

## **Circulation Agreement**

In presenting this dissertation/thesis as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for an advanced degree from Emory University, I agree that the Library of the University shall make it available for inspection and circulation in accordance with its regulations, governing materials of this type. I agree that permission to copy from, or to publish, this dissertation may be granted by the professor under whose direction it was written, or, in his absence, by the Dean of the Graduate School when such copying or publication is solely for scholarly purposes and does not involve potential financial gain. It is understood that any copying from, or publication of, this dissertation which involves potential financial gain will not be allowed without written permission.

---

Daniel Mains

“We are just sitting and waiting”: Aspirations, Unemployment, and Status among Young  
Men in Jimma, Ethiopia

By

Daniel Mains  
Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Anthropology

---

Donald Donham  
Adviser and Committee Chair

---

Bruce Knauff  
Committee Member

---

Huda Mustafa  
Committee Member

---

Debra Spitulnik  
Committee Member

Accepted:

---

Dean of the Graduate School

---

Date

“We are only sitting and waiting”: Aspirations, Unemployment, and Status among Young  
Men in Jimma, Ethiopia

By

Daniel Mains  
Ph.D., Emory University, 2007

Adviser: Donald Donham, Ph.D.

An Abstract of  
A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate  
School of Emory University in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Anthropology  
2007

## **“We are only sitting and waiting”: Aspirations, Unemployment, and Status among Young Men in Jimma, Ethiopia**

My dissertation is based on eighteen months of research conducted in Jimma, Ethiopia, a city of 120,000. Jimma is typical of urban Ethiopia in that unemployment rates for youth are close to fifty percent. The dissertation examines the manner in which unemployed and working youth, primarily young men, negotiate aspirations for the future, local notions of status, and economic opportunity. I argue that tension between work as a source of income and a means of constructing identity provides the basis for rethinking unemployment and the analytical value of theories of neoliberal capitalism.

A key component of the dissertation is an analysis of youth aspirations in relation to consumption of global media, education, and notions of family and marriage. Young men's aspirations are intertwined with social relationships in that they seek to move from a position of dependence to one in which they are able to provide material support to others. The inability of young men to fulfill their aspirations leads them to experience unstructured time as an overly abundant and potentially dangerous quantity, allowing for an interesting contrast with analyses of boredom in western contexts. Related to young men's problems of time is their struggle to actualize ideals surrounding marriage, raising children, and fulfilling localized notions of masculinity. For young men, everyday activities like the consumption of international films and *chat* (a mild stimulant) facilitate the imaginative construction of international migration as a solution to their problems of time. Migration is thought to enable a shift in the interconnections between production, time, and social relationships so that young men are able to experience progress.

Youth aspirations have a reciprocal relationship with status, which in turn shapes economic behavior. Within the dissertation status is analyzed primarily in terms of work. I engage with the anthropological literature on the relationship between wealth in people and wealth in things, and gift exchange in order to analyze the complex interconnections between class and status. This analysis supports a conceptualization of employment that gives more attention to the manner in which work positions one within social relationships.

“We are only sitting and waiting”: Aspirations, Unemployment, and Status among Young  
Men in Jimma, Ethiopia

By

Daniel Mains  
Ph.D., Emory University, 2007

Adviser: Donald Donham, Ph.D.

A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate  
School of Emory University in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Anthropology  
2007

## **Acknowledgements**

This dissertation is based on research funded by a Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad Grant and grants from the Emory University Graduate School Fund for Internationalization and the Emory University Department of Anthropology.

My dissertation committee provided a remarkable level of support throughout the research and writing process. Donald Donham, Bruce Knauff, Hudita Mustafa, and Debra Spitulnik patiently read chapter draft after chapter draft, always offering critical insights that pushed me to take my analysis further. Particular thanks goes to my committee chair, Donald Donham, who shares my interest in Ethiopia and was happy to engage in endless discussions of cultural and historical particularities.

