Legal Statement

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Explaining Famines in Ethiopian History:

The Case of the Kefu Qän, 1888-1892

Introduction

Foreign attention to the famine has been markedly polemical. In human disasters of this scale the search for blame seems to be a deep-seated instinct. And in the search for blame, too many commentators seem prone to scoring political and ideological points. The Ethiopian government was a vulnerable target and some critics have claimed that "Ethiopian government policies have become the major cause of death in the country;"[1] or that, "Famine in Ethiopia is clearly linked to specific famine-producing policies."[2] Ethiopian government behavior was, indeed, lacking. But many of the accusations leveled at it revealed more about the ignorance or predisposition of the accusers than they did about Ethiopia.

Thinking about Famine in Ethiopia

One target was the government's policy of agricultural collectivization, which, it was alleged, suppressed production.[3] Yet, collectivization played only a modest role in the famine-affected areas and the case that it suppressed national agricultural production to the point that the nation itself could not make up its regional shortfalls is a counter-

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[1] Jason W. Clay and Bonnie K. Holcomb, *Politics and the Ethiopian Famine, 1984-1985* (Cambridge, MA: Cultural Survival, 1986), Cultural Survival Report #20, p. 193. Clay and Holcomb sum up many of the arguments.

[2] Jason W. Clay, Sandra Steingraber and Peter Niggli, *The Spoils of Famine. Ethiopian Famine Policy and Peasant Agriculture* (Cambridge, MA: Cultural Survival, 1988), Cultural Survival Report 25.

[3] Clay and Holcomb, *Politics and the Ethiopian Famine*, p.190.

factual one.[4] Moreover, the argument ignores the fact that in 1973 famine also occurred under a very different regime of political economy. Another target was warfare. While *prima facie* a case might have been made that warfare was a factor in Tegray province,[5] yet there had been no fighting at all in equally hard-hit neighboring Wällo province. Still another target was government policy toward areas under the control of the Eritrean and Tegreyan Peoples Liberation Fronts. Here, it was alleged, a combination of warfare and policies directed to undermining rebel legitimacy increased vulnerability to famine.

Deep thinking about famine in Ethiopia is at a premium, yet such thinking there has been. Perhaps the most distinguish account is that by Nobel Prize winner, Amartya Sen, who concluded that the key factor explanatory of the famine of 1973 was a "loss of entitlement."[6] Sen argued that, while there had, indeed, been some climate-related decline in the production of food in northern Shäwa and Wällo provinces in 1973, national markets had compensated by moving food in from other, less adversely affected, parts of the country. Famine was a result of the inability, because of poverty, of the most needy to purchase food, which was available. This case, however, was disproved by Kumar, who established that Sen had under-estimated the shortfall of production in northern Shäwa and Wällo in 1973 and exaggerated the inward movement of grain.

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[4] See Clay and Holcomb, *Politics and the Ethiopian Famine*, p.190 and 192 for variants of this argument. The accounts by Clay and Holcomb and by Clay, Steingraber and Niggli both rest almost exclusively on interviews with Ethiopian refugees in the Sudan and reveal a pronounced political bias against the Ethiopian government and in favor of the Eritrean and Tegrayan Peoples Liberation Fronts.

[5] Clay and Holcomb, *Politics and the Ethiopian Famine*, p. 192.

[6] Amartya Sen, *Poverty and famines : an essay on entitlement and deprivation* (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1981); and B. G. Kumar, "Ethiopian Famines 1973-1985: A Case-Study," pp. 173-216 in volume 2 of Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen (eds.), *The Political Economy of Hunger* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2 vols., 1990).

Jim McCann has also addressed vulnerability to famine. His monograph, *From Poverty to Famine in Northern Ethiopia. A Rural History, 1900-1935*, deals with the interaction of state and rural economy in northern Wällo province in the years leading up to the Italian invasion of 1935. He is unable to treat in detail any famine episode during those years, although he does provide a general account of recurrent hardship and dearth.[7] He returns to famine vulnerability when addressing the larger significance of his study, linking the processes underway in the earlier twentieth century to the famines of 1973 and 1984. His summary view is that "Overall, the region's vulnerability to famine appears to come less from drought than from a shortage of productive resources—land, oxen, and forage—some of which may be a result of lack of rain."[8] At other points, his account suggests that long-term population growth coupled with a stagnant agricultural technology is also contributory. Population growth has meant increasingly small farm plots in the historically cultivated parts of northern Wällo and an increasingly downslope movement of the lower ranges of cultivation. This downslope movement, in turn, has brought agriculture into areas of increasingly unreliable rainfall, thereby increasing vulnerability.[9] At best, McCann's arguments are at a pretty high level of generality.

Sen, Kumar and McCann apart foreigners have not directed much sustained attention to Ethiopia's recurrent vulnerability to famine. This has not been the case on the part of Ethiopians. At least five scholars have produced studies of depth and substance: Mesfin Wolde Mariam, Alemneh Dejene, Dessalegn Rahmato, Fekade Azeze and Adhane Haile

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[7] James McCann, *From Poverty to Famine in Northeast Ethiopia. A Rural History 1900-1935* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), pp. 30-33.

[8] McCann, *From Poverty to Famine*, p. 206.

Adhane. Famine vulnerability was, for many years, the principal focus of Mesfin's academic interests. In two separate books he examined the factors behind the famines of 1973 and 1984. His first monograph, which explored the background to the famine of 1973, appeared in the famine year of 1984.[10] In it he tried to establish first the incidence of famine from the late 1950s into the mid-1970s and then a broad set of locational correlations between the incidents and various indices of modernization. His conclusions emphasised the ubiquity of famine and related it to a dysfunctional process of modernization. His second monograph was more ambitious in the extent to which it rested on extensive original field research.[11] It was also more focused spatially, tacitly rejecting the conclusions about ubiquity in his earlier study and concentrating its attention on the contiguous regions of northern Shäwa and southern Wällo. Ultimately, Mesfin explained "the predicament" of Ethiopia's farmers as a function of "backwardness," of ill-directed attempts at "development." He identified three critical factors inhibiting development in Ethiopia: the "structural" problem that farms are "too small and fragmented;" the "institutional" problem of "very lop-sided priorities of officials;" and the problem of "subsistence mentality," that "peasants cling insecurely to their subsistence goals of production."[12]

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[9] This argument he articulates most clearly in: "Ethiopia," pp. 103-115 in M. Glantz (ed.), *Drought Follows the Plow: Cultivating Marginal Areas* (Cambridge, 1994).

