. The Amhara culture is indeed a patriarchal and authoritarian culture where, for example, men and the elderly are always right. This reinforces in people the idea that established power cannot be contested or shared. <sup>2</sup> This passivity of the powerless is obviously not absolute: when access to resources and power is too inequitable, passivity and acceptance give way to conflict: contemporary Ethiopia provides many examples of this .

Decentralisation officially implemented in this federal country would then be essentially administrative and superficial because it is decided from above, resulting in very little effective participation of citizens in decision-making. An informant from a neighbouring village of Awra Amba thus testifies that, when the local authorities organise a public meeting to present a government directive and discuss its implementation in the village or commune, the villagers participate but are convinced that they cannot have any influence, as everything is already decided from above. Their participation is therefore passive, they listen to the authorities and do what they are told, but do not build their future themselves. <sup>3</sup>

Thus, the relationship between the peasants and the state has hardly changed: minimising contact, obeying when necessary, and otherwise ignoring it <sup>4</sup>.

Moreover, although Ethiopia has democratised since the fall of the Derg, freedoms of expression and association are in a poor state. The country is one of the worst countries for press freedom, especially since the 2008 press law and the 2009 anti-terrorism law, a controversial legal tool that human rights organisations say is used to deter and suppress political dissent.

#### **3.4.2. The Awra Amba cooperative**

It is in this very hierarchical context and the relative independence of the peasant world from the state that the first structure created on the Awra Amba site, in 1986, is its cooperative <sup>5</sup>. After a short-lived integration in 1989-90 into an existing cooperative during their exile in the south, the cooperat-

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<sup>1</sup> Alene (2011: 12).

<sup>2</sup> Alene (2011: 10, 15).

<sup>3</sup> Alene (2011: 11, 59-60).

<sup>4</sup> Aspen (2002: 69).

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ive was finally recognised by the authorities in 2008 under the name of "Awra Amba Community Agriculture and Handicraft Multi-Purpose Cooperative". It is remarkable that unlike the usual case in developing countries where it is the law that initiates cooperatives, the Awra Amba cooperative was created by the cooperators themselves, independently of the authorities <sup>1</sup>.

The cooperative is a productive structure with collective ownership of the means of production, collective work and equal sharing of income between the cooperators at the end of each fiscal year. It is open to all members of the community of at least 18 years of age (14 years <sup>2</sup> for those without parents to rear them), but not all of them are members. Thus in 2008-2009, the members of the cooperative and their families are 368, the non-members of the community are 35 with their families <sup>3</sup>. Membership is therefore not automatic, especially according to the job opportunity: one author notes that in 2011 eight people applied for membership, but were unsuccessful, with 153 members at that time. Six other adults from the community are not members, whether they did not want to be or were not admitted, is not known. In 2014, about ten families in the community were not members of the cooperative (such as the young adult living from his private weaving workshop, Picture 22 page 99). In addition, cooperators may be self-employed outside their working hours in the cooperative (weaving, small animals, etc.). <sup>4</sup>

Children of Awra Amba employed by external organisations (public, NGOs, etc.) can also be members of the cooperative. If they can, they send it money, and as cooperators, they receive their cooperator's share at the end of the year because they contribute to its success. <sup>5</sup>

The cooperative, which in 2020 has 172 members (76 men and 96 women) was initially managed by a steering committee and a so-called field work assignment committee of three members. Subsequently, the cooperative's seven-member steering committee was monitored by a three-member audit committee as required by law since 1998, and assisted by a six-member field work assignment committee (in 2020), all elected by the cooperators. It is therefore one of the structures of the community, probably the most important in terms of activity, which is theoretically egalitarian and democratic.

### **3.4.3. The community as a central body**

Awra Amba was created from the beginning as a community, i.e. a group of people who share values and objectives. From its creation in 1972 <sup>6</sup>, the principles and rules were discussed at length before being adopted. A charter was drawn up in 1984 and put down on paper in 2001. It seems not to have been amended before the 2010s, although some people have hoped for it, but has been several times since that then <sup>7</sup>. Indeed, community members can propose modifications to the development committee; then the development committee discuss the proposals before submitting them to the general

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<sup>5</sup> Excluding the cooperative created in 1972 in Gibra in the Alayhim community, which may correspond to the so-called Awra Amba community created at that time: see paragraph 2.2.

<sup>1</sup> Seid (2008: 124).

<sup>2</sup> 14 years is the minimum age for membership in a cooperative according to the law (Cooperative Societies Proclamation No. 147/1998).

<sup>3</sup> Genet (2009: 45), Awra Amba community (2021).

<sup>4</sup> Tilahun C. (2012: 63), Eskinder (2013: 277), Awra Amba community (2014c; 2021), Solomon (2015: 69).

<sup>5</sup> Chekole (2014: 75).

<sup>6</sup> In 1972 a common structure was created, the community according to the official account, a cooperative according to the Alayhim: see paragraph 2.2.

<sup>7</sup> Mussa (2004: 35), Tilahun C. (2012: 65), Awra Amba community (2021).

assembly<sup>1</sup>.

The community is open to anyone who respects this charter. However, candidates have to respect a fairly long trial period, from one to seven years depending on their behaviour. What behaviour is expected? No conflict, no immoral behaviour, no stealing, no swearing, getting rid of bad habits like getting drunk, only doing good.<sup>2</sup>

For members living in Awra Amba and who have therefore signed the charter, the community administers common life, its public aspects, as both a communal and a state authority; it is responsible for the assets and financial commitments of the associates, with the exception of personal assets which remain totally private. It enforces the charter (see section 4.4).

The general assembly of members is the sovereign institution. It brings together all members over the age of 14 every six months or every year depending on the sources, and more often if necessary. Decisions are generally taken by consensus, and in the absence of consensus, by simple majority.<sup>3</sup>

With the community charter, fourteen committees were created in 1984, even sixteen: a strategic committee (A) which oversees thirteen specialised sub-committees (B1 to B13), and two control committees (C / A and C / B2). Here is the list with their attributions<sup>4</sup>:

- A. Development Committee (5 members): this is the strategic committee, which coordinates and oversees the thirteen sub-committees.
- B1. Legislative committee (15 members): defines the rules, modifies them if necessary and control their implementation.
- B2. Weekly development committee (5 members): organises the weekly solidarity day (Tuesday) which finances the community's social security.
- B3. Guest reception committee (4 members): organises the reception of visitors, guides them and informs them about Awra Amba.
- B4. Lost property committee (3 members): keeps lost objects and looks for their owner; if the owner remains unknown, the lost objects are given to the weekly development committee.
- B5. Elderly and orphans care committee (5 members): provides assistance to the elderly and orphans.
- B6. Health committee (5 members): takes care of the sick, pregnant women and young mothers.
- B7. Social welfare committee (3 members): identifies people in need of assistance and reports them to the weekly development committee.
- B8. Complaint resolving committee (3 members): resolves complaints between members of the community through discussion; if this fails, the matter is dealt with by the general assembly.
- B9. Security committee (3 members): ensures the security of the village by guards.
- B10. Education committee (5 members): provides school materials for the children, ensures the tranquillity of the kindergarten and manages issues related to the education of children and adults.

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<sup>1</sup> Awra Amba community (2021).

<sup>2</sup> Tervo (2009: 2' 34").

<sup>3</sup> Awra Amba community (2014c, 2020a), Eskinder (2013: 276). Mengesha *et al.* (2015: 174) indicate a two-thirds majority, which seems wrong.

<sup>4</sup> Awra Amba community (2015a: 18; 2021).

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- B11. Hygiene and sanitation committee (3 members): ensures and enforces the cleanliness of the village.
  - B12. Cooperative steering committee (3 members): coordinates and supervises all the activities of the cooperative <sup>1</sup>.
  - B13. Field work assignment committee (3 members): assigns a task to each member of the cooperative. It is a sub-committee of the steering committee.
  - C/A. Development committee control committee (3 members): controls and monitors the strategic committee.
  - C/B2. Control committee of the weekly development committee (3 members): controls and supervises the weekly development committee.

Then at the end of the 2010s the committees were reorganised into a broader development committee, overseeing 12 sub-committees, and 3 audit committees <sup>2</sup>:

- D. Development committee (19 members) bringing together the former development (A) and legislative (B1) committees: it coordinates and oversees the sub-committees E1 to E12 and the three audit committees, defines community rules and monitors their application. It is in a way the municipal council.
- E1. Solidarity committee (9 members), which takes over the functions of the weekly development committee (B2): it organises the solidarity day, manages income from it as well as those from visitors, and allocates it to those who need it.
- E2. Reception committee (9 members): unchanged from committee B3.
- E3. Lost property committee (3 members): unchanged from the B4 committee.
- E4. Elderly, orphans, patients and maternity care committee (3 members): brings together the former committees of elders and orphans (B5) and health (B6).
- E5. Social welfare committee (3 members): no change from the B7 committee. It identifies people in need of help and reports them to the solidarity committee.
- E6. Complaint resolving committee (3 members): no change from committee B8.
- E7. Security committee (3 members): no change from committee B9.
- E8. Education committee (5 members): unchanged from committee B10.
- E9. Water, hygiene and sanitation committee (7 members): manages access to drinking water and no change from the B12 committee the cleanliness of the village. He is close to the former B11 committee.
- E10. Residence committee (7 members): allocates 150 m<sup>2</sup> of land to the members of the cooperative who do not have housing.
- E11. Cooperative steering committee (7 members): no change from the B12 committee.
- E12. Field work assignment committee (6 members): no change from the B13 committee.
- C/E1. Control (or audit) committee of the E1 solidarity committee (3 members): it controls and su-

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<sup>1</sup> To our knowledge this steering committee has never been mentioned in the literature, and is mentioned for the first time by Awra Amba community (2021).

<sup>2</sup> Awra Amba community (2020a).

pervises this committee.

C/E9. Control (or audit) committee of the water, hygiene and sanitation committee E9 (3 members): controls and supervises this committee.

C/E11. Control (or audit) committee of the E11 cooperative steering committee (6 members): it controls and supervises this committee.

All these committees are elected by consensus or, failing consensus, by a simple majority by the general assembly of community members except for the three committees specific to the cooperative (cooperative steering committee, field work assignment committee, and audit of the first) which are elected by the cooperators, for two to three years. However, the general assembly has full power to recall an elected member or a committee at any time. Elected representatives do not enjoy any special privileges or advantages and can be re-elected without limit.<sup>1</sup>

The number of elected representatives is very high (68 in 2005, 69 in 2011, 93 in 2020) for a population of over 14 years old, which was only 200 people in 2005, and should be slightly over 300 in 2020: this corresponds to 34, 26 and 30% of the electorate in 2005, 2011 and 2020 respectively. This indicates the very high participation of grassroots citizens in the administration of their community. However, a member can be elected in several committees and personal competence favours election, suggesting to one author that the core functions are held in 2005 by only 12 to 15 people<sup>2</sup>. Indeed, few members have the necessary skills to master the responsibilities of a president, secretary or treasurer: "*We elect those of our members who can read and write, who have a good management skill, who have a good exposure to Bahir Dar [capital of Amhara Region] and other towns for our public relation. Those who have these qualities are elected repeatedly.*" testifies a woman in 2005. This lack of competent people was undoubtedly true in the beginnings, but the high number of educated members in the community in recent years must considerably widen the pool of elected representatives.<sup>3</sup> Thus in 2020, the 93 elected positions are occupied by 46 people, which represents 15% of the voters<sup>4</sup>, which is still considerable. It should be noted that the 20 women elected hold 38 positions, while the 26 men elected hold 55 positions: an elected male representative holds an average of 2.12 positions (2.04 if Zumra is excluded from the calculation), while an elected female representative holds only 1.90.

"*There is no polarisation on the community members into those who command and those who obey.*" affirms a resident in 2010<sup>5</sup>. The participation of all seemed to be a shared requirement, which led many authors to say that everyone had the same decision-making power, that there was no distance between those who decided and those who obeyed. According to these authors, it is through the general assemblies, the committees and the cooperative that all members participate in the decisions, because these institutions are not under the control of Zumra but democratic.<sup>6</sup>

Would Awra Amba meet this definition of democracy<sup>7</sup>: the power of those who have no particular title to exercise it, that is, of all? One author is not far from thinking so after his very serious survey on self-development in Awra Amba, insisting on the active participation of community members in

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<sup>1</sup> Solomon (2005: 56, 58), Eskinder (2013: 275, 276), Awra Amba community (2021).

<sup>2</sup> This is rather higher than the number of elected municipal officials of a French commune of the same population: 11 elected officials if the commune has less than 500 inhabitants, 15 if it has more.

<sup>3</sup> Solomon (2005: 58), Chekole (2014: 49).

<sup>4</sup> Awra Amba community (2020a).

<sup>5</sup> Alene (2011: 63).

<sup>6</sup> Solomon (2005: 53), Alene (2011: 62), Mengesha *et al.* (2015: 173).

<sup>7</sup> Rancière (2005).

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general assemblies and various meetings, and thus on their effective and direct participation in decision-making<sup>1</sup>. The decision would not be the business of a few representatives who are validated every five years, but the business of all, according to most of the studies available at the end of 2020. It should be noted, however, that these studies are most often based on interviews with members of the community, either alone or in focus groups, whose choice is strongly influenced by the reception committee and who are therefore likely to relay the official word. Their discourse, which is very convergent, although supplemented by some qualitative observations, does not necessarily reflect the reality, which may be different and which could be approached by measuring and analysing the real participation of the various members in the places of power. However, no researcher has really measured participation in general assemblies or in the various committees. One could, for example, ask whether the weavers, who are at the bottom of the social ladder according to one testimony<sup>2</sup>, have as much power as the others, whether the less educated have as much right to speak as the graduates, or whether there are leaders (apart from Zumra) who are likely to acquire an inordinate amount of power in view of their skills, etc. This raises the question of a possible concentration of power in a few hands. This issue is addressed in his findings by Merhatsidk (2009), then by Tilahun C. (2012), and last but not least by Østebø (2021), who sheds a very different light, as we shall see below.

Moreover, the community accepts external members who do not live there, and for whom the rules are more flexible: "*the only condition for joining the community is to be peaceful*", according to Zumra<sup>3</sup>. The external members of the community are therefore hardly controlled, the relationship is one of trust: they are rather friends or supporters of Awra Amba than full members like those who live there. How many are there? It is difficult to know, perhaps around a hundred: we only know that they sometimes meet, as twelve of them did in Addis Ababa in 2014. The community is thinking of better structuring these external members.<sup>4</sup>

#### **3.4.4. Voluntary departures and exclusions**

It is very difficult, if not impossible, in talking to community representatives to know how many community members have left and why. A few authors and marginally the community allow us to approach this phenomenon somewhat.

People who leave Awra Amba can be classified into three categories:

- those who leave, temporarily or permanently, of their own uncoerced choice, for various personal reasons,
- those who felt forced to leave, but were not formally excluded,
- and finally those who have been excluded.

Voluntary departures seem to be mainly from students after their studies. Some return to Awra Amba, either to work in the cooperative or as teachers or carers. But the number of graduates is clearly far greater than the number of jobs requiring a university qualification in a small community. The lack of job opportunities is therefore an important reason for departures. In addition, there is the issue of spouses, as both spouses have to follow the rules of the community and even work in the cooperative. It is therefore difficult to find a spouse who will comply with all these rules, and also the impossibility of following religious rites when one works six days a week all year round, whereas be-

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<sup>1</sup> Alene (2011: 62-63, 71).

<sup>2</sup> Østebø (2021: 176).

<sup>3</sup> Eskinder (2013: 277).

<sup>4</sup> Awra Amba community (2014c).



longing to a religion is almost systematic in Ethiopia.<sup>1</sup>

More generally, the rigour, obedience, lack of freedom and narrowness of the village compared to the variety of Ethiopia are problematic for some - even if they also speak of Awra Amba with warmth - as one young person puts it<sup>2</sup>: *"If I become a member, I would not be able to do what I want – to make my own choices and invest in developing my interests and skills. [...] Many of my friends have similar concerns. [...] My friends know how things work and they do not want to be part of that. There is only half freedom in Awra Amba."*

The community does not communicate about the children of the community who move away from the community, only congratulating themselves that their integration outside the community is not a problem. They admit, however, that *"Twice, young people, born in Awra Amba, disagreed with the community and wanted to leave. They were stealing. They were told to leave if they wanted to; their parents were the first to want them to leave. They left, then came back later, not having found better elsewhere."*<sup>3</sup>

In contrast to these voluntary departures, which correspond to the choice of each individual, there are more or less forced departures following what could be called harassment, and departures following a formal exclusion.

We have only one account of harassment – from a woman who left the community, but which could not be confirmed by another source<sup>4</sup>: *"I frequently felt sick, and it became hard for me to handle the big weaving machines. I asked for another job assignment, but Zumra refused. They made my life so difficult, so I did not really have a choice. In order to improve my health, I decided to leave the cooperative."*

As for formal exclusions from the community, the reason given is as follows: *"If an Awra Amba community member deviates from the norm, he/she is advised up to three consecutive times. If the member refuses to improve his/her behaviour, the person is isolated from any social service of the community. If the member is still reluctant to act according to the established norms, he is enforced to leave the community."* This is exclusion. A researcher estimated in 2005 that exclusions are rare. The community told the researcher who took the above testimony in 2011 that there had never been an exclusion before. However, a witness from outside the community tells him otherwise and he even meets former members who have been expelled, without giving any further details.<sup>5</sup> In 2014, Zumra told us that there had only been two: a woman and her boyfriend were expelled from the community because they had had sexual relations without being married, and another single woman who became pregnant: she and her boyfriend were also expelled<sup>6</sup>.

A few years later, community members are very reluctant to talk to Marit Østebø about the exclusions. Most of them told her that they did not know of any, as exclusion was presented as a purely theoretical possibility. However, by interviewing outsiders and some community members, Østebø came up with a list of 36 excluded people, 21 of whom were women, although it was not clear whether only adults were counted in this number or whether it included their children.<sup>7</sup> These numbers are incomparably higher than those suggested or put forward by the community at first glance

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<sup>1</sup> Tilahun C. (2012: 110), Alemu *et al.* (2013: 119-120), Østebø (2021: 167-169).

<sup>2</sup> Østebø (2021: 169).

<sup>3</sup> Awra Amba community (2014c).

<sup>4</sup> Østebø (2021: 173).

<sup>5</sup> Solomon (2005: 65), Tilahun C. (2012: 65-66).

<sup>6</sup> Awra Amba community (2014c).

<sup>7</sup> Østebø (2021: 172).

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and are very high in comparison to the population: compared to the population figures of 2005 and 2015, this represents about 7% of men and young boys and 10% of women and girls. In relation to the population of at least 15 years old, these percentages rise to about 13 and 16%, which is considerable.

When informed by the researcher of the names of the 36 excluded people, Zumra and some other community members could only confirm them <sup>1</sup>.

The reasons given for these exclusions, in addition to the sexual relations outside of marriage mentioned above, relate to divorces that are considered arbitrary, i.e. without the agreement of the community. The few testimonies given by Østebø show that the reasons officially put forward are questionable, and even that in at least one case the general assembly was not consulted, even though this is theoretically obligatory. But as it was not possible to conduct contradictory investigations, the facts reported could not be verified. <sup>2</sup>

In addition to the loss of one's living environment and work, an exclusion can also be financially very burdensome, for two reasons which can be cumulative <sup>3</sup>:

- Members' land has been pooled within the cooperative. In case of departure, a member recovers his land and can sell it. However, this rule does not seem to be applied systematically, particularly in the case of exclusion, as some excluded members have recovered their land, while others have not.
- The members of the cooperative, when they leave or are excluded, get back the salary that is due to them, but they do not get back their social share, i.e. the share of the capital of the cooperative that is theirs. Moreover, they have no right to the community's infrastructure and services, even though they have contributed to them. However, the salaries distributed by the cooperative are low, but compensated by the indirect income from social security and the important investments made by the cooperative and the community. An excluded cooperator is therefore almost naked and loses his contribution to the collective capital, which is very high compared to his salary. This risk makes cooperators docile, especially those who do not have special skills that can be easily valued externally.

### **3.4.5. Transparency and freedom of speech**

The Awra Amba community claims the value of honesty and puts it into practice as we have seen in paragraph 3.3, at least at the level of daily life: theft and lies seem to be effectively absent. On the other hand, past relations with the Alayhim community and the reality of exclusions are denied. It is only when faced with the evidence that Zumra and the community leaders admit to the exclusions, and perhaps only when faced with the evidence of the relationship with the Alayhim will they be admitted.

At the same time, as we will see in paragraph 4.5.2, the numerous aids from which the community has benefited are, without being denied, passed over in silence before being acknowledged or even detailed in front of the interlocutor who shows that he knows about them.

Transparency is therefore severely limited and, more seriously, lies are far from absent when it comes to the history of the community, more precisely for what could go against the local equivalent of a national narrative that Awra Amba or at least Zumra and its elite has constructed. This highly roman-

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<sup>1</sup> Østebø (2021: 169).

<sup>2</sup> Østebø (2021: 158, 173).

<sup>3</sup> Østebø (2021: 178-180).

ticised way of telling history, with erasures, omissions and additions of fictional origin, in order to more easily forge an identity, is in no way specific to Awra Amba, but one would expect something else from a utopia that claims honesty, democracy and a deterministic approach, all of which demand transparency about past and present realities. This is all the more worrying because it is not a question of details, but of some of the essential elements that make up this utopia.

Østebø also encountered repeated refusals to speak by community members who had not been designated by the reception committee to speak to outsiders in the community. She also noted the discomfort and fear that came with the mention of the Alayhim.<sup>1</sup> There would thus be pressure not to deviate from the official narrative.

The community tries to control its image by deciding who can and who cannot speak to outside witnesses. Thus, several teachers from Awra Amba school and high school questioned the official narrative, as described above. Independent from the community because they are civil servants, suspected of misinformation towards visitors and foreigners, they are not liked. Some of them could no longer find accommodation to rent and therefore asked to be posted elsewhere.<sup>2</sup>

Some of Zumra's criticisms of research also reflect this: for example, in 2012 he would not allow a researcher to write that the community had no religion because this did not fit with what Awra Amba maintained, which could lead him to refuse any research on Awra Amba to avoid spurious claims<sup>3</sup>. A few years later, he criticised a researcher for publishing incorrect and distorted descriptions of the community<sup>4</sup>. Zumra's wife, Enaney, explains: "*Sometimes, researchers obtain information from people who have left, or from people who live outside our community. If conclusions are made based on information from outside, things can easily be distorted.*" Zumra adds: "*What is most important, though, is that you tell our story, because the story we tell reflects our way of living.*" This behaviour borders on public relations and propaganda, but is contrary to any scientific approach, which is not only to report faithfully what people say without any hindsight, but to analyse it in the light of the state of knowledge.

A member of the community gives his impression: "*The researchers, journalists, etc. all speak with the same people. And they only speak with those who have been approved to talk. Zumra and the people around him are the ones controlling the story.*" As the researcher in question points out, this way of seeing and doing contrasts an inside view and an outside view, each of which is homogeneous, and the two views opposing each other. However, many of the testimonies we have relayed show that the internal voices of Awra Amba are diverse and sometimes opposed, even if the dominant, official discourse is obviously coherent and harmonious. The same is true of the outside testimonies. There is neither homogeneity nor opposition *a priori*. Moreover, the researcher realised that Zumra and Enaney were informed about who she had met before, where and when, and what she had discussed with the district representatives. It is true that this researcher is an established researcher who was not satisfied with official speeches and who has a critical approach, as is the rule in research. So Zumra and Enaney had some reason to be concerned...<sup>5</sup>

This view of research and information more generally can be contrasted with the limited freedom of the press in Ethiopia and the policy of information control. The influence of the country's political culture is clear.

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<sup>1</sup> Østebø (2021: 44, 86, 91).

<sup>2</sup> Østebø (2021: 176).

<sup>3</sup> Assefa (2013: 29).

<sup>4</sup> Østebø (2021: 40).

<sup>5</sup> Østebø (2021: 39-41).

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"There are three kinds of persons; the intelligent one knows and asks; the medium one knows, but doesn't ask; and the stupid one neither knows nor asks." the community posted a sign in the visitors' room in 2011. <sup>1</sup> How can one know without free and contradictory information? And why is asking so important if the answers are formatted?

### 3.4.6. Potential concentration of power

*"Constant experience shows us that every man invested with power is apt to abuse it and to carry authority as far as it will go":* one cannot forget this well-known sentence of Montesquieu (1748: 46), which the evolution of countless leaders in the world, in all eras, justifies. This is obviously the case of all those who came to power through cleverness and bidding – their main, if not their only, skills. But it is also the case with true leaders who, through their thinking, their ideas, their sense of organisation, have been able to change the meaning of history for the benefit of ordinary citizens, those who have no particular title. Indeed, *"Nothing is more dangerous for man's private morality than the habit of command. The best man, the most intelligent, disinterested, generous, pure, will infallibly and always be spoiled at this trade. Two sentiments inherent in power never fail to produce this demoralisation; they are: contempt for the masses and the overestimation of one's own merits."* <sup>2</sup>

Zumra's eminent position in Awra Amba could give rise to such excesses, during his lifetime or after him. He did imagine Awra Amba, he did lay down the principles, no doubt inspired by other experiences, he did fight hard to make it happen and then not to see it disappear in an extremely hostile environment. He is the ideologue of this utopian experience and an excellent organiser. He is also charismatic, and therefore has great potential power with his fellow disciples, who trust him completely, and has an authority that is unparalleled in the community <sup>3</sup>. This term of authority refers to the quality of the person who is at the originator of something, who is the author of it. It also means the power that the one who "increases", who inspires the enterprise. Two meanings which, when added together, give the person in authority the power to create and to bring about creation. The authoritative one, by his example and testimony, inspires the desire to undertake, by transmitting his creative force through his work. Authority is expressed through assertiveness, self-confidence, foresight, and the ability to create. It is not authority imposed on others, but simple authority that elicits listening, respect and recognition, as opposed to aggressiveness or threats that contradict the very idea of authority and the respect it naturally inspires. <sup>4</sup> Does this definition of authority apply to Zumra?

An author <sup>5</sup> explains Zumra's success by three of his qualities: firstly, his ability to fight for the poorest and especially with them, secondly, the awareness that his struggle challenges an inequitable distribution of power at the heart of the country's socio-political culture, and thirdly, his ability to create a democratic life within the community capable of empowering its members who then become actors of change. This analysis seems somewhat idyllic.

#### *Some privileges*

Zumra seems to have some privileges. For example, one of the very first researchers who conducted

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<sup>1</sup> Tilahun C. (2012: 84).

<sup>2</sup> Bakunin (1867).

<sup>3</sup> Chekole (2014: 82).

<sup>4</sup> Thanks to JL. Picard-Bachèlerie for this definition.

<sup>5</sup> Alene (2011: 62).

a very thorough survey of Awra Amba in 2004 notes that Zumra's house is larger than the others <sup>1</sup>. Another researcher <sup>2</sup> who conducted a very long on-site survey in 2015-2018 also observes that it is more comfortable than the other houses, with, for example, a tiled floor and a veranda. The space in front of this house resembles a courtyard, which does not exist elsewhere in the village, surrounded by various outbuildings serving as rooms for Zumra's children, a private weaving workshop or accommodation for her mother-in-law, giving this courtyard a private feel. However, this space also serves as an agora where people come to discuss, a sort of 'café du commerce' <sup>3</sup>.

In addition, in 2011, a minor son of Zumra was reportedly given the privilege of collecting and distributing fruit from community trees, which no other child could do (a claim disputed by his mother) <sup>4</sup>. A few years later, in 2019, Zumra's eldest son Ayalsew, 22, who will graduate in civil and building engineering the following year from Addis Ababa University, participates in the Africa Young Women's Consultation on Beijing +25 from 12 to 14 August 2019 in Abidjan <sup>5</sup>. Two months later, he and his father are guest speakers at the Social Enterprise World Forum held in Addis Ababa from 23-25<sup>th</sup> October 2019.

One author notes that Zumra's family members have privileged positions in 2011: his wife was a member of two committees, his daughter a member of one committee <sup>6</sup>. In 2020, Zumra is a member of 4 out of 16 committees (development, solidarity, reception, and education). His wife is also a member of 4 committees (development, solidarity, reception, and resolution of complaints) as well as their eldest son (development, solidarity, reception, and residence). <sup>7</sup>

More generally, is there any accumulation of mandates among elected officials? We examine this point in Annex 8 on the basis of the precise composition of the various committees in 2020 <sup>8</sup>. Elected officials have from one to five mandates, with an average of 2.0 mandates per elected official, with men accumulating slightly more than women. The development committee is mainly composed of elected representatives with a high number of mandates, with an average of 2.8 mandates per official. Depending on the committee, the cumulation rate of their elected representatives is on average very variable, ranging from 1.2 to 3.8 mandates per official: this may indicate the committees with low or high levels of power. 6 people together hold 25 of the 93 posts to be filled, i.e. 27%. However, this analysis gives only a very partial view of the concentration of power, which depends on the actual distribution of power within each committee.

### *Zumra idolised*

Zumra is often greeted with an '*Ebabey Zumra*', which in Ethiopian culture is the title given to the fathers and elders of the immediate family, whose words are authoritative regardless of their rationality. The trust placed in him by the people of the village, old or young, is impressive and highly exaggerated by the usual standards. He is idolised. Outside the community, many believe that the Awra Amba community treats him as if he were their God. A journalist who knows Awra Amba well adds: "*Not only God, but God Plus*". <sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Solomon (2005: 37). He writes that "the house of the leader is *of course* larger".

<sup>2</sup> Østebø (2021: 173).

<sup>3</sup> Tilahun C. (2012: 70).

<sup>4</sup> Tilahun C. (2012 : 80, 91).

<sup>5</sup> Conference organised by UN Women, in collaboration with the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa and Oxfam International.

<sup>6</sup> Tilahun C. (2012: 80).

<sup>7</sup> Awra Amba community (2020a).

<sup>8</sup> Awra Amba community (2020a).

<sup>9</sup> Merhatsidk (2009: 73, 80), Tilahun C. (2012: 70), Østebø (2021: 175).

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### *Unbalanced power distribution*

An author asks a student of about 11 years old who goes to school in single file why she does so. She replies that she does not know but that it is because the community leader orders it, while the leaders argue that the children know well why they do it. So there seems to be an element of obedience in this behaviour without real discussion and understanding, whatever the leaders say. This anecdote concerns a child, but other similar behaviours concern adults. For example, at a meeting of four families, including Zumra's, he was sitting on a high seat, physically and therefore symbolically dominating the other participants. And every morning before going to work and every evening on the way back, a few dozen members of the cooperative come to the leader's house. With Zumra, or if he is away another elder close to him, and sometimes his wife sitting on their veranda, the community members approach, hold their hands on their back, bow, greet, listen, answer questions about their day's work, and leave. This clearly shows a hierarchy between the ordinary members and those close to Zumra. However, this conclusion must be put into perspective by considering that Zumra, not being able to write, can only communicate orally and therefore face to face. On the other hand, these meetings, even if unbalanced, strengthen the cohesion of the group. However, the fact remains that Zumra – and secondarily his relatives – occupy the central position and control the communication within the community. <sup>1</sup>

One author even speaks of a possible dictatorial influence <sup>2</sup>, the power of the leader being such that no one dares to oppose him. The general assembly would be only formal: "*If Zumra says 'yes', all people say 'yes'. If he says 'no', they also say 'no'*" according to a former community member who was expelled. "*Awra Amba is a very democratic community on paper, but in practice it is Zumra and his family who is ruling*", says a teacher at a nearby high school. The system could more or less replicate the old feudal system, with Zumra and his family reminiscent of the old *balabbat*, the intermediaries between the old nobility of the imperial era and the people. <sup>3</sup>

Power thus seems to be concentrated in the hands of Zumra, and a few other members of an 'elite' including members of his immediate family. The influence of the highly hierarchical Ethiopian political culture is evident. "*That tendency may, I am afraid, hamper or even abort the Community's extraordinary showing if not seriously addressed and curtailed at time.*" said a researcher in 2009 <sup>4</sup>. The fact remains that the democratic structures – committees, general assembly – exist and function, albeit more or less well. While the current situation can be explained by the Ethiopian political culture and Zumra's visionary role, the future is uncertain. Recent testimonies we have received show that Zumra is moving away from Awra Amba, spending more and more time outside, lecturing, especially in universities: he is above all an activist seeking to convince as many people as possible of the rightness of his ideology, which is not contradictory with the search for power. We cannot forget that many wives, children or relatives of prominent leaders around the world take advantage of their proximity to the latter to play a role that is not due to their exceptional skills but to their family or friendship ties. Nor can we forget the tendency of all power to expand at the expense of democracy. The situation may therefore evolve towards a continuation of the current hierarchical system, to the benefit of the members of the current elite, and in particular of his son or much younger wife, replacing the leader after his death, but without having either the legitimacy or the qualities. This drift is a real risk that would transform an imperfect experiment in direct democracy into a classical political community where power is very unevenly distributed.