I was fortunate to have participated in two writing groups, one at Emory University in Atlanta and one at Don's place in Oakland. Thanks to Pat Whitten, Matt Dudgeon, Ryan Brown, and Faidra Papavasiliou for their feedback on chapters presented in Atlanta. Special thanks goes to Ryan Brown for helping me organize and think through some of my quantitative data. Sarah Mathis, Chris Krupa, Tim Murphy, Ayesha Nibbe and Nick D'Avella all provided outstanding feedback at the Oakland group. Jed Stevenson also deserves special thanks for being such an outstanding colleague. Jed visited me in the field, read numerous chapter drafts, and shared many long conversations about research, Ethiopia, and what it means to live a good life.

It is difficult to thank all of the people in Ethiopia who helped with this project. I was affiliated with The Institute for Ethiopian Studies at Addis Ababa University during my research. The Cultural Affairs Department at the US Embassy in Addis Ababa provided extremely valuable support, including arranging for me to present the results of my research at Addis Ababa University. While these formal ties were important, I would have never been able to complete this research without the people of Jimma. So many people helped me in so many different ways that it would be impossible to list them all here. Some of them make an appearance under pseudonyms in the pages of this dissertation. I developed friendships with many of the young people who participated in my research that I hope will last long into the future. There were also relationships that were less directly related to my research. My friendships with Teddy, Taddesse, Elias, and Teshome were particularly important as each of these people invited me into their homes and lives and gave me the emotional support that I needed while spending 18 months in Jimma.

Finally I must thank Alise Osis. Alise was with me for the last seven months of my research and clearly demonstrated the intellectual and emotional value of having your partner with you in the field. She has also been extremely patient with me during the writing process, offering to read drafts when necessary, but also helping me remember that life offers enjoyment outside of work.

## **Table of Contents**

1. Introduction
2. Historical and Cultural Background
3. Time, Consumption, and Imagination
4. Aspirations, Progress, and Migration: Solving Problems of Time Through Spatial Movement
5. Occupation and Status
6. Occupational Choice and Values
7. Patterns of Reciprocity and Hierarchies of Status
8. Class, Status, and Inequality
9. Conclusion

Glossary

Bibliography

## **Tables**

1. Medians of Unemployed Youth Gift Income in Relation to Parental Wealth, Head of Household Gender, Parental Occupation, and Zemed

## Chapter 1: Introduction

In the afternoons there is usually a good crowd at Haile's house. Young men sit on stools and benches in the cool shade of the front porch. Haile's family is poor and his house is simple – a tin roof and floors and walls made of mud. This is the norm in urban Ethiopia and Haile's friends are comfortable here, even if they come from wealthier families. Inside the house, his sisters relax doing handcrafts and sometimes making strong coffee for Haile and his friends. Outside, in the center of the semi-circle of young men is a pile of branches covered in green leaves. Most, but not all of the young men are here to chew *chat*<sup>1</sup>, a mild stimulant. The chewers occasionally grab fresh branches from the communal pile. They pull off the leaves and stuff them in their mouths, adding to the massive green ball that they are already masticating. Chat is only half of the attraction at Haile's house, other young men come for the *chewata*, the playful conversation that is a favorite pastime for Ethiopians of all ages.

Haile is a master of *chewata*, especially after he has been chewing chat. He is a strange figure in Qottebe Seffer, the neighborhood where I resided for eighteen months while conducting research in Jimma, Ethiopia. I am not sure how old Haile is, but I would guess in his mid-30's, making him the oldest of the young men who regularly gather on his porch in the afternoons. Unlike the other young men who wear clean button down shirts or sports jerseys over loose fitting jeans, Haile cares little for his appearance and his clothes are often full of holes. I do not know of anyone else who was as popular and universally disdained among young men as Haile. It is said that he used to be a hard

---

<sup>1</sup> The transliteration of Amharic terms is carried out in the manner established by Hoben 1973:xi.



worker, but now he devotes his life to chat. For Haile mornings are spent under the shade of a tree waiting for a friend to pass who might lend him the money he needs for his daily bundle of chat branches. Afternoons are spent at home chewing. Haile's father is not present and his mother is very poor. Everyone in the neighborhood agrees that Haile should be married with a family of his own, and helping his mother instead of spending his time and money on chat and cigarettes. If Haile is a model that young men seek to avoid, that does not prevent them from visiting him every afternoon. His jokes, stories, and access to a shaded space out of the burning afternoon sun nearly always attract a small crowd.