[10] Mesfin Wolde-Mariam, *Rural Vulnerability to Famine in Ethiopia, 1958-1977* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1984).

[11] Mesfin Wold-Mariam, *Suffering Under God's Environment. A Vertical Study of the Predicament of Peasants in North-Central Ethiopia* (Berne: The African Mountains Association and Geographica Bernensia, 1991).

[12] Mesfin, *Suffering*, pp. 183-187.

Dessalegn was primarily interested in peasant *responses* to famine and, in that sense, treated famine as a given. Nevertheless, he does offer a brief explanation. He approvingly cites Tawney, who, writing of famine in China, sees the underlying causes of famine "in the primitive organization, and absence of surplus resources over daily needs." He locates the famine of 1984 as but one of a long, two hundred year sequence of famines. "It may be stating the obvious," he writes, "but serious crop failures leading to famine have occurred in Wollo caused by drought, too much rain, locusts or other pests, frost or hailstorms, human or cattle disease, and war and social destablization."[13] For Alemneh, famine in Wällo is the result of human-generated environmental degradation, the principal manifestation of which is soil erosion. This cause he takes as a given.[14] This is also the case with Fekade's moving study of the ways in which Ethiopian famine victims expressed their experiences.[15]

Finally, Adhane Haile Adhane produced a major study of famines in northern Ethiopia in the mid-decades of the twentieth century.[16] Ostensibly, Adhane covered three different famines—two in Tegray, in the 1940s and in 1958-59; and the Wällo famine of 1972-73—and deliberately omitted two famines in the contiguous regions of Wag and Lasta in 1965 and 1966. In fact, Adhane's interest was famine in Tegray, as a result of which the marginal Tegray event of the 1940s receives much more attention than events in Wällo in

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[13] Dessalegn Rahmato, *Famine and Survival Strategies. A Case Study from Northeast Ethiopia* (Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1991), see especially, p. 99.

[14] Alemneh Dejeneh, *Environment, Famine, and Politics in Ethiopia. A View from the Village* (Boulder and London: Lynn Rienner Publishers, 1990).

[15] Fekade Azeze, *Unheard Voices. Drought, Famine and God in Ethiopian Oral Poetry* (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 1998).

[16] Adhane Haile Adhane, "History of Selected Famines in Peasant Societies in Tigray and Wällo, Ethiopia, 1941-1974," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Addis Ababa University, May 1996.

the early 1970s. Nevertheless, Adhane has a clear and unequivocal explanation for the sources of famine in Ethiopia: they were caused by nature.[17] Nature struck either as locusts or drought or a combination of both. His approach is more sophisticated than this bald claim might lead one to believe. In the same passage just cited, he approvingly refers to Michael Watts and goes on to claim that the decisive causes of famine are the "social referents" of natural events: "the nature of the historically determined society determines whether or not adverse natural events necessarily culminate in famines."[18] His discussion touches on political events and processes as well as on social structure and in no way tries to minimize the negative impact of government policies in exacerbating conditions in the countryside. Nature appears in Adhane's argument in another guise. "In social terms, the Wällo Famine, especially in its severity, must be understood, then, as a function of an ever greater naturalisation—(i.e. ever greater dependence on nature) of a peasant society rather than as a consequence of new processes of socialisation or primitive capital accumulation."[19] Thus, in Adhane's view, we are dealing with a society which had what Marx described as a "natural economy." Adhane believes such a society to be essentially static, on its own incapable of significant innovation or development.

Preliminary Thoughts on Explanations

Adhane's study marks an important step forward in understanding, and accounting for, famine in recent Ethiopian history. It has two particular values pertinent to the argument here: the attempt to integrate into the explanation natural, political, social and economic

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[17] Adhane, "Selected Famines," p. 600.

[18] Adhane, "Selected Famines," pp. 602-603.

[19] Adhane, "Selected Famines," p. 551.

factors; and the treatment of famine as an *event*, the end product of a sequence of events. Explanation invariably involves relating the unknown to the known, the particular to the general. Here it comes not from reference to abstract laws or underlying "scientific" principles, which strips away particularity, but by integration into a coherent and persuasive narrative, which insists on particularity. Such a task is no easy one—famine is one of the most complicated events which might befall a society.

Famines, of course, arise from many different situations, some of them almost exclusively social and political. Such would be the case with Germany in 1919, where acts of war disrupted both production and distribution of food. So also the 30 years war of the mid-seventeenth century saw civil conflict engender famine and disease through disrupting food supplies and the violent displacement of peoples. On the other hand, the natural correlates of some famines are equally obvious—one thinks of the dire consequences of persistent unseasonably cold and wet weather during the Little Ice Age in seventeenth century Scandinavia.[20] The problem in explaining famines is adequately to integrate both the natural and the social. There can be no abstract model providing for such an integration—no pre-determined formula for relating the various factors at work, the one to the other—for dynamic interaction is precisely what is to be established. The *a priori* uncertainty of how everything actually fitted together, coupled with the gravity of the human consequences and the accompanying urge to uncover and allocate responsibility, opens the space for polemics. Thus the Cultural Survival group, in their accounts of the Ethiopian famine of 1984-85, minimized natural factors and maximized

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[20] Gustaf Utterström, "Climatic Fluctuations and Population Problems in Early Modern History, pp. 39-80 in Donald Worster (ed.), *The Ends of the Earth. Perspectives on Modern Environmental History* (Cambridge, 1988).

the effect of Ethiopian government policies. And such polemics obscure the search for a deeper understanding by diverting attention to a target chosen for unacknowledged political or ideological reasons.