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<sup>1</sup> Tilahun C. (2012: 68-74), Østebø (2021: 173, 182-183).

<sup>2</sup> Merhatsidk (2009: 80).

<sup>3</sup> Østebø (2021: 175-176, 178).

<sup>4</sup> Merhatsidk (2009: 80).

The disappearance of the historical leader could instead be an opportunity to give the various democratic bodies back all their power, to give the unranked as much decision-making power as the others. This requires an uncompromising analysis of the current situation, taking into account the testimonies of ordinary members and former members. It requires challenging the power of the elite, stopping the likely rise of a few heirs, in favour of the power of all.

### **3.5. Work value**

According to several surveys, the number of public holidays and therefore non-working days is very high in the Amhara Region, up to four days out of ten in rural areas <sup>1</sup>. Work in rural communities therefore takes second place to the many religious obligations.

In addition, in traditional Amhara society, craft professions (blacksmith, tanner, potter, carpenter, weaver, etc.) are socially and economically marginalised. Artisans have a lower status and are sometimes seen as sub-human. They have inferior rights, sexual relations with them are limited, they cannot enter houses except on special occasions, food is served to them in leaves or broken dishes, they have to kneel down and look away when they meet other people, etc.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, they occupy an important position in the religious or spiritual sphere, especially during events such as births, weddings, funerals, etc. They are also credited with magical powers as intermediaries between supernatural forces and society.<sup>3</sup>

This inferior status of manual jobs is not favourable to the diversification of farmers' activities towards craft activities <sup>4</sup>.

Awra Amba has been built in contrast to this ultimately secondary place of work and the social depreciation of non-agricultural occupations. Work is considered there as the central value, the means to flourish. Everyone must work according to their abilities, except children who must study and play, women close to childbirth (who have three months leave), the sick and the elderly. Work is a response to poverty, but it is first and foremost a means to fulfil oneself and to participate in the well-being of the community, a basic need rather than a means to satisfy one's needs. It is not absolutely compulsory – and therefore alienating, but voluntary, done for oneself and for the good of the community. Working well and efficiently leads to social recognition. Whoever neglects or forgets his or her responsibilities in this matter cannot gain the respect of others. Not working, even for a valid reason, leads to a feeling of guilt.<sup>5</sup>

Prestige is acquired by those who work conscientiously and apply the values of the community in their daily life. Daily behaviour is therefore the criterion of one's status.<sup>6</sup>

Also, some can work in the cooperative beyond the compulsory eight hours a day (8-13 and 14-17), six days a week, without being paid overtime <sup>7</sup>. Each cooperator has the seventh day of the week, generally devoted to the market, cleaning, or collecting wood. This free day was set for Wednesday

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<sup>1</sup> According to Seid (2008: 85), 53% of the Region's rural communities had more than 13 public holidays per month in 2003, i.e. at least 156 days per year. Eskinder (2013: 301) gives these same figures but as a regional average (rural and urban) published by the Region in 2010...

<sup>2</sup> Haberland (1978: 131).

<sup>3</sup> Levine (1974: 170).

<sup>4</sup> Seid (2008: 28).

<sup>5</sup> Solomon (2005: 48, 50, 51, 55), Alemu *et al.* (2013: 119).

<sup>6</sup> Solomon (2005: 9).

<sup>7</sup> Genet (2009: 45), Teshager (2010: 59), Mengesha *et al.* (2015 : 173).

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every other week and Saturday the following week, but is now set for Sunday <sup>1</sup>. Apart from New Year's Day, which is celebrated in Ethiopia on 11 September (or 12 September in leap years), Awra Amba members are therefore active every day and do not celebrate any other civil or religious holiday <sup>2</sup>.

There would be no type of work more valued than another and the only criterion for assigning tasks to one or the other (by the *ad hoc* committee within the cooperative) is one's ability to perform well, not gender or age <sup>3</sup>. However, it was noted that one outside observer felt that weaving was not highly valued.

Most adults work in the cooperative (see paragraph 3.4.2), but many also work for themselves by spinning, weaving on a personal loom at home, being a beekeeper, keeping chickens or even keeping a zebu whose milk is sold in the café restaurant for example <sup>4</sup>. This private work seems to be indispensable for many people because the wages are low, as one member of the cooperative testifies <sup>5</sup>: "*Many are suffering. [...] The people who are not members of Zumra's family have to get up early in the night to work for their private income.*"

Awra Amba's work value contradicts traditional values such as the division of work based on gender, patriarchal authority, the submission of women, the respect of many public holidays according to religious principles, whose irrationality it points out <sup>6</sup>. This is therefore one of the ways of criticising religious rites and obscurantism as well as challenging traditions, in favour of a rational approach to existence, which makes work a value close to rationalism.

The extreme place given to work, for all adults and throughout the year, leaves little room for leisure and pleasures: life is too serious to give priority to immediate pleasures. Awra Amba is therefore a fairly austere community, in which apart from euphorants such as tobacco, coffee or alcohol, there is little room for games or dancing, nor for sex outside marriage. <sup>7</sup> This rigorism does not seem to apply to children, who play, sing and dance. The coffee ceremony, for example, is not practiced by members of the community, as it is considered a waste of time and an opportunity for backbiting <sup>8</sup>, although this rather long ritual is important in Ethiopia, where coffee is the national drink.

However, this rigorism, tinged with puritanism and asceticism, seems to be softening: if community members probably still do not drink coffee, visitors can now have a coffee on site and a neighbour prepares the traditional coffee (*buna*) as shown in Picture 11. There are a few coffee trees in the community garden. And on New Year's Day 2011 (E.C.) on September 11, 2018, which is the only holiday in Awra Amba, young people in their twenties performed in traditional dress in a show of dances and songs that conveyed the values of the community (see Picture 12), singing for example "*if there is love, there will be peace, if there is peace, there will be development, if there is development, there will be richness*" in the song "*Fikir Kale, Selam Alle*": a playful way of presenting the philosophy of the village... This show was then performed for visitors, in schools and on various occasions in the neighbourhood, and has been successful. <sup>9</sup> Improved living conditions, calmer relations

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<sup>1</sup> Joumard (2010b: 6), Awra Amba community (2021).

<sup>2</sup> Seid (2008: 73).

<sup>3</sup> Solomon (2005: 50), Seid (2008: 72), Chekole (2014: 68), Awra Amba community (2015a: 12).

<sup>4</sup> Solomon (2005: 52), Alemu (2013: 70), Solomon (2015: 69).

<sup>5</sup> Østebø (2021: 178).

<sup>6</sup> Solomon (2005: 49).

<sup>7</sup> Solomon (2005: 42, 58).

<sup>8</sup> Abebaw (2007: 52).

<sup>9</sup> Pastor (2020).



with neighbours, openness to society during university studies, among other things, have undoubtedly had some influence in this area too.



*Picture 11: Woman from outside the community preparing coffee (buna) according to the Ethiopian ritual in the village of Awra Amba, in 2019. (Photo F. Pastor)*



*Picture 12 Dance and song show given on New Year's Day 2011 (E. C.), September 11, 2018 (screenshot of a video from Awra Amba Community).*

### **3.6. Relationship to religion**

The Awra Amba community believes it has a religion, which is disputed by some researchers and many Ethiopians. In a very religious Ethiopian society, what then is Awra Amba's "religion", and can it be defined as a religion in the scientific sense of the term?

#### **3.6.1. Weight of religion in Ethiopia**

The Amhara Region is made up of over 82% Orthodox and over 17% Muslims, with the latter being mainly present in Oromiya and South Wello zones. The percentage of Orthodox is even higher, close to 96%, in the zone and in the district where Awra Amba is located. Protestants, Catholics, followers of traditional religions and "others" are not very present there. However, these "others", which include "Jehovah's Witnesses, Bahais, Hindus, etc." are notably more numerous in the district of

Fogera, which is probably due to the presence of Awra Amba (see Table 3), as well as in the town of Gondar and the Awi zone.

The relationship between Muslims and Christians in Ethiopia is generally described as one of tolerance and peaceful coexistence. But it is not all tolerance, as Muslims have always had a secondary status, with Christians controlling most of the power. This is even more true in the Amhara Region and in the South Gondar Canton where Awra Amba is located, where the Orthodox are in the overwhelming majority.<sup>1</sup>

	Orthodox	Muslim	Protestant	Catholic	traditional	other
Amhara Region	82.5	17.2	0.176	0.025	0.033	0.077
South Gondar zone	96.1	3.7	0.101	0.051	0.002	0.029
<i>South Gondar except Awra Amba</i>	<i>96.2</i>	<i>3.7</i>	<i>0.101</i>	<i>0.051</i>	<i>0.002</i>	<i>0.010</i>
Fogera district	95.8	3.6	0.445	0.003	0.009	0.223
<i>Fogera except Awra Amba</i>	<i>95.9</i>	<i>3.6</i>	<i>0.446</i>	<i>0.003</i>	<i>0.009</i>	<i>0.050</i>

Table 3: Declared religion of the inhabitants of the Region, zone and district in which Awra Amba is located, in percentage, and figures for the zone and district outside Awra Amba, according to the 2007 census (CSA, 2007).

	A religious person	Not a religious person	A convinced atheist	Don't know / no response
Northern Asia	17	30	42	11
France	37	34	29	1
Western Europe	51	32	14	3
World	59	23	13	5
Africa	89	7	2	2

Table 4: Percentage of religious persons, not religious, and convinced atheists in different geographic areas according to the Gallup index (Shahid & Zuetzel, 2012: 17).

The Gallup index of religiosity and atheism<sup>2</sup> gives an overview of the place of religion in the world. Based on more than 50,000 interviews in 57 countries on five continents (but not Ethiopia), it indicates that in 2012, among the continents or sub-continents, Africa is the most religious with 89% believers<sup>3</sup>, 7% non-believers and only 2% convinced atheists, these figures being 59, 34 and 13% respectively at the global level: see Table 4.

This shows the essential place of religion in the environment of Awra Amba and the very great rarity of atheists. Moreover, the 2007 national census does not include the category of atheist in the description of "others" given above, which is an indication of their almost non-existence, if not the impossibility of the concept. Another more anecdotal clue to the incongruity of atheism in Ethiopia

<sup>1</sup> Østebø (2021: 98).

<sup>2</sup> Shahid & Zuetzel (2012).

<sup>3</sup> Described as "religious person". The poll should be taken with caution because of the different conceptions corresponding to the terms in different languages and countries.

comes from a question asked to foreign visitors to Awra Amba by a researcher <sup>1</sup> during his study on the potential of tourism in Awra Amba. Among the questions on the identity of the interviewees (sex, age, etc.), the question on religion has only four possible answers: Orthodox, Muslim, Catholic, or Protestant. It is not expected that a foreigner could answer "no religion" or "atheist", whereas convinced atheists are 13% worldwide and at much higher levels in some countries (see Table 4)...

Another researcher <sup>2</sup> confirms that in northern Ethiopia, although religious freedom is guaranteed by the Constitution, not belonging to either the Orthodox or Muslim faiths is considered to be on the margins of society and does not fail to provoke amazement, as Zumra testifies <sup>3</sup>: "*When I became an adult, people said to me that my ideas and practices were good, but they asked me why we didn't have a church or a mosque in our village.*" In traditional Ethiopia, the real world is understood as a temporary phase during which everyone suffers, where poverty and hunger are seen as trials for eternal life and therefore positively accepted. Therefore the weight of religion induces a life-long fatalism, a laissez-faire attitude, with life not being of great importance. Development is then hardly conceivable. <sup>4</sup>

The rites are numerous and demanding as shown by the examples of weddings and especially funerals that we will see in sections 4.2 and 4.3.

### **3.6.2. The "religion" of Awra Amba**

The founders of Awra Amba and those who later joined them came from this religious culture. They are of Orthodox or – mostly – Muslim origin <sup>5</sup>. Like Muslims and Christians, they believe, according to studies, in a creator of all things, but they are careful not to name him, as this is, according to them, the source of divisions and conflicts: each claims by calling him God, Allah or other that he is the true and only creator and that the other believers are in error <sup>6</sup>. "*We believe in the existence of one creator, who created the sky and the earth, night and day, female and male, air, sun and all the creatures that exist on earth, and our belief is conveyed by good deeds. We live by doing good deeds for others and avoiding bad deeds from being done to others without giving a name for the super natural power.*" says Zumra <sup>7</sup>.

For the people of Awra Amba, believing means thinking peacefully and creating peace, helping those in need, loving others, doing to others what we would like to be done to ourselves, avoiding harm to others, treating everyone equally regardless of colour, gender, race, age, etc., and creating a world of social justice <sup>8</sup>. The "religion" of Awra Amba is thus defined essentially by respect for the golden rule, which is the moral basis of all religions <sup>9</sup>, which has earned Zumra and the community the recognition of the Interfaith Peace Initiative. But it goes further by very actively combating racism, sexism and inequalities of all kinds, which very few religions do. <sup>10</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kassaw (2018: 49).

<sup>2</sup> Tilahun C. (2012: 99).

<sup>3</sup> Awra Amba community (2015a).

<sup>4</sup> Seid (2008: 26-27), Fikir (2014: 9).

<sup>5</sup> Abebaw (2007: 56).

<sup>6</sup> Seid (2008: 68).

<sup>7</sup> Chekole (2014: 48).

<sup>8</sup> Seid (2008: 85), Alene (2011: 18), Assefa (2013: 31), Awra Amba community (2015a: 27).

<sup>9</sup> Zumra insists a lot on that to persuade that the 'religion' of Awra Amba is a true religion (Seid, 2008: 68).

<sup>10</sup> This conception of religion is therefore very close to that of the Alayhim that we saw in paragraph 2.2, apart from the rites.

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This "religion" does not practice any kind of worship, any rite, does not recognize and respect any religious feasts, any sacraments, does not organise any ceremony for weddings or funerals, does not have any place of worship such as mosques or churches. Nevertheless, it does believe in a supernatural power that would govern life on Earth and maybe a life after death. But it considers women and men collectively responsible for the quality of their lives and that of their descendants, each of whom should seek to improve what exists – life on Earth – rather than prepare for future life. It is their own efforts that enable them to develop. Awra Amba does not believe in a divine power that allows and sends trials; it only believes in an almighty God whose ultimate goal is to create a world of social justice, and who has only a helping or supporting role.<sup>1</sup> And since religions forbid working several days a month, these religious rituals are considered to absorb working time without reason<sup>2</sup>. Is it really a religion?

In an Amhara society that is conservative or even fanatical when it comes to religion<sup>3</sup>, Awra Amba's very particular relationship to religion is the main source of conflict, the main obstacle with the neighbours, who often appreciate all the other aspects of Awra Amba, but cannot accept people who have no religion in their opinion, and who are even considered cruel because they do not respect any funeral rite reduced to its simplest expression.<sup>4</sup> This condemnation is particularly strong from Muslims of all ages on the one hand, and elderly non-Muslims on the other. The general condemnation by Muslims can probably be explained by the predominantly Muslim origin of the Awra Amba members, who have therefore renounced their faith in Islam. But younger and poorer non-Muslims appreciate the community members for their hard work and honesty.<sup>5</sup>

### 3.6.3. Is the "religion" of Awra Amba a religion?

The Awra Amba community strongly claims that it is not pagan, that it has a religion, and even that it follows the first and original religion or belief, which is expressed through practical good deeds.<sup>6</sup> It also considers that religion is a personal matter (which is the definition of secularism).<sup>7</sup>

Among the researchers who have studied Awra Amba, there is a diversity of views. Some consider that the community cannot be qualified as a community without religion<sup>8</sup>, sometimes even taking offence at this, while others consider that it has no established religion or no religion at all<sup>9</sup>. For one of the latter<sup>10</sup>, the members of the Awra Amba community rather defend and practise a humanist philosophy very close to *ubuntu*, a notion originating from the Bantu of southern Africa that is close to the concepts of humanity and fraternity.

How then to qualify the "religion" of Awra Amba? Is it a religion, or otherwise what is it like? For Durkheim (2012), "*Religion is an interdependent system of beliefs and practices regarding things which are sacred, that is to say, apart forbidden, beliefs and practices which unite all those who fol-*

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<sup>1</sup> Abebaw (2007: 48), Seid (2008: 72-75, 84-85), Awra Amba community (2021).

<sup>2</sup> Abebaw (2007: 57).

<sup>3</sup> Assefa (2013: 2).

<sup>4</sup> Solomon (2005: 66), Asnake (2005: 32), Tilahun C. (2012: 100).

<sup>5</sup> Solomon (2005: 66).

<sup>6</sup> Awra Amba community (2013), Assefa (2013: 30).

<sup>7</sup> Awra Amba community (2014c).

<sup>8</sup> Alemu (2013: 69, 71), Assefa (2013: 29), Chekole (2014: 47).

<sup>9</sup> Abebaw (2007: 58), Seid (2008: 68), Genet (2009: 56), Eskinder (2013: 264), Mengesha *et al.* (2015: 176).

<sup>10</sup> Eskinder (2013: 264).

*low them in a single moral community called a church.”*

Awra Amba has only one belief related to religions, the creation of the world by a supernatural creator.

Since Durkheim, social science research on religions has progressed. Diamond (2012) among others summarises this research, distinguishing seven major functions of religion:

1. Explaining the incomprehensible reality around us through supernatural explanations.
2. Defusing anxiety of human beings over problems and dangers beyond their control through ritual.
3. To provide comfort for life's pains, hope and meaning to the prospect of one's own death and that of loved one.
4. A standardised organisation: full-time priests, rabbis, pastors, imams, etc., places of worship, a standardised sacred book, rituals, art, music, architecture and clothing, specific to each religion and common to all followers of the same religion. Since religions are social movements that aggregate people who identify themselves as sharing deeply held beliefs, their adherents make costly or painful sacrifices that convincingly display to others the adherents' commitment to the group, and make prayers, donations, and sacrifices to intervene on behalf of mortal petitioners.
5. Preaching political obedience, seeing the chief or king as related to the gods or a god himself.
6. Giving moral codes of behaviour towards strangers within the community of believers (including the golden rule). Supernatural agents reward virtuous rule-obeying people and punish evildoers and rule-breakers.
7. Justifying wars against others: most religions claim that they have a monopoly on the truth and that other religions are wrong. Commonly in the past – and far too often still today – citizens have been taught that they are not merely permitted, but actually obliged, to kill and steal from believers in those wrong religions

Points 6 and 7 are the twin aspects of the often-discussed roles of religion in maintaining social order. The importance of these seven functions has evolved over the course of human history: functions 1 and 2 have declined, the other 5 functions reached their peak before declining somewhat. Finally Jared Diamond (2012: 368) proposes the following definition of religion: *“Religion is a set of traits distinguishing a human social group sharing those traits from other groups not sharing those traits in identical form. Included among those shared traits is always one or more, often all three, out of three traits: supernatural explanation, defusing anxiety about uncontrollable dangers through ritual, and offering comfort for life's pains and the prospect of death. Religions other than early ones became co-opted to promote standardized organization, political obedience, tolerance of strangers belonging to one's own religion, and justification of wars against groups holding other religions.”*

What functions among the seven listed by Diamond does Awra Amba's "religion" correspond to?

Function 1) Part of the first function only because only the creation of the world is explained by the supernatural and not the all the current realities, even they claim sometimes that god is always present with them <sup>1</sup>.

Function 6) Part of this function, no supernatural power playing a role in monitoring the observance of moral rules: this role of such supernatural power never appears in the literature on Awra Amba <sup>2</sup>. No value and no rule is dictated to them by a supernatural power, they are all developed by the community itself.

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<sup>1</sup> Awra Amba community (2021).

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Concerning the other functions:

Function 2) Awra Amba expects nothing from a ritual to appease its members, but much more from their conscious organisation for a peaceful society.

Function 3) Awra Amba's "religion" brings no comfort in the face of pain and death, but its organisation values solidarity to do so.

Function 4) Awra Amba's "religion" does not create any formal organisation.

Function 5) Awra Amba's "religion" does not preach any obedience to anyone related to the gods.

Function 7) Awra Amba fights any war against those who do not think like it.

Finally, apart from the belief in a universal creator who has no impact on the behaviour of its members and which is therefore only a gratuitous belief, and apart from the respect of the golden rule promoted without much conviction by most religions and often practised by women and men, whether believers or atheists, the "religion" of Awra Amba has none of the other functions of religions <sup>1</sup>. It meets neither the Durkheim nor the Diamond definition.

One researcher <sup>2</sup> believes that Zumra's status, the mythical elements of his personal history and the influence of his philosophy on the community's behaviour, norms and self-representation show that the community clearly has religious characteristics. While Awra Amba's characteristics relating to Diamond's first six functions – myth, community organisation in the face of anxiety, pain and death (through solidarity), formalised organisation (community, cooperative), obedience to a leader (though not formalised), codes of conduct – are present in religions, they are not specific to them as they are also present in most societies. These characteristics do not make Awra Amba a religious society: the fundamental difference lies in the role that a supernatural force systematically plays in religions, either to explain reality or to justify codes and behaviour: this is definitely not the case in Awra Amba.

On the other hand, Awra Amba's insistence on the total responsibility of men and women with regard to their living conditions, whether at the personal, interpersonal, community, national or global level is very close to rationalism, atheism as well as Free Thought based on reason, free examination, doubt, instituted as philosophical values: to make the world intelligible by reason, by constantly referring to reality. The only hiatus is the creationism displayed.

This belief in a universal creator may be surprising. The original theory of evolution has indeed been verified, clarified and reinforced by one hundred and fifty years of scientific research, it is at the very heart of biology, and to question it has become as absurd as to refuse the rotundity of the Earth or its rotation around the Sun. This belief can be explained by the total ignorance of the founders of Awra Amba of scientific knowledge on the matter, as well as of the diversity of religious conceptions in the world <sup>3</sup>, faced with the need for each man and each woman to understand where we come from. It is

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<sup>2</sup> Awra Amba community (2021) explains that their religion corresponds totally with this function, because they expect a positive feedback from the supernatural power when they do good deeds and the reverse when they do not comply with the morals. But the community never claims that they have to do good deeds and to be virtuous because it is an obligation of the supernatural power: the supernatural argument is never raised, but the compliance with the values of the community itself.

<sup>1</sup> The relationship of Awra Amba members with the supernatural power would be only private, intimate according to Awra Amba community (2021).

<sup>2</sup> Østebø (2021: 175).

<sup>3</sup> Thus Enaney, Zumra's wife, asserts in 2010 that "*all human beings say that there is only one God*" (Teshager, 2010: 43); in 2011 a community member said to Tilahun C. (2012: 101) that different religions differ only in the name of God, not in belief. More recently (2015), Zumra is well aware that he is not well

also almost ubiquitous in Ethiopia. However, there are indications that younger, educated members of the community may not necessarily share this belief, and some even seem to think that there is in fact no religion in Awra Amba.<sup>1</sup>

So it seems to us that the "religion" of Awra Amba is not a religion: Awra Amba members are much closer to atheism and rationalism than to a religion.

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educated about different religious beliefs and only expresses what he has in mind (Awra Amba community, 2015a: 27).

<sup>1</sup> Awra Amba community (2014c).

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## 4. Social organisation

We have already dealt extensively with social organisation through values such as solidarity, democracy or the golden rule, which are translated in terms of community organisation. Here we complete this description of social organisation by dealing with education, marriage, funerals, conflict management, the economy of the community before looking at its relations with the outside world, within Ethiopia or abroad.

### 4.1. Education

Education and training are understood as a necessity in Awra Amba, resulting in a kindergarten to university enrolment rate unmatched by the rest of Ethiopia, especially rural Ethiopia.

#### 4.1.1. Situation in Ethiopia

In the traditional Amhara culture, children have little schooling. This is even more true for girls – school being considered useless for them – who marry very early and quickly have many pregnancies that are dangerous to their health.<sup>1</sup> The economic activity rate of children aged ten to fourteen was close to 49 per cent in 1970 and fell below 40 per cent in 2005 according to ILO data, which places t Ethiopia's rate well above the African average, as is the case in other major developing countries. The International Labor Organization and the Ethiopian statistical agency (CSA) conducted a more detailed survey in 2015, the results of which can be found in terms of children's activities in Table 12 in Annex 9<sup>2</sup>. Nationally, 51% of children aged 5-17 years are engaged in paid economic activity and 58% in rural areas. This rate increases with age, rising nationally from 42% between the ages of 5 and 11 to 65% between the ages of 14 and 17. An even higher proportion participate in domestic chores.

The school enrolment rate for children aged 5 to 17 is 61% nationally and 57% in rural areas; it is slightly higher – 65% – in the Amhara Region and increases with age. It was only 35% in 1996 in primary school: see the evolution in Table 13 in Annex 9. In 2016, primary school enrolment in Ethiopia stood at 72%, but only 33% of children complete primary school. Primary school attendance increases regardless of parental income, but secondary school attendance increases only for the better-off.<sup>3</sup>

A brief description of the Ethiopian school system and the university population from Awra Amba is given in Annex 10: the school system comprises first a primary school of two times four years (grades 1 to 8), then a secondary school of twice two years (grades 9 to 12). At the end of grade 10, students can go either to one of the vocational courses of one to three years, or to upper secondary (grades 11 and 12), which gives access to university. The latter comprises three or four years of bachelor's studies which brings together 95% of the students, followed by two years of master's studies which brings together less than 5% of the students, and finally three to five years of doctoral studies

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<sup>1</sup> Seid (2008: 77), Genet (2009: 63).

<sup>2</sup> ILO & CSA (2018).

<sup>3</sup> World Bank (2020: 10, 27).



which brings together 0.4% of the students.



(Photo C. Crespo)

#### **4.1.2. Education in Awra Amba**

For Zumra, founder and leader of the community, education is a priority: "*Although we are illiterate ourselves, we want our children to get an education and have a better future than we did.*"<sup>1</sup>

Education is basically seen as a means to achieve economic prosperity: this is the instrumental view of education. But it is also seen as a way to change one's way of thinking, to direct it towards the solution of problems, to participate in the development of the country, or to understand society and oneself.<sup>2</sup>

Among the 15 or 16 committees responsible for community administration (see section 3.4.3), the education committee ensures that children and adults have access to education. It provides the necessary materials, is responsible for the kindergarten, manages relations with the neighbouring school and the community's participation in extra lessons (after-school) of the public school. Until a few years ago it had five members, making it the second largest of the 15 committees (see Annex 7); other committees have since grown in importance.

As a result, the community has a much better relationship with the school than the neighbouring villages. which also send their children to the school: community members are invited periodically to give lectures to students on ethics, among other things, whereas the school has rarely invited representatives from other villages.<sup>3</sup> The headmaster of the school in 2014 testifies to this: "*The community members always work with us and discuss issues when there is problem in the teaching-learning process. They find a grant and bring us different reference books to the school. Moreover, they gave their land for the construction of school out of their communal small plot of grazing land.*"<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, all the parents participate in the parents and teachers union (PTU) whose most of the representatives are from neighbouring village rather than Awra Amba and are therefore involved in the school<sup>5</sup>.

The community of Awra Amba has a total of only 17.5 ha, which does not allow it to feed its popula-

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<sup>1</sup> Fikir (2014: 17).

<sup>2</sup> Genet (2009: 61-62).

<sup>3</sup> Abebaw (2007: 88).

<sup>4</sup> Chekole (2014: 43).

<sup>5</sup> Awra Amba community (2021).

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tion of 400 to 500 people in the 2010s. Nevertheless, between 2008 and 2018, it provides four hectares of land for the secondary school and the high school with a recruitment pool of around 30,000 inhabitants. This shows the importance of the school for the community.<sup>1</sup>

Before or at the same time as the public primary school, the community educates its children within the family, in family reunions (see section 4.4), and in general assemblies that bring together all the inhabitants over 14 years of age.<sup>2</sup>

A system of mutual education is organized, first of all for the care of children between meals and school by older children. This system was originally set up to allow women to work outside the homes without their children, and it eventually became an excellent tool for education and transmission of values. Older students must indeed help the younger ones if they have some difficulties in their studies and at the same time give them moral and ethical instruction. Children who are able to walk, those of four or five years old, primary school students between school and meals as well as illiterate adults are encouraged to participate in this education system by young people who have finished primary or secondary school.<sup>3</sup>

The children first have a free time for playing or other activities before breakfast. After breakfast as well as after lunch, their activities are collective and supervised by an older student. The children are therefore not left on their own, but are supervised, which allows parents to be informed of what their children are doing, and parents to monitor, or even correct, their children's education during meals together and in the evening.<sup>4</sup>

Adolescents and adults therefore educate the younger ones, but adults also learn from children. In fact, during meetings and discussions, children are listened to just like adults. The latter think that children have valuable opinions useful for the community, improving the situation: children are asked to come with new ideas and concrete proposals.<sup>5</sup>

Community members also share their skills so that each other's skills are passed on to others: *"If a member gets some sorts of technical training somewhere outside, he or she will share it with other members upon return"* testifies a 22-year-old woman in 2014.<sup>6</sup> This sharing of knowledge extends to some extent to foreigners in Awra Amba: for example, in 2008-2010, the weaving cooperative should have trained five prisoners of Bahir Dar<sup>7</sup> in modern weaving, while the community trained around 2010 22 Ethiopians from two villages to help members of their respective communities to build stoves from local materials<sup>8</sup>. This training is again being organised over three days in 2015 for health extension workers from neighbouring communities<sup>9</sup>.

The second, more formal level of education goes through school.

The community first built a small school in the centre of the village from what they found on site, mud, wood and grass<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Eskinder (2013: 269), Awra Amba community (2014c).

<sup>2</sup> Awra Amba community (2014c).

<sup>3</sup> Solomon (2005: 90), Asnake (2005: 47).

<sup>4</sup> Solomon (2005: 91).

<sup>5</sup> Assefa (2013: 72, 95).

<sup>6</sup> Mengesha *et al.* (2015: 172).

<sup>7</sup> Itagaki (2013: 48). However, this information is not confirmed by Awra Amba community (2021).

<sup>8</sup> Tilahun A. (2012: 18), with the help of the German cooperation (GTZ).

<sup>9</sup> Østebø (2021: 77), in collaboration with an international NGO.

<sup>10</sup> Genet (2009: 68). This school seems to have existed in the early 2000s.