Although the young men who visit Haile in the afternoons are often critical of his lifestyle, there is a sense that in the future they might all be like him – unemployed, unmarried, and dependent on their parents. Many of these young men are in their late teens or early twenties. They have recently finished secondary school and they were expecting to find desirable employment. Instead of working they have found themselves passing each day in the same manner as the last, moving ever closer to becoming another Haile. These young men often joke that the only change in their lives is following the contours of the shade from one side of the street to the other with the passing of the sun. They speak of time as an overabundant and potentially dangerous quantity.

Perhaps because of my interest in unemployment, when I am present the conversation often turns to work. The consensus is usually that there is no work and therefore there is no progress or change – often stated simply as “*sira yellem, lewt*

*yellem*.<sup>2</sup>” Sometimes when I push this point, pointing to other youth who are working, they claim that it is impossible to work in Ethiopia because of *yiluñña*. To have *yiluñña* is to experience an intense shame based on what others are thinking and saying about you and your family (see Poluha 2004: 147). The presence of *yiluñña* is like a mosquito faintly whining in your ear, reminding you that others are watching and judging. One young unemployed man explains, “We would never work as a porter here. There is *yiluñña* here and that kind of work is not respected. People will shout orders at you and you are expected to obey. If we go abroad we can work without being insulted. We don’t care about seeing other countries, but we want to be free to work and help our families.”

It is the intersections of work, time, status, progress, and space that are the focus of much of the analysis that follows. In a context of extremely high unemployment young men faced a problem of progressing through time in order to become an adult. Days were passed without change, and young men feared that they were seeing their future selves in people like Haile. Unemployment was the barrier to progressing through time. Widespread unemployment was not only caused by a lack of jobs, but by stigmas associated with available forms of work. In this context youth sought to circumvent the problem of becoming through time with spatial movement, specifically migration to places where they could earn higher incomes and escape the issues of occupational status that prevented them from working at home. In urban Ethiopia, global economic shifts interact with local values concerning work in order to produce new forms of stratification

---

<sup>2</sup> Although *lewt* is often translated as “change,” in practice it is used to refer to change that is desirable and an improvement on the past, and therefore I believe it is appropriate to translate it as “progress.”

in terms of both class and status. This dissertation takes spaces like Haile's house as sites for analyzing these processes. It is here that stories are told, plans for the future are made, and young men negotiate the expanding gap between their aspirations for the future and economic realities.

### **Turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Urban Africa, Neoliberal Capitalism, and Inequality**

At its core this dissertation is an ethnography of the economic and social conditions of turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century urban Ethiopia as they are experienced by young men. In Africa this time period has been conceptualized as a "neoliberal age" (Weiss 2004a) or placed within a context of a "neoliberal world order" (Ferguson 2006). While these analyses correctly point to the importance of neoliberalism, particularly structural adjustment, in shaping life in Africa, the economic and social processes that I observed in Jimma cannot be adequately explained with the concept of neoliberalism. Both the utility and problems of using neoliberal capitalism as the primary context for analysis can be seen in the work of the Comaroffs. In discussing capitalism and culture at the turn of the century the Comaroffs explain, "the workplace and labor, especially work-and-place securely rooted in a stable local context, are no longer prime sites for the creation of value and identity" (2000:295). "Class comes to be understood, in both popular and scholarly discourse as yet another personality trait or lifestyle choice" (2000:306). In terms of youth, "the modernist ideal in which each generation does better than its predecessor is mocked by conditions that disenfranchise the unskilled young of the city and countryside" (2000:307). In more recent work the Comaroffs argue that in this

context crime and political violence become means for youth to attain desires and disrupt hierarchies of class and status (2004: 343).