One of the most forceful alternatives to the position I am developing here asserts the primacy of "political economy." And, to be sure, being events which involve the totality of human experience, famines necessarily have both political and economic dimensions, and those dimensions are often intimately inter-connected. But the approach of political economy surely asserts more than this and implies that the political and economic have an inextricable relationship, one in which, in the ultimate analysis, the economic is supreme. Such a position may produce powerful and seductive analyses, but it rests on a foundation as arbitrary as any other, unless it be tied, as Marx tied it, to the characteristics inherent in a capitalist economy. In such a case, it has then to be established that the economic forces at work are, indeed, capitalist, and, if so, how and to what extent. This is more difficult, at least in the case of Ethiopia, and, one suspects, in many other parts of Africa, than many proponents of the political economy approach acknowledge.[21].

Ethiopian famines are a case in point. To some extent, the Cultural Survival group may be said to have made arguments from political economy, asserting that government economic policies engendered famine. On the other hand, Adhane has refuted, to my satisfaction, the assertion that capitalism played any role in shaping events and processes in those parts of the Ethiopian countryside most vulnerable to famine.

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[21] Cf. Henry Bernstein and Philip Woodhouse, "Telling Environmental Change Like it is? Reflections on a Study in Sub-Saharan Africa," *Journal of Agrarian Change*, I, 2 (2001), pp. 283-324. Bernstein and Woodhouse are able to demonstrate how a shift to commodity production is a significant factor in environmental change in a number of African cases, but fail to make the larger case that this is ubiquitous.

Another way of framing the argument is to assert that discussions which focus too narrowly on any particular famine in Ethiopian history—such as the famine of 1984—run the risk of overlooking factors of much longer standing. For famine has been a recurrent phenomenon. Both Mesfin and Adhane have demonstrated that 1973 was a precursor of 1984 and that 1973, in its turn, had its own twentieth century precursors. Richard Pankhurst has further demonstrated that twentieth century famine in Ethiopia has a long pedigree.[22] Discussions that try to provide a larger context for understanding Ethiopian famines invariably mention the great famine of 1888-1892—the *Kefu Qän*—quite possibly the direst event in recent Ethiopian history. This, it seems to me, is the proper point of departure in contextualizing events in the more recent past. A careful reading of Pankhurst's general survey indicates that the sources for any famine or epidemic before the middle of the nineteenth century are extremely thin, so attempting to generate a complex and satisfactory analysis on the basis of this long record would be an exercise in futility. On the other hand, the *Kefu Qän* are very much a part of living memory and, *prima facie*, provide the richness of source material necessary for a nuanced understanding.[23]

The argument here proceeds from the fact that in the space of the 96 years between 1888 and 1984 Ethiopia suffered three large scale famines each of which affected hundreds of thousands of people and asserts that a fully satisfactory explanation of Ethiopia's vulnerability to famine should encompass all three famines. While it might, in theory, be

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[22] Richard Pankhurst, *The History of Famine and Epidemics in Ethiopia prior to the Twentieth Century* (Addis Ababa: Relief and Rehabilitation Commission, 1986).

[23] The standard account of the Great Famine of 1888-1892 is Richard Pankhurst, "The Great Ethiopian Famine of 1888-1892: A New Assessment," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, XXI (1966), pp. 95-124 and 271-294.

the case that some profound transformation separated one of these famines from the others there is no scholarship establishing such a case. On the other hand, it is notable that the framework of political economy proper to each of these famines was strikingly different. That of 1888 broke out at the point of transition from the rule of Emperor Yohännes IV to that of Menilek II. The social and economic order over which they both presided was only marginally articulated with the world economy and was characterized by personal, patrimonial relations connecting producers and a broad ruling class through the land-holding institution of *gult*, which some observers have likened to landed property under feudalism.[24] Production of agricultural commodities was virtually non-existent and such would remain the case well into the twentieth century.

Eighty-five years later, when a general famine broke out in 1973, things had, indeed, changed. From 1941 onwards, Haile Sellassie had constructed a modernizing, autocratic state. The institution of *gult* had been undermined, and, in 1966, eliminated. Property was being privatized, or, by one account, assimilated into historic notions of hereditary holding.[25] The state promoted articulation with the world economy and the emperor himself invested in a host of enterprises. Commodity production advanced in a number of areas and sectors, most notably with respect to coffee.[26] Both sugar and cotton were produced on European-owned plantations and the commercial farming of oil seeds and

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[24] Donald Crummey, *Land and Society in the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia: From the Thirteenth to the Twentieth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

[25] Bahru Zewde, **"**Economic Origins of the Absolutist State in Ethiopia (1916-1935)," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, XVII (1984), pp. 1-29; Tekalign Wolde Mariam, verbal communication.

[26] Charles W. McLellan, *State Transformation and National Integration: Gedeo and the Ethiopian Empire, 1895-1935* (East Lansing, MI: African Studies Center, Michigan State University, 1888); and Daniel Ayana, "Land Tenure and Agriculture in Western Wallaga, Ethiopia, 1880-1974," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Illinois, 1994.

sorghum developed apace under the control of Ethiopian farmers.[27] The cities and towns were fed by a national market in food stuffs. However, the point of continuity from 1888 to 1973 was provided by the basic relations and means of agricultural production. Well over 80% of Ethiopia's population remained in the countryside, where, at least in northern Shäwa, Wällo, and Tegray, agricultural production was still organized by individual households, using the same technology and broadly the same repertoire of cultigens as had been the case in 1888.[28] The conditions of agricultural production were not stagnant in these years and probably saw more innovation than most commentators allow for. Nevertheless, Adhane and McCann reflect broader thinking when they emphasise the growth of both population and the demands of the state as two processes notably changing life at the farm household level. Referring to famine in Tegray in 1958-59, Adhane underlines the main point here: "Tegray Famine is not amenable to any theory of capitalist articulation or modernisation in the economic and social sense … the society … was perfectly peasant rural as in the forties."[29] In some respects, where *gult* was effectively eliminated, the state itself stepped in to place its direct demands on the rural household. With respect to Wällo in the early 1970s, Adhane characterizes the Ethiopian state as "… an extractive rather than a generative institution as regards peasant agriculture and livelihood."[30] Whether, in fact, the Ethiopian farmer was subject to heavier extractive pressures in the 1950s and 1960s compared with the 1920s and 1930s,

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[27] James McCann, "A Dura Revolution and Frontier Agriculture in Northwest Ethiopia, 1898-1920," *Journal of African History*, XXXI (1990), pp. 121-34.