It was used from 2003 onwards for adult literacy classes<sup>1</sup>. 64 adults thus received basic reading and writing training on site through internal training.<sup>2</sup> This number corresponds to the number of people who could only read and write in 2004, but the need for adult training is still significant a few years later: 97% of heads of household in 2006 felt that there was a great need for training, especially in modern weaving and spinning, general mechanics and ironwork, and carpentry.<sup>3</sup> In 2008, continuing education courses are held three times a week from 6 to 8 a.m. and reach 46 adults (27 women and 19 men), divided into three groups. These groups study separately two days a week and together have an English course on a third day. The basic subjects taught are hygiene, arithmetic and English, but deal with daily life through subjects such as communication in the family, children and discipline, health, hygiene, birth control, ethical and moral values, etc. At the end of each daily session, the participants, with their hands raised, repeat after the teacher the slogan that we have already seen on page 55 in a very similar form:<sup>4</sup>

*"We, the Awra Amban people  
Do not touch others money;  
If we find one, we will return to the owner;  
We work and produce together;  
Our peaceful life will flourish."*

All adults have attended or are participating in these continuing education courses in 2008, except those who cannot due to their age or health and the very new ones. The teachers, after having been slightly more educated adults, were replaced in 2007-2008 by really better educated facilitators: two men having finished general secondary (therefore the tenth year) and a female health officer (an intermediary between nurse and doctor). These teachers, who are native and members of the community, teach for free.<sup>5</sup> Since 2011, evening classes have been given to adults in this small school.

This school was later transformed into a kindergarten which welcomes some of the children from 3 to 6 years old, in the morning from 8.30 to 11.00 am and in the afternoon from 2.00 to 5.00 pm. This first kindergarten was later replaced by a larger school with a playground: see Picture 13. The teacher is an adult or a student from the village. Children mainly play, prepare for primary school, learn the norms, values and principles of the community, and learn Amharic, English and arithmetic. At the beginning or end of each day, they all sing a hymn<sup>6</sup> together (see page 55) and sing other verses whenever possible<sup>7</sup>, such as:

*"We children do not steal!  
We children do not lie!  
We children do not insult others!  
We children respect people!  
We are a lover of work! etc."*

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<sup>1</sup> Genet (2009: 66).

<sup>2</sup> Solomon (2005: 61, 90), Asnake (2005: 47).

<sup>3</sup> Seid (2008: 100).

<sup>4</sup> Genet (2009: 66-67).

<sup>5</sup> Genet (2009: 67-68, 71).

<sup>6</sup> Abebaw (2007: 61, 92), Chekole (2014: 41), Awra Amba community (2014c).

<sup>7</sup> Solomon (2005: 93).



Picture 13: On the left, the first kindergarten on a Thursday afternoon in April 2010 (Photo of the author). On the right, the new kindergarten on a Tuesday afternoon in March 2016 (Photo F. Pastor).

The kindergarten would be open to children from neighbouring villages. So in 2006, according to Zumra, there were a few, but the researcher who interviewed him did not see any and thought the young neighbours might have to work. In 2014, 3 of the 40 kindergarten children were from the neighbourhood. But were they children from neighbouring villages or children of teachers from Awra Amba schools who live in the village but are not members of the community? <sup>1</sup>

Kindergarten plays a great role in the socialisation of children, making them more ethical, more respectful of others, better at speaking, but at the same time perhaps little aware of the external reality and sure that they are on the right track. <sup>2</sup>

After kindergarten comes the eight-grade primary school.



Picture 14: The public primary school of Awra Amba in April 2010. (Photo of the author)

The public primary school which Awra Amba children attended was located until 2009 in Maksegn, one of the villages in the commune to which Awra Amba belongs, 2 km away. Since September

<sup>1</sup> Abebaw (2007: 60, 61), Chekole (2014: 41), Awra Amba community (2014c). The presence of teachers' children is certified.

<sup>2</sup> Abebaw (2007: 94).

2009, a primary school built by the district (*woreda*) of Fogera has been open next to the village of Awra Amba (Picture 14). It has eleven classrooms, as well as a library, a laboratory, a documentation centre and administrative premises. <sup>1</sup> Each class in the first cycle (grades 1 to 4) has a single teacher, while in the upper grades a teacher teaches several classes, probably by subject.

Children in Awra Amba enter the first grade at the age of 6 or 7, often after attending the village kindergarten, while some pupils from neighbouring villages may attend for the first time much later. The school gives new pupils an examination, and they can enter grades 2 to 5 directly, depending on their level: either they have attended religious school before, or they have been to the Awra Amba kindergarten – which ensures a better level in the first two years, or they have followed a three-year alternative education programme. <sup>2</sup>

Half of the students have classes in the morning from 8 a.m. to 12 p.m. and the other half in the afternoon from 12:30 p.m. to 5:45 p.m., with one hour of preparation and four hours of classes from Monday to Friday. Awra Amba children also have, in 2010, four hours of study on the premises of the public school on Saturday and Sunday mornings for revision and homework, for which the teachers are paid directly by the community. <sup>3</sup> The school is free, but supplies, notebooks and books are paid for and purchased by the community.

A general secondary school (grades 9 and 10) opens in September 2010 for the first grade and in September 2011 for the second. It has four classrooms, a library, a laboratory and administrative premises. This school was entirely built by members of the Awra Amba community and 82% financed by the community and then donated to the government. <sup>4</sup> Previously the students had to go to Woreta, about ten kilometres away.

In September 2018, the upper secondary school or preparatory to university (grades 11 and 12) opens: see Picture 15. The Awra Amba community funded half of it. <sup>5</sup>



*Picture 15: Awra Amba public upper-secondary or preparatory secondary school (grade 11 and 12). (Photo AAC)*

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<sup>1</sup> Joumard (2010b: 67), Guday & Eskinder (2013: 27), Awra Amba community (2020b).

<sup>2</sup> Abebaw (2007 72-74, 89-90).

<sup>3</sup> A total of 400 birr per month (or €22), corresponding to 1.6 months' salary for a cooperator: Joumard (2010b: 7).

<sup>4</sup> Awra Amba community (2020b; 2021). Awra Amba has contributed more than 2.1 million birrs (about 125 000 €). It corresponds to about 1.5 times the annual profit of the cooperative (wages included).

<sup>5</sup> Awra Amba community (2020b).

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All primary and secondary schools in Awra Amba are public and therefore open to all children. For example, in 2006, the primary school had around 1,600 pupils, of which only around 80 were from Awra Amba, this number revolving around 125 pupils from 2010, i.e. around 16 per grade <sup>1</sup>.

The number of Awra Amba children attending the different educational cycles can be found in Table 14 in Annex 10. In secondary, during the 2010s, there were around 25 students in general secondary and around 30 in upper secondary, i.e. approximately 12 and 15 per grade respectively. This shows that most of the children of Awra Amba continue up to grade 12 at the end of secondary school.



*Picture 16: On the left, before going to school, children gather in the centre of the village at the call of a member of the education committee in 2010 (Photo of the author). They leave in single file, the smallest ones in front, in 2013 on the right (Photo F. Pastor).*



*Picture 17: When they return from school in 2019, the children mix, regardless of their age and origin. (Photo F. Pastor)*

When the school was far from the village, the children went to and came back from school together. They would meet in the centre of the village under the authority of a member of the education committee, then leave in single file, the older children behind to help the younger ones if necessary: see Picture 16. <sup>2</sup> This habit still prevailed in 2010 and 2011, although the school is very close by and

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<sup>1</sup> Abebaw (2007: 72), Joumard (2010b: 68).

<sup>2</sup> Solomon (2005: 43), Abebaw (2007: 80).

there is therefore no longer any security problem. For an author <sup>1</sup>, this is an example of an old rule that has not been able to adapt to a new context and which also prevents the young people of Awra Amba from discussing with those from the surrounding villages on their way to and from school, which does not contribute to their open-mindedness. However, this practice seems to have disappeared in 2019 at least on return from school, as shown in Picture 17.

The community built a first library in 1997, which is no longer in use but is kept as a witness to the past. A new library was opened in August 2007 (see Picture 18), open from 5 pm to nightfall. Managed by a librarian, the books are consulted on the spot by the village's pupils, and hardly any adults, who we are told, have no time to read. The library, which is reserved for members of the community, contains around 500 books in 2010, more than nine out of ten of which deal with languages or exact sciences: literature is very little present <sup>2</sup>, social sciences practically none. Zumra believes that technology is the most important and emphasizes the practical aspect: culture, social or human aspects are learned in the community itself and in particular from himself, whereas technology can only come from outside. This almost exclusive attraction to exact sciences and technology seems uncommon in Ethiopia. <sup>3</sup> Zumra also emphasises the importance of practical knowledge and studies that lead to innovation, denouncing gratuitous knowledge that makes one appear scholarly but leads to nothing concrete and new <sup>4</sup>.



*Picture 18: The new library in April 2010. (Photo of the author)*

In addition, Zumra teaches every fortnight to all primary and secondary school students the moral and ethical values of the community <sup>5</sup>.

In comparison with pupils from neighbouring villages, these primary and secondary school pupils are more assiduous: in 2010, for example, the attendance rate of children from the community is 100%, but that of other pupils is 90% according to the school director, Mohamed Alemie. <sup>6</sup> More generally, in the Amhara Region, the school attendance rate between 5 and 17 years of age is only 65% in 2015 (see Table 12 in Annex 9).

Awra Amba students, where education is a top priority, are also more serious, more hard-working, more ethical and more cooperative. They play less willingly, but often stay longer in school and are

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<sup>1</sup> Tilahun C. (2012: 67).

<sup>2</sup> Genet (2009: 68) emphasises the presence of fiction books, but we have hardly seen any.

<sup>3</sup> Joumard (2010b: 6).

<sup>4</sup> Awra Amba community (2015a: 22).

<sup>5</sup> Eskinder (2013: 303).

<sup>6</sup> Joumard (2010b: 7).

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very active in social and ethical clubs. On the other hand, they would not be very open to others: for example, when the primary school was in Maksegn (2 km away), the children of Awra Amba never followed their classmates to the café to drink tea or a *tela*.<sup>1</sup> Are they better than their classmates from neighbouring villages? Yes according to the school headmaster we interviewed in 2010, or only the first two years according to Abebaw (2007)? Success at university answers this as we shall see below.

They consider themselves to belong to the same family and avoid criticising their community in front of others. According to a study conducted in 2006, pupils from other villages do not appreciate them very much and avoid being around them, especially in the first two years, mainly because of their supposed lack of religion: see section 4.6.1. However, relations improve over time.<sup>2</sup>

Beyond primary and secondary schools, during the 2010s, an average of around 14 young people from Awra Amba study in vocational courses, and around 21 at university: see Table 14 in Annex 10. Compared to the rate of students in the general Ethiopian population, there are about 5 times as many undergraduate students in Awra Amba, and about 11 times as many masters students, which is considerable (see Table 15 in Annex 10).

### 4.1.3. Educational attainment of the population

The latest available statistics on the population of Awra Amba do not allow us to know precisely the educational level of the inhabitants apart from pupils and students, as only the numbers of adults who have completed general secondary (grade 10) and higher levels are specified. Population studies in 2005 and 2006 give more precise results, differentiating between those who are illiterates, can only read and write, having attended the first cycle of primary, second cycle, general secondary, or upper secondary, either for the general population<sup>3</sup>, or for heads of household<sup>4</sup>. We can compare these figures with those for the adult population of the Amhara Region in 2005<sup>5</sup>: see Annex 10. It points out that for the population of Awra Amba aged over 6, the illiteracy rate is 30%, and those who can only read and write are 24%. Among the heads of household, the illiteracy rate falls to 15%, but with a large difference between men (4%) and women (32%), and those who can only read and write are 49%, with relatively little differences between the sexes. Compared to the adult population of the Region, the educational level of Awra Amba is very much higher: see Figure 15 in Annex 10.

Beyond secondary school, in 2013, the village population has 2.5% of graduates from vocational courses and 2.9% of university graduates. These figures are increasing rapidly, reaching 8% and 10% respectively in 2020 (see Table 14 in Annex 10), which is incomparable with the rest of the country. However, this mass of graduates cannot find a corresponding job in the village, or find a more interesting job elsewhere. As a result, some of them no longer live or work there. For example in 2010, out of seven university graduates, two are health workers (intermediaries between nurses and doctors), one is an agricultural technician, four are teachers (one at the faculty of medicine, one in a short post-secondary cycle, one is the director of the public school in the village and one is a school-

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<sup>1</sup> Abebaw (2007: 76, 79, 83-84). The farmers usually give the children *tela*, which is a light beer. The refusal of the café allow the children to avoid alcohol and also to protect them from safety problems (Awra Amba community, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Abebaw (2007: 72, 77, 78, 87).

<sup>3</sup> Solomon (2005: 63).

<sup>4</sup> Seid (2008: 91).

<sup>5</sup> CSA (2006: 33-34).



teacher). They are four men and three women, most of whom live in the area. <sup>1</sup>

#### **4.1.4. Health status of the population**

The health of the population is an area where education and access to health care play a key role.

Parasitic diseases are the major cause of health problems in Ethiopia. The high prevalence of parasitic infections is well correlated with poverty, poor environmental hygiene, and weak health services <sup>2</sup>. In addition, maternal mortality is among the highest in the world, but is declining: it has fallen from 871 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2000 to 676 in 2011 <sup>3</sup>.

A team of biologists from Addis Ababa University <sup>4</sup> measured the prevalence of parasitic infections among 392 people of all ages, half living in Awra Amba and half in neighbouring villages between November 2010 and April 2011 <sup>5</sup>. In parallel, their knowledge and behaviour in terms of hygiene were recorded. This study shows that the inhabitants of Awra Amba are in much better health than their neighbours: the prevalence of anaemia is 9.4 and 13.8% respectively, that of malaria is 5.1 and 24.5. %, and that of intestinal parasitic infections is 18.8 and 69.4%, these differences being statistically significant <sup>6</sup>. Moreover, malaria is also much more frequent in the surrounding villages than in the Amhara Region on average (4.6%), which shows that Awra Amba is located in an infested area.

While hygiene-related illnesses are not very common in Awra Amba, the working conditions in the weaving workshop, all day long without changing position <sup>7</sup>, are a source of abdominal and gynaecological problems as well as urinary infections. Those affected change jobs, for example working in the shop or caring for the elderly. However, one of them, an elderly man, has had to stop all activity and we saw in section 3.4.4 that one woman was not allowed to leave the weaving machines despite her problems. <sup>8</sup>

According to the nurses, however, the most common illnesses among their patients are respiratory diseases, although no one smokes. They have decreased with the equipping of stoves with a smoke exhaust duct (see section 2.1). <sup>9</sup>

Access to health care is essential, it is a priority for Awra Amba. One woman explains, "*When we are sick, we rest and sleep in our home, and other people do our job instead. We do not worry about that we cannot work, because everybody help each other.*" The health centre, which is part of the cooperative, is in the centre of the village (see Picture 19) and is open every weekday from 8am to 5pm, with a nurse on duty. It welcomes the inhabitants of the village and also the inhabitants of neighbouring villages <sup>10</sup>. It has first aid equipment, treatment for common illnesses that do not require

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<sup>1</sup> Joumard (2010b: 7).

<sup>2</sup> Yihewew *et al.* (2014: 1).

<sup>3</sup> UNICEF (2012: 35-36) cited by Solomon (2015: 52).

<sup>4</sup> Yihewew *et al.* (2014).

<sup>5</sup> Villages of Arbachan, Qorke, Jib-Gudguad, Laydewol, Wojiterara, Maksegn, Tizaba, Timinda, Warsa, and Dej-Mesk (see Figure 1). The survey participants were randomly selected.

<sup>6</sup>  $P < 0,05$ .

<sup>7</sup> Itagaki (2013: 42) shows how holding the same position for hours, with one leg outstretched, allows the weaver to minimise surface irregularities and have a uniform texture, but is extremely tiring.

<sup>8</sup> Alemu (2013: 70), Alemu *et al.* (2013: 119), Chekole (2014: 45), Arvidsson & Sandgren (2015: 16), Østebø (2021: 173).

<sup>9</sup> Arvidsson & Sandgren (2015: 14, 18).

<sup>10</sup> However, they often prefer a more distant but less expensive health centre (Pastor, 2020).

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hospitalisation, takes care of family planning and childbirth. Patients pay for the visit and the drugs. According to the nurses, if hospitalization is necessary and the patient cannot pay for it, the community pays.<sup>1</sup>



*Picture 19: The new health centre in November 2017. (Photo F. Pastor)*

Before access to treatment, curative, preventive measures are essential and particularly well followed in Awra Amba, whose members are well informed of the modes of transmission of parasitic diseases and have adequate health education. A health extension worker explains: "*The community health status is much better than others. It's because of the fact that they are open for knowing every health issue, cooperative, open, and those who care for themselves.*"<sup>2</sup> The Addis Ababa University study shows that good hygiene in the home and outdoors, the construction and use of well-designed toilets and the correct use of insecticide-treated mosquito nets have significantly contributed to the reduction of parasitic infections. Behaviours contributing to hygiene are much more frequent in Awra Amba than among their neighbours: washing hands before eating and after using the toilet (84 and 58% respectively), washing and cooking vegetables properly (50 and 32%), not walking barefoot to protect against soil infections (99 and 70%), collecting and destroying rubbish...<sup>3</sup> The lack of sanitation facilities and drinking water is also mentioned as a problem in neighbouring villages by four of the ten residents of Awra Amba women interviewed during another survey<sup>4</sup>.

Pregnant women do not perform difficult work, while in other societies the workload of pregnant women is not lightened<sup>5</sup>.

For biologists at Addis Ababa University, Awra Amba is exemplary. Neighbouring and more distant communities should share their experiences in personal and environmental hygiene, construction and use of toilets, and relations with health care workers.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Crespo (2011), Awra Amba community (2014c), Arvidsson & Sandgren (2015: 15, 16, 19).

<sup>2</sup> Chekole (2014: 45), Yihenew *et al.* (2014: 3).

<sup>3</sup> Seifu *et al.* (2012: 46-47), Yihenew *et al.* (2014: 1, 3).

<sup>4</sup> Arvidsson & Sandgren (2015: 14).

<sup>5</sup> Arvidsson & Sandgren (2015: 16).

<sup>6</sup> Yihenew *et al.* (2014: 6).

## 4.2. Marriage and divorce

In the Amhara tradition, marriage is seen as a bond between two families and not between two individuals. Therefore, the family of the potential spouse is closely scrutinised before the father gives his consent. The parents and especially the father have indeed a great role in the choice of their future son-in-law or daughter-in-law. Thus in 2016, only 15% of married women aged 15 to 49 in the Amhara Region made the decision to marry themselves, while for 83% of them it was their parents who decided to do so <sup>1</sup>.

Usually an elderly male from the boy's family contacts the girl's parents. Once both families agree to the marriage, the date of the wedding is set sufficiently in advance to give both families time to prepare for a week of very expensive celebrations (wedding gifts, meals for a large number of guests, etc.), each attempting to assert the superiority of their social status. The bride and groom do not even know each other before the wedding itself. A son who would dare to choose his future wife himself would be committing an offence against his father, who would then have the moral right to curse and disinherit him. These practices would still be in force in rural areas in the early 2000s.<sup>2</sup>

Early marriage was common in Ethiopia, especially before the 1974 revolution and in the Amhara and Tigray regions, but it is far from over. For example, UNICEF reports that in the Amhara Region, *"the women interviewed in the 2005 Demographic and Health Survey who were between 45-49 were married, on average, when they were just over 13 and half years old; those who were 20-24 years old were married on average when they were just 15 years old."* <sup>3</sup> Eleven years later, according to the same survey conducted in 2016, the median age of first marriage in this same region is 16.2 years for women aged 20-49, 15.7 for women aged 25-49, and 22.5 for men aged 25-59 <sup>4</sup>. Early marriage is particularly common in rural areas and when education levels are low. Its immediate effect is that girls drop out of school. In the longer term psychological problems arise due to their loneliness, when they should be at school and playing with their friends. Therefore the family code revised in 2000 banned it, setting a minimum age of 18 for both girls and boys.

Virginity at marriage is expected from both girls and boys, but it is imperative for a girl, while premarital sex is considered natural for a boy <sup>5</sup>. However, the 2016 Demographic and Health Survey indicates an age median for first sexual intercourse in the Amhara Region of 15.8 years for women aged 20-49, 15.5 for women aged 25-49, and 20.8 years for men aged 25-59 years, i.e. approximately 5 months, 2 months and 20 months respectively before first marriage, which confirms a difference in behaviour between women and men, but invalidates the absolute virginity of girls before the first marriage. <sup>6</sup>

In Awra Amba, parents play no role in the choice of their child's spouse, as marriage is a matter for the spouses alone <sup>7</sup>. In a 2008 survey of 88 heads of household (53 men and 35 women), 86 considered that marriage was decided by partners only, and 2 by both partners and parents <sup>8</sup>. However, one researcher, quoting Zumra, indicates that families must approve their children's union for the

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<sup>1</sup> CSA (2017: 278).

<sup>2</sup> Asnake (2005: 11), Solomon (2005: 46-47) and Abebaw (2007: 48), partly according to Levine (1965); Solomon (2015: 53), Erulkar (2013: 7), Awra Amba community (2014c).

<sup>3</sup> UNICEF (2012).

<sup>4</sup> CSA (2017: 73).

<sup>5</sup> Asnake (2005: 11).

<sup>6</sup> CSA (2017: 74).

<sup>7</sup> Asnake (2005: 42), Solomon (2005: 79).

<sup>8</sup> Seid (2008: 81).

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sake of formality <sup>1</sup>.

If a boy or a girl wants to get married, he or she can ask for the hand of the loved one, or if he or she is shy, sends an emissary <sup>2</sup>. Neighbours report in the early 2000s that Zumra finds spouses for some young people within Awra Amba: this is strongly contested by members of the community. Rather, this statement is probably the consequence of an opposition to a radically different way of life. <sup>3</sup>

The minimum age for marriage is 19 for girls and 20 for boys, to ensure that they are mature enough <sup>4</sup>. Young women generally marry between 19 and 22, and young men between 20 and 25 years. Another limit is in the past the degree of kinship, which had gradually changed over twenty years from a ban up to the 7<sup>th</sup> degree of kinship – the rule in neighbouring communities – to a ban up to the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> degree. The probable reason given by one researcher was the near impossibility at this time of getting married outside the community due to cultural and religious differences and the lack of opportunities within the community. At the time of the study (2004), only 5 couples out of 47 had an external spouse. Indeed, the external spouse must respect the rules of the community under penalty of exclusion. <sup>5</sup> However, the present ban is again up to the 7<sup>th</sup> degree of kinship as in neighbouring communities, which demonstrates undoubtedly the better integration of the community in its environment <sup>6</sup>.

Sexual relations outside marriage, once tolerated, are prohibited on pain of exclusion <sup>7</sup> – we have given two examples of couples excluded for this reason in paragraph 3.4.4. The reasons given are, apart from the respect for values and principles without any further precision, the strict taboo of incest (minimum degree of kinship)<sup>8</sup> and above all the desire not to behave like animals, as indicated by a text from the Awra Amba community <sup>9</sup>: "*The rule of marriage is the respectable one. It's the one in which we humans differ from animals. If not doing so, how we differ from other animals? Other animals don't plan to have a sexual friend but they mate as they want at every time and place. We humans have a supreme marriage rule and regulation and also have a plan how and with whom we have to make a sexual intercourse.*" This rule is therefore justified by a belief <sup>10</sup> and does not seem to be based on the values and principles of the community. It is imposed in a manner quite similar to the traditional rule concerning the virginity of future spouses, with however an application apparently as severe for the man as for the woman.

Prostitution is also totally prohibited as unethical, as is polygamy <sup>11</sup>. Contraception is a right for women as discussed in section 3.1.2.

According to 2005 figures, women are systematically younger than their husbands, with an average

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<sup>1</sup> Abebaw (2007: 48).

<sup>2</sup> Calvino (2011: 128), Solomon (2015: 53).

<sup>3</sup> Solomon (2005: 41), Abebaw (2007: 49).

<sup>4</sup> Abebaw (2007: 49), Solomon (2015: 52).

<sup>5</sup> Solomon (2005: 34, 41), Abebaw (2007: 50-51).

<sup>6</sup> Awra Amba community (2021).

<sup>7</sup> Solomon (2005: 42, 43, 79), Awra Amba community (2015a: 26).

<sup>8</sup> Solomon (2005: 43).

<sup>9</sup> Chekole (2014: 54), Awra Amba community (2015a: 26).

<sup>10</sup> Sexual behaviour is in fact very diverse in the animal world, ranging according to species from strict monogamy to polygamy or debauchery. In the case of monogamy, extra-marital relations are more or less frequent depending on the species. Moreover, mating is very rare: for example in mammals, it only takes place during the very short period of ovulation of the female.

<sup>11</sup> Seid (2008: 85, 90), Solomon (2015: 18).

age difference of 7.3 years as seen in section 2.5: see Figure 12 in Annex 3. Several men remarried younger women after exile, widowhood or separation, but rarely to a young girl.<sup>1</sup>

Marriage is formalized by signing a document in front of witnesses from the community, without any other legal basis. The witnesses verify the minimum age of young people and their consent<sup>2</sup>. It does not involve any material or financial arrangement between the two families. There is no wedding ceremony, no festivities, not even tea party, as this is considered wasteful. However, if people are coming from far away, the bride and groom can prepare a meal. The second reason given for the absence of a party is to prevent the couple from escaping: indeed, if the parents cannot afford to pay for a practically compulsory party, the couple can flee to avoid this derogatory situation.<sup>3</sup>

Until they have built their own house, the newlyweds live with the parents of one of them<sup>4</sup>.

Divorces were quite frequent within the Awra Amba community, undoubtedly linked to the difficult conditions at the beginning, but have become rare, with married children clearly favouring stability<sup>5</sup>. A couple can, however, divorce without formality by mutual consent, but only to the extent that the divorce is justified to the community by one of the following four reasons: sexual incompatibility, infertility of a partner, regular conflicts within the couple, violation of the rules of the community.<sup>6</sup> Also, divorce proceedings before the judge are rare: for example during the period 2004-2008 only one person applied for divorce before the district court of justice<sup>7</sup>.

The assets and property of the couple are equally shared between the two former spouses.

### **4.3. Funerals**

Like weddings, funerals are in most Ethiopian societies an opportunity to bring together relatives, sometimes from far away<sup>8</sup>. In the Amhara Region, the family and relatives of an Orthodox deceased are numerous to shout and lament in the house of the deceased; to the maximum of laments, some beat themselves and throw themselves to the ground all around the bed of the deceased. The laments continue and intensify in the churchyard. After the burial, family, friends and neighbours may stay for several days – up to a week or a month – with the relatives of the deceased, with the women uttering loud cries of lamentation. On the morning of the third day, family members and relatives go to the churchyard, offering food and drink while lamenting. Participation in these ceremonies is a mark of respect for the deceased: to withdraw from them without a major reason is to place oneself outside the community, and to go to excommunication and sanction. Shouting and lamenting shows attachment to the deceased. Some may cut their hair, dress in black, women no longer wear jewellery, and

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<sup>1</sup> Solomon (2005: 36, 37, 42). With the notable exception of Zumra who remarried at the age of 50 to a 19 year old woman.

<sup>2</sup> Chekole (2014: 54), Awra Amba community (2015a: 26), Solomon (2015: 18, 53).

<sup>3</sup> Solomon (2005: 41, 79), Abebaw (2007: 49), Awra Amba community (2015a: 26).

<sup>4</sup> Solomon (2005: 41), Chekole (2014: 54).

<sup>5</sup> Solomon (2005: 43, 79), Asnake (2005: 43), Awra Amba community (2021). Asnake even states that divorce is forbidden, which must rather correspond to its rejection by young people. The decrease in divorce may also be due to divorces that are considered arbitrary and lead to exclusion, as discussed in section 3.4.4.

<sup>6</sup> Solomon (2005: 42), Seid (2008: 81), Chekole (2014: 55), Awra Amba community (2015a: 26), Solomon (2015: 61). The first three reasons are close to the criteria for legal dissolution of marriage in the Muslim religion according to Østebø (2021: 172).

<sup>7</sup> Merhatsidtk (2009: 54).

<sup>8</sup> Abebaw (2007 : 52).

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do not oil their hair throughout the entire mourning period.<sup>1</sup>

The Muslim communities close to Awra Amba perform very similar ceremonies, the main difference being that women do not participate in the burial under threat of sterility. Moreover, the laments are less loud and less frequent than among the Orthodox. Orthodox priests also advise these same limitations on lamentation, which should not be "exaggerated".

In any case, funerals that have attracted a large number of people are considered the most respectable. These long funerals allow loved ones to mourn, as the presence of the deceased gradually fades in the minds of those close to him.<sup>2</sup>

The members of Awra Amba are considered inhumane by their neighbours because they do not follow any of these mortuary rites, even for a deceased person who is very close to them. Thus a resident of the neighbouring village of Jib Gudguad says: *"To express our sympathy and to make our friend not to think about the dead person again and again, we have to be with him at least for some time or some days. This is one of our cultures that I am proud of. Like what they [Awra Ambas] think, we are not going there to get something to eat; it is not because we want to make ourselves idle. They are really very weak in this regard."*<sup>3</sup>

When a death occurs, there is no crying, lamenting or flogging. The body is simply wrapped in a new shroud and then buried by a few men as early as possible, during the day or the next morning if the death occurred during the night, while the other relatives stay at the house of the deceased (see Picture 20). The number of people accompanying the remains is free and varies according to the deceased, from a few for a child to much more for an elderly adult (see Picture 21). In the past, women did not participate in the burial – the cemetery was shared with other villages, and the Muslims in those villages did not accept women, as mentioned above. Today, both men and women from the community participate.<sup>4</sup>



*Picture 20: Loved ones remaining with the family of a deceased person during burial. (Photo Awra Amba community)*



*Picture 21: Procession of two dozen men during burial. (Photo Awra Amba community)*

After the funeral, everyone resumes their usual activities and therefore goes back to work. The

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<sup>1</sup> Solomon (2005: 67-68, 71), Fikir (2014: 18).

<sup>2</sup> Solomon (2005: 68-69, 71).

<sup>3</sup> Solomon (2005: 66), Abebaw (2007: 63).

<sup>4</sup> Solomon (2005: 70), Abebaw (2007: 51), Awra Amba community (2014c, 2021).

mourning period lasts at most one evening at the deceased's home, with the relatives playing, joking and chatting all together while spinning cotton. There is no funeral ceremony because "*if you have something to say to someone, you should say it while they are alive*": the members of Awra Amba do not believe in life after death but favour life on earth, for example by taking great care of the sick and the elderly. The community believes that work facilitates the grieving process.<sup>1</sup> However, a helper is given to the bereaved person who, for several days, will stay with him, do household chores with him, take care of the children, help him, etc. It is therefore a human accompaniment for those who remain, even if work resumes very quickly.<sup>2</sup>

When a loved one from a neighbouring community dies, Awra Amba members go to his funeral because they believe it is a duty, but do not visit his relatives. If a neighbouring community asks for help for a funeral, members of Awra Amba give willingly assistance.<sup>3</sup>

A widow does not have to wait until a certain period of time before remarrying, as is traditional, but can remarry immediately<sup>4</sup>.

All children also inherit from their parents, with the community inheriting in the absence of close family<sup>5</sup>.