Particularly given the role of young men in relation to the explosions of political unrest that occurred in Addis Ababa in 2001 and then again following the 2005 elections it would appear that the Comaroffs' analysis is quite accurate. In urban Ethiopia the unemployment rate among youth (ages 18 - 30) is estimated to be higher than 50 percent (Serneels 2004). Young men frustrated with their inability to obtain work construct their identity through consumption, often of international media, and are occasionally united in brief, but potent episodes of political action.

While there is certainly some truth to this description, it overlooks two important issues. One is the continued importance of work and production in the creation of identity. In this dissertation I take occupational status as one of my key areas of analysis. The decisions of youth regarding employment were firmly embedded in the manner that particular occupations placed them within relations of production. These relations were not necessarily evaluated in the Marxist sense of control over the means of production or its surplus, but the interpersonal power relations associated with exchange and the process of production were key. Even for the unemployed young men who were the focus of much of my research, their avoidance of particular occupations was essential for the construction of identity.

The second problem with understanding turn of the century Ethiopia in terms of neoliberal capitalism is that it glosses over longstanding relationships between class and lifestyle. The position of the Commaroffs on this issue is quite nuanced and they do not argue that neoliberalism has caused a radical break with the past. Rather, they claim that

traditional practices such as witchcraft and ritual enable changes in one's class and status position, and that these practices have increased in a context of neoliberal capitalism. In this dissertation I also explore the potential of shifts in lifestyle to alter class and status based stratification. The interrelationship between class and status is not new in Ethiopia and by investigating its transformation in an urban environment I will draw attention to the particularities of current economic and cultural conditions. In doing so I seek to concretize both concepts in order to provide a more grounded examination of the relative importance of class and status for inequality in the present context.

I do not wish to imply that neoliberal capitalism has not profoundly changed African economies. If late capitalism in the United States has been associated with growth (and possibly a long-term economic crash), in Africa it is generally associated with economic decline or at best stagnancy. An inability to compete with the nations of East and South Asia in the manufacture of low cost commodities, the burden of servicing interest on debt, and the economic policies associated with structural adjustment have all contributed to economic decline in Africa (Arrighi 2002). Harvey (2005) describes neoliberal capitalism as a strategic process of dispossession in which the extremely wealthy are able to exert control over an increasingly greater portion of the world's capital. For Harvey, neoliberalism is characterized less by free flows of capital than by the use of space in order to solidify the dominant position of the ruling class. Ferguson (2006) applies a similar conception of neoliberal capitalism to Africa, explaining how isolated spaces within Africa are linked to the global economy so that resources may be

extracted without interacting with or investing in the continent as a whole<sup>3</sup>. For Africa the rise of neoliberal capitalism does not imply the creation of a free market economy. Instead to speak of a “neoliberal Africa” is to describe the economic relationship of Africa to the rest of the world. As Ferguson (2006) demonstrates with his discussion of economic growth in states like Angola, “neoliberal Africa” is characterized by the use of technology and political institutions in order to selectively extract resources. This is dispossession in Harvey’s sense because what has previously been classified as public property or rights is appropriated by private interests without providing compensation. In Ethiopia, an IMF imposed reduction in the size of the public sector has been particularly significant, as it has eliminated opportunities for desirable government employment.

It would seem that for much of Africa, neoliberalism has been experienced as an absence, or as Ferguson argues, a very isolated presence. While conspicuous absence is highly significant, it should not stand in the way of a more positive analysis of on the ground practices. Gibson-Graham (1996, 2006) argues that subsuming all economic and cultural activity within the category of “capitalism” inhibits social change. Regardless of its political implications, analyzing a young man who depends on his mother for food and lodging, repairs bicycles on the side of the street, and then spends the majority of his income on drinking honey wine with friends in terms of neoliberal capitalism is questionable.