[28] McCann has made this argument, in rather more detail, for northern Wällo, in the twentieth century: *From Poverty to Famine*, Chapter 8, "Peasants and Paupers: The Impoverishment of the Household Economy in Northern Wallo."

[29] Adhane, "Selected Famines," pp. 411, 438.

[30] Adhane."Selected Famines," p. 578.

or, indeed, the 1880s and 1890s, remains a contentious subject and was heavily dependent on just where the farm was located within the Empire.

Between 1973 and 1984 this situation changed again, although rather less than some would have us believe. Most changes increased extraction from and constraints on, the family farmer. The first change was sweeping land reform in 1975 which leveled down farm size and reduced peasant geographical mobility. The second change was the institution of a command economy, which led to highly controlled markets at all levels. Thirdly, the state steadily increased direct and indirect taxation on the rural sector. Finally, a bundle of additional policies tightened the conditions of rural life and production. Conservation policies meant the loss of hillside grazing lands which had helped support a large livestock population of oxen, sheep and goats, which, in turn, was one of the principal forms of investment in the countryside. An ill-considered policy, intended to increase agricultural productivity by curtailing social time spent in markets, eliminated an intricate cycle of daily markets and replaced it everywhere with a Saturday market. This further constrained farmer action. Nevertheless, the conditions of agricultural production, for 90% of the rural population and 90% of the rural land, remained essentially as they had been ten years earlier. Individual households made their own decisions and deployed the same technology and crop repertoire.

Thus, the overall effect of changing political economy in the ninety-six years following 1888 was increasingly to constrain the conditions of peasant life and, therefore, the ability of rural people to respond to dearth and disease. To give this change primary causal status, without equally assessing changes in the natural forces creating conditions of dearth and disease, seems arbitrary. At least a *prima facie* case can be made that the

scale of the impact of famine in 1973 compared to 1984 was, to some degree, proportional to the extent and intensity of natural pressure.[31] Reference to the *Kefu Qän* of 1888, however, does complicate the comparison, since drought was the principal form of natural stress in the later incidents of famine, whereas epidemic animal disease brooked larger in the late nineteenth century.

The Kefu Qän: Outbreak

The *Kefu Qän*—"Evil Days," "Bad Days"—are well remembered throughout northern Ethiopia. Seventy year old informants in Armac'äho district in 1997, who had no memory of the great national famine of 1984, recalled hearing about the Great Famine of 1888-1892 from their parents.[32] For all the importance of the *Kefu Qän*, it is over thirty years since they last received extended attention.[33] The intervening years have seen the great famines of 1973 and 1984 as well as the publication of new source material of relevance to 1888. On the other hand, their relevance to contextualizing famine in the twentieth century and the availability of new material notwithstanding, many facets of the

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[31] Daniel Gemechu, *Environment and Development in Ethiopia* (Geneva: International Institute for Relief and Development, 1988); and Workineh Degefu, "Some Aspects of Meteorological Drought in Ethiopia," pp. 23-36 in Michael Glantz (ed.), *Drought and Hunger in Africa: Denying Famine a Future* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

[32] Information about the informants, interviewed with the support of a Fulbright fellowship, is provided in Donald Crummey and Alex Winter-Nelson, "Farmer Tree Planting in Wällo," forthcoming in Thomas Bassett and Donald Crummey (eds.), *African Savanna Environments: Global Narratives of Local Environmental Change* (Oxford/Portsmouth, NH: James Currey Publisher/Heinemann USA). One of the informants actually had a son who had spent time doing relief work in Wällo in 1984. McCann's informants also remembered the Great Famine of 1888: *From Poverty to Famine*, p. 30.

[33] Pankhurst, "Great Ethiopian Famine," *loc. cit.*

Kefu Qän remain beyond our ken. Finally, Pankhurst's account, published in 1966 stands up very well to the light of revision.[34]

There is a high degree of consensus on the events which triggered the *Kefu Qän*, events which were to have sub-continental significance.[35] In 1888 the Emperor Yohännes IV was close to the end of his tether. To the West he faced an aggressive Mahdist foe; to the North he was under pressure from expansionist Italians, who, in 1885, with the connivance of the British, had occupied the port of Massawa; and, to the South, his principal vassal and major rival, Menilek II, was in open defiance. In March Yohännes besieged a small Italian garrison at the mainland site of Sa'ati. Distracted by Menilek's rebellious alliance with *Negus* Täklä Haymanot, Yohännes's second most powerful vassal, and by the incursions of Sudanese Mahdists into the central highlands, in April Yohännes broke off the siege and marched south into the central highlands, carrying in his train cattle, spoils of his war with the Italians.[36] These cattle the Italians had imported from India or southern Russia and they brought with them cholera, a disease "enzootic in

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[34] Pankhurst, "Great Ethiopian Famine." The most vivid part of Pankhurst's account is drawn from interviews with *Aläqa* Lämma. This account is also available in *Aläqa* Lämma's "memoirs" as recounted to his son, Mängestu: Mängestu Lämma, *Mäs'hafä Tezeta ZäAläqa Lämma Haylu Wäldä Tarik* (Addis Ababa, 1959 Eth. Cal.). Practically all contemporary sources agree on the origins of the cholera epidemic as well as on its impact. Ethiopian sources published since 1966, or unavailable at that time, support this account: Bairu Tafla (ed.)**,** *Asma Giyorgis and His Work. History of the Galla and the Kingdom of Sawa* (Stuttgart: Frank Steiner Verlag, 1987), pp. 802-805; *Aläqa* Lämläm and *Aläqa* ZäYohännes, "YäAs'é Täklä Giyorgis Tarik, YäAs'é Yohännes Tarik," Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, Manuscrits Éthiopien 259, folio 36 *verso* and folio 37 *verso*.