#### **4.4. Conflict management**

Conflicts are inherent to any group of people, to any society. More or less violent, they are largely the consequence of individual or collective behaviour corresponding to social choices. The Awra Amba community has sought to act on both these aspects by eliminating the underlying reasons for conflicts and by managing residual conflicts as well as possible. Already, there would be no conflict over material matters<sup>6</sup>, but we have seen in paragraph 3.4.4 that there can still be serious material conflicts in the case of exclusion.

According to the community, conflicts arise from a lack of consideration of others and not treating others as one would like to be treated oneself, as well as from inequalities, social injustice or lack of dialogue. The inherent dignity and well-being of each person, equality between men and women, protection of and respect for children, care for the elderly and disabled, as well as transparency and open communication – in other words a humanistic philosophy based on the values of equality and solidarity – are thought to structurally form the true foundations of peace, justice and social harmony at the community level.<sup>7</sup> This is in line with studies that show how equality is a source of well-being for all: "*It is not wealth that makes societies happy, but equality of conditions.*"<sup>8</sup>

As we have seen, the first concrete translation of these principles is that, unlike many traditional communities in the region, Awra Amba prohibits any public humiliation, insult, affront, offence and physical violence, and this from childhood<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Solomon (2005 : 70), Abebaw (2007: 51), Seid (2008: 86), Calvino (2011: 128).

<sup>2</sup> Pastor (2020).

<sup>3</sup> Abebaw (2007: 51), Awra Amba community (2021).

<sup>4</sup> Solomon (2005: 42).

<sup>5</sup> Solomon (2005: 40).

<sup>6</sup> Merhatsidk (2009: 49).

<sup>7</sup> Merhatsidk (2009: 43, 78), Eskinder (2013: 250, 289).

<sup>8</sup> Wilkinson & Pickett (2009).

<sup>9</sup> Merhatsidk (2009: 51).

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Awra Amba then sets itself apart from other communities at the same level of development<sup>1</sup> by its ability to detect the slightest tension or the slightest non-compliance with a rule as early as possible. Dissent is quickly made known and dealt with as if it were to endanger peace within the community, through informal mechanisms and if necessary by *ad hoc* formal institutions. Those who argue are first invited to settle their dispute among themselves, while non-compliance with a norm is openly criticised. Conflicts are then dealt with informally and preventively by neighbours, in multiple meetings, and if that is not enough, by the complaint resolution or security committees.<sup>2</sup> Alienation or even exclusion and banishment is the ultimate stage.

First of all, therefore, there are many, varied and free discussions between members to deal with any emerging disputes in order to maintain cohesion and to move the project forward. These range from daily meetings before and after the working day in front of Zumra's house on the square, to the two meetings per year for young people, one in September where students and those who do not live there can participate, and another in February.<sup>3</sup> In addition, there are family reunions.

Family reunions bring together every fortnight young and old members of two to four neighbouring families. They discuss what might upset the well-being of the members and the neighbourhood. The discussions are very frank and without aggressiveness and give a big role to children aged 13-14 and even younger as they are able to speak. They are managed by a facilitator or chairperson, who is elected for four meetings, including among young adolescents.<sup>4</sup>

A woman testifies: "*If an individual is doing a bad deed on others, he/she tells the situation to all participants at free will. And then, receives advice from all participants not to commit that mistake again and the situation may be re-evaluated in the next discussion again.*"<sup>5</sup> Another author describes a reunion of four families: all the participants speak one after the other and say more or less the same thing: "I have accomplished my goals in the last fortnight. If there is a problem with my behaviour that I am not aware of, thank you for your comments and I will adapt to it." A case is different: a mother complains that her daughter was upset for nothing and had gone for school without eating breakfast. The other participants felt that this was a misconduct and finally her daughter was asked whether she agreed with this comment; she admitted that it was deviant behaviour and said she would not do it again. We can therefore see that the slightest little conflicts are dealt with there. Family reunions are therefore one of the mechanisms for controlling behaviour considered to be deviant, making it possible to reduce conflict and ensure that norms are respected.<sup>6</sup>

Another mechanism is the Complaint resolving committee<sup>7</sup> which seems to have been established at the same time as the community. It is composed of three people known for their integrity and reputation, who are elected by the general assembly every two or three years and who can be dismissed at any time if they do not fit the bill, while the former members can participate if necessary in the committee. Its members do not receive any benefit or remuneration, apart from reimbursement of their possible expenses. They have no specific training, and are trying to reestablish dialogue. The com-

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<sup>1</sup> Merhatsidk (2009: 21-26) shows the variety of mediation tools in major cultures, in Africa and particularly in Ethiopia.

<sup>2</sup> Solomon (2005: 65), Merhatsidk (2009: 44, 77, 79), Tilahun C. (2012: 111), Eskinder (2013: 279-280).

<sup>3</sup> Tilahun C. (2012: 12, 69, 76).

<sup>4</sup> Solomon (2005: 92), Merhatsidk (2009: 44, 81), Assefa (2013: 43-44), Chekole (2014: 52), Awra Amba community (2015a, 2021).

<sup>5</sup> Chekole (2014: 53).

<sup>6</sup> Tilahun C. (2012: 74-75).

<sup>7</sup> *Quireta - Semie* in Amharic.



mittee therefore has above all a persuasive role, but cannot impose anything. It is seldom consulted, always voluntarily.<sup>1</sup>

If there is a major conflict with the internal rules, it is exclusion, a sign of the failure of the conflict management mechanisms. We saw in paragraph 3.4.4 that exclusions, although hidden by the community, were probably very numerous, affecting more than 10% of the population. They were sometimes quite violent, as one villager reported: members of the community came to the home of the excluded woman, loaded all her belongings into a truck and took her and her entire family to Aember, a town some 15 km away. The exclusion was not to the liking of all the residents, many of whom shouted and protested when she left. "*That was the day the community broke*", he said.<sup>2</sup>

Exclusion, relegation or forced exile excludes not only people, but above all behaviour and ideas, punishes critics. For an author<sup>3</sup>, all the discussion and mediation processes put in place do not aim to enable the community to change its rules, but only to protect existing rules and to promote member conformism and their integration into the group by controlling deviant behaviour, dissent or marginality. Moreover, the Awra Amba community is very critical of the rigidity and immobility of neighbouring rural communities where social relations and cultural traditions are defined once and for all and cannot be changed. The freedom of the individual is subordinated to the interests of his family, his clan, his community. Awra Amba members feel much freer.<sup>4</sup> However, while social relations and traditions are clearly very different in Awra Amba and in rural and traditional Amhara society, respect for the rules is perhaps just as obligatory there, with the interests of the group taking precedence over those of the individual, as is the case in Ethiopia in general.

This could define what a community is, characterised by control by all over all, as opposed to a more diverse society. Such control over behaviour and even ideas is hardly compatible with human rights. But isn't this the case in any society that also enforces its rules, condemning those who do not respect them to prison, for example? Exclusion for prohibited behaviour may seem acceptable, especially as the exclusion is geographically limited to the few kilometres separating Awra Amba from neighbouring villages or towns. It is not an exile from society and the excluded do not become pariahs, far from any social or cultural attachment. However, as we have seen in section 3.4.4, exclusion can also result – though not systematically – in a significant financial loss that does not seem to follow any rules. The process of exclusion, the method, is also problematic because it seems that, on the one hand, the materiality of the alleged facts is not always proven and, on the other hand, the rights of the defence are not always respected. For example, according to her mother, a young girl who was expelled in 2008 for having had sexual relations with a young man contested the facts and even proposed a virginity test at the time, which was refused. This seems to show that the relationship was not established, but only pretended. This mother of the young girl, who was also excluded, also asserts that the general assembly did not rule on her own case as provided for by the internal procedure and the Ethiopian law on cooperatives.<sup>5</sup> However, the various facts reported by the author have not been the subject of an adversarial investigation and are therefore naturally open to question.

This conformism to the group, in addition to human rights, raises the question of Awra Amba's ability to adapt to a changing environment or to evolve on its own, according to its members' own desire.

Many authors are very skeptical about Awra Amba's capacity to evolve, or even to last: its members

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<sup>1</sup> Merhatsidk (2009: 55-58, 65).

<sup>2</sup> Østebø (2021: 158).

<sup>3</sup> Tilahun C. (2012: 118)).

<sup>4</sup> Seid (2008: 60), Tilahun C. (2012: 2).

<sup>5</sup> Østebø (2021: 158, 171).

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are said to be formatted, simply obedient, and incapable of adapting <sup>1</sup>, not very open to criticism and external contributions <sup>2</sup>, too homogeneous in culture and refusing other ways of thinking and behaving <sup>3</sup>, open neither to external spouses nor to one's own children once they have graduated from university <sup>4</sup>, too independent and autonomous <sup>5</sup>, and lastly not economically diversified enough <sup>6</sup>.

These criticisms are undoubtedly partly true, at least at the time they were written. However, they often appear to us to be hasty, generalising one or a few cases without in-depth study, sometimes based on erroneous data <sup>7</sup> or problematic interpretations <sup>8</sup>. Some of them no longer correspond to current reality, such as the lack of diversity of sources of income (see section 4.5.3). These criticisms should probably also be placed in the more general situation of small rural communities in Ethiopia, to assess what is specific to Awra Amba and what is a more widely shared characteristic.

Other authors, far fewer in number among those who attempt to answer the question, are optimistic, noting for example the appetite for technologies seen as Western in order to extricate themselves from an economy based on human labour alone, and believe that their community life and mutual understanding are guarantees of survival <sup>9</sup>. Another author believes that the future of the community would be quite favourable if it maintains its image as a model village. It would simply conform to the ideology of the Ethiopian state and international organisations regarding gender and development by adapting to political changes. According to this author, this conformity explains past successes. This ideology is that of small business promotion and liberal feminism at the confluence of Western liberal feminism (aiming at women's autonomy and emancipation) and neo-liberal financial logic (consumption and production of wealth). <sup>10</sup>

The researchers' positions can also be explained by their own ideological stance towards the values and rules of Awra Amba: for example, the refusal of any religion in Awra Amba, which is not a problem for most Europeans, especially a researcher, but is difficult to conceive of in Ethiopia, even it seems for a researcher, who has great difficulty in admitting it. We evaluate more widely the research on Awra Amba in Annex 1. More generally, Awra Amba's ideological positioning is in contradiction not only with many Ethiopian traditions but also with some of the current rules of global society based on economic liberalism and not on solidarity, equality or autonomy of local communities.

Our impression – which should be confirmed, modulated or refuted by in-depth research – is, however, that while Awra Amba is very open on the technological level, it remains little open to outside

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<sup>1</sup> Tilahun C. (2012: 66-68, 120).

<sup>2</sup> Tilahun C. (2012: 67), Assefa (2013: 28-32), Mengesha *et al.* (2015: 175).

<sup>3</sup> Abebaw (2007: ii), Alemu *et al.* (2013: 118-119), Mengesha *et al.* (2015: 175).

<sup>4</sup> Tilahun C. (2012: 110), Alemu *et al.* (2013: 119-120).

<sup>5</sup> Mengesha *et al.* (2015: 175).

<sup>6</sup> Alemu *et al.* (2013: 120), Mengesha *et al.* (2015 : 175).

<sup>7</sup> Regarding the impossibility of students to settle in Awra Amba, Solomon (2005: 63) indicates that a woman has a bachelor's degree and two men a master's degree, while Joumard (2010b) quotes the head of the school who is a university graduate. Since then, other Awra Amba residents have graduated as the finance officer. It is more a question of a difficulty to settle than an impossibility: see paragraph 3.4.4. Regarding the lack of relations with the outside world, the large number of visitors have long denied it.

<sup>8</sup> This is the case with the exacerbated desire for autonomy based on internal resources alone, even though it is a question of decision-making autonomy: Awra Amba in no way refuses external contributions, but wants to remain in control of its decision: see section 4.5.2.

<sup>9</sup> Chekole (2014: 87, 92).

<sup>10</sup> Østebø (2021: 64, 78, 131).

ideas, many of which could help them, with the risk, however, of not being able to resist the cultural and ideological bath imposed from outside. Awra Amba is well aware of this weakness – its founders paid a heavy price for that – and of its relative ideological isolation in a still very traditional rural Ethiopia and a world that knows only economic competition. Hence the temptation of ideological withdrawal, of the besieged fortress, for the founders and first and foremost for Zumra, to be moderated however because of the very good relations with the authorities and foreign donors. The high level of training of its younger members can only open up the intellectual horizon of the community, as several remarks by some of their young leaders have shown us. The challenge is then to reconcile intellectual openness and unity of the community, especially since it is possible to think that the demographic and geographical expansion of the community could lead to greater ideological and behavioural diversity <sup>1</sup>.

## 4.5. Community economy

In the Fogera district where Awra Amba is located, 92% of the population were farmers at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with two-thirds of their income coming from crops and one-third from livestock. However, almost 30% of the rural inhabitants do not have oxen, which is an indicator of wealth. The average size of farms is 2.1 ha, consisting of 1.4 ha of crops and 0.7 ha of grassland. The cereals grown are *teff* <sup>2</sup>, millet, nug, maize, beans and peas. <sup>3</sup>

In the Amhara Region, for every 100 working adults there are 87 dependents people, with the latter figure being 76 in Awra Amba in 2010-2011, with smaller families <sup>4</sup>. Craftsmen are poorly regarded in the region as in the whole of Ethiopia, as noted above <sup>5</sup>. Food insecurity is chronic, with almost two-thirds of households producing enough food for no more than nine months of the year <sup>6</sup>. This can be related with the many non-working days for religious or civil holidays, baptisms, weddings or funerals. These moments of conviviality are, however, factors of solidarity and unity that should not be overlooked. <sup>7</sup>

Awra Amba has 17.5 ha, of which 10.2 ha was agricultural land in 2006, reduced to 6.5 ha in 2014 for non-agricultural uses <sup>8</sup>. This land is also moderately fertile and malaria infested (see section 4.1.4). None of the land was irrigated. <sup>9</sup> However, it seems that the garden created in the mid-2010's is irrigated by a solar pump <sup>10</sup>. The population is very large for this small area of land, with a

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<sup>1</sup> Chekole (2014: 85).

<sup>2</sup> *Teff* or *tef* is a cereal native to the highlands of Eritrea and Ethiopia, where it is the basic ingredient of *injera* or beer (*tela*): it is therefore the basis of the diet. It has very small seeds and is gluten free.

<sup>3</sup> Solomon (2005: 26) according to Wereda Rural Development Office et Organization for Rehabilitation and Development of Amhara (ORDA).

<sup>4</sup> Eskinder (2013: 268) according to BoFED (2011) and Awra Amba Community Information Center, November 2011. Seid (2008: 95) gives a slightly higher figure for the Region for 2006, no doubt, but without giving his source: 101 non-active per 100 active (and 74 in Awra Amba).

<sup>5</sup> Chekole (2014: 84).

<sup>6</sup> Seid (2008: 101).

<sup>7</sup> Mussa (2004: 34).

<sup>8</sup> That is, in 2006 5.7 ha of *teff*, 3.7 ha of maize and 0.8 ha of beans according to Seid (2008: 97), and in 2014 according to Chekole (2014: 64) with, in addition, 5 ha of reforestation land.

<sup>9</sup> Fantahun (2003: 5), Solomon (2005: 38, 99).

<sup>10</sup> Slowfood (nd).

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density more than four times higher than the density of the district of Fogera in turn of the century <sup>1</sup>. Moreover, the population is strongly increasing as seen in section 2.5, for example going from 400 to 551 inhabitants from 2006 to 2020.

Livelihoods include all resources (natural, physical, human, financial and social capital), and access to these resources (through institutions and social relations) which together condition the standard of living achieved by an individual or household <sup>2</sup>. The ideology specific to Awra Amba that we presented in section 3 therefore undoubtedly plays a driving role in its economic development. It should be remembered that it is based on the values of equality (especially between women and men), respect (between adults and children and between adults), solidarity and autonomy (vis-à-vis external bodies).

The economic activities have widely diversified since the start of Awra Amba, from agriculture and traditional weaving originally to services (tourism, trade) and industry (modern weaving, oil, etc.), without forgetting many public services <sup>3</sup>. This diversification and the high density of the village tend to make the way of life of the inhabitants more urban than rural <sup>4</sup>.

We present below successively the structures, flows, activities and finally revenues, before discussing the strengths and weaknesses.



*Picture 22: Small house, exceptionally round, with its private loom which is the work tool of its owner, in 2010. (Photos of the author)*

#### **4.5.1. Economic structures**

In terms of entities with an economic role, these are essentially the cooperative and secondarily the individuals.

The cooperative is active in agriculture, weaving, flour milling, trade, tourism and public service. It started in 1986 and took off in 2006 <sup>5</sup>. The number of cooperators increases with the general popula-

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<sup>1</sup> Solomon (2005: 39) according to South Gondar Planning and Economic Development Department (1999/2000).

<sup>2</sup> Ellis (2000: 10) cited by Chekole (2014: 18).

<sup>3</sup> Tesfaye (2017: 24, 39).

<sup>4</sup> Chekole (2014: 92).

<sup>5</sup> Seid (2008: 108).

tion and represents on average 32% of the population from 2006 to 2020. Compared to the number of working people (adults neither students nor retirees), cooperators represent only 68% of the working population in 2015, the only year for which the number of working people is available <sup>1</sup>. This percentage is slightly higher for women than for men. It is surprisingly low because all sources indicate the small number of self-employed people as will be seen below. One explanation could be that some workers who are formally members of the community do not live in Awra Amba and are therefore not really Awra Amba workers. However, being a cooperative is not at all automatic, as we saw in section 3.4.2. Cooperators work from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. and from 2 p.m. to 5 p.m. <sup>2</sup>.

Private activities concern first of all the members of the cooperative who, outside their working hours at the cooperative, may have private activities. This concerns first of all weaving: for example in 2013, 133 of the 141 households have a loom <sup>3</sup>. In addition to these marginal activities, some members of the community have their own individual business: weaving (see Picture 22), small grocery shop, bee-keeping, chicken breeding or cereal trade <sup>4</sup>. However, they are said to be rather few in number, around 3% of the active population <sup>5</sup>, which is contradictory to the large number of non-cooperative workers.

#### **4.5.2. Economic flows**

In terms of economic flows, most of the inflow comes from the external sale of goods and services produced by the cooperative or by members of the community on a private basis. We detail these goods and services in the following paragraph.

Another relatively important flow comes from aid received, from Ethiopian public bodies, foreign states, national, foreign or international NGOs, and finally from individuals, whether or not members of the community and residing abroad.

We have listed in Annex 12 the aid from public bodies or NGOs of which we are aware, probably the most important among public aid or by international NGOs. It can be seen that the aids mentioned by the various authors from outside the community are very heterogeneous and only partially correspond to the known reality.

Aid began in 1995-96 due to the recurrent drought with emergency food aid which continued until 1999 but at a much lower level.

This was followed in 1995-96 by the provision on credit of beehives, oxen and goats for women. The beehives were a failure because they were provided without consultation or training. The oxen were supplied without seeing that the community did not have enough pasture; they could not be sold because they were bought on credit and eventually died. The goats were not purchased in local markets with community participation as requested, but were provided directly by the Ministry. Due to illness, they died without any benefit to the women. This external aid was therefore a failure because it was decided without the needs and priorities of the beneficiaries being identified with their participation. They put the community into debt without bringing them any benefit. They are the source of

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<sup>1</sup> 164 cooperators according to Awra Amba community (2020b) for 242 workers according to Awra Amba community (2015b).

<sup>2</sup> Awra Amba community (2014c).

<sup>3</sup> Chekole (2014: 72).

<sup>4</sup> Chekole (2014: 61, 73). In 2013 there are 2 households running a small grocery shop and 3 households trading grain with the outside world.

<sup>5</sup> Chekole (2014: 14, 38).

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mistrust of credit.<sup>1</sup> The installation of a diesel pump is another example of imposed and useless help. Following the community's request to the regional authorities to install a second water pump, the authorities installed a diesel pump without consultation. As its cost of use is too high, it is hardly used.<sup>2</sup> These failures have reinforced the community's conviction that it must be autonomous in its decision-making, i.e. it must refuse any imposed aid. So when a local authority wanted to persuade Zumra to build a dam to irrigate the land, as part of a government programme (which ultimately failed in the country), he refused. This refusal was interpreted by the authority's representative as a refusal of expert advice, whereas Awra Amba only refuses to have ready-made solutions imposed on it from above.<sup>3</sup>

The aid then concerned training in digging and using a hand pump in 2000, in weaving in 2002 and 2006, in management in 2004 and in tourism at an undetermined date.

It also enabled the community to acquire a hand-dug well in 1998, a small mill in 2003, weaving machines in 2003 and 2005, weaving workshops in 2003 and 2007, the infirmary between 2004 and 2008, a workshop for the production of solar ovens and water pasteurisation indicators in 2012-2014, the kindergarten building, books for the primary and secondary schools, and equipment for the hostel in 2013-2014, and a little later the secondary school and solar and diesel pumps.

The aid agencies are partly public, at national or regional level. Several foreign countries have also helped directly, such as Finland for a well in 1998 and training in 2000, Sweden and Germany for training in 2002, or the Netherlands for the weaving workshop in 2007. Several foreign or international NGOs have provided assistance such as Action Aid Ethiopia in 2006 for weaving machines and training in weaving, A Glimmer of Hope (US NGO) for the construction of the small infirmary between 2004 and 2008<sup>4</sup>, the Solar Cooking Foundation Netherlands in 2012-2014 for the construction of a workshop for the production of solar ovens and water pasteurisation indicators in 2012-2014 (with the help of the Ethiopian NGO ORDA)<sup>5</sup> the Belgian NGO Heber Solidarité Éthiopie for the reconstruction of the kindergarten, the provision of books for the primary and secondary schools and materials for the hostel in 2013-2014<sup>6</sup>, or the Italian NGO Slowfood in the mid-2010s for gardening<sup>7</sup>.

The two CEOs of the company that made two films about Awra Amba (Write This Down later renamed Lyfta) held a fundraiser to help build the high school, while Ethiopian-American film-maker Salem Merkuria organised one on Martha's Vineyard in the United States, known as the summer home of the jet set, for a solar pump in 2017.<sup>8</sup>

In addition, the authorities have equipped or helped the community to equip itself with a number of

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<sup>1</sup> Mussa (2004: 41-42), Tilahun C. (2012: 89).

<sup>2</sup> Seifu et al. (2012: 16), Tilahun C. (2012: 93).

<sup>3</sup> Solomon (2005: 56), Alene (2011: 77).

<sup>4</sup> The community indicates 2008 as the date of construction, while the NGO indicates 2004-2005 without doubt as the date of release of funds.

<sup>5</sup> SCN (2013). The aim is to produce various solar cookers for sale (made of cardboard covered with aluminium foil, in the form of a box, or a fibre basket) and water pasteurisation indicators (with wax that melts when the right temperature is reached).

<sup>6</sup> <https://heberasbl.wikeo.net/awra-amba.html>: reconstruction of the small kindergarten and provision of equipment, provision of the primary and secondary school workroom with a sufficient number of books from the Ethiopian state curriculum.

<sup>7</sup> Slowfood (nd).

<sup>8</sup> Østebø (2021: 162).

public services such as the construction of an access road, the development of the library and schools, the installation of electricity, telephone or drinking water <sup>1</sup>.

The village is further helped and supported by external supporters, other associations, associates who may provide occasional financial assistance or logistical support, make private donations, or communicate with the media. In 2020, for example, the community launched an appeal for help to cope with the drop in income due to the Covid 19 pandemic, which seems to have been relatively well received <sup>2</sup>.

Finally, the trips abroad by members of the community in 2014 and 2016 were paid for respectively by French local authorities <sup>3</sup> and probably by the NGO Slowfood.

Institutional or private support is therefore very important, leading to an accumulation of resources and infrastructure that neighbouring communities are far from having. The public authorities acknowledge that the community receives preferential treatment from them. <sup>4</sup> This aid has had a decisive economic impact: "*There is a substantial improvement in our lives because of supports we got from government and NGOs. Therefore, these days we are able to escape from all past sufferings of absolute poverty and eviction.*", said a community member to a researcher in 2008 <sup>5</sup>. The role of the community in the success of this aid is essential, as the authorities and NGOs assist community initiatives rather than planning themselves and implementing development projects in Awra Amba. The role of these actors is only to make the implementation of community projects possible by offering them material assistance or training. <sup>6</sup> The number and importance of the aid does not allow us to agree with the assertion of one author that Awra Amba does not appreciate the help of NGOs or even any aid at all, as it would encourage an attitude of begging and dependency <sup>7</sup>. The cases of refusal are explained by aid that does not correspond to any community project, aid that is planned and decided by external entities. On the other hand, support for community projects seems to be very well received.

Many public and marginally private institutions, both Ethiopian and foreign, therefore trust the Awra Amba community enough to grant their aid. The fact that the community is at the origin of the projects, that it is involved in them – sometimes heavily, as in the construction of the secondary school (see section 4.1.2), that it has carried out several projects, that its members have a relatively high level of education (which facilitates interaction with funders <sup>8</sup>) and training, that they are very hard-working, honest, etc. undoubtedly explains this trust. Østebø (2021) explains this confidence on the one hand by the image of Awra Amba which corresponds to the expectations or hopes of many associations and people in the world, and on the other hand by the adequacy of the economic and feminist project of the community with the political line of Ethiopia and the international organisations. We will return to this question of the model in the conclusion.

It is worth noting that in the best-known public communication of the community ("*Journey to peace*" <sup>9</sup>), which details its principles and history, these external aids are not mentioned, thus giving

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<sup>1</sup> Merhatsidk (2009: 74), Østebø (2021: 164).

<sup>2</sup> For example, the community received over €2,000 from just three foreign supporters.

<sup>3</sup> The three-person trip was organised by the Attac and French-Ethiopian Friendship associations, and partly financed by the Rhône-Alpes Region and Greater Lyon.

<sup>4</sup> Østebø (2021: 163-164).

<sup>5</sup> Merhatsidk (2009: 74).

<sup>6</sup> Merhatsidk (2009: 73).

<sup>7</sup> Mengesha *et al.* (2015: 172).

<sup>8</sup> Alene (2011: 76).

<sup>9</sup> Awra Amba community (2015a).

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the impression that the community has built itself autonomously, which should be put into perspective. However, the community does not deny these aids and, for example, at our request, it has indicated several important aids of which we were unaware <sup>1</sup>.

Emigration is another source of income, a marginal one as it is not advisable, and a minor one as it concerns only two families (in 2013) whose children have emigrated to Arab countries and help their families. A final source of income comes from the few members of the community who are employed by public bodies or NGOs. <sup>2</sup>

Internal flows within the community are also relatively large and correspond to the sale of goods and services produced and sold within the community. Thus the cooperative provides health care to community members for a fee (the infirmary is part of the cooperative and the nurse is a cooperator). The cooperative also provides blankets to the hotel of Awra Amba and sells clothes to members for their personal use. <sup>3</sup>

This also includes loans between members of the community. While in other rural communities, interest is often usurious, with the lender doubling his investment, Awra Amba's internal loans are interest-free, which strengthens friendship and honesty between lender and borrower. <sup>4</sup>

Finally, we must also consider outgoing flows corresponding to the aid provided by the community to external persons. This concerns the reception in the community of a few elderly people from outside <sup>5</sup>, the training of some outsiders, or even the assistance given to the church of a neighbouring community <sup>6</sup>.

### **4.5.3. Economic activities**

Awra Amba's economic activities can be classified into six categories: public services, agriculture, weaving, milling, trade, and tourism. The economic activities have been largely diversified on the community's own initiative, not without a prior study of production costs, their comparative advantage, market needs, etc., for each new product or service envisaged <sup>7</sup>.

#### *Public services*

Kindergarten and primary school, secondary and high school, library, infirmary, old people's home, access road, drinking water, electricity and telephone, as well as the whole decision-making and administrative structure of the community (committees) are services open to the members of the community and beyond, managed collectively by local and/or regional bodies. They are therefore public services, the most important of which we have presented in detail in sections 3.2, 3.4.3 and 4.1. Like all public services, they are an essential part of the infrastructure that allows other monetisable activities to function efficiently and smoothly.

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<sup>1</sup> Awra Amba community (2020a).

<sup>2</sup> Chekole (2014: 75), Awra Amba community (2021).

<sup>3</sup> Alemu (2013: 71).

<sup>4</sup> Chekole (2014: 62).

<sup>5</sup> Joumard (2010b: 6), Crespo (2012).

<sup>6</sup> According to Tesfaye (2017: 34). This aid to a religious institution is astonishing in view of the community's refusal of any religious rite.

<sup>7</sup> According to an official informant from Fogera Woreda Economic Development Office cited by Eskinder (2013: 302).



*Agriculture*

Agriculture is the oldest activity as all the founders of the community are of peasant origin. It is nevertheless a very secondary activity given the very small surface area available, which has also been cut down to build houses, schools or for reforestation. Animal husbandry is not very important, with 18 oxen, a donkey, a mule and 44 hens in 2004, all belonging to the cooperative <sup>1</sup>. The animals are fed on the farm due to the lack of grassland<sup>2</sup>. Nine years later, the livestock numbers 9 cows, 6 young bulls, 2 heifers, 7 calves, a donkey, a mule, 122 hens and 20 beehives <sup>3</sup>. The ownership is not specified, but some cows must be owned by private individuals as some sell milk, while private individuals raise hens and bees <sup>4</sup>. We can therefore see that the livestock has diversified with a clear increase in small animals, but remains very modest for a population of nearly 482 people and 141 households in 2013.

	year	surface (ha)	production (q)	yield (q/ha)
teff	2005/06	5.75	32	5.6
	2013/14	3.5	21	6.0
maize	2005/06	3.73	118	31.6
	2013/14	2.0	78.5	39.3
dry beans	2005/06	0.75	5	6.7
peanuts	2013/14	0.5	3	6.0
global cultivation	2005/06	10.23	155	
	2013/14	6.0	102.5	
grasslands	2013/14	0.5		
reforestation	2013/14	5.0		
constructions	2013/14 2011	6.0 (incl. schools: 4.5 <sup>5</sup> )		
total	2005/06	17.5		
	2013/14	17.5		

Table 5: Main crops of the cooperative and use of space in 2005/2006 according to Seid (2008: 98) and in 2013/14 – in blue – according to Chekole (2014: 64, 69).

The crops are mainly maize and *teff*, and secondarily beans and groundnuts, for which the area cultivated by the cooperative and yields in 2005-2006 and 2013-2014 can be found in Table 5. It can be seen on the one hand that the cultivated area has decreased by more than 40% in eight years, on the other hand that *teff* and maize yields have increased. This improvement is probably due to the abandonment of the least productive land in favour of construction and reforestation. The forest – eucalyptus trees as almost everywhere in Ethiopia – has increased significantly in area and is being used as a resource for fuelwood and construction while contributing to more sustainable develop-

<sup>1</sup> Solomon (2005: 39).

<sup>2</sup> Seid (2008: 97).

<sup>3</sup> Chekole (2014: 70).

<sup>4</sup> Chekole (2014: 61), Tesfaye (2017: 24, 34).

<sup>5</sup> Guday & Eskinder (2013: 14).

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ment <sup>1</sup>.

In addition, two members of the community each own 0.5 ha of land, which they cultivate mainly for cereal crops. This land is located outside the community. <sup>2</sup>

In recent years, the community has started irrigated market gardening, growing lettuce, tomatoes, peppers, chard, cabbage, pumpkins, sweet potatoes and beets on 600 m<sup>2</sup>, with the support of Slowfood, while continuing to grow *moringa* shrubs, a kind of super food <sup>3</sup>.