If one accepts that neoliberalism does not provide an adequate explanatory principle for the cultural and economic dynamics of urban Africa then a space is opened

---

<sup>3</sup> Examples of the isolated extraction of resources described by Ferguson (2006) may be found in the recent exploration of oil drilling possibilities in the Gambella and Ogaden regions of Ethiopia. Perhaps not coincidentally both of these areas have recently experienced escalating levels of ethnic violence.

for exploring new analytical directions. At the base of my analysis is an examination of the multiple ways that value is constructed, and their implications for inequality.

Neoliberal capitalism influences but does not determine the construction of value. Class relationships in urban Ethiopia have been ruptured by recent economic changes and yet continuities remain, particularly around issues of status.

### **Rethinking Neoliberalism through Ethnography: Youth, Aspirations, and Modernity**

In order to understand the variable ways in which value is constructed it is necessary to first examine the aspirations of youth. Recent anthropological discussions of modernity provide a useful analytical framework for examining young men's aspirations. Anthropologists have described multiple ways of being modern, and used such terms as "parallel," "gendered," and "vernacular" modernities in order to address this diversity (Larkin 1997, Rofel 1999, Knauft 2002). In response to the proliferation of academic discourse concerning modernity, Ferguson (2006) has cautioned against allowing a celebration of multiple modernities to distract from issues of economic inequality, and the ways that different world areas continue to be less "modern" than others in terms of health care, access to education, and the prevalence of famine and disease. Building on Ferguson's critique, I argue that culturally specific notions of what it means to be modern often shape economic practices.

"Youth" as a social category occupies a peculiar position in relation to discussions of modernity. Becoming modern implies a process of transformation and movement through time towards a definite end. Youth exists as a stage between childhood and

adulthood and in this sense also represents a process of transformation. Youth are continually engaged in a process of becoming, and a key element of the condition of youth is one's relationship to the future. "Youth" is understood here as a "social shifter" in the sense that it serves both a referential and indexical function (Durham 2004:592). In other words, youth refers to a specific group of people, but membership in that group is always defined in relation to other categories that encompass not only age, but may include gender, class, status and other markers of identity.

Anthropologists have begun to identify the variable ways in which youth emerges as a social category within a context of global capitalism in different world areas (Cole 2004, Liechty 2003). In the African context scholars have rightly emphasized the role of neoliberal economic policies, particularly structural adjustment, in creating a gap between the aspirations of youth and economic realities (Cole 2004, Hansen 2005, Howanda and De Boeck 2005, Masquelier 2005, Jua 2003, Weiss 2004a, Silberschmidt 2004). When aspirations are increasingly difficult to attain, the period in which one exists in the ambiguous stage between childhood and adulthood expands. "Youth" comes to be defined on the basis of an individual's inability to take on the responsibilities associated with adulthood. A youth is in the process of becoming something else, but in an environment of severe economic scarcity this transformation is frequently never realized. Despite the importance of time and progress for youth, with few exceptions this relationship has not been adequately theorized.

I approach issues of time, progress, and aspirations through an ethnography of everyday life. I argue that young men's notions of modernity were constructed through everyday activities such as chewing chat, watching films, and attending school. Arjun



Appadurai (1996) has claimed that increased flows of electronic media across the globe have shifted the manner in which future possibilities and lives are imagined. Weiss (2002) extends on Appadurai's analysis, describing how the imagination may function as habitus that is interrelated with the reproduction of stratification. In chapters 3 and 4 I examine how young men engaged with international discourses like film and formal education in order to generate aspirations and imaginative possibilities for the future. While the movement of ideas and technology across space certainly provides opportunities for the imaginative construction of possible lives, this process is always shaped by local values and norms. Additionally, the actual spaces in which ideas and images are accessed influence imaginative creativity and therefore I give close attention to video and chat houses in chapter 3.