[35] The rinderpest raged southward from the Ethiopian highlands, triggering disaster in Maasailand and great hardship all the way to South Africa, and westward through Sudanic Africa. See for example, John Lonsdale, "Scramble and Conquest in African History," *Cambridge History of Africa*, VI, pp. 689-690; and John Ford, *The Role of Trypanosomiases in African Ecology. A Study of the Tsetse Fly Problem* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971).

[36] For an account of the complicated political situation, see Zewde Gabre-Sellassie, *Yohannes IV of Ethiopia. A Political Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975). For issues of chronology an invaluable tool is Chris Prouty Rosenfeld, *A Chronology of Emperor Menilek II of Ethiopia* (East Lansing, MI: African Studies Center, Michigan State University, 1976).

the cattle of the steppes of eastern Asia," hitherto unknown in tropical Africa.[37] As Yohännes marched South into Bägémder and Gojjam, which he reached in August, cholera followed him. Its impact on Ethiopia's ungulate population, wild and domestic, was devastating. Estimates of the death rate range up to 90% and 95% of cattle, with, apparently, some regional variation in intensity. The highest parts of the Highlands were affected least and the eastern lands inhabited by the Somali were affected less than the Highlands. For Ethiopia's farmers the effect was the loss of a crucial factor of production—plow oxen. For *Aläqa* Lämma there was no doubt about the cause of the famine which followed this epizootic: "The famine was caused by the rinderpest which decimated cattle. With what to plow? The land was left fallow. The famine immediately followed the cattle disease."[38] Lämma's words are echoed by the Italian geographer, Traversi, who wrote from Lät Maräfeya in Shäwa in January, 1892, "The first and only cause.. [of the famine] … was the death of the animals…"[39] While this claim may stand, the sources put other factors into play—epidemic diseases and locust infestations.

The Kefu Qän: Parameters (mostly chronological)

The chronology of the famine,which persisted from 1888 through to 1892, has long been known in outline. European documents have been particularly useful in establishing it, because so many of them are dated. Several Ethiopian documents also contribute to our understanding of the famine's unfolding. The earliest source for the outbreak of famine is an anonymous letter quoted by Bettembourg, the Procurer of the Lazarist missionary

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[37] John Ford, *Trypanosomiases*, p. 139.

[38] Mängestu Lämma, *Mäs'hafä Tezeta*, p. 142.

[39] *Bollettino della Società Geografica Italiana*, S. 3, V (1892), p. 227.

order in Paris. Bettembourg's letter is dated Paris, November 16, 1888, so the events to which it refers must have happened sometime in October, perhaps towards the end of the month when farmers would expect to start their principal annual harvest. The anonymous letter laments the condition of "our poor catholics," communities on the Eritrean plateau.

> To the continual fires and pillaging which had practically ruined them, has been added an epidemic which has taken a large part of their herds. To add to the misfortune, the harvests failed because of the lack of rain and famine began to take hold in the districts of our Christians.[40]

We will return to this letter when we visit the issue of causation. Famine apparently was well established by January of 1889 when Crouzet observed that "The inhabitants of Keren and the interior have nothing to eat and nothing is growing.[41] That February the Italian diplomat, Antonelli reported that the failure of harvest had "reduced Tigre, Gondar, Begemder, and Gojam to misery."[42] However, *Aläqa* Lämma remembered that, although all the cattle had died, as of May, 1889 famine had not yet struck northern Shäwa.[43] Perhaps the key development for Shäwa was crop following the rains of mid-1889. Gäbrä Sellasé, chronicler of Menilek of Shäwa, who was in the process of taking over from the now deceased Yohännes IV, wrote that, "In that time, the year of Matthew [September 1888-September 1889], when *krämt* [the long rains, from late June to mid-September] arrived, all the cattle had been exterminated by disease … Also, the

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[40] *Les Missions Catholiques*, XX (1888), p. 557. An identical extract from the letter was also published in *Annales de la Propogation de la Foi*, LXI (1889), pp. 143-144.

[41] Pankhurst, "Ethiopian Famine," p. 112; citing a letter in *Les Missions Catholiques* of 1889.

[42] The words are Pankhurst's, "Ethiopian Famine," p. 107; citing a report by Antonelli published in a report to the Italian Chamber of Deputies, in 1890.

following year, the year of Mark, a general famine broke out," and Menilek's capital at Ent'tot't'o was besieged by hungry throngs.[44] Gäbra Sellasé provides circumstantial detail about how this affected Menilek's plans. He deferred an expedition to Tegray to subdue the followers of Yohännes IV, and agonized over the appropriateness of holding a ceremony of coronation.[45]

European sources again pick up the story. The Catholic missionary Crouzet wrote from Massawa in January, 1890, noting that the famine had spread from Bogos to Akalä Guzay in eastern Eritrea.[46] In March of the same year,Coulbeaux wrote from Bogos of general public misery and of "walking skeletons."[47] In April famine is reported from Tegray.[48] A small Protestant community near Gondär, between May and October of 1890, lost 177 of its members, a reflection of the "indescribable" famine which raged through Tegray and Amhara.[49] In October, 1890, Leopold Traversi, in Lät Maräfeya, in Shäwa, wrote that famine had reduced people to cannibalism; and a month later, writing from nearby Ankobär, Alfred Ilg, reported to his correspondent, that famine "has claimed many

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[43] Mängestu Lämma, *Mäs'hafä Tezeta*, p. 106.

[44] C. Mondon-Vidailhet (ed. and trans.), *Chronique du règne du Ménélik II, Roi des Rois d'Éthiopie, d'après un Manuscrit Original* (Paris: 2 vols., 1930, 1932), vol. II, p. 296. Another Ethiopian author, As'mä Giyorgis, describes the following Ethiopian year, that of Luke (1889-1890), the year of great famine although he also placed famine in the year of Mark: Bairu Tafla, *Asma Giyorgis and His Work*, p. 829.