Picture 23: Spinning in 2019 and weaving in 2008 at the cooperative. (Photo F. Pastor and C. Crespo)

### Weaving

Weaving is the second activity chronologically, which the founders developed on their return from exile. It is primarily a family activity, with almost all the inhabitants having a loom, traditional or modern, at home (only 2 to 8 households out of 141 do not have one in 2014 <sup>4</sup>). Concerning the cooperative, its weaving activity started in 2003 with the arrival of weaving machines. In terms of income, it took off in 2005 with traditional trades, supplemented a year later by modern looms: see Picture 23. In 2007, two thirds of the weaving income still came from traditional looms. Seven years later, the weaving workshop has more than twenty modern looms, made of wood or metal. It is a harmful activity for health, with most workers suffering from back pain (see section 4.1.4). Weaving thus seems to be more a necessity for survival than a choice. <sup>5</sup> Fabrics by the metre, scarves, blankets, tablecloths, jackets and dresses are produced <sup>6</sup>. These items are sold either to wholesalers who resell them to traders, or in the cooperative shops (see below) including the workshop shop. <sup>7</sup> The products from the cooperative are marked with the place of production; they are reputed and therefore sold about twice as much on the Bahir Dar market as the same products made by prisoners

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<sup>1</sup> Chekole (2014: 64, 77).

<sup>2</sup> Chekole (2014: 69, 86).

<sup>3</sup> Slowfood (nd). The project should have started in mid-2010s. *Moringa stenopetala* (called *mourongue* in Réunion) is a tree whose leaves are richer in vitamins, minerals and proteins than most vegetables.

<sup>4</sup> Chekole (2014: 60, 72).

<sup>5</sup> Seid (2008: 108), Chekole (2014: 72, 84).

<sup>6</sup> *Shamas*. Weaving in the Bahir Dar region is an activity of full-time professionals, mostly Muslims, and of peasants who migrate temporarily to Bahir Dar, especially during the low agricultural season, from May to August (Itagaki, 2013: 27).

<sup>7</sup> Crespo (2011, 2020), Chekole (2014: 72).

in Bahir Dar.<sup>1</sup>

### *Flour mill and oil mill*

Regarding the flour-milling activity, the cooperative acquired a first mill in 2003 and then continued to equip itself. In 2010 it owns six electric mills that grind *teff*, maize and sorghum from the village and neighbouring farmers (see Picture 24). Three new electric mills were added at the beginning of 2012, one for *teff*, the second for maize and the last for husking rice. In 2014, there are about ten mills in permanent operation. They are additionally supplied by trucks delivering grain from quite a distance.<sup>2</sup> “*Neighbours prefer to use our mill because they trust us and we don't cheat*”, according to a villager: this allows customers to drop off their grain in the morning and come back to pick up the flour in the evening, rather than waiting on site for their flour to be ready as is the case elsewhere; a second reason is the price, which is lower than that of neighbouring mills: 0.20 birr per kilo of flour, compared to 0.25 to 0.30 (in 2012).<sup>3</sup>

The cooperative has also been equipped with oil mills since 2016, for the production of nug oil<sup>4</sup>. Nug is an endemic plant, native to the Ethiopian highlands and cultivated for several millennia for the production of edible oil, particularly in India and Ethiopia. Its oil is used not only for food but also to produce paints and soaps, and for lighting. It is a substitute for olive oil, which is considered to be very good for health. In Ethiopia there is a strong local demand for nug oil, especially as a substitute for imported palm oil. The cooperative buys the nug from neighbouring farmers and sells the oil: see Picture 24. A large shed has been built to store it. The meal resulting from the extraction is used to feed livestock. However, the cooperative has difficulties in obtaining supplies of raw material at an affordable price<sup>5</sup>.



*Picture 24: Neighbours clients of the cereal mill in 2012, with a child at work in the centre and a woman with a cross on her chest on the right (Photo C. Crespo); Nug oil mill in 2019 (Photo F. Pastor).*

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<sup>1</sup> Itagaki (2013: 48).

<sup>2</sup> Joumard (2010b: 44), Crespo (2012), Chekole (2014: 74).

<sup>3</sup> Halpern (2007), Crespo (2012).

<sup>4</sup> Botanical name: *Guizotia abyssinica*. Other names: *Ramtil* (Hindi), *kalatil*, *sarguia*, *tilangi*, *karala* (India), *neuk*, *noog*, *nug* (Ethiopia), *niger*.

<sup>5</sup> Awra Amba community (2020a).

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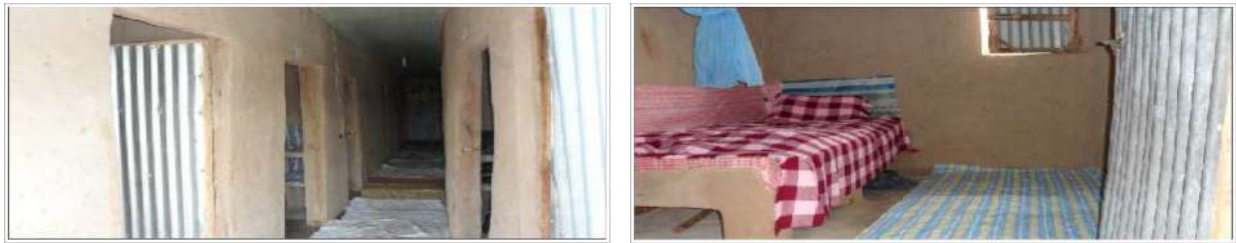
## Trade

The cooperative opened two grocery bazaars in Awra Amba for local customers. It opened shops to sell its products first locally, then in the neighbouring towns of Woreta and Aember (both 14 km away), a large shop in Bahir Dar (68 km away), and finally one in Addis Ababa. In addition, the cooperative's two small Isuzu trucks can be rented on demand and notably carry loads for neighbouring villages, and two community members have opened a small shop in Awra Amba.<sup>1</sup>

In addition, community members rent rooms to teachers from Awra Amba schools, health workers and students from secondary school<sup>2</sup>.

Finally, at the request of neighbouring communities, the cooperative plays a role in stabilizing the grain market when prices rise: when prices are low, it buys grain in bulk from the Gojam or elsewhere, stores them in a large warehouse, then, when market prices are high, resells it at an affordable price in nearby or more distant markets. This is the cooperative's main commercial activity. Three members of the community (in 2014) also carry out this same activity, but in a private capacity.<sup>3</sup>

Awra Amba is therefore an important commercial hub.



Picture 25: Awra Amba guesthouse in 2012. (Photo A. Assefa)

## Tourism

Awra Amba became an official tourist attraction in 2001, having been identified as a potential tourist destination by the Ministry of Tourism as early as 1995. The community was listed in 2006 in the Bradt Tourist Guide, which is the most used guide for foreign tourists in Ethiopia<sup>4</sup>.

Awra Amba has been welcoming a large number of visitors for the past fifteen years (see Figure 6 on page 116 and section 4.6). Their number peaked in 2007 and has remained significant since then, i.e. between 5,000 and 6,000 between 2017 and 2019, 60% of whom are foreigners. Visitors pay the same entrance fee regardless of their nationality, but with a reduced price for students. The entrance fee is 5 birr in 2010, 6 birr in 2012, then 20 birr in 2013 and 2016<sup>5</sup>, and for students 3 birr in 2012 and 6 birr in 2013<sup>6</sup>. It is possible to have a guide to visit the village, for an additional 50 birr (in 2013<sup>7</sup>). The community has built a small café-restaurant serving (non-alcoholic) drinks and simple meals at a very low price<sup>8</sup>, as well as a small guesthouse with simple but very clean rooms, with shared bathroom, toilet, and recently hot water: see Picture 25. A room for one or two people costs

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<sup>1</sup> Crespo (2011, 2020), Tilahun C. (2012: 90), Chekole (2014: 73), Østebø (2021: 164).

<sup>2</sup> Chekole (2014: 62), Østebø (2021: 179).

<sup>3</sup> Mussa (2004: 41), Tilahun C. (2012: 85), Chekole (2014: 73), Østebø (2021: 164).

<sup>4</sup> Østebø (2021: 38, 75, 113).

<sup>5</sup> That is respectively 0.29, 0.23 and 0.74 €.

<sup>6</sup> Respectively 0.12 and 0.22 €.

<sup>7</sup> I. e. 1,85 €.

20 birr in 2010, 30 birr in 2012, 100 birr in 2013-2014<sup>1, 2</sup> This tourism is an important source of direct income, estimated by the district at 330,000 birr in 2010/2011, or about 14,000 €. It can be deduced that direct income from tourism represents about 28% of the cooperative's profit, on average over the years 2008 to 2016<sup>3</sup>. In addition to this direct income from entrance fees and guesthouse, there is also the sale of products in the cooperative's shop and indirect benefits through donations, of school materials for instance.<sup>4</sup>

#### **4.5.4. Incomes**

Information on average incomes per worker or cooperator from different researchers is scarce, sometimes unclear or contradictory.

In terms of the hierarchy of activities according to their contribution to household income in 2007, weaving was the first occupation for 98% of households, agriculture the second occupation for 94% and commerce the third occupation for 74% of households. Pluriactivity is almost general: only 5% of households have only one activity (weaving, agriculture or commerce), 20% have two activities and 75% have three activities.<sup>5</sup> In 2013, weaving (either as a cooperative or privately) was the primary source of income for 94% of households<sup>6</sup>. In 2005, each cooperator would earn 180 birr annually from weaving and 134 birr from agriculture, but the corresponding annual income (314 birr) does not correspond to the income declared by the community (265 birr)<sup>7</sup>. The source being generally serious, we can nevertheless deduce that in 2005, the cooperative derived 57% of its profits from weaving and 43 % from agriculture. This same source gives an income from private weaving of 120 birr on average per household, indicating that private activities were a secondary but not negligible source of income at that time.

More generally, what are the level and the evolution of income per worker or per household in Awra Amba? Figure 4 shows that the evolution of annual income distributed to each cooperator – the direct salary or income – has been impressive since 2003. However, these figures must be put into perspective as inflation is high in Ethiopia (on average 15% per year from 2003 to 2019). In birrs 2019 (i.e. excluding inflation), growth is naturally lower as shown in Figure 5. It was particularly high from 2003 to 2009, with income multiplied by more than twenty during this period, after which income remains fairly stable or even slightly decreasing until 2017 (with large variations from one year to another), before rebounding in 2018 and 2019 with an increase of almost 60%.

According to a researcher, the per capita income in 2006 would be nearly 20% higher in Awra Amba than in the Amhara Region, but the income he indicates does not correspond to the figures given somewhere else by Awra Amba community<sup>8</sup>: this comparison is therefore questionable.

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<sup>8</sup> For example, at the beginning of 2011, 1 birr for a tea, a glass of milk or an individual bread; 4 birr for a plate of pasta with meat sauce, or a part of *injera* and sauce according to Crespo (2011).

<sup>1</sup> Respectively 1.15, 1.15 and 3.70 €.

<sup>2</sup> Crespo (2011), Assefa (2013: 22-23), Chekole (2014: 74-75), Østebø (2021 : 37).

<sup>3</sup> The average number of visitors over 2008-2016 is 18% higher than in 2011. In 2019 birr, so excluding inflation, the average profit of the cooperative is 3,400,000 birr, the direct income from tourism for 2011 is 810,000 birr, and so the average 2008-2016 direct income from tourism is 960,000 birr.

<sup>4</sup> Eskinder (2013: 272).

<sup>5</sup> Seid (2008: 99).

<sup>6</sup> Chekole (2014: 71).

<sup>7</sup> Income from weaving and agriculture given by Solomon (2005: 39), overall income given by Awra Amba community (2012) cited by Chekole (2014: 77).

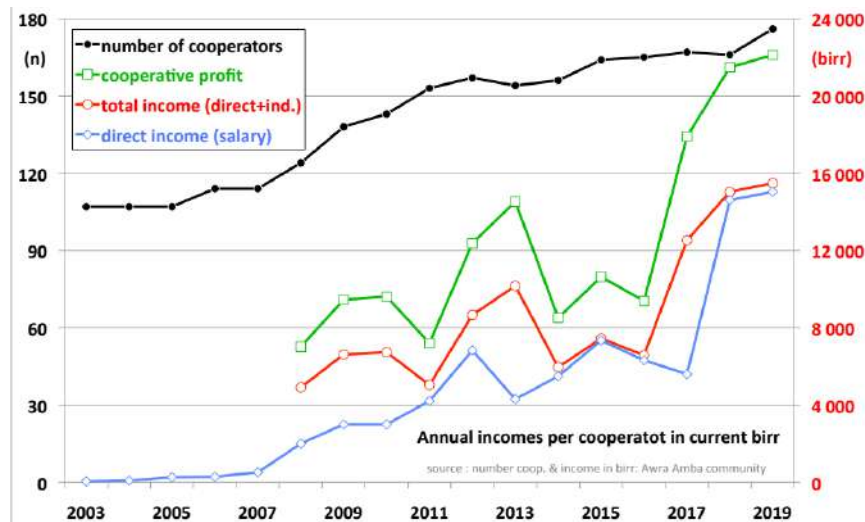


Figure 4: Evolution of the number of cooperators and different annual incomes per cooperator in current birr: direct salary or income, direct and indirect income, and cooperative profit per cooperator. One euro is worth 34.7 birr in 2019. Sources: Chekole (2014: 77) and Awra Amba community (2020a).

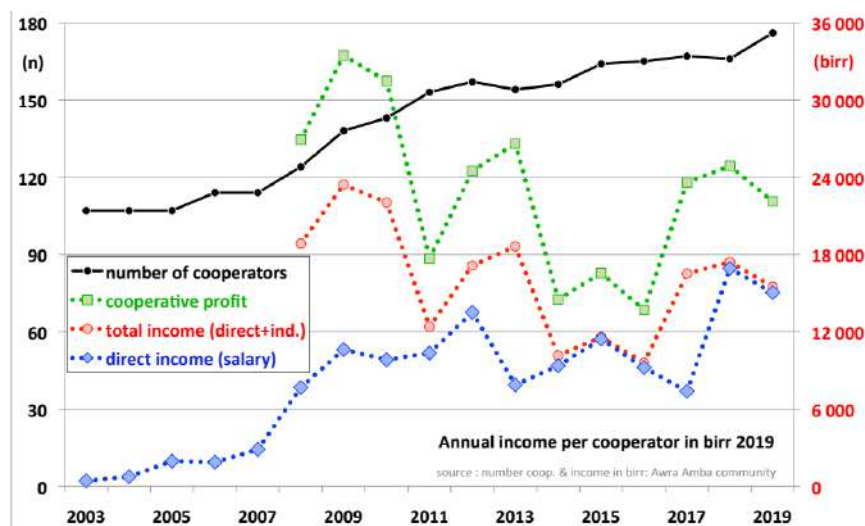


Figure 5: Evolution of the number of cooperators and different annual incomes per cooperator in birrs 2019, i.e. excluding inflation: salary, total income, and cooperative profit per cooperator. Sources: Chekole (2014: 77) and Awra Amba community (2020a).

In addition to the income directly received by the workers in the form of wages, the socialised income is important. The net profit of the cooperative is indeed shared between the reserve (30% as provided for by law <sup>1</sup>), the social security or indirect income (between 1 and 41% from 2008 to 2019,

<sup>8</sup> Seid (2008: 104) gives an annual income in Awra Amba of 1005 birr per person in 2006. But Awra Amba community (2012) cited by Chekole (2014: 77) gives an income per cooperator of 289 birr in the same year. This would mean that by far the bulk of the income would come from private activities, which is contrary to what is known elsewhere.

<sup>1</sup> Cooperative societies (amendment) proclamation No. 402/2004.

20% on average), and the direct wages (between 29 and 69%, 50% on average).<sup>1</sup> Indirect income thus amounts to 40% of wages on average, and is added to give total income.

To appreciate the level of income in relation to the national situation, one can compare it to the average Ethiopian or Amhara income, which are very close. The average annual consumption per adult is 12,340 birr in the Amhara Region in 2016, which is significantly higher than the direct income or total income of the cooperators. It can also be compared to the poverty line. The poverty line is based on the food basket required to meet the minimum daily calorie intake plus non-food consumption. The poverty line was 3,781 birr in 2011 and 7,184 birr in 2016 according to the World Bank.<sup>2</sup> Both wages and total income are slightly above the poverty line in 2011 (+11 and +33% respectively), and slightly below in 2016 (-12 and -8% respectively). However, 2011 and 2016 are bad years for the cooperative, with indirect wages – which ultimately contribute to household consumption – particularly low. Excluding inflation, average direct income and total income over the 2008-2019 period are respectively 17% and 68% above their 2016 values. This suggests that, on average over the period 2008-2019, direct income and total income per cooperator should be 3 and 54% above the poverty line respectively. The standard of living afforded by the income of cooperators over the period is therefore approximately slightly above the poverty line, while 26% of the rural Ethiopian population is below the poverty line in 2016<sup>3</sup>.

Furthermore, there seems to be quite a large disparity in living standards within the community, especially between the weavers and Zumra's relatives, according to the fairly recent testimonies of a teacher and a member of the cooperative<sup>4</sup>. Are these differences due to the private activities of the elite? It is difficult to know, as it is difficult to have any solid information on the actual economic disparities within Awra Amba.

#### **4.5.5. Strengths and weaknesses**

Contrary to what an author claims in 2013 after a survey in late 2012-early 2013<sup>5</sup>, one of Awra Amba's strengths is that its sources of income are quite diversified, since 2010 at least. However, they are not very autonomous, Awra Amba being dependent on the outside for most of its income, for weaving, trade outside the community, or tourism. Only its public services and its agricultural activity (especially market gardening) can be used directly by the inhabitants. This situation, which is the consequence of the drastic lack of agricultural land, has shown its weakness during the Covid-19 pandemic, where most of Awra Amba's sources of income have dried up due to lockdown.

This lack of land is noted by many authors and alarmed some. The economic situation appears to be relatively fragile in the event of a crisis: the community has understood the importance of moving towards food sovereignty by developing market gardening, which remains limited without new land. There would be only two solutions: either increase the available surface area through land redistribution by the state (probably to the detriment of neighbouring communities), or expand elsewhere. The creation of a second Awra Amba could be a solution, either *ex nihilo* in a desert area, or by associating with another community with sufficient agricultural land, which raises the problem of extending or duplicating the Awra Amba's experience that we discuss more generally in section 4.6.1. Without territorial extension, population growth risks transforming Awra Amba into a small town, but with a

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<sup>1</sup> Tesfaye (2017 : 34) and data Awra Amba community (2020a).

<sup>2</sup> World Bank (2020: 37-39).

<sup>3</sup> World Bank (2020: 9, 39).

<sup>4</sup> Østebø (2021: 176, 178).

<sup>5</sup> Alemu *et al.* (2013: 120).

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mode of management which is not that of a municipality. However, the way of life of the inhabitants is already very similar to that of the city dwellers.<sup>1</sup>

Apart from this weakness, Awra Amba's economic strengths are a consequence of their high level of education, gender equality, their constant search for new techniques and *ad hoc* training, and their relative internal unity and solidarity. The significant growth of their income, at least that of cooperators, in constant currency, i.e. excluding inflation, at the end of the 2000s and at the end of the 2010s bears witness to these assets.

Another risk is linked to the double economic structure of Awra Amba: the main structure is the highly egalitarian cooperative which finances a large part of the solidarity of the community as a whole, while the secondary structure brings together the self-employed (members of the cooperative or not) whose participation in the solidarity of the community is unknown. This independent sector could benefit from many opportunities to obtain a high income within the rather unequal Ethiopian economy. These opportunities are particularly strong for those with a very good education, for example in tourism, trade or industry, as well as for those who are close to local or regional power. How can the cooperative integrate people who could get a much higher salary elsewhere or even as a subcontractor of the cooperative<sup>2</sup>, when it provides all its members with the same low salary<sup>3</sup>? In other words, how can an egalitarian micro-society develop in an unequal society? And how can we avoid an elite reserving for itself the best opportunities for gain thanks to its social position? This raises the question of the real distribution of power within Awra Amba.

## 4.6. External relations

A utopian experience questioning Ethiopian traditions, Awra Amba first had to face the hostility of its neighbours and the authorities, before becoming a model and a subject of study for local and national authorities, then for many foreigners. Below we look at the evolution of its relations with neighbours, the potential extension of the model, then relations with the press and the authorities, and finally with foreigners.

### 4.6.1. Relations with neighbours and extension of the model

Awra Amba was, and probably still is, largely an island in the middle of a very conservative Amhara society, even tinged with religious fanaticism<sup>4</sup>. The virtual absence of religion in Awra Amba, and at the very least the absence of any religious rite (see section 3.6) appears to be the main obstacle to relations with its neighbours<sup>5</sup>. Indeed, in northern Ethiopia, although religious freedom is guaranteed by the Constitution, not belonging to one of the two orthodox or Muslim religions relegates you to

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<sup>1</sup> Chekole (2014: 92-93).

<sup>2</sup> For example, a child from the community, a professional guide, preferred to be an employee of the cooperative rather than a cooperator (Pastor, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> At the global level cooperatives account for 12% of employment. However, few cooperatives practice equal pay. In France, for example, on average, and all functions combined, the salaries paid in cooperative societies are within the range of those of conventional enterprises of the same size or in the same sector, and therefore with a similar salary scale. Sources: <https://www.ica.coop/fr/coop%C3%A9ratives/quest-ce-que-cooperative>, [https://www.lemonde.fr/entreprises/article/2016/05/06/travailler-en-scop-qu-est-ce-que-ca-change-pour-le-salarie\\_4915109\\_1656994.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/entreprises/article/2016/05/06/travailler-en-scop-qu-est-ce-que-ca-change-pour-le-salarie_4915109_1656994.html)

<sup>4</sup> Pratt & Earle (2004: 10), Assefa (2013: 2).

<sup>5</sup> Asnake (2005: 32), Abebaw (2007: 63), Alemu (2013: 117), Østebø (2021 : 154).



the margins of society <sup>1</sup>. No doubt added to this is the overly discreet funerals that shock neighbours (see section 4.3) <sup>2</sup>. At the same time, the members of the Awra Amba community, at least probably the natives of the village, are shocked by the marginalisation and discrimination of women in the surrounding society <sup>3</sup>.

These major cultural differences have five consequences in particular:

- Slander mixed with jealousy: the community may have been perceived as a group of suspicious, secretive, cruel, and even sometimes lazy pagans, where everything is collective, including women and children, and where marriages are arranged by the chief... <sup>4</sup>
- Difficult relations between the children of neighbours and those of the community: in primary school, during playtimes and after school, on the one hand, the children of Awra Amba rather than playing prefer to work, participate in extra-curricular activities or discuss the different school subjects; on the other hand, the children of neighbours are reluctant to mix with children seen as having no religion, who moreover never invoke God or Allah as others do to support their words by using for example interjections such as *Wollahi* or *Egziabherin* which mean "by God" for Muslims and Christians respectively: "*How can I play with someone who has no religion?*" concludes a pupil from a nearby village. Finally, when the school was quite far away from Awra Amba, the young people of Awra Amba always refused to go to the café to drink tea or beer (*tela*) like the pupils in the neighbourhood, which did not facilitate relations. <sup>5</sup>
- Insecurity for community members: two authors who investigated in 2006 and 2011 note that Zumra cannot move to neighbouring villages for fear of troubles <sup>6</sup>. In the village of Awra Amba itself, he is always accompanied by an armed guard (see Picture 7 on page 22), at least until 2011, while the village is guarded at night by the inhabitants in turn at the four guard posts, which is unusual in Ethiopia <sup>7</sup>. It is true that young people from neighbouring villages have often come to perpetrate some mischief in Awra Amba <sup>8</sup> and that the village had even had to face serious attacks <sup>9</sup>. If the situation seems to have gradually calmed down, one author, however, notes that in 2014 both women and men in Awra Amba do not cross into neighbouring villages for fear of being attacked <sup>10</sup>.
- Awra Amba's perception of the surrounding communities as antagonistic of their philosophy, values and lifestyle and therefore irreconcilable, and enemies especially after the conflicts of the first decades. <sup>11</sup> "*If we were to be like Awra Amba, how can we keep our religion? How can we celebrate our holidays if we have to work the whole time?*" said a young farmer from the next village in the late 2010s <sup>12</sup>.
- A fold of Awra Amba on himself: because of their principles, members of the community present

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<sup>1</sup> Tilahun C. (2012: 99).

<sup>2</sup> Abebaw (2007: 63).

<sup>3</sup> Alemu (2013: 69).

<sup>4</sup> Solomon (2005: 41, 66), Abebaw (2007: 66), Seid (2008: 118).

<sup>5</sup> Abebaw (2007: 72, 76-77, 83).

<sup>6</sup> Abebaw (2007: 64), Tilahun C. (2012: 114).

<sup>7</sup> Joumard (2012: 22), Tilahun C. (2012 : 114).

<sup>8</sup> Chekole (2014: 89).

<sup>9</sup> Eskinder (2013: 300).

<sup>10</sup> Solomon (2015: 62).

<sup>11</sup> Mengesha *et al.* (2015: 170).

<sup>12</sup> Østebø (2021: 154).

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in the surrounding markets never go to drink even a tea at the neighbouring cafés, which makes a 60-year-old neighbour in 2004 think that they “*are ashamed of their deviant behaviour and afraid of what they might suspect of their opponents.*”; neither do they participate in weddings in neighbouring villages.<sup>1</sup> Relations with neighbours are therefore essentially economic. Several authors note the lack of interest of the inhabitants of Awra Amba in their neighbours, not seeking to discuss with them or visit them, while willingly answering their questions; some local communities also criticise Awra Amba leaders for privileging relations with universities or at the national level and neglecting them. This distance is sometimes seen as condescension on the part of community members who are overconfident of the superiority of their culture and society.<sup>2</sup>

However, this break and mutual rejection has faded over time for a number of reasons:

- Awra Amba was able to respond to violence with non-violence, as Zumra testifies several years later, in 2011: “*One day, our neighbours crossed over to our territory and came to attack us, fully armed and determined to turn our small village into dusts. We did not know how exactly to respond to their attacks, but we surely knew that their violent threats of attack should not be responded violently. No! No! Violence only breeds violence and it is only through love that one day ‘truth’ could get the opportunity to be revealed. So, I thought for a moment and decided something, which was a bit funny. What I did, was that I went to the shop and bought a ball! Then we all – girls, boys, men, women – mixed and began to play football. Honestly, we had never played football before, but that was the only thing that flashed into my mind faced as we were with this grave threat. By our very act, the people that came to attack us get confused and they seemed to be thinking ‘we are coming to attack them and how dare they play football!’.* Then, they became suspicious that there should be something or somebody behind our confidence and, thus, managed to observe us without performing any act. This continued for three consecutive days until they became hopelessly confused, and for being suspicious, decided to leave us doing the thing that we had done for three days.”<sup>3</sup>
- Neighbors, and first and foremost the younger ones, appreciate the honesty, hard work and even equality of the members of the community<sup>4</sup>.
- They also appreciate the services provided by the community (mills, health centre, grocery shops, fabrics, cafeteria, etc.)<sup>5</sup>.
- The community organises training for people from neighbouring communities, such as in 2015 a three-day training of health extension workers to build a stove in collaboration with an international NGO<sup>6</sup>.
- Contacts between children, mainly through school, are more and more numerous and friendly. Through this, the community comes into contact with the entire school recruitment pool, i.e. around 30,000 people.<sup>7</sup>
- The media de-dedicates and promotes Awra Amba through their broadcasts on the community's

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<sup>1</sup> Solomon (2005 : 66), Abebaw (2007 : 49).

<sup>2</sup> Abebaw (2007: 67, 69, 71), Alene (2011: 97), Tilahun C. (2012: 84), Mengesha *et al.* (2015: 175).

<sup>3</sup> Eskinder (2013: 300).

<sup>4</sup> Pratt & Earle (2004: 10), Mussa (2004: 41), Solomon (2005: 66).

<sup>5</sup> Mussa (2004: 41), Eskinder (2013: 305), Chekole (2014: 58), Tesfaye (2017: 37).

<sup>6</sup> Østebø (2021: 77).

<sup>7</sup> Asnake (2005: 32), Abebaw (2007: 31), Awra Amba community (2014c), Chekole (2014: 58).

economic successes and by clarifying its values, objectives and way of life <sup>1</sup>.

- Awra Amba is being held up as an example by the regional and national authorities, which can only improve its image in the long run and cause reservations to fade away.
- Awra Amba's fame in Ethiopia and abroad and the very high number of visitors for such a small village undoubtedly impress the closest neighbours <sup>2</sup>.

Today, if not for at least the last ten years, relations with the neighbours seem to have calmed down, hostility has disappeared: the neighbouring communities have evolved as a result of their contact. <sup>3</sup>

However, political violence is very present in Ethiopia with violent and violently repressed demonstrations in recent years that have resulted in hundreds of deaths in a backdrop of ethnic tensions, not to mention the war in nearby Tigray since November 2020. We recall the risk of Zumra's assassination, which led the community to flee precipitously to the South in 1988 (see section 2.3). This temptation to settle ideological differences by force has apparently not disappeared, as a 50-year-old member of the community testified in 2013: *"I think most neighbouring people are waiting for opportunities to attack us simply because we have different life philosophy. Upon the death [August 20th, 2012] of the late Prime Minister, Meles Zenawi, people from our vicinity sought to attack us assuming that the government would collapse. Fortunately, government stability was maintained, and they stopped. However, if in case some political instability occurs, I am sure that they will come and destroy us."* <sup>4</sup> Tensions are high in Ethiopia today, testing the system of ethnic federalism and political stability: Awra Amba could suffer from that, as a collateral victim by neighbours.

As relationships improve, to what extent is Awra Amba's model replicable elsewhere? There is a real risk of failure if a particular measure implemented in the community is simply duplicated, for example the absence of a division of labour between men and women. Since it is the whole set of Awra Amba values, though variously implemented, – equality, solidarity, respect for children, democracy, etc. – that is the key to success, not any particular application. <sup>5</sup> Several authors believe that Awra Amba's experience is quite exportable elsewhere in Ethiopia, apart from religious aspects <sup>6</sup>.

Besides, it seems to have been duplicated by a village called Lulista Mariam. This is a village of about fifty households located about 150 km from Awra Amba to the south-west of Bahir Dar and close to the Bahir Dar - Addis Ababa road (see Figure 1 page 16), in the rural district of Fagita Lekoma in Awi zone of Amhara Region. Awi zone is a zone with a fairly strong presence of non-religious people. <sup>7</sup>

The origin of this duplication is a zonal training course on gender equality in 2006 for inhabitants of the zone coming from different districts, including Fagita Lekoma, represented by about twenty

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<sup>1</sup> Eskinder (2013: 304-305).

<sup>2</sup> Awra Amba community (2014c).

<sup>3</sup> Pratt & Earle (2004: 10), Abebaw (2007: 62, 92), Awra Amba community (2014c), Chekole (2014: 59, 89), Tesfaye (2017: 40).

<sup>4</sup> Mengesha *et al.* (2015: 172).

<sup>5</sup> Alene (2011: 90).

<sup>6</sup> Haileyesus (2010) cited by Teshager (2010: 18), Alene (2011: 95).

<sup>7</sup> Fagita Lekoma district is located at an altitude of between 1900 and 2900 m, with an average temperature of 24°C and a rainfall of 2400 mm. It has a population of 151,000 in 2013, according to Belayneh *et al.* (2018). It is 99.9% Orthodox, in a zone that has a relatively large proportion (0.5%) – compared to the Amhara region where it is only 0.1% – of inhabitants who do not identify themselves as Christians, Muslims or of traditional religion, especially in Guangua (1.6%) and Jawi (2.0%) zones according to CSA (2007).