Young men consistently expressed a desire to experience progress. While abstract notions of progress as linear improvement over time resemble those found in the west (Koselleck 1985), they were also locally specific. In chapter 4 I discuss the manner that young men conceived of progress in terms of their relationships with others. Young men aspired to start a family of one's own and move from a position of economic dependence to providing support for others. The importance of social relationships for experiencing progress demonstrates the peculiarly localized notion of modernity possessed by Ethiopian young men.

In chapters 3 and 4 I examine young men's notions of modernity primarily in terms of time. Changing notions of time and progress in relation to industrial capitalism have been well analyzed within the social sciences (Postone 1993, Thompson 1967). Conditions of widespread unemployment among youth in urban Africa provide the

opportunity to approach this topic from a new perspective. The inability to actualize desires for progress caused unemployed young men in Jimma to experience time as a potentially dangerous and overabundant quantity. Unstructured time produced feelings of stress and anxiety because it forced young men to think about the future and their inability to achieve their aspirations. Their inability to experience progress led young men to experience something like boredom. Goodstein (2005) has argued that boredom is related to the emergence of notions of progress in Western Europe. A comparison with the experience of time among young men in Jimma generates insights into the relationship between time, production, and progress.

Solutions to young men's temporal problems were conceived of in spatial terms. In chapter 4, I explore the manner that migration, especially to the United States and Europe, was thought to solve the problem of progressing through time. Although they approach the topic from different perspectives, David Harvey and James Ferguson have both argued that in a context of late capitalism spatial strategies are increasingly prioritized over temporal processes. I engage with these arguments in order to explore the relationship between migration and young men's aspirations to experience progress. The use of migration or spatial movement in order to take on the responsibilities associated with adulthood has been well documented in literature on Africa. Often migration allows young men and women to access monetary wealth that may then be used to obtain livestock, land, or wives in one's homeland. Examples of this process in relation to rural-urban migration from around the continent include Bozzoli 1991, Hutchinson 1996, and White 1990. Other studies have argued that migration allows youth to reconstruct their identities by repositioning them in relation to modern spaces

and commodities (MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000, Newell 2005). While issues of modernity and accessing material wealth were certainly relevant, the Ethiopian case provides a different perspective on the value of migration. The importance of social relationships for notions of progress and occupational status meant that spatial movement took on important social dimensions. This dynamic enables an analysis of variation in the relationship between time, production, and status within different spaces.

### **Class and Status**

The analysis of aspirations in relation to the specific issues discussed above provides a basis for an examination of stratification in terms of class and status. Within the broad areas of class and status I focus on three primary sub-issues: the implications of class and status for occupational choice, the interrelationship between class and status in producing stratification, and the possibility of analyzing inequalities based in status without reducing them to class. Each of these sub-issues is described in more detail below.

Before moving further it is necessary to define my key terms of class and status, and I adopt Weberian notions of both concepts. Weber defines a class situation as one in which, "a large number of men have in common a specific causal factor influencing their chances in life, insofar as this factor has to do only with the possession of economic goods and the interests involved in earning a living, and furthermore in the condition of the market in commodities of labor" (1978:43). A Weberian concept of class may include all factors that influence one's economic chances in life including education,

occupation, and status. This perspective also takes into account ways of acquiring economic goods that are only indirectly related to production, like sharing and gifts.

Marx's notion of class is similar to Weber's in that it also acknowledges the importance of access to economic goods. Wright (1997:29-37) effectively summarizes the distinction between Marx and Weber by contrasting Marx's emphasis on "exploitation" with Weber's "chances in life." Exploitation describes a very specific type of relationship in which one class essentially lives off the labor of another. In an exploitative relationship the interests of different classes are necessarily opposed. A difference in "chances in life" does not imply this level of conflict. For Weber a class difference may be based on one group's greater ability to access economic goods even if it is not achieved at the expense of another group.