[45] Mondon-Vidailhet, *Chronique de Ménélik,* pp. 264-265. Mondon (note 5, page 265) cites an Italian diplomatic source for dating the coronation to November 3, 1889.

[46] *Les Missions Catholiques*, XXII (1890), pp. 85-86.

[47] *Idem*., p. 350.

[48] Bairu Tafla (ed.), *Ethiopian Records of the Menilek Era. Selected Amharic Documents from the Nachlass of Alfred Ilg 1884-1900* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2000), p. 393.

[49] Johann Martin Flad, *60 Jahre in der Mission unter den Falaschas in Abessinien. Selbstbiographie des Missionars Johann Martin Flad. Mit Einleitung und Schlusswort von seinem Sohn Pastor Friedrich Flad* (Giessen and Basel, 1922), p. 385.

lives."[50] In March, 1891, the Italian traveler, Salimbeni, reported on his approach to Harar, in the eastern Ethiopian highlands, coming upon desperate famine refugees from Shäwa.[51] In April, 1891, Ferdinando Martini, parliamentary deputy and member of an official commission of inquiry, wrote to his daughter from Massawa of people dying of hunger only a half kilometer from the town—"A spectacle which I will never forget."—and went on to describe the countryside being in the grip of an aridity without comparison.[52] In October, 1891, Traversi wrote again from Lät Maräfeya: "The country is in a terrible moment. Famine, from day to day more acute…"[53] The following April, 1892, a correspondent informed Alfred Ilg that people were still dying of famine in Shäwa.[54] In July, of that same year the situation in Eritrea, seemed as bad as ever:

> The poor people, having nothing left, have been forced to go into exile. they have been condemned to die from hunger or to become the prey of wild beasts. People, in order not to die of hunger, sell their goats, their cows, their mules, their lands and everything which they own.[55]

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[50] For Traversi, *Let-Marefià. Prima Stazione geografica Italiana nelo Scioa e le nostre Relazioni con l'Etiopia (1876-1896)* (Milan, 1931); also *Bollettino della Società Geografica Italiana*, **NEEDS VOLUME AND YEAR #**. p. 22; for Ilg, Bairu Tafla, *Ethiopian Records of the Menilek Era*, p. 399.

[51] Carlo Zaghi (ed.), *Crispi e Menelich nel Diario inedito del conte Augusto Salimbeni. Con Prefazione, Introduzione, Note e Appendici* (Turin, 1956), p. 319.

[52] Ferdinando Martini, *Lettere [1860-1928] con 26 Tavole e 7 Autografi fuor di Testo* (Milan, 1934), p.249.

[53] *Bollettino della Società Geografica Italiana*, Series 3, IV (1891), p. 1009.

[54] Bairu Tafla, *Ethiopian Records of the Menilek Era*, p. 420.

[55] Letter of Fr. Picard, Akrur, July 22, 1892; *Les Missions Catholiques*, XXIV (1892), p. 438.

And things were no better in Bägémder, where, in the latter part of 1892, a correspondent of Martin Flad informed him, "Our famine and calamity are indescribable." He went on to repeat the stories of cannibalism.[56]

The geographical reach of the *Kefu Qän* was unmatched by later famines. We have seen that observers place it in Eritrea, Tegray, Bägémder and Shäwa. Others place it as far away as Käfa, in southwest Ethiopia; in the Oromo lands to the west and southwest of Addis Ababa;[57] and in Harar and other parts of the eastern highlands.[58] The Ethiopian author As'mä Giyorgis claimed "The extermination of the cattle occurred everywhere from Met'ewa [=Massawa] to Kafa, and from the 'Arab [western Wälläga, the Sudan borderlands] to Harar."[59]

The Kefu Qän: "Causes"

The anonymous letter, which first announced the famine, also laid out a number of causal factors: pillaging by armies; an epizootic; and drought. Other observers support the letter's contention that the level of warfare, both civil and national, which characterized Ethiopia from about 1860 onwards, bore hard on the peasants. Several other sources also

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[56] Martin Flad, *60 Jahre*, pp. 410-411.

[57] Leopoldo Traversi, Lät Maräfeya, January 14, 1892; *Bollettino della Società Geografica Italiana*, Series 3, V (1892), p. 229. See also the retrospective account by the Russian traveler, Alexander Bulatovich, *Ethiopia Through Russian Eyes. Country in Transition 1896-1898 Translated and Edited by Richard Seltzer* (Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, 2000).

[58] The earliest source here is the "Report by Lieutenant-Colonel Stace on the Trade and Commerce of the Somali Coast Protectorate for the Year 1891-92," p. 7, 9-10: Foreign Office. 1893. Annual Series. No. 1208. Diplomatic and Consular Reports on Trade and Finance. Africa. Report for the year 1891-92 on the Trade of the Somali Coast Protectorate, 1893. About the same time Traversi, in Shäwa, claimed: "Harar then, if one permits me the phrase, is today the emporium of all these miseries:" *Bollettino della Società Geografica Italiana*, Series 3, V (1892), p. 230. See also the retrospective account by Sylvain Vignéras, *Une Mission française en Abyssinie* (1897), pp. 56, 83.

[59] Bairu Tafla, *As'ma Giyorgis*, p. 805.

indicate that drought was a factor. We have seen that Martini, the Italian parliamentary deputy, had referred in 1891 to "an aridity without comparison."[60] Two years later, the English traveler, Bent, mentioned drought as a factor contributing to hardship in Addi Qayeh, in southern Eritrea.[61] However, most sources are silent on the issue. *Aläqa* Lämma is explicit of the opposite view: "There was no absence of rain. God gave regular rain …"[62] Given the vividness of Lämma's memory and the wealth of circumstantial detail which he recalled, one would hesitate to disagree with him. Good meteorological data would help resolve the question, but none seem to exist for the Ethiopian Highlands for the critical years of 1888 and 1889. Data were collected in Massawa for the earlier years of the decade, but they run out in 188x.[63] Proxy data do exist. Records of the Nile flood indicate, in a general way, changes in rainfall over the Ethiopian Highlands. According to those data the years from 1870 to 1895 saw rainfall above the long-term average, and the years from 1895 to 1920 saw below average rainfall.[64] However, associated records indicate that 1888 was the driest year between 1871 and 1899, which was slightly drier.[65] This information is consistent with the anonymous letter's indication of drought. It might also be possible to reconcile this claim with the claim of *Aläqa* Lämma. Nile flow is an index of aggregate rainfall over the

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[60] Martini, *Lettere*, p. 249.