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people. Awra Amba was presented by the zone organizers as the most successful experience, to which a visit was made soon. Two inhabitants of the commune where Lulista Mariam is located therefore visited Awra Amba and then discussed it within their commune. In the end, only the village of Lulista Mariam tried to put Awra Amba principles into practice. The success of this new experience seems to be due to the qualities and leadership of the Orthodox priest of Lulista Mariam, to a strong collective awareness of the need for change and to the habit of the villagers to cooperate among themselves. <sup>1</sup>

The researcher who reported this story was unfortunately unable to go further in his analysis due to lack of time, for example by focusing on the opinion of the inhabitants of Lulista Mariam towards Awra Amba and especially on the reality of the changes made in this village in relation to the values and behaviours of Awra Amba. At the same time, it is surprising that the members of the Awra Amba community did not attempt to accompany this experience, have never visited them, at least until 2014 <sup>2</sup>. This illustrates, it seems to us, the difficulty for the community to promote their model directly to grassroots communities, i.e. ordinary citizens of rural areas.



*Picture 26: Zumra seated left presenting Awra Amba to Ethiopian visitors in the village centre, April 2010. (Photo of the author)*

#### **4.6.2. Relations with the authorities and the press**

In the early years of the community, relations with the local and regional authorities were deplorable: from 1985 until the community's flight to the south in 1988, relations were very tense, even conflictual, Zumra was thrown into prison without trial, with the authorities pushing the neighbours underhand against Awra Amba: see section 2.3. The press then ignored this experience.

A few years after the fall of the Derg and the community's return to Awra Amba, the Ethiopian press "discovered" Awra Amba and popularized its name and experience <sup>3</sup>. Following its articles, the authorities and intellectuals became interested in it because of its values and principles and the violent relations with its neighbours, which has brought a considerable number of Ethiopian visitors (polit-

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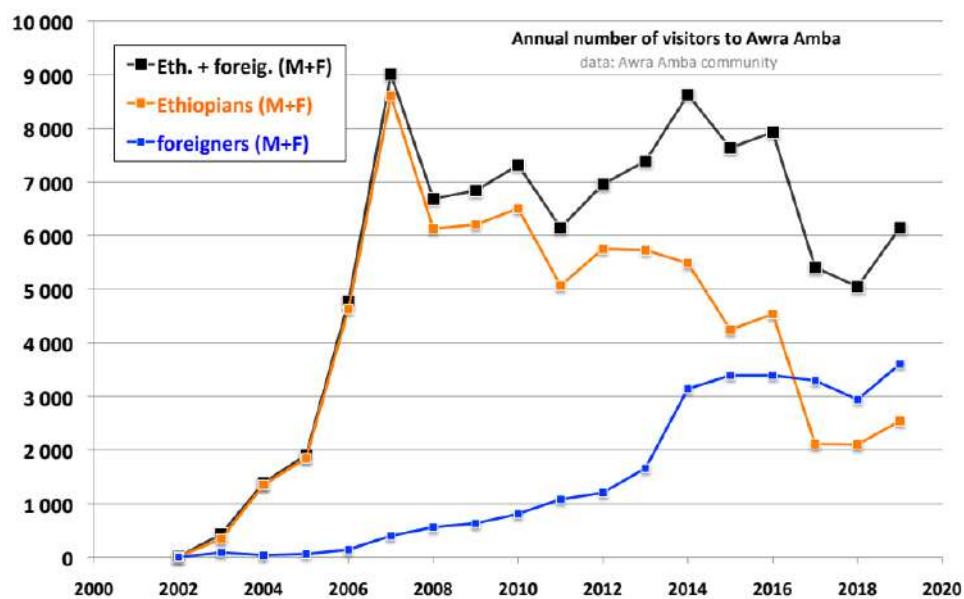
<sup>1</sup> Alene (2011: 99-100).

<sup>2</sup> Awra Amba community (2014c).

<sup>3</sup> Engedayehu (2007: 8) cited by Tilahun C. (2012: 10).

ical leaders, associations, religious leaders, teachers, pupils, students, etc.)<sup>1</sup>. The Amhara government then seeks to protect Awra Amba, to make it known and to duplicate its principles in other communities if possible.<sup>2</sup>

The regional and national authorities finance bus tours of farmers, civil servants and students to Awra Amba<sup>3</sup>: see Picture 26. A visit to Awra Amba can even be part of university programmes, for example for tourism students at the University of Gondar. Several ministers have visited Awra Amba, such as Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Minister of Health from 2005 to 2016 and then Minister of Foreign Affairs (and now Director-General of WHO), Genet Zewde, Minister of Education from 1991 to 2006, Tefera Walwa, Minister of Defence and then Minister of Capacity Building, or Bereket Simon, Minister of Communications from 1995 to 2012.<sup>4</sup>



*Figure 6: Evolution of the number of Ethiopian and foreign visitors to Awra Amba, according to data from Awra Amba community (2020b).*

Hence the number of Ethiopian visitors jumped from 2003 to reach a maximum in 2007 with almost 8500 visitors that year as Figure 6 shows, mainly from December to March<sup>5</sup>. Four guides welcome the visitors on site. The national craze for Awra Amba, at least in terms of visitors, then decreased quite continuously to drop to just over 2000 visitors per year from 2017 onwards. The figures for 2020 can only be very low given the pandemic and lockdown.

The number of Ethiopian women visiting the community remained stable from 2007 to 2016 – close to 2000, dropping to around 850 in recent years: see Figure 7. Men have therefore always been a fairly large majority among national visitors, but the rate of Ethiopian women is continuously increasing, from less than 10% in the early 2000s to around 40% in recent years, which may be explained both by the general evolution of the place of women in Ethiopia and by the specific interest of women in the Awra Amba model.

<sup>1</sup> Assefa (2013: 23).

<sup>2</sup> Mussa (2004: 41), Tilahun C. (2012: 81).

<sup>3</sup> Awra Amba community (2014c).

<sup>4</sup> Østebø (2021: 105, 164-165).

<sup>5</sup> Chekole (2014: 74).

Press articles, reports and these numerous visits have had the effect of popularising this community, with schools changing their name to "Awra Amba" or "addis miera", the name of the community's email address which means "new idea" in Amharic <sup>1</sup>. The university has been interested in this community since the early 2000s, multiplying the research works carried out mainly by master's students: see Annex 1.

The regional authorities are therefore relying on Awra Amba to change society. In addition to the visits, we have seen, for example, that the cooperative trains outsiders.

The recognition of Awra Amba and its notoriety has also translated into aid: it was initially often plated, imposed, without having been developed and requested by the community, which led to failure as we have seen in section 4.5.2. Then external aid sought to support and facilitate community projects, which has led, among other reasons, to the current rather enviable situation.

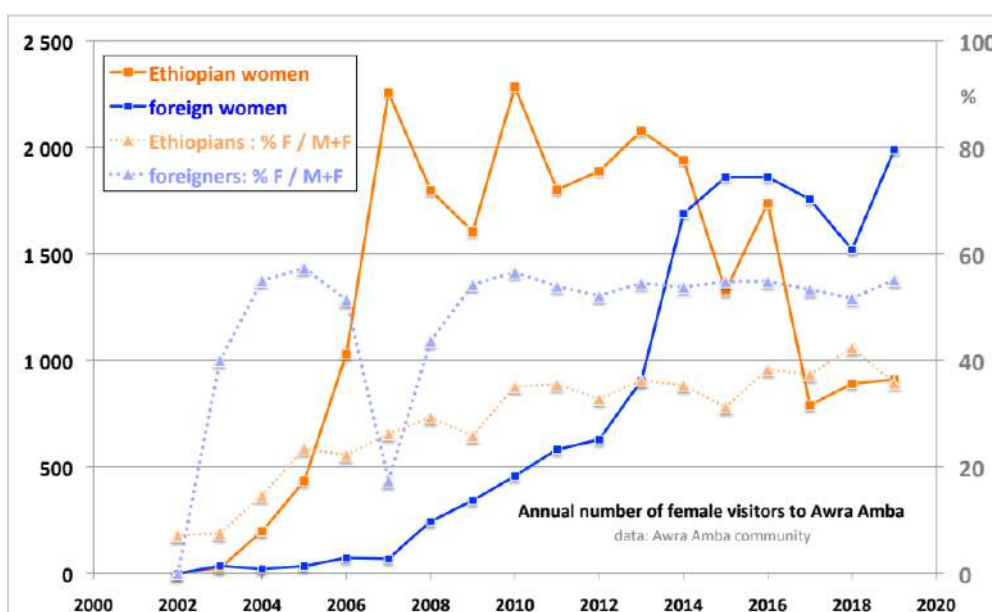


Figure 7: Evolution of the number of Ethiopian and foreign women visiting Awra Amba and of the women ratio among visitors, according to data from Awra Amba community (2020b).

### 4.6.3. International relations

Zumra wants to convert the world to his philosophy, but, some believe, without knowing the realities of this outside world, without Awra Amba being equipped to understand a multi-cultural world. This analysis is based on the will of the community and its leader to maintain their way of life and their autonomy, and therefore to reject many external cultural influences. <sup>2</sup> Autonomy is, however, understood by these researchers as the desire to rely only on internal resources, which in my opinion is a misinterpretation. Awra Amba is indeed very demanding and very open to external technical innovations (insofar as they are not imposed on them) as Zumra defends: "Nowadays, it's hard to rely on existing knowledge. Therefore, it's imperative to integrate the knowledge of others with us; this can be possible through continuous trainings which can much with our ability. We believe in education

<sup>1</sup> Awra Amba community (2014c).

<sup>2</sup> Tilahun C. (2012: 83), Mengesha *et al.* (2015: 175).

*and training; Training! Training!..."*<sup>1</sup>

It was also noted in section 4.5.2 that several foreign governments and NGOs have provided significant support to Awra Amba's development with its consent, although Awra Amba appears to have been initially very wary of support from NGOs and other charities, which were seen to encourage begging and dependency<sup>2</sup>.

On the other hand, the community and first of all Zumra are not very interested in external ideas, ideologies, values and principles, considering that culture, social and human aspects are learned in the community itself and in particular from him, while technology can only come from outside. This is evidenced, for example, by the library, which is very rich for a small village, which in 2010 dealt with 90% languages or exact sciences, with literature being very little present and social sciences practically absent, whereas this almost exclusive attraction for exact sciences and technology seems to be uncommon in Ethiopia.<sup>3</sup> Some of Zumra's statements also bear witness to this, such as the assertion that Awra Amba has no religion, when the issue is not as simple as Zumra seemed to believe, as we show in paragraph 3.6. Literature and, more broadly, the arts or social sciences, make it possible to avoid peremptory assertions and, above all, to be open to the diversity of the world, and to nourish the deterministic approach claimed by Awra Amba.

To assert that Awra Amba is inward-looking and not very open to the world seems to us, however, to be a partial and hasty conclusion. It does correspond to the lack of intellectual openness that we have noted, but does not correspond either to the priority given to education – a prime source of intellectual openness, especially for young people<sup>4</sup> (see section 4.1), nor to the significant flow of foreign visitors for several years as seen below, nor to the trips of Awra Amba representatives abroad. With the arrival of the younger generations, very well educated up to university level for many of them, with peaceful relations with neighbours and the authorities that make unnecessary the initial state of mind of the besieged fortress, with the Awra Amba's overall success, the community is evolving and can open up to the world and intellectual influences, without fear of suffocation because it feels stronger.



*Picture 27: The three Awra Amba members visiting Savoie in France, and Zumra with Pierre Rabhi. (Photos of the author)*

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<sup>1</sup> Chekole (2014: 87).

<sup>2</sup> Mengesha *et al.* (2015: 172).

<sup>3</sup> Joumard (2012: 67).

<sup>4</sup> Chekole (2014: 59).

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Following its international recognition, the community has been invited abroad twice, to our knowledge:

- Zumra, his wife, as well as a third member of the community, Gebeyehu, spent nine days in France from 4 to 13 April 2014 at the invitation of the associations Attac and French Ethiopian Friendship, with funding from the Rhône-Alpes Region. They spoke at public conferences, in a high school and at the university, exchanged at length with Pierre Rabhi and then the leaders of Larzac, gave interviews, and visited organic farms: see Picture 27.
- Zumra and his wife represented Awra Amba at the Terra Madre Taste Fair from 22 to 26 September 2016, in Turin, Italy, at the invitation of Slowfood.

The number of foreign visitors remained very low until 2006, then increased significantly from 2014 onwards, with a delay of around 8 years on the increase of domestic visitors as shown in Figure 6. Since then, the number of foreigners visiting Awra Amba has remained fairly stable at around 3,300 per year, exceeding the number of Ethiopians since 2017, who now represent only 41% of visitors. Women are in the majority, with a fairly stable percentage over the last ten years, close to 54% of foreign visitors, which means that foreign women have been twice as numerous as Ethiopian women since 2017: see Figure 7. Awra Amba has become a tourist destination mentioned by the Ministry of Tourism since the beginning of 2010s, then by major international tourist guides.

Large tourist agencies integrate Awra Amba into their programme as a "visit to a particular village" and bring their clients there who are neither really prepared nor interested. They go around it in an hour and leave without having spoken with the inhabitants or even having a drink or a meal, and sometimes without respecting the principles of the community. As the agencies do not announce their arrival, the organization of the reception is difficult: sometimes there are too many groups and not enough guides, sometimes there is no one there, the reception committee never knows if meals are to be provided or not, etc.

Other visitors spend one or more nights there, taking a closer look at the experience.

The interest of foreigners in Awra Amba is undoubtedly linked, like that of Ethiopians, to the many articles and reports devoted to it by the press and websites. One of the very first articles in the foreign press is arguably the article by Orly Halpern (2007) in the *Christian Science Monitor*. Then there is the film by Paulina Tervo (2009) and more recently the interactive documentary by Paulina Tervo and Serdar Ferit (2016), and in the French-speaking press the article by Antoine Calvino (2009) in *Marie-Claire* or the report by France 24 (2009). Awra Amba has also had some success on the web with many approximations (at least at the beginning) as we had shown<sup>1</sup>.

However, the community is wary of tourism, which can introduce prohibited behaviours in the community such as tobacco or alcohol: the advantages are, however, considered more important than the disadvantages<sup>2</sup>.

In a concern for equality and universality, and despite pressure from the Minister of Tourism, the community applies the same rates for visits, meals and overnight stays for nationals and foreigners, which is very rare in Ethiopia<sup>3</sup>. If Awra Amba's arguments are understandable, it seems to us that they seem to forget that a birr has absolutely not the same value for the average Ethiopian and for the

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<sup>1</sup> Joumard (2010a).

<sup>2</sup> Chekole (2014: 74).

<sup>3</sup> Assefa (2013: 24).



average citizen of the European Union for example: the gross national income<sup>1</sup> per inhabitant in 2019 is \$2,300 for the former, but \$46,500 for the latter, at purchasing power parity, a difference of one to twenty...



*Picture 28: Sign at the entrance of the path leading to Awra Amba for the visitors, in 2013. (Photo J. Boocock)*

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<sup>1</sup> Gross national income is the sum of income (wages and financial income) received during a year in a country. It includes gross domestic product as well as income from other countries (expatriate transfers, dividends, interest, etc.).

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## Conclusion

Awra Amba seems to have been built in part on a myth about its genesis and its relationship with the rest of society.

Thus, from the age of two, its founder would have asked questions of those around him as an adult. By the age of four, he would have asked questions about the injustice of gender inequality, elder abuse, exploitation at work, child punishment and dishonesty. At the age of six, he would have formulated the first four principles of the future community. As a teenager, he is said to have travelled the region in search of disciples, living in great poverty and rejected by his family and society. According to the testimonies of neighbours living next to Awra Amba, he seems to have invented the name of the community and a legend about its local origin. These unimportant details contribute to the construction of a myth, mixing exaggerations and inventions.

We also witness the construction of a visionary Zumra who, without any influence and thanks to his genius alone, worked out the principles of the community and led it, while the community was built up by its own efforts, practically without any help. Marit Østebø <sup>1</sup> speaks in her book of Awra Amba's 'immaculate conception', which seems to us to be quite accurate.

Thus, Zumra would not have been influenced ideologically by either the Alayhim Sufi community or the cooperative movement. We have seen that the Alayhim community undoubtedly played a major role in the Awra Amba project. As for the cooperative movement, it has been very influential in Ethiopia for fifty years. How can we imagine that Zumra alone formulated the idea of a cooperative when at the same time they were flourishing, not to mention the cooperative initiated by the Alayhim?

Once recognised, the community gives the impression in its institutional communication, for example in the document "Journey to peace" <sup>2</sup>, in its oral presentations to visitors or on the walls of the reception hall and its small museum, that it has built its facilities and infrastructures alone. Yet we have seen the considerable help it has received from Ethiopian authorities, foreign governments, Ethiopian and foreign NGOs and individuals. However, unlike the influence of the Alayhim and the cooperative movement, the aid is not denied, but only discreetly passed over.

Marit Østebø <sup>3</sup> also notes the influence of the ideological line of the Ethiopian government as well as global institutions, with Awra Amba conforming to the neo-liberal entrepreneurial ideology of its main donors giving priority to the market, which would explain the aid received. Influence, but influence in silence.

This construction of a visionary genius, fighting against society to bring about a better world, building a kind of paradise on earth with only his followers, is inevitably reminiscent of Jesus Christ or Mohammad, as the Bible and the Koran tell the story. Zumra is almost considered a prophet, an extraordinary man who is worshipped. An elderly man who was very close to Zumra did not hesitate to make this comparison in front of cooperators gathered one evening in front of Zumra's house <sup>4</sup>: "*The*

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<sup>1</sup> Østebø (2021: 98).

<sup>2</sup> Awra Amba community (2015a).

<sup>3</sup> Østebø (2021: 75, 79, 82).

<sup>4</sup> Østebø (2021: 174).

*Prophet Muhammad only worked for the Muslims and Jesus only worked for the Christians. Zumra has, however, since the time he started, worked for the global community." Zumra better than Mohammad or Jesus Christ...*

Alongside these exaggerations and arrangements with reality, there are also problematic realities that are erased from the discourse and, above all, denied, i.e. lies. For example, the many exclusions, the conditions of which deserve to be analysed in order to assess the extent to which the rules were respected and to understand the real reasons for them; or the existence of an elite around Zumra, including his wife and eldest son, which can be seen in several testimonies and studies; or, more broadly, significant inequalities within a theoretically egalitarian community. These disturbing realities or suspicions of disturbing realities raise the question of the distribution of power within the cooperative and the community and therefore of their democratic character.

The lies or semi-lies above question in particular the value of honesty claimed by the community.

What could be the reasons for the construction of this myth? Let us first note that models – always more or less associated with myths – have always been numerous in Ethiopia. The phenomenon of model farmers dates back to the 1960s and continued in the form of model cooperatives or model villages. Then in the 2010s, role models abound at all levels, from model women to model cooperatives to model students. Awra Amba is thus part of a long tradition of models and myths, not to mention religious myths. The model is an image, either totally imagined or from the real world, corresponding to a political project and ideology on the one hand, and a desire on the other.<sup>1</sup> The model's characteristics of simplicity, linearity and extraordinariness (a single founder who invented everything, a linear story with a single actor facing the whole society) favour its recognition and identification with the desires of its admirers: a beautiful and simple story is easier to remember and admire than a complex story with multiple actors, simply human with their qualities and defects, and who are divided as to the directions to take. Hence the creation of a myth as a political tool.

The partly mythical character of Awra Amba further serves Zumra's position within the community, as the myth is as powerful towards community members as it is towards outsiders. It is an important ingredient in the idolatry of which he is the object, to be compared with the religious veneration that permeates Ethiopian culture. This is, in our opinion, the main reason why Zumra and his close circle created the mythical aspects of Awra Amba. The myth serves the power of the one who constructed it and those who nurture it.

The picture might look bleak. In reality, it is rather contrasted, like any human society. Since besides the exaggerations, the invented stories and the denied realities, Awra Amba is also a progressive reality in many ways.

Gender equality is one of the community's successes, and not the least. Although not all tasks are strictly shared equally between the sexes, gender equality is not only reflected in a fair and non-gendered sharing, strong participation of women in local institutions, equal access to education, but most importantly in a similar self-perception between men and women, both masculine and feminine. Most importantly, the imaginaries associated with the masculine and feminine have been profoundly altered, with non-biological differences between the sexes virtually eliminated.

What is sometimes called the golden rule, i.e. treating others as you would like to be treated yourself, seems to be a reality of everyday life that makes it very peaceful. It is expressed in terms of honesty, refusal of addictions, mutual respect, especially for children who have specific rights, and dignity. This value is at the origin of a very elaborate system for detecting emerging conflicts and managing

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<sup>1</sup> Østebø (2021: 58, 75, 79-84, 133, 190).

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them, which seems to be effective, except in the most serious cases leading to exclusion. But here again, daily life is transformed. On the other hand, in the most serious cases of opposition to the model, or perhaps a challenge to power, the golden rule no longer seems very operational.

Equality between members, especially within the cooperative, which is the principle, seems to be largely respected, even if a more in-depth analysis would be welcome. The same is true of solidarity, thanks to the establishment of a local social security system backed up by substantial financial participation.

Another major success is the priority given to education and training for both children and adults, in order to break away from the conservatism and traditions of rural Ethiopia. The investment of time and materials in education is therefore extremely high in this community created by illiterate peasants. As a result, the adult illiteracy rate is much lower than that of rural communities in the region, and all children attend school for as long as their abilities allow; the proportion of university students and university-educated adults is exceptional, about six times higher than in the general population.

This high level of training and education has undoubtedly encouraged the diversification of economic activities. Initially limited to traditional agriculture and weaving, they now include market gardening, modern weaving, flour milling, oil production, trade and tourism. The priority given to work, tinged with rigorism, has enabled the community to greatly improve its standard of living, and to escape from extreme poverty for some. Work leaves little room for leisure and pleasure, and borders on rigorism. Economic activities are very diversified, which is a guarantee of stability for the future. This diversification undoubtedly owes much to Zumra's qualities, always on the lookout for new technologies.

Finally, the refusal of all religious rites and, above all, the trust in human beings to improve their condition without any supernatural power governing their lives, and therefore alone responsible for their present and future, are quite exceptional in Ethiopia, which brings Awra Amba closer to the atheistic and rationalist convictions of a part of the world.

The Awra Amba utopia is thus far from being a myth and has largely become reality. The Awra Amba model undoubtedly corresponds in part to the expectations of the authorities and public bodies that support it, but differs in several of its characteristics, such as honesty, the golden rule, equality, rationalism and the absence of religion. These values are more in line with the expectations of the many citizens and citizens' organisations that support Awra Amba.

If Awra Amba interests so many Ethiopians and foreigners, it is undoubtedly because it represents for them a hope of emancipation. However, its values are hardly original, since equality, solidarity, rationalism, and the power of those left behind have long been at the heart of the many emancipation movements around the world. The exception is honesty and more generally the golden rule, which are explicitly claimed here and widely applied, albeit imperfectly as we have seen. However, apart from Awra Amba, although these two values are part of the moral basis of societies, they are hardly claimed by social and political movements and even less applied in social life.

In our opinion, the originality of Awra Amba and its power of attraction come from several factors:

- It is a utopia imagined and implemented by common people, that is, by people who have no particular title to exercise power: not intellectuals, but illiterate people; not members of the elite, but simple peasants; not Europeans or North Americans, but citizens of one of the poorest countries in the world.
- Values are put into practice, with ideals becoming norms of everyday life. This characteristic is specific to all the utopian communities that have marked out history, from the Adamites in Bo-

hemia in the 15<sup>th</sup> century to the still current Auroville adventure in India, including Robert Owen's model factories in the 1820s in Great Britain and in the United States, the Familistère of Guise in France in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and even the Mozabites of the Algerian Sahara. Each utopian community creates a society governed by its own rules and puts its values into practice, more or less. This is not always the case elsewhere, as reality sometimes bears little relation to stated values and ideals.

- A somewhat marvellous model, with a marginal as central character, who succeeds against all odds in imposing his humanist vision.

Many researchers among those who have studied Awra Amba are nevertheless quite critical and skeptical about the sustainability of this experience. On the other hand, it should be noted that the community will soon celebrate its fiftieth anniversary, in 2022: its longevity is already remarkable when compared to countless utopian communities that have died out in less than a generation, if we exclude the rare well-known utopias, precisely because of their longevity. Awra Amba could moreover join this rather closed club of relatively perennial utopias.

We insisted on the monopolisation or risk of monopolisation of power by its leader and a few relatives. The risk is a real one, as examples are legion in the history of nations and organisations, including among the undoubtedly emancipatory projects at the outset. It is to be hoped that the community will be able to react to this drift, otherwise the model will quickly become a counter-model, with all the negative consequences that one can imagine.

The other risk, in our opinion, is the dominant world culture, consumerist and neoliberal, in front of which many societies with little economic or ideological tools are giving way: it is often the struggle between a David and a Goliath. It is all the more difficult to resist it because it is not well known, because we are not able to know its strengths and weaknesses, nor to know who to rely on. The disinterest of the leader of Awra Amba in human and social sciences or literature to the benefit of technical knowledge alone seems to us problematic from this point of view. On the other hand, the university education of many Awra Amba's children is a guarantee of intellectual openness and openness to the world, which is very positive. Let's hope that it is not just technical, but also open to the human and social sciences.

The state of knowledge on Awra Amba that we have attempted to make here leads us to mention four lines of research that seem to us to be lacking:

- Most of the research work on Awra Amba is done in human and social sciences and very little in biology, agronomy or engineering sciences. As the community seems to have embarked itself into market gardening or even organic farming in recent years, this could be an interesting field of investigation.
- As most of the history reported by the different authors originates from interviews with Zumra, the known history is that seen by one of the actors, even if he is the main one. Other testimonies give a different view, but they are rare. Broadening the circle of witnesses to include the few surviving founders, former community members, teachers from nearby schools and other officials living in or near the community, and neighbours would enrich the story. In addition, many actors and witnesses are external to the community, whether they are the people the founders of the community met in the Amhara Region and in exile, or the political, administrative or economic officials they dealt with. All these witnesses and actors should make it possible to specify the chronology, clarify the role of the various actors, and finally to better understand this utopia.
- Thirdly, the question of power within the community is particularly obscure, between the ex-

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tremely positive image given by the local elite and the few divergent accounts. Who participates in the general assemblies and committees, what is the distribution of power within them, what are the real mechanisms of decision-making? How is power shared within the cooperative? While such a study is by nature difficult to envisage within the community, external witnesses, of which there are many, could no doubt provide useful insights.

- Fourth, study the distribution of income in the community: what is the share of the different sources? Which channels contribute to the standard of living of different members? What distribution of income can be observed? This would help to objectify the level of equality and solidarity within the community.

Finally, this bibliographical synthesis on a particular subject, a small community - Awra Amba, which nevertheless mobilised several dozen researchers, showed us the extent to which this research work remains unknown to the researchers themselves, and therefore to the press and the public. The accessibility of research work is indeed regrettably low, which calls into question the usefulness of the research. We hope that this research will contribute to the dissemination of the results of this very rich body of work.



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## Annex 1: Scientific production on Awra Amba

### Status of publications and research

To our knowledge, the Awra Amba community has been so far the subject of 49 scientific publications, in the form of university reports (31), reports from consultancy firms or NGOs (2), scientific articles (11), books (3) or of an indeterminate type (2). But as some works have been the subject of two or three publications, this corresponds to 43 original research works. All these publications are in English. They are listed in the list of references at the end of the report.

Out of these 49 publications, we have only obtained 32 publications through the web, from Ethiopian researchers or the Awra Amba community, corresponding to 30 original works<sup>1</sup> (see Table 6).

	Number of publications	...of which duplicates	Number of original research
Publications obtained	32	2	30
Publications not obtained	17	4	14
Publications obtained or not	49	6	43

Table 6: Number of publications obtained or not and correspondence with the number of original research works.

24 of these research works were carried out by Ethiopian researchers, and 6 by foreign researchers. The remaining 17 publications that we did not obtain are references cited in publications that we may have read or obtained through search engines, but were unable to consult; they are usually works carried out by students in Ethiopian universities that are not subsequently published. We were unable to obtain these reports which are not available on the web, either because we were unable to contact their authors or the relevant academic services, or because the contacts were unsuccessful. The only exception is Feyissa's master's thesis in anthropology (2010) which contains personal data and is therefore not disseminated for ethical reasons.

The publications consulted often indicate the period during which the *in situ* surveys were carried out, obviously prior to the date of publication. The time between the survey and the first publication is on average about 19 months. The number of research works conducted each year peaked in 2011 before decreasing: it has been close to one search every year since 2015 (see Table 6 and Figure 8). Over the whole period, there have been about 1.5 research projects conducted each year since 2002 (considering only those for which we have obtained publications).

Among the 28 academic works consulted, 22 are from Ethiopian universities (14 from Addis Ababa, 5 from Gondar, 1 from Bahir Dar, 1 from Mekele and 1 from Woleita Sodo) and 6 from foreign universities (2 from Norway, 1 from Sweden, 1 from the United Kingdom, 1 from Japan and 1 from the

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<sup>1</sup> We do not include here some academic publications on Awra Amba that provide very little information or are only bibliographic, nor our own previous publications: Dereje (2013), Mengitsu (2014), Østebø (2018) on the one hand, and Jourard (2010a, b, 2012) on the other hand.



US). It should be noted that one of the first research studies, carried out at Addis Ababa University (Solomon, 2005), was funded by the Austrian embassy and the NGO Action Aid Ethiopia. 11 of these works were carried out by researchers employed by a university and 17 by students, as part of a bachelor's degree (1 case) or a master's degree (16 cases). We did not obtain and therefore could not consult any doctoral thesis on Awra Amba, but one thesis was apparently defended in 2008<sup>1</sup>.

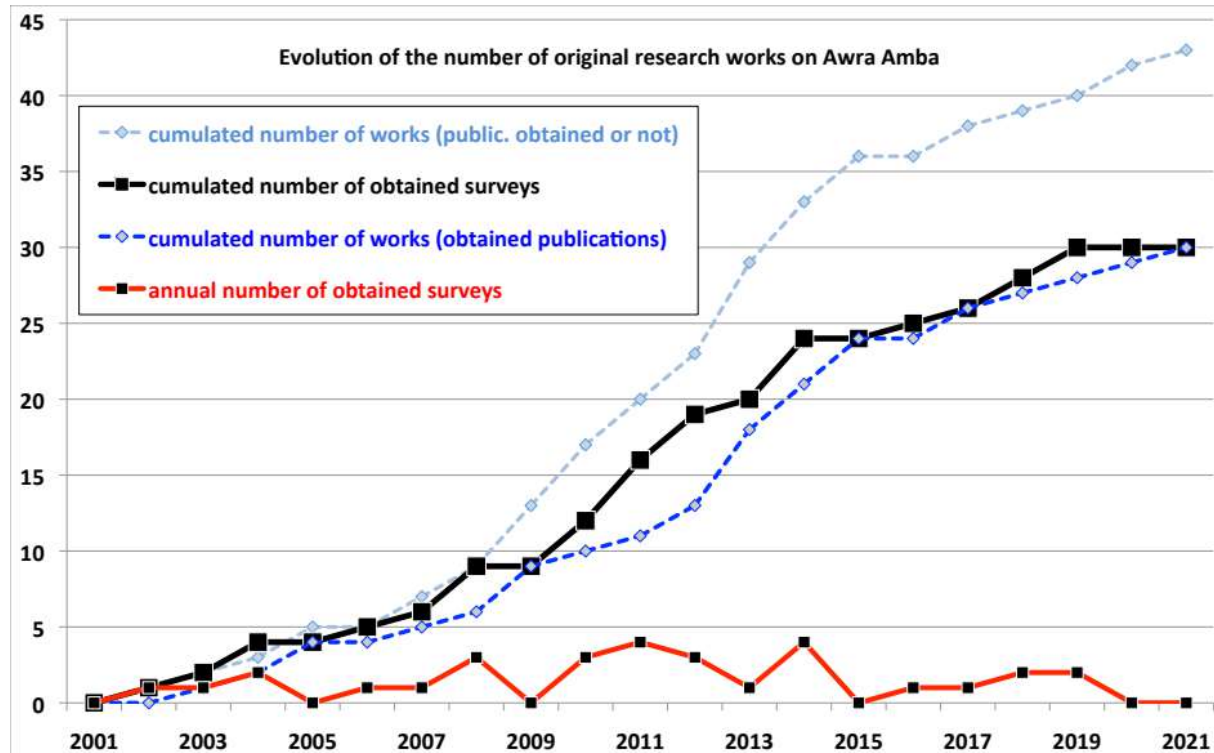


Figure 8: Evolution of the only original research works on Awra Amba, as a function of their year of publication or of year of in-situ survey. For example, for the year 2013, we obtained only one paper relating to a survey conducted the same year, and obtained publications of 20 research works carried out up to 2013; 18 research works from which we obtained a publication were published till 2013; and 29 research works were published in 2013 or earlier, regardless of whether we obtained these publications or not.