[61] J. Theodore Bent, *The Sacred City of the Ethiopians Being a Record of Travel and Research in Abyssinia in 1893* (London, 1896), p. 91. McCann also mentions "failure of the rains" in a list of factors contributing to the Great Famine of 1888-1892 in northern Wällo, but doesn't indicate his source.

[62] Mängestu Lämma, *Mäs'hafä Tezeta*, p. 143.

[63] **NEEDS REFERENCE**

[64] Sharon E. Nicholson, "Environmental Change within the Historical Period," Chapter 4 (pp. 60-87) in W. M. Adams, A. S. Goudie and A. R. Orme (eds.), *The Physical Geography of Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

entirety of the Blue Nile basin in Ethiopia and can tell us nothing about how patterns of rainfall varied across that basin. The three sources which mention drought all do so with reference to the highlands of what was to become Eritrea, which lie outside the basin at the extreme northern edge of the climatic system which dominates the western highlands of Ethiopia. Conditions there could differ sharply from those in Gojjam and Shäwa, where *Aläqa* Lämma was during this time. Still, if drought did play a role in the failure of the main harvest of 1888, thereby triggering famine, it appears to have played little role in the continuation of famine into 1892.

The persistence of famine had its source in a combination of forces—a serious loss of agricultural productivity through the death of oxen, and the depredations of locusts. Hitherto, the loss of productivity has been treated as an overwhelmingly decisive factor, and, given the role of the rinderpest epidemic in triggering the famine, it is a factor hard to ignore. However, the rinderpest epidemic raged in 1888 and it wasn't until over a year and two harvests later that one can speak of a *general* famine. Moreover, the last year of famine was 1892, long before the cattle population, and, hence, agricultural productivity, could fully have been restored. Lonsdale, citing Ford, estimates the recovery process as follows:

> If one assumes a 90 per cent loss and a constant recovery rate uninterrupted by drought, other cattle pests or raids from neighbours, up to

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[65] Declan Conway, "Extreme Rainfall Events and Lake Level Changes in East Africa: Recent Events and Historical Precedents," *SINET—Ethiopian Journal of Science*, XXIII (2000), pp. 139-161. I am very indebted to Declan Conway for my climatic information.

> twelve years would still be needed for herds to recoup half their original size, and seventeen for their full restoration.[66]

The earliest accounts of the outbreak of famine, like the anonymous letter to which reference has already been made, stress the interacting of different factors. Crouzet, the Lazarist bishop, wrote from Massawa in January, 1889. For over a year, he said, his unhappy flock had been visited by "all manner of scourges."[67] First the epizootic had killed the animals. In some places, "all the harvests have been in the field by the sun or devoured by locusts and caterpillars ..." The Swiss entrepreneur, Alfred Ilg, confidant of Emperor Menilek, confirms the plagues of locusts and "caterpillars." He traveled inland from Massawa in 1892, and witnessed the continuing effects of famine. He attributed its outbreak to the rinderpest epidemic, which was followed by caterpillars (*Raupen*) and then by locusts, which, between them, destroyed crops.[68] Two other sources from 1892 with primary reference to Eritrea confirm the locusts, but not the "caterpillars."[69] These "*chenilles*," apparently, were army worms, mentioned by a number of other sources, as were the locusts. The locust swarms were not confined to Eritrea. The previous September, an Ethiopian correspondent wrote to Ilg from Ent'ot't'o that Bulga, a district

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[66] Lonsdale, "Scramble and Conquest," pp. 689-690.

[67] "*tous les fléaux*:" *Les Missions Catholiques*, XXI (1889), p. 62.

[68] Conrad Keller, *Alfred Ilg. Sein Leben and sein Wirken als schweizerischer Kulturbote in Abessinien* (Frauenfeld and Leipzig, 1918), pp. 89-90. McCann's sources mention the same combination of forces: *From Poverty to Famine*, p. 30.

[69] G. Schweinfurth, *Einige Mitteilungen über seinen Diesjährign Besuch in der Colonia Eritrea (Nord-Abessinien). Vortrag Gehalten in der Gesellschaft für Erdkunde zu Berlin Am 2 Juli 1892* (Berlin, 1892); Consul Barnham to Sir E. Baring, Suakin, April 25, 1892, Document 20, pp. 137-139 in *British Documents on Foreign Affairs: Reports and Papers from the Foreign Office Confidential Print. Part I. From the Mid-Nineteenth Century to the First World War. Series. G. Africa, 1885-1914. Volume 13. Abyssinia and its Neighbours, 1854-1914* (University Publications of America, 1995). For the specific reference see page 138.

to the east of Addis Ababa, "has been eaten by locusts."[70] Still other sources refer to locusts continuing to be a problem in Eritrea.[71]

The final factor commonly mentioned to have been of deadly importance was epidemic disease—dysentery, cholera, smallpox, typhus. However, of these diseases only smallpox would have a set of symptoms clearly recognizable to all observers setting it apart from the others. The first hand references to smallpox are very few: Salimbeni in Massawa, in January, 1890; and Schweinfurth with general reference to Eritrea in 1892.[72] It may be that the most acute observation on the "epidemics" of disease which followed famine was made by the British consular agent, Stace, who, reporting about Harar in April, 1892, observed that "an epidemic said to be cholera, but which might be 'starvation fever' has broken out…"[73] Most of the references to "typhus" or to "cholera" carry the same degree of specificity, and one observer even designated the disease to be "the typhus of famine;"[74] in short the general sorts of illnesses to which starving people are vulnerable.