The disciplines involved are very varied, but three quarters of them are in the humanities:

- 4 in education sciences: Abebaw (2007; 2010), Genet (2009), Assefa (2013), and Barnes (2019),
- 3 in languages: Teshager (2010), Alemu (2013), and Alemu *et al.* (2013),
- 3 in psychology: Asnake (2005), Seid (2009; 2015), and Missaye *et al.* (2014),
- 3 in sociology: Solomon (2005), Chekole (2014), and Mengesha *et al.* (2015),
- 3 in economics: Kassaw (2018), as well as Fantahun (2003) and Mussa (2004) carried out by consultancy firms,
- 2 in anthropology: Itagaki (2013), and Østebø (2021),
- 2 in development sciences: Alene (2011), and Tesfaye (2017),
- 2 in peace sciences: Merhatsik (2009), and Eskinder (2013) – also published by Guday and Eskinder (2013),

<sup>1</sup> Wade (2008).

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- 1 in communication sciences: Tilahun C. (2012),
  - 1 in law: Solomon (2015),
  - 1 in agriculture: Seid (2008),
  - 2 in medicine: Yihene *et al.* (2014), and Arvidsson and Sandgren (2015),
  - 3 in engineering: Seifu *et al.* (2012), Dino and Alemu (2017), and Mulugeta (2020).

For 26 of the 30 research works consulted, Awra Amba is at the heart of their subject, even if its situation is sometimes compared to that of one or two other communities. For 4 research works, Awra Amba only holds a very marginal place in the study. This more or less marginal position of Awra Amba in the research is differentiated in the list of references at the end of the book.

### **Name of Awra Amba in publications**

Scientific publications (43 in number <sup>1</sup>) use the name Awra Amba in 53% of cases, Awramba in 28% of cases, Awura Amba in 9% of cases, Awuramba in 7% of cases, and finally Awora Amba in 2% of cases. If we add the 9 press articles consulted (in English), the percentages are 60, 25, 8, 6 and 2% respectively.

### **Methodological aspects**

Some of the academic research synthesised here does not always meet the standards of scientific research:

- The indication of sources which ensures transparency: three of the 32 publications studied cite sources without giving the exact reference.
- Respect for ethics: research ethics require that reports and articles be anonymised. This aims to ensure that no personal data and no answers can be attributed to any of the private individuals interviewed or studied, in order to ensure the confidentiality of the answers. This confidentiality is indispensable from an ethical point of view and also allows a freer and therefore richer expression of the interviewees. This does not apply to persons interviewed or studied because of their responsibilities (representing an organisation in its capacity ...), unless explicitly requested. Two of the authors cite the names of the private individuals they interviewed and reproduce non-anonymised personal information<sup>2</sup>. Research ethics further prohibit copying verbatim sentences from another author without reference to them, that one of the authors studied does on several occasions.
- The absence of gratuitous assertions or conclusions: assertions and conclusions must be based either on the synthesis of the literature or on the data collected. Six of the 32 publications obtained do not comply with this requirement, allowing themselves to make peremptory and trenchant assertions, sometimes on major subjects: their publications then partly reflect their personal convictions more than the results of their research.
- Non-induction of answers by the questions asked to the interviewees: two of the authors in particular administer a rather poorly done questionnaire insofar as many questions induce the answer. For example, the questions "Do you believe that individual rights are respected in the

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<sup>1</sup> That is 30 researches consulted and 13 publications not obtained which have the name of the community in their title.

<sup>2</sup> Another author was obliged not to make his research report public because he did not comply with this obligation, which decreases a lot the interest of his work, which we did not obtain.

community? Yes / No” or “Do children used to work balanced to their age? Yes / No” are more likely to elicit positive responses.

- The method followed by the research must be precisely and clearly indicated, as this is an important element allowing to assess the interest and quality of the study. Almost half of the publications do not specify the date or duration of the field survey that is part of the method. The date makes it possible in particular to precisely date the information given in order to study, for example, the evolution of the community. In some cases, the method is presented too succinctly, which makes it impossible to assess its validity.

This failure to comply with scientific standards is not a formal question, but an indicator of the sometimes questionable scientific quality of the studies, as these standards are part of the scientific method that ensures the quality of the results.

Moreover, as is the rule, research in the human and social sciences is based on interviews and focus group discussions. Many of the studies consulted synthesise the results of such interviews in order to measure behaviours regarding gender, internal democracy, rules, sources of livelihood, etc. However, this only makes it possible to measure the interviewees' perception of these behaviours. For example, the question "Do you benefit from the mass media? Yes / No” cannot in any way assess the extent to which interviewees actually have access to the mass media and to what extent they benefit from it – this would have required, for example, a closed question on the frequency of access to different mass media; this question only measures the opinion of each person on their own information, which is an interesting but different piece of data. The relatively limited means of the studies probably hardly allowed for more comprehensive explorations.

Few researchers, especially students, seem to be aware of this difference between perception and reality according to the publications. Rare are also the authors who have hindsight in relation to what the interviewees say, which would provide them with a critical view that is often necessary. Some, however, have this critical view either by interviewing people outside Awra Amba<sup>1</sup>, or by highlighting realities that hardly correspond to the discourse<sup>2</sup>. However, a critical look is quite difficult given the relatively short duration of the *in situ* studies, which rarely allows one to get to the bottom of things.

The hindsight is all the more important given that some have recruited their informants from or through community leaders, who naturally transmit the dominant discourse<sup>3</sup>. For example, one of the authors interviewed six adults and six children. Among the six adults interviewed are three members of the reception committee, including the community leader. The children interviewed were chosen by this same community leader and his wife, including their own children. There is therefore a significant bias, because they are surely children who know well and respect the values of the community. There is therefore a strong risk one will get the official word, i.e. the image that the community wants to give of itself. Other researchers, however, take a critical look at the dominant discourse. This may call into question some of the observations made by researchers, who rely on the words of leaders or people very close to the leaders.

Finally, Awra Amba is a small community of 400 to 500 people depending on the year, 40% of whom are children under the age of fifteen, which has been the subject of much research, which receives many journalists, leaders of public organisations and private visitors. Its members are therefore

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<sup>1</sup> Solomon (2005), Abebaw (2007), Genet (2009), Merhatsidk (2009), Alemu (2013), Guday and Eskinder (2013) (and Eskinder, 2013), Yihenew *et al.* (2014), Østebø (2021).

<sup>2</sup> This is only the case of Tilahun C. (2012) and Østebø (2021).

<sup>3</sup> Østebø (2021) has particularly studied this aspect.

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somewhat tired of answering all their questions, especially the time-consuming investigations of researchers. Interviews often take place at work in conditions that are far from calm. All this does not favour the quality of the answers and ultimately the quality of the research results.<sup>1</sup>

Most of these methodological weaknesses are probably due to the status of the researchers: only one third of the research is carried out by researchers employed by organisations, most of it by master's students, whose it is the first real research experience. The duration of the research is therefore quite short (from one day to a few months *in situ*, one month on average; probably a few months to 2-3 years of full-time work all included).

### **Dissemination and referencing of research**

While most research refers to many general scientific works that are not specifically related to Awra Amba, is previous research done on Awra Amba part of the references cited by work on Awra Amba that we obtained? We calculate the number of references dealing with Awra Amba cited by each of the works on Awra Amba consulted (see Table 7). The 30 studies cite from 0 to 8 previous works on Awra Amba, or 1.3 on average. As the number of research works increases over time, the number of references to these works should be higher at the end of the period under review (2002-2021), but this is not really the case.

In addition, we are looking for other previous work on Awra Amba that could usefully be cited by each study depending on the proximity of the themes. As many of the research studies provide information on Awra Amba that is much broader than their specific topic, the number of potentially useful works is proportionally quite high. The estimation of potentially useful references is obviously not very precise, as each author may quite consider this or that reference without interest whereas we considered it *a priori* as potentially useful. The number of potentially useful references (including those actually cited) ranges from 0 to 26, with an average of 6.2. The actual figure of 1.3 citations therefore gives a rate of 28% of citations compared to the potential number of 6.2. If this actual/potential citation rate is calculated for each study, this gives an average percentage of 20% (average of rates).

When we now look at the number of times each of the scientific works on Awra Amba is cited by the other authors who worked on Awra Amba, only 5 studies are cited a few times: Solomon (2005) 8 times, Abebaw (2007) 7 times, Seid (2008) 5 times, Merhatsidk (2009) 4 times and Mengesha *et al.* 2 times: see Table 7. All other studies are cited at most once and very often never cited. Thus the very interesting works of Asnake (2005) on the construction of adolescents' gender identity or Genet (2009), comparing the expected roles of women in Awra Amba and in a traditional community, are to our knowledge only used by one subsequent study dealing with Awra Amba, whereas the gender issue is central to Awra Amba and feeds into many other studies. Similarly, most of the research published after 2009 is not cited. The number of actual subsequent citations varies across studies from 0 to 8 with an average of 1.2.

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<sup>1</sup> Guday & Eskinder (2013: 12).

Author(s)	Year of publication	number public.per study	citations by the author			citations by later authors		
			actual / potential in %	actual number	potential number	actual / potential in %	number actual citations	nb potential citations
Fantahun	2003	1	-	0	0	25	1	4
Mussa	2004	2	-	0	0	20	1	5
Solomon	2005	1	-	0	0	36	8	22
Asnake	2005	1	0	0	1	6	1	17
Abebaw	2007	2	50	1	2	37	7	19
Seid	2008	1	33	1	3	31	5	16
Genet	2009	1	50	2	4	7	1	14
Merhatsidk	2009	1	75	3	4	25	4	16
Seid	2009	2	25	1	4	0	0	13
Teshager	2010	1	38	3	8	0	0	15
Alene	2011	1	14	1	7	17	1	6
Seifu <i>et al.</i>	2012	1	-	0	0	0	0	1
Tilahun C.	2012	1	22	2	9	0	0	9
Itagaki	2013	1	0	0	1	100	1	1
Alemu	2013	1	10	1	10	14	1	7
Guday & Eskinder	2013	1	33	3	9	0	0	2
Alemu <i>et al.</i>	2013	1	9	1	11	0	0	6
Assefa	2013	1	0	0	8	20	1	5
Missaye <i>et al.</i>	2014	1	10	1	10	0	0	1
Yihenew <i>et al.</i>	2014	1	0	0	2	50	1	2
Chekole	2014	2	36	4	11	0	0	6
Solomon	2015	1	44	7	16	0	0	2
Mengesha <i>et al.</i>	2015	1	0	0	14	67	2	3
Arvidsson & Sandgren	2015	1	0	0	11	0	0	1
Dino & Alemu	2017	1	100	1	1	100	1	1
Tesfaye	2017	1	0	0	15	0	0	3
Kassaw	2018	1	30	3	10	0	0	1
Barnes	2019	1	0	0	12	-	0	0
Mulugeta	2020		100	2	2	-	0	0
Østebø	2021	1	31	8	26	-	0	0
averages			28	1,3	6,4	18	1,2	6,8
percent of averages			20			18		

Table 7: Number of citations of previous research on Awra Amba made by the different authors of the publications obtained, and number of citations of each research made by the later publications. A distinction is made between actual – measured – and potential numbers according to subject and date. The studies are presented in chronological order by date of publication e. For example, Teshager (in yellow) in 2010 cites 3 of the 8 previous papers potentially useful for his topic, i.e. 38 %. He is never cited, but should have been cited 15 times by later publications , i.e. with a citation rate of 0 %.

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The same previously used estimates of potential citations also make it possible to calculate the potential number of citations of each study by subsequent work: it varies from 0 to 22 with an average of 6.8. The actual number of subsequent citations (1.2) is therefore equal to 18% of the potential number (6.8). If this actual/potential citation rate is calculated for each study, the average of this rate is also 18%. This means that studies on Awra Amba are cited 5 to 6 times less than they could be by other studies on Awra Amba.

Overall, four out of five potentially useful pieces of research are ignored by researchers. One of the reasons is the freedom of each author to cite or not cite a particular reference. But the huge gap between actual and potential citations is probably mainly due to the lack of access to publications: either they have not been published or are not physically accessible within the universities, which is particularly regrettable, or students or university researchers did not seek much work outside their discipline or their own faculty.

This situation is detrimental to the quality of research that hardly benefits from previous work, but it is also detrimental to researchers whose work is largely ignored.

The purpose of scientific research, including a master's thesis (especially in Ethiopia where there are few doctoral theses), is not only to train a young researcher in research, to assess his or her capacities, or to fulfil a research contract, but essentially to advance knowledge in the country and be useful for the object of his or her study. The dissemination of research results through scientific articles or reports is therefore essential. However, the studies on Awra Amba are, as we have seen, very little cited by subsequent studies on the subject. Furthermore, many studies on Awra Amba for which only the reference is known are not accessible on the web: the poor dissemination and use of research conducted in Ethiopia, at least on Awra Amba, is problematic. They are very damaging to the dissemination of knowledge, to the objects studied themselves, to research, and to the recognition of researchers.

## Annex 2: Data on the Awra Amba population

date (E. C.)	period (11 Sept. – 10 Sept.)	population			households			cooperators		
		men	women	total	men	women	total	men	women	total
1964	1971-72									0
1978	1985-86									19
1980	1987-88			159						
EXILE										
1985	1992-93			253						
1986	1993-94			255						
1995	2002-03			343			90			107
1996	2003-04	178	186	364	56	40	96			107
1997	2004-05									107
1998	2005-06			400						114
1999	2006-07			388			104			114
2000	2007-08			403			119			124
2001	2008-09	196	207	403						138
2002	2009-10	198	214	412						143
2003	2010-11	211	221	432	76	47	123			153
2004	2011-12	230	233	463	93	48	141			157
2005	2012-13	233	249	482	98	43	141	66	88	154
2006	2013-14	238	245	483						156
2007	2014-15	240	254	494						164
2008	2015-16	252	262	514						165
2009	2016-17	253	263	516						167
2010	2017-18	254	265	519						166
2011	2018-19	257	278	535						176
2012	2019-20	268	283	551	121	46	167	76	96	172

Sources: 1971-94 : Awra Amba community (2014c, 2015), 2002-03 : Mussa (2004),  
 2003-04 : Solomon (2005), 2005-06 : Tilahun C. (2012),  
 2006-07 : Sisay (2007), 2007-08 : Merhatsidk (2009),  
 2010-11 : Eskinder (2013), 2011-12 : Assefa (2013),  
 Awra Amba community (2014b, 2020a & b).

### Annex 3: Composition of the population of Awra Amba in 2005

Below we present the main findings regarding the demographic structure of the community in March 2005, as studied by Solomon (2005).

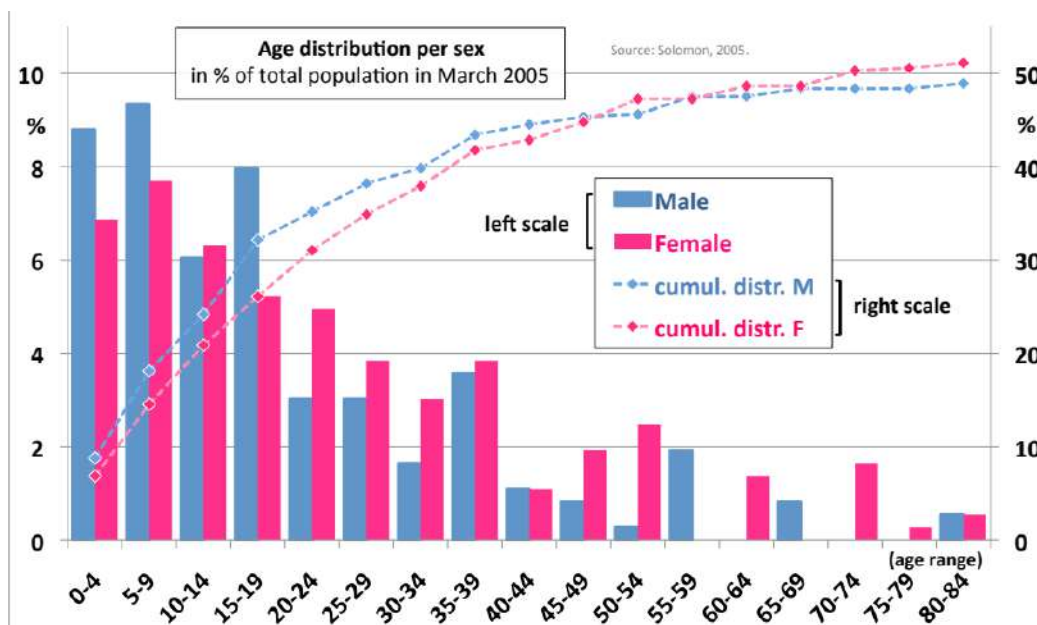


Figure 9: Distribution of the population of Awra Amba in March 2005 per age range and sex according to data from Solomon (2005).

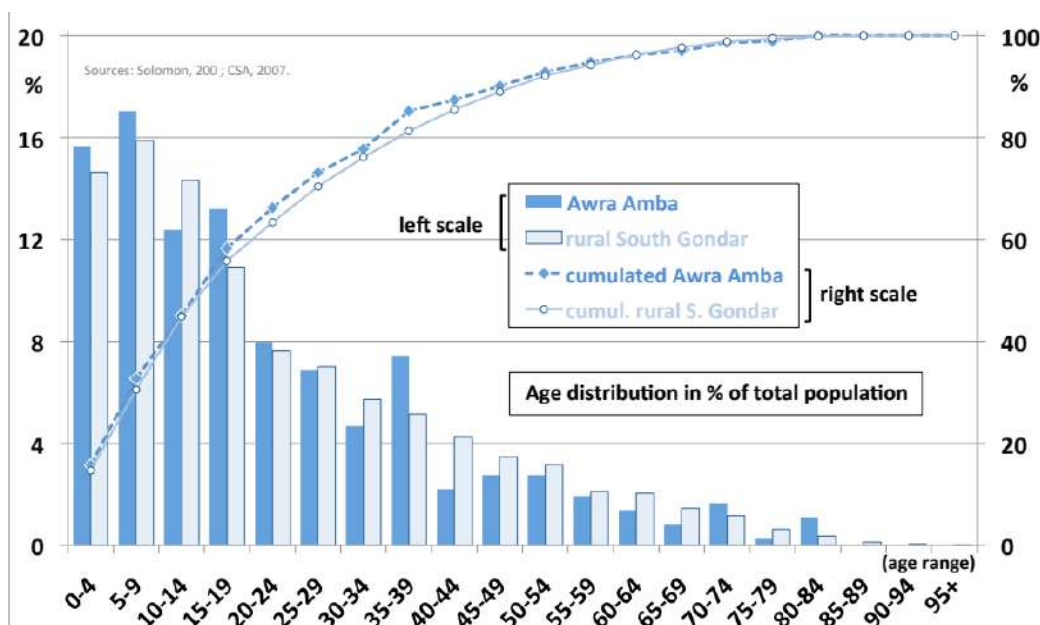


Figure 10: Distribution per age range of the population of Awra Amba in March 2005 and of the rural South Gondar population according to data from Solomon (2005) and CSA (2007) respectively.



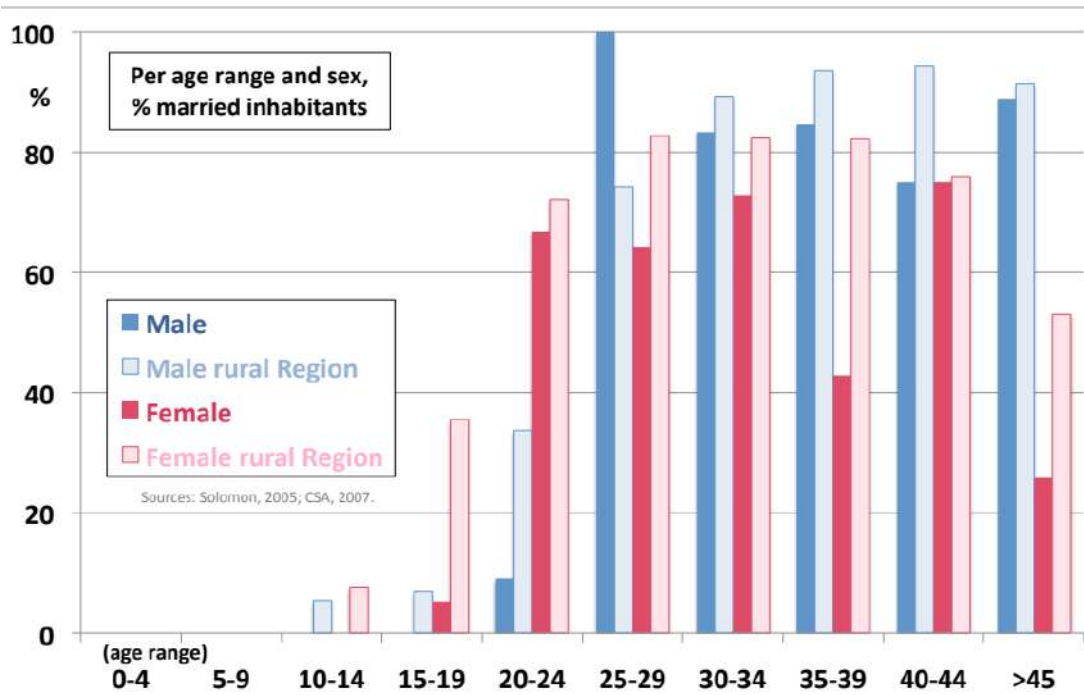


Figure 11: By age group and sex, percentage of the married population of Awra Amba as of March 2005, and comparison with the rural population of the Amhara region according to Solomon (2005: 36) and CSA (2007) data respectively.

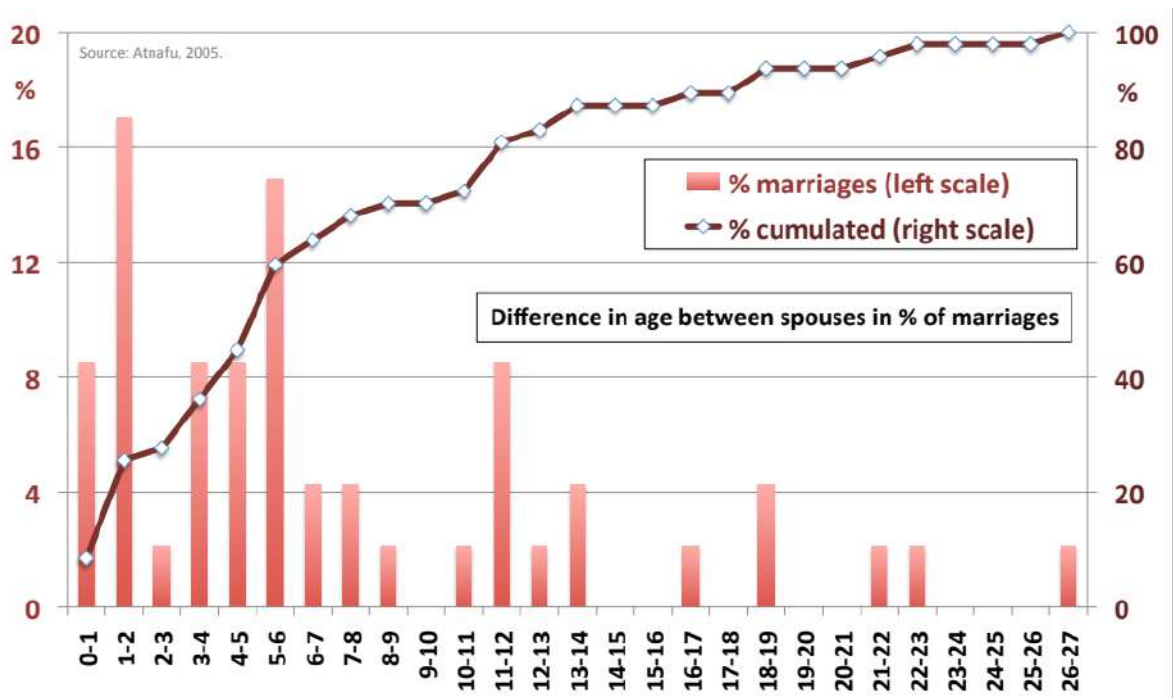


Figure 12: Percentage of married couples in Awra Amba in March 2005 according to the age difference between husband and wife according to data from Solomon (2005: 36). For example, 15 % of couples have an age difference of 5 or 6 years, and 60 % of couples have an age difference between 0 and 6 years.



Figure 13: Number of Awra Amba households in March 2005 according to their number of children, by differentiating between married couples and single heads of household, according to data from Solomon (2005).

## Annex 4: Values according to the authors

The authors are listed below in chronological order of publication. An attempt is made to classify the values or cultural aspects highlighted by the different authors. The nine authors who do not deal with values are not listed here.

reference	gender	solidarity	golden rule	work	rationalism / belief	democracy	children's rights	other
Fantahun (2003)	gender	solidarity	honesty, golden rule	work, conscientious, serious, self-confident	no religion			
Mussa (2004) & Pratt & Earle (2004)	gender	solidarity	honesty	work, self-confident	no religious ritual	transparency		
Solomon (2005)	gender	solidarity, brotherhood	honesty, loyalty, golden rule, no addiction	courage, self-discipline	responsible for future			
Asnake (2005)	gender	participation in social life, solidarity, peace	respect for the individual, no discrimination, honesty	work	no religious ritual / creator <b>god</b>	equality		
Abebaw (2007)	gender	brotherhood	golden rule, no addiction	work				
Seid (2008)		world brotherhood, solidarity, <i>social justice</i> , peace	respect, golden rule, no addiction, honesty		responsible for his future, reason	citizenship, independence, equality, <i>social justice</i>	children's rights	
Genet (2009)	gender	solidarity / weak	honesty			equality	children's rights	
Merhatsik (2009)	gender	solidarity, peace	dignity, tolerance			individual rights		
Seid (2009, 2015)	gender					equality between members		

<b>reference</b>	<b>gender</b>	<b>solidarity</b>	<b>golden rule</b>	<b>work</b>	<b>rationalism / belief</b>	<b>democracy</b>	<b>children's rights</b>	<b>other</b>
Teshager (2010)	gender	solidarity, brotherhood	respect, golden rule, honesty	work, self-confident, trust				clean-illness
Alene (2011)	gender	solidarity, cooperation		mutual trust	no institutionalized religion	democracy		
Alemu (2013)	gender			work	/ creator god			
Guday & Eskinder (2013) & Eskinder (2013)	gender	humanity, brotherhood, ubuntu, peace	trust, mutual respect	work	humanity	democracy		
Alemu <i>et al.</i> (2013)	gender	solidarity		work				rigid
Assefa (2013)	gender	peace, solidarity, caring, brotherhood among all human beings	golden rule, honesty	work	/ creator god	equality	children's rights	
Chekole (2014)	gender	humanity, brotherhood, solidarity, caring	golden rule	work, saving			children's rights	
Solomon (2015)	gender				/ creator god			
Mengesha <i>et al.</i> (2015)						democracy, independence		
Arvidsson & Sandgren (2015)	gender							clean-illness
Kassav (2018)	gender	solidarity	conflict management	work				
Barres (2019)	gender							

## Annex 5: Gender equality in household and agricultural tasks

Solomon (2005: 76-80) measured the participation of men and women, as well as young boys and girls, in household and agricultural chores, during his survey through self-reporting.

	adults			children			children / adults
	women (%)	men (%)	women/ men	girls (%)	boys (%)	girls / boys	
<i>Sample (number of people)</i>	80	80		80	80		
fetching water	98	69	1.42	31	19	1.67	0.30
collecting fire wood	44	99	0.44	6	19	0.33	0.18
cooking food	99	71	1.39	9	4	2.33	0.07
taking care of animals	99	99	1.00	19	19	1.00	0.19
caring for small kids	100	99	1.01	81	69	1.18	0.75
taking goods to market	98	99	0.99	9	14	0.64	0.11
washing clothes	88	94	0.93	19	16	1.15	0.19
cotton clearing	99	81	1.22	31	29	1.09	0.33
spinning	96	88	1.10	19	13	1.50	0.17
non weighted average	91	89	1.06	25	22	1.21	0.26

Table 8: Participation rate in % in different household chores as a function of sex and age according to data from Solomon (2005: 76). The colours indicate the most unequal situations.

The nine household tasks identified are equally distributed between the sexes, except in a few cases, presented below in descending order of gender difference (see Table 8):

- fetching wood: men fetch wood 2.3 times more often than women, boys 3 times more than girls; the reason given is that men want to protect women from risks outside the village<sup>1</sup>;
- cooking: women are 39% more involved than men, girls 2.3 times more than boys;
- fetching water: women do this 42% more often than men, and girls 67% more often than boys;
- Bringing products to market: girls do this 57% more often than boys, but it is a rare activity for children;
- spinning: girls are 50% more likely than boys to do this, but it is also a rare activity for children;
- purifying cotton: women do this 22% more often than men.

The difference is very noticeable for collecting wood, noticeable for cooking and fetching water, and small for the last three tasks. The few tasks performed mainly by women do not benefit from a lower status than traditionally male tasks<sup>2</sup>. The average participation is slightly higher for women than for men (91 and 89%), and for girls than boys (25 and 22%): but the weight of each task would have to be known for these figures to have any real meaning.

<sup>1</sup> Solomon (2005: 75).

<sup>2</sup> Solomon (2005: 80).

	adults			children (%)	children / adults
	women (%)	men (%)	women / men		
<i>Sample (number of people)</i>	80	80		80	
land cleaning	99	100	0.99	21	0.21
farming	15	100	0.15	0	0
sowing	99	98	1.01	0	0
weeding	99	100	0.99	9	0.09
harvesting	94	99	0.95	11	0.12
transporting the harvest	94	99	0.95	0	0
treshing	51	98	0.53	6	0.08
storing	94	98	0.96	4	0.04
non weighted average	80	99	0.82	6	0.07

Table 9: Participation rate in % in different agricultural tasks as a function of sex and age according to data from Solomon (2005: 77). The colours indicate the most unequal situations.

The eight identified agricultural tasks are on average performed by men 25% more than by women (see Table 9). The difference is fairly constant between the sexes, except for two tasks, which probably require the most physical strength:

- plowing: done seven times more by men than by women,
- threshing: done twice as much by men as by women.

In contrast, sowing is divided equally between men and women. During the peak agricultural season, it is not uncommon for women to leave the care and feeding of their young children to other family members, especially their older children, in order to work <sup>1</sup>.

These are apparently responses to a questionnaire, and not counting the chores actually performed by each other. A limited count that we carried out in 2010 <sup>2</sup> shows that:

- for traditionally female activities, out of 51 people who fetch water from the well (and therefore carry around fifteen kilos), 35 are women (2.2 times more than men), than out of 10 spinners working in the cooperative, 8 are women (4 times more than men), and that out of 14 spinners during development day in the village square, 12 were women (6 times more than men);
- for traditionally male trades, among eleven weavers in the cooperative, eight are men (2.7 times more than women), and the five ploughmen we saw were all men.

These figures, measured on very small samples and which are therefore not very representative, show a greater disparity of tasks by gender than the disparity measured by Solomon's declarative survey.

<sup>1</sup> Solomon (2005: 78).

<sup>2</sup> Joumard (2010b: 4).

## Annex 6: Access to university by gender

To what extent do girls have equal access to university as boys? For this we have the number of boys and girls studying at university in 2013 (Awra Amba community, 2014b), in 2015 (Awra Amba Community, 2015b), and in 2020 (Awra Amba community, 2020b). By comparing these data with statistics either on the number of children by age a few years earlier, or on the number of schoolchildren or college students a few years earlier – bearing in mind that all children go to primary school and college, the percentages of girls in both cases can be compared. We have yet the Awra Amba population by age in 2005 (Solomon, 2005: 32), and statistics by school year in 2013 (Awra Amba community, 2014b) and in 2015 (Awra Amba Community, 2015b). The comparisons are, however, not very accurate because we do not have the precise ages of university students nor their precise position in the school curriculum a few years earlier.

	studying in the university in	corresponding to		female representation rate
		children in	school students in	
	2013	2005 of 11-15 year		
% of girls	22.2	48.7		0.46
	2015	2005 of 9-13 year		
% of girls	40.0	49.6		0.81
	2020	2005 of 4-8 year	2013 of grade 6-10	
% of girls	44.4	44.9	43.5	0.99 & 1.03
	idem	-	2015 of grade 8-12	
% of girls			47.1	0.94

Table 10: Percentages of girls studying at university in 2013, 2015 and 2020 compared to the percentages of girls in the corresponding age group in 2005 and among schoolchildren at the corresponding grades in 2013 and 2015, and female representation rate, i.e. the ratio between the percentage of girls among the university students and the percentage of girls in the corresponding child population. Data from Solomon (2005: 32) and Awra Amba community (2014b, 2015b, 2020b).

The results presented in Table 10 compare the percentages of female students at the university and the percentages of girls in the corresponding age groups or classes in the Awra Amba schools that correspond to them a few years earlier. Ideally, if girls had equal access to university as boys, these two percentages would be the same, except for inaccuracy. The ratio between these two percentages therefore indicates the female representation rate (FRR). For example, female students represented 22.2% of university students (girls and boys) in 2013, while the corresponding age group in 2005 was 48.7% girls. The female representation rate is therefore  $22.2 / 48.7 = 0.46$ , which means that gender equality is only achieved in this case at 46%.

Equal access to university for girls and boys is therefore far from being achieved in 2013. It improves in 2015 (FRR = 0.81) and is practically achieved in 2020 (FRR varying from 0.94 to 1.03 depending on the comparison).

## Annex 7: Participation in institutions by gender

year		2004			2011			2020		
N	Committee	number		FRR	number		FRR	number		FRR
		M	F		M	F		M	F	
A, D	Development	4	1	0.36	6	3	0.64	12	7	0.70
B1	Legislative	8	7	0.85	11	4	0.51			
B2, E1	Weekly development, then Solidarity	4	1	0.36	2	3	1.14	6	3	0.63
B3, E2	Guest reception	2	2	0.91	1	2	1.27	3	6	1.26
B4, E3	Lost and found property storing	2	1	0.61	2	1	0.64	2	1	0.63
B5	Elderly and orphan care	3	2	0.73	2	3	1.14			
B6	Sanitation	2	3	1.09	1	2	1.27			
E4	Elderly, orphans, patients, mater. care							0	3	1.89
B7, E5	Problem identifying	1	2	1.21	1	2	1.27	2	1	0.63
B8, E6	Complaint resolving	1	2	1.21	2	1	0.64	2	1	0.63
B9, E7	Security	3	0	0.00	3	0	0.00	3	0	0.00
B10, E8	Education	3	2	0.73	3	2	0.76	3	2	0.76
B11	Hygiene and sanitation	2	1	0.61	2	1	0.64			
E9	Water, hygiene and sanitation							5	2	0.54
E10	Residential area allocating							5	2	0.54
B12, E11	Cooperative steering							5	2	0.51
B13, E12	Field work assigning	1	2	1.17	1	2	1.17	4	2	0.60
C/A, C/D	Development c. auditing	1	2	1.21	1	2	1.27			
C/B2, C/E1	Weekly dev <sup>†</sup> / Solidarity c. auditing	1	2	1.21	1	2	1.27	1	2	1.26
C/E9	Water, hygiene & sanitation c. auditing							1	2	1.26
C/E11	Cooperative c. auditing							1	2	1.19
A, D	Development committee %	80	20	0.36	67	33	0.64	63	37	0.70
All except A or D	All commit. except dev <sup>†</sup> : total number	34	29		33	27		43	31	
	Ass. A (all c. except dev <sup>†</sup> ): total nb %	54	46	0.84	55	45	0.86	58	42	0.79
	Ass. B (all c. except dev <sup>†</sup> ): aver. FRR			0.85			0.94			0.83
All	All comities : total number	38	30		39	30		55	38	
	Ass. A (all c.): total number in %	56	44	0.80	57	43	0.83	63	37	0.77
	Ass. B (all committees): average FRR			0.82			0.92			0.82
Population > 14 year, in %		45	55		48	52		47	53	
Population > 14 year: year, source		data			data			2015, AAC (2015b)		
Cooperators, in %		43	57		43	57		44	56	
Cooperators: year, source		2013, AAC (2020b)			2013, AAC (2020b)			2020, AAC (2020b)		

Table 11: Number of men (M) and women (F) in the different management committees of the Awra Amba community in 2004, 2011 and 2020 according to Solomon (2005: 62), Eskinder (2013: 285) and Awra Amba community (2020a) respectively. FRR = female



*representation rate, i.e. the ratio between the percentage of women in the committee(s) and their percentage in the voting population (over 14, or *cooperators in blue*).*

Three sources allow us to assess the weight of women in the different committees and to compare it to the weight of women in the population of electors on these committees, i.e. the population 15 years and older in the general case, and the cooperators for the three committees dedicated to the cooperative.

For each year under consideration, the first two columns of Table 11 give the number of men and women in each committee. From this the percentage of women is deduced, which is compared to the percentage of women in the population of voters in these committees. This population of voters is either a given, or estimated from somewhat less detailed authors' data or from a nearby year if necessary.

Thus in 2004 (in **yellow** in Table 11), women accounted for 55% of the population over the age of 14, and 20% of the development committee (N° A: 4 men and 1 woman) that was elected by this population. The ratio between the percentage of women in the committee and that of the population, i.e. the female representation rate FRR is  $20/55 = 0.36$ . This means that in this committee women are only 36% of what they should be if they were proportionately as numerous as among the voters.

The situation is utterly normally quite different between committees. It is the overall situation that makes it possible to assess the place of women in these institutions. In order to make an average, several difficulties are encountered

- The development committee is the umbrella committee for all the others, so it has more power than each of the other committees. It cannot therefore be considered like any other committee. We therefore consider three groups of committees: the development committee, all the committees outside this development committee, and all the committees as a whole.
- The number of committee members is quite variable from one committee to another, ranging from 3 to 19. When the numbers of men and women on all committees are simply added together to derive an average weight of women, it is assumed that the importance of a committee in terms of power is proportional to its number of members, which is not certain: this is assumption A.
- It can also be assumed that all committees have the same power, regardless of their number of members. In this case, the overall weight of women is obtained by averaging the percentages of women in each committee (or, what is equivalent, by averaging the FRRs): this is assumption B.

When we consider the main committee, that of development, we see that from 2004 to 2020, the weight of women increased from 20 to 37%, which represents 36 and 70% of their theoretical weight in the case of gender equality.

When all the other committees are taken together, the percentage of women in these 14 or 15 committees goes from 46 to 42%, which represents (assumption A) respectively 84 and 79% of their theoretical weight, as the weight of women in the voter population has decreased slightly in parallel. But if we consider that all the committees have the same power (hypothesis B), their weight decreases from 85 to 83% of their theoretical weight, while having been higher in the meantime, in 2011.

When all 15 or 16 committees are considered together, the situation is intermediate: in terms of total number (assumption A), women represent 80% of their theoretical weight in 2004, 83% in 2011 and 77% in 2020. With committees of equal power (assumption B), their weight increases from 82 to 92 and then falls back to 82% of their theoretical weight.

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Equality is therefore not achieved, neither in 2004, nor in 2011, nor in 2020, especially in the development committee. The evolution is however contrasted, with a very clear improvement in gender equality in the main committee, with a doubling in 16 years of their representation rate, and almost stability in the sub-committees, with a clear improvement from 2004 to 2011 followed by a sharp deterioration from 2011 to 2020.

## Annex 8: Accumulation of mandates

From the precise nominative composition of the various committees in 2020<sup>1</sup>, it is possible to calculate the number of mandates of each elected representative, which varies from one to five: see Figure 14. Among the 46 elected representatives, 22 have only one mandate, 8 have 2 mandates, 10 have 3, 5 have 4 and one elected representative has 5 mandates. The 26 elected men have an average of 2.1 mandates, the elected women 1.9 mandates; men are quite clearly more present than women among those who have 3 to 5 mandates. The men elected to the main committee – the development committee – almost all have several mandates (11 out of 12), while 5 of of the 7 women elected to this committee have several mandates. The vast majority of men holding several mandates are elected to this committee (11 out of 14).

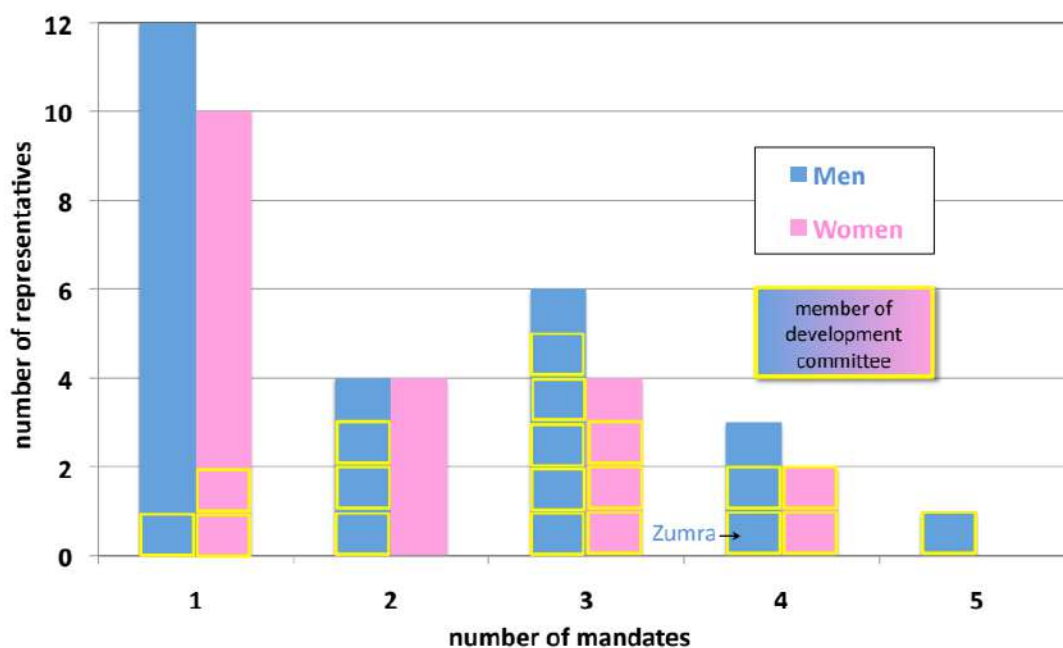


Figure 14: Distribution of the representatives in the different committees as a function of the number of mandates they hold, with an indication of those elected to the development committee, in 2020. For example, 6 men and 4 women are elected in 3 different committees, while Zumra is member of 4 committees, including the development committee.

The committees differ not only in the number of elected members, but also in the propensity of their elected members to hold several mandates. Thus, the men and women elected to the development committee have an average of 2.8 mandates. Elected representatives of 4 committees have a low average number of mandates, between 1.2 and 2.0 (Field work assigning; Elderly, orphans, patients, maternity care; Water, hygiene and sanitation; Security), while elected representatives of 5 committees have a high average number of mandates, greater than 3 (from 3.1 to 3.8: Reception; Complaint resolving; Cooperative committee auditing; Solidarity; Education). There are therefore committees where people with a high degree of cumulation are elected, other committees with elected officials with little cumulation; or, perhaps, committees in which elected officials with high power are primarily involved, and other committees which are of little interest to them.

<sup>1</sup> Awra Amba community (2020a).

## Annex 9: Child labour and schooling in Ethiopia

The International Labor Organization and the Ethiopian Institute of Statistics measured in 2015 children's participation in domestic work, paid work and school activities (ILO & CSA, 2018): see Table 12.

	% of total	activity			percentage			B/G	
		W	S	H	Boys	Girls	To-tal		
Ethiopia, urban + rural, 5-17 years	100	% of total				52	48	100	1,09
		Working for pay only	+	-	-	9	3	6	3,25
		Attending school only	-	+	-	9	7	8	1,22
		Involved in household chores only	-	-	+	6	13	9	0,49
		Working for pay and attending school only	+	+	-	9	2	6	3,92
		Working for pay & involved in household chores	+	-	+	16	13	15	1,21
		Attending school & involved in household chores	-	+	+	15	31	23	0,49
		Working f. pay, attend. school & inv. in hh chores	+	+	+	26	22	24	1,16
		Neither activity	-	-	-	9	8	9	1,12
		Working for pay	+	?	?	60	41	51	1,48
		Attending school	?	+	?	60	63	61	0,94
		Involved in household chores	?	?	+	63	79	71	0,80
<i>Amhara</i>		<i>Attending school</i>	?	+	?	60	69	65	0,87
Urban	18	Working for pay	+	?	?	22	17	19	1,25
		Attending school	?	+	?	83	82	82	1,01
Rural	82	Working for pay	+	?	?	68	47	58	1,46
		Attending school	?	+	?	55	59	57	0,94
5-11 years	59	Working for pay	+	?	?	49	34	42	1,45
		Attending school	?	+	?	51	55	53	0,94
		Involved in household chores	?	?	+	56	69	62	0,80
12-13 years	17	Working for pay	+	?	?	75	51	63	1,47
		Attending school	?	+	?	76	81	78	0,94
		Involved in household chores	?	?	+	73	93	83	0,79
14-17 year	24	Working for pay	+	?	?	78	51	65	1,54
		Attending school	?	+	?	68	71	70	0,95
		Involved in household chores	?	?	+	75	94	84	0,80

Table 12: Participation in 2015 of children aged 5-17 in paid work (W), school (S) and household chores (H), in Ethiopia (except in blue for Amhara Region only) according to ILO & CSA (2018: 41, 45, 48). In columns W, S and H, "+" on a green background indicates participation in the activity, "-" non participation, and "?" possible participation. In red, the most unequal situations between boys and girls.

The evolution of school enrolment is positive as shown on Table 13. These figures put in 2015 Ethiopia's ranking 23<sup>rd</sup> among 54 African countries for primary school, and 163<sup>rd</sup> among 183 world countries for secondary.

level	1980	1989	2000	2010	2015
primary	-	28.6	40.0	73.5	85.4
secondary	-	-	12.4	14.9	31.0

*Table 13: Evolution of school enrolment in Ethiopia (Atlas sociologique mondial, 2019).*

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## **Annex 10: School population**

### **Ethiopian school system**

The Ethiopian school system is classically divided into three main levels, primary school, secondary school and university with in parallel vocational courses <sup>1</sup>.

Primary school lasts eight years divided into two cycles of four years each (grades 1 to 4, and 5 to 8), and ends with the regional examination of the Primary School Leaving Certificate, which is required to move on to secondary school. Secondary school is divided into two cycles of two years each: first general secondary (grades 9 and 10), then upper secondary or preparatory to university (grades 11 and 12). General secondary school concludes with the Ethiopian General School Leaving Certificate Examination EGSLCE; depending on their results in this examination, students move on to upper secondary or to Technical and Vocational Education and Training TVET where the majority of students go, or leave the school system. At the end of grade 12, students take the Ethiopian University Entrance Examination EUEE.

TVET vocational courses are very varied. They last from one to three years, and are 30% theoretical and 70% practical with compulsory internships. Universities are selective, with public universities being more difficult than private ones. To enter they require a certain grade at the EUEE, which varies according to universities and disciplines. The university consists first of three or four years of bachelor's programme, which ends with the Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Science, followed by two years (usually) of master, and then possibly the doctorate, which lasts three to five years. In 2015, 94.8% of students were in bachelor's programmes, 4.8% in master's programmes and only 0.4% in doctoral programmes (see Table 15). At public universities, the state provides students with free access to courses, canteen and a place in a dormitory, but the cost of food and dormitory facilities as well as 15% of the cost of the courses must be reimbursed later through a levy on graduates' wages.

The system includes at all levels free public institutions and private institutions, usually fee-paying.

### **Educational attainment of the population of Awra Amba**

Nine sources give us often partial data on the composition of the population of Awra Amba according to their educational level, from 2004 to 2020: see Table 14. In particular, we see a net increase in the number of graduates from vocational and university courses, and the doubling of the number of university students between the 2000s and the 2010s.

The first survey was conducted among the entire village population in 2005, without it being possible to differentiate between adults and children. <sup>2</sup> We therefore remove the illiterate child population under 7 years of age in order to have a representation of the general population that could have been literate. The illiteracy rate is then 30%. Those who can only read and write are 24%.

We compare these figures to another survey that only concerns heads of household in 2006, i.e. 53 men and 34 women. <sup>3</sup> It is therefore more representative of adults. The illiteracy rate falls to 15%, or half as much as in the general population of Awra Amba over 6 years old, but with a large differ-

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<sup>1</sup> Trines (2018).

<sup>2</sup> Solomon (2005: 63).

ence between men (4%) and women (32%). Those who can only read and write are 49%, or twice as much as in the general population over 6 years old, and with relatively few differences between the sexes.

Finally, we compare these two statistics specific to Awra Amba with the level of education of the adult population of the Amhara Region in 2005 <sup>1</sup>: see Figure 15. The illiteracy rate is four times higher in the Region than in Awra Amba. The comparison of the other levels is not very accurate, because the limits of the classes of schooling are different for Awra Amba and the Region, which obliges us to make some assumptions. However, it is clear that the educational level is much higher in Awra Amba than in the Region.

	source	Solo- mon (2005)	Sisay (2007)	Habta- mu (2009)	Jou- mard (2010b)	Eskin- der (2013)	AAC (2014c)	Chekole (2014)	AAC (2015b)	AAC (2020a)	
	year	2004	2007	2009	2010	2011	2013		2015	2020	
	population	364	388	403	412	432	482	482	494	551	
other pre-school						16	28	29	29	26	
students	kindergarten	75				35	40	40	27	39	
	grade 1-4				164	120	45	114	52	50	
	grade 5-8						69		74	54	
	grade 9-10					35	35	35	9	23	
	grade 11-12						24	24	21	53	
	college & polytechnic						10	5	5	18	6
	university	2	9	11	10	13	18	20	25	18	
working people	illiterate	78									
	read & write only	64									
	other adults	46				203	192	169	174	160	
	grade 10 complete								18	13	
	college & polytechn. grad.						12	12	17	42	
	university graduate	3	2	5	7		14	14	23	57	
retired people								7	10		

Table 14: Distribution of the population of Awra Amba as a function of their level of schooling, according to different authors. Figures in blue are uncertain.

### University population in Ethiopia and in Awra Amba

The number of students attending Ethiopian universities is known in 2015 by cycle, which makes it possible to calculate a rate of students in relation to the national population. Applying this rate to the population of Awra Amba in 2013 and 2015 makes it possible to calculate a theoretical number of students from the community, if the same proportion of the population attended university. Table 15 shows that in 2013 there are 5 times more students from Awra Amba at the bachelor's level than na-

<sup>3</sup> Seid (2008: 91).

<sup>1</sup> CSA (2006: 33-34).

tionally, and 11 times more in master's level. Overall in both 2013 and 2015, the number of students is about 6 times higher in Awra Amba than nationally. However, this comparison is approximate, as the age structures of the national population and the Awra Amba population may be slightly different.

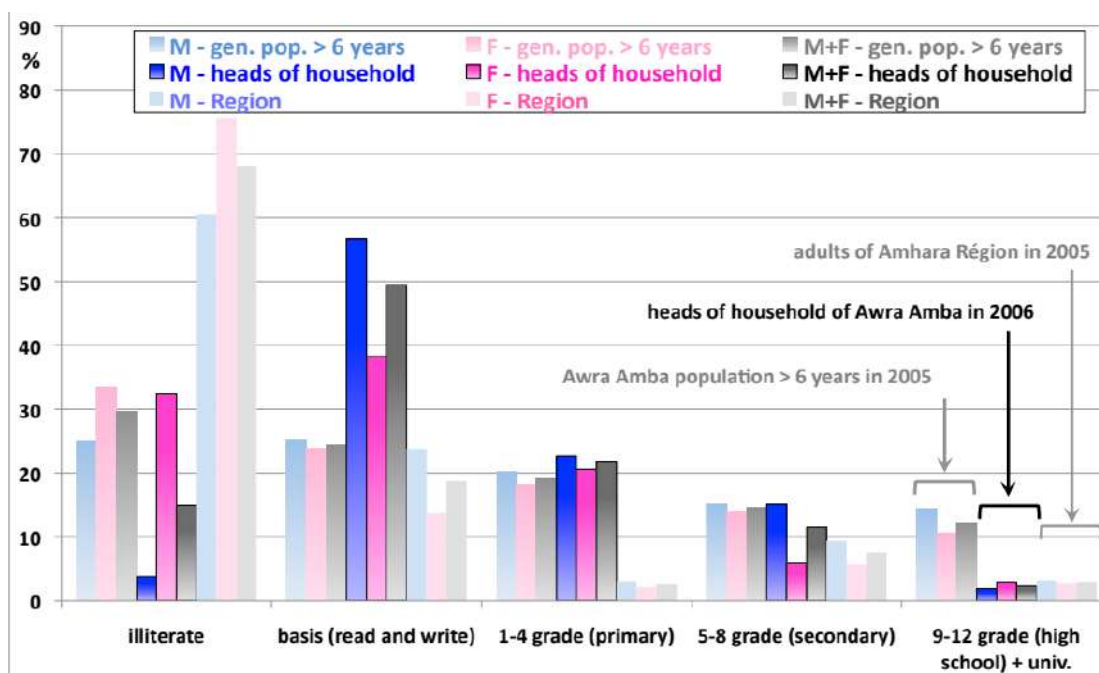


Figure 15 Distribution in % of the gender based educational attainment in the general population of Awra Amba aged 7 years and over, in 2005 (Solomon, 2005: 63), among heads of household in Awra Amba in 2006 (Seid, 2008: 91), and among the adult population of the Region Amhara in 2005 (CSA, 2006: 33-34).

	Ethiopia			Awra Amba					
	2015			2013			2015		
population	100 835 000	100.00		482			494		
	number	%	% / pop.	theor. number	actual number	actual / theor.	theor. number	actual number	actual / theor.
undergraduate	729 028	94.8	0.72	3.5	18	5.2	3.6		
master's programs	37 152	4.8	0.037	0.18	2	11.3	0.18		
doctoral programs	3 135	0.4	0.003	0.01		0.0	0.02		
total	769 315	100.0	0.76	3.7	20	5.4	3.8	25	6.6

Table 15: Distribution of the student population in Ethiopia in 2015 according to Trines (2018) and comparison with Awra Amba. Data for Awra Amba in 2013 from Chekole (2014), and in 2015 from Awra Amba Community (2015b). The theoretical number for Awra Amba is the number of students that Awra Amba would have if it were in the Ethiopian average.



## Annex 11: Participation of the cooperative in social security

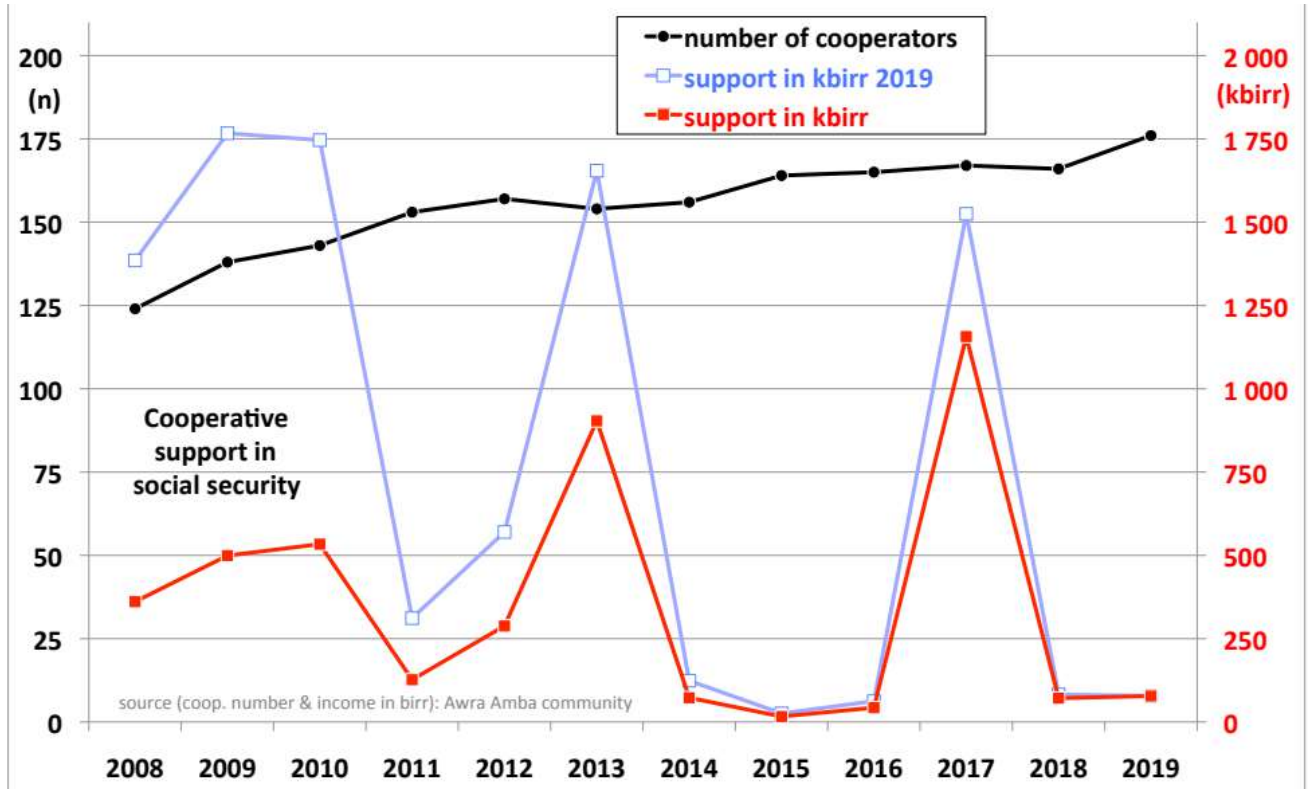


Figure 16 Participation of the cooperative in the social security of the Awra Amba community in both current birr and constant 2019 birr, taking into account inflation (Awra Amba community, 2020b).

## Annex 12: External aid according to the authors

Object	AAC (2020a; 2021)	Fantahun (2003 : 5)	Mussa (2004 : 35, 40, 42)	Seid (2008 : 120)	Alene (2011 : 74-76)	Tilahun C. (2012 : 88-89, 93)	Østebø (2021 : 161-162)
Beehives on credit	BoA 1995		BoA				
Goats on credit	BoA 1995		BoA				
Food aid	DPPB 1995-96		DPPB				
Oxen on credit	DPPB 1996		DPPB				
Short food aid	DPPB 1997-99		DPPB				
Hand dug well	FINIDA 1998						
Training young p. / well	FINIDA 2000						
Training in fire-wood saving stoves	no		FINIDA				
Training in weaving for 27 trainees, 2 months	REMSEDA 2002	REMSEDA	REMSEDA + FEMSEDA			REMSEDA	SIDA, GTZ + REMSEDA 2003
Small grinding mill + materials	ADA + ESRDF 2003	ADA	3 mills by ADA and REMSEDA	ADA 1995		ADA	ADA
Small weaving workshop	ESRDF 2003	ESRDF	ESRDF	ESRDF		NL	EBDSN + REMSEDA 2003
4 modern weaving machines	REMSEDA 2003	REMSEDA fr. FEMSEDA from SIDA	REMSEDA			REMSEDA	EBDSN + REMSEDA 2003
Managem. training for 5 people, 7 days	REMSEDA 2004		REMSEDA				
5 modern weaving machines	AAE 2006				AAE	ADA	
Training in weaving for 10 trainees	AAE 2006				AAE		
Weaving workshop	NL 2007			NL	NL		
Weaving machines					NL		
Small building for health service	ADA 2008						GoH + ADA (2004-2005)
Solar cooker workshop							SCF + ORDA (2012-2014)
Kindergarten, books, tableware							HSÉ (2013-2014)
Secondary school							raising Tervo/ Ferit (2016?)
Solar pump							raising S. Merkuria 2017

Diesel pump						ANRS	
Equipment and training tourism					CTB		
non-detailed						FINIDA, ESRDF, REMSEDA, BoA, DPPB, individ.	

- AAE: Action Aid Ethiopia (NGO)  
 ADA: Amhara Development Association  
 ANRS: Amhara National Regional State  
 BoA: Bureau of Agriculture (Amhara region)  
 CTB: Culture and Tourism Bureau (Amhara Region)  
 DPPB: Disaster Preparedness and Preventions Bureau (Amhara Region)  
 EBDSN : Ethiopian Business Development Service Network  
 ESRDF: Ethiopian Social Rehabilitation and Development Fund  
 FEMSEDA: Federal Micro and Small Scale Enterprise Development Agency  
 FINIDA: Finish International Development Agency  
 Go H: A Glimmer of Hope (US NGO)  
 GTZ : *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit* (German Cooperation Agency)  
 HSÉ : Heber Solidarité Éthiopie (Belgian NGO)  
 NL: Netherlands embassy  
 ORDA : Organization for Rehabilitation and Development in Amhara (NGO)  
 REMSEDA: Regional Micro and Small Scale Enterprise Development Agency  
 SCF : *Solar Cooking Foundation The Netherlands*, renamed in 2016 *Solar Cooking KoZon*  
 SIDA: Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency

In **red** are data from the literature that contradict data directly from Awra Amba. Dates from sources other than the author are in *italics*.

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The type of reference depends on the colour:

- In black the works resulting from research and statistical data to which we have had access. Those preceded by \* or \*\* are the 32 publications we are making the synthesis, whether they deal solely or largely (\*\*) or very partially (\*) with Awra Amba,
- *In grey italics the 17 research works to which we did not have access,*
- **In dark red the testimonials,**
- **In dark blue, articles and films by journalists and non scientific articles.**

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