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[70] Bairu Tafla, *Ethiopian Records of the Menilek Era*, p. 413. Another correspondent reported similarly with respect to Shäwa, a few months later: Wälättä Maryam to Ilg, Ent'ot't'o, April 12, 1892, *Ethiopian Records*, p. 420.

[71] Letter of Father Picard, Akrur, July 22, 1892; *Les Missions Catholiques*, XXIV (1892), p. 438.

[72] Zaghi, *Diario inedito del conte Augusto Salimbeni*, p. 20. Flad's autobiography, which, at this point rests heavily on information gained from letters from Ethiopia, claims that the rinderpest epidemic of 1888 was followed, first, by smallpox and then by typhus. But the attribution of the source is not strictly made. For Schweinfurth, see *Einige Mitteilungen*, p. 4. There are also two retrospective references to smallpox, neither of which carries a great deal of weight: Sylvain Vignéras, *Une mission française en Abyssinie* (Paris, 1897), p. 80; and R. Wurtz, "Hygiène Publique et Privée en Abyssinie," *La Semaine Médicale*, 18th year (1898), p. 492.

[73] The words are Stace's quoted by Pankhurst, "Ethiopian Famine," p. 272. Pankhurst cites a report by Stace in the British Foreign Office papers, FO 401/177.

[74] Wurtz, "Hygiène Publique," p. 492.

The cholera references may also be taken to describe "famine caused diseases."[75] Among its symptoms are dysentery and vomiting, disorders likely to occur in people whose regular diet has been destroyed. Martini talks of cholera in his account of Eritrea in 1891.[76] The Protestant convert, Arägawi, wrote that an epidemic of cholera had affected his central Ethiopian community during the rains of 1891.[77] Schweinfurth, with reference to Eritrea in the first half of 1892, mentions cholera.[78] Catholic missionaries write of cholera in the Massawa region and in Bogos, in July, 1892.[79] And Bent, still with reference to Eritrea mentions cholera in 1893.[80] The other cholera references are retrospective: De Lauribar with reference to Eritrea for the first half of 1890; Vignéras, writing of Harar in 1890; and, finally, Wurtz, a French medical researcher, heavily dependent on information from Alfred Ilg.[81] Traversi mentions "typhus," with reference to the lowland country of northern Shäwa, in October of 1891; and Wurtz, even more vaguely, refers to "influenza" and "*grippe*."[82] And, finally, Menilek's chronicler claims that on return from an expedition to Harar in the first half of 1892, Menilek's troops were

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[75] Traversi and Salimbeni, who were in correspondence with each other, are the only sources for "dysentery," an even vaguer phenomenon: Traversi, *Let –Marefià*, p. 333; Traversi to the Secretary General of the Italian Geographical Society, Lät Maräfeya, January, 14, 1892; *Bollettino della Società Geografica Italiana*, Series 3, V (1891), p. 227; and Zaghi, *Diario inedito del conte Augusto Salimbeni*, p. 99.

[76] Ferdinando Martini, *Nell'Affrica Italiana. Impressioni e Ricordi* (Milan; 14th ed., 1895), p. 35.

[77] Flad, *60 Jahre*, p. 413. The letter is dated August 24, 1892 (i.e. towards the end of the rainy season of 1892), and refers to "the last rainy season." This letter *could* refer to the rains of 1892.

[78] Schweinfurth, *Einige Mitteilungen*, p. 4.

[79] Picard, Akrur, July 22, 1892, *Les Missions Catholiques*, XXIV (1892), p. 438; and Crouzet, from Akalä Guzay, with reference to July 2 of that year, *Annales de la Propagation de la Foi*, 1892, p. 31.

[80] Bent, *Sacred City*, p. 87.

[81] Paul de Lauribar, *Douze Ans en Abyssinie (Souvenirs d'un Officier)* (Paris, 1898), p. 193; Sylvain Vignéras, *Une mission française en Abyssinie* (Paris, 1897), p. 56; R. Wurtz, "Hygiène Publique et Privée en Abyssinie," *La Semaine Médicale*, 18th year (1898), p. 492.

[82] *Bollettino della Società Geografica Italiana*, Series 3, IV (1891), p. 1009; Wurtz, "Hygiène Publique," p. 492.

affected by an "epidemic," which killed "a great number."[83] It is possible that these references do point to an epidemic of cholera, but, if so, it was an epidemic to which people became many times more vulnerable, because they were starving.

Conclusion

If there is a "political economy" to the *Kefu Qän* it is articulation with the forces of imperialism which were engulfing Africa and parts of Asia in the last decades of the nineteenth century, something very different from what is usually meant. The economics were the collapse of a system of production in the hands of peasants, who were dependent on draught oxen. Oxen multiply the labor of a farmer by several times, and their complete disappearance would have grievous effects, although those effects were partially offset by farmers who resorted to equines—horses, donkeys, and mules, who were unaffected by the epidemic—as substitute draught animals.

Mesfin, Dessalegn and Adhane agree in seeing the famines of 1973 and 1984 in the light of a peasant system of agricultural production, with limited surpluses and, hence, vulnerability to natural stress. How much more does this analysis apply to the *Kefu Qän*, where epidemic cattle disease, in some instances exacerbated by drought, brought devastation to farmers dependent on draught oxen. Turned around, a close look at the *Kefu Qän* supports the analyses of later famines in light of the limitations of peasant agriculture. This suggests that many of the political and economic interpretations of the origins of famine in 1973 and 1984 need significant revision. Politics and economics were factors at work, to be sure. In 1973 government policies *may* have increased the

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[83] Mondon Vidailhet, *Chronique*, p. 323.

burdens on peasants, and by 1984 this was certainly the case, but the primary effect of these measures was to constrain the capacity of rural communities to respond to natural disaster in historically developed ways. Moreover, in both 1973 and 1984 governments showed a remarkable callousness to the sufferings of the drought afflicted, and, in this respect too, they are to be criticized. But it is difficult to make the step to say that these government actions and inactions *caused* the famines. For causation we must look to Nature.