The notion of class as a process associated with the appropriation of surplus labor has been developed as a useful addition to classic Marxian approaches (Gibson-Graham 1996, 2006, Resnick and Wolff 1987). This perspective moves away from defining class in terms of specific groups of people. Instead individuals take part in multiple class processes in which their relation to others is evaluated in terms of flows of surplus labor. Particularly in chapters 7 and 8 I closely examine the movement of economic goods among unemployed young men and self-employed workers. The multiplicity and diversity of economic activities engaged in by these young men mean that they do not easily fit into single categories of class. Conceptualizing class as a process supports an analysis of the inequalities produced in the movement of goods among youth. That said, in order to evaluate class processes in relation to surplus labor it is still necessary to invoke notions of exploitation. Resnick and Wolff (1987) argue that the class process, or

the appropriation of surplus labor, is one entry point among many for the analysis of social life. However, in choosing this as their entry point a particular type of relationship is privileged. Although the individual may be engaged in multiple class processes it is still the separation from the product of his or her labor that constitutes a relation of power. I discuss the problems of this approach further in relation to Strathern's (1988) critique of neo-Marxist analyses of exploitation below.

An additional problem is that although the neo-Marxian approach is useful for describing relationships surrounding surplus labor, it tells us little about inequality or relations of power. There is no basis for evaluating one's position within relations of exploitation. To be exploited is to lose control over the product of one's labor, but there is no reason to conceive of this process in positive or negative terms. I believe that individuals and groups do perceive themselves as dominant or subordinate and this often motivates behavior. I recognize the importance of exploitation for understanding social conflict. However, I adopt a Weberian definition of class because in the context of my research it provides a better tool for understanding stratification. In Jimma definite causal factors existed that provided some individuals with greater access to economic goods than others, but for the most part an exploitative relationship did not exist between these groups. For example, government workers had greater life chances in terms of accessing economic goods than daily laborers who worked in the informal economy, but the elevated position of government employees was not dependent on the subjugation of laborers. I utilize the concept of class to address a particular type of inequality – differences in access to economic goods, and therefore Weber's approach to class is more relevant for my analysis. I also appreciate Weber's emphasis on a "common" factor.

While people are not neatly organized into classes, within any society groups of people do share common characteristics like gender, occupation, and ethnicity. When that common characteristic is associated with access to economic goods it is analytically useful to employ the concept of class. If a group of people with common characteristics consistently has greater access to economic goods, then that group may be described as a dominant or upper class. Used in this manner, class facilitates a better understanding of economic inequality.

One of Weber's primary insights is that status may act as a source of relations of dominance. Status is based on the components of a lifestyle or socially shared characteristics that are subject to positive and negative social evaluation (Weber 1978:48). As status depends on social evaluations, it is always relative to social context. An individual only possesses status in so far as other individuals positively evaluate his or her lifestyle. Class and status are very much interrelated. The prestige or distinction that is attached to a certain lifestyle may preserve inequalities in access to economic goods by legitimizing the power of the dominant class and creating barriers to social mobility. For example, the status of a king or lord may justify greater control over the product of labor (e.g. Donham 1999a), and in contemporary Western Europe status facilitates the social connections that may eventually bring material advantages (Bourdieu 1984). While these interconnections are important, status is not necessarily related to class domination, and in this dissertation I will also give attention to disconnections between status and class, where one is increased at the expense of the other. An analysis of these situations sheds light on the distinct manner in which hierarchies of power may be based on class or status.

Although Weber provides a relatively clear definition of status he does not explain how status hierarchies may be assessed. One of the contributions that I seek to make in this dissertation is to provide a detailed analysis of status-based inequalities. Much of the theoretical background for this analysis comes from discussions of gift exchange and I address this below.

Many of the anthropological analyses that have dealt extensively with status have examined gender inequality (Kelly 1993, Ortner and Whitehead 1981). Ortner and Whitehead claim that, “the other-than-gender prestige hierarchies of most societies are, by and large, male games” (1981:19). In other words, status systems that are not constructed around gender frequently impact women only indirectly. For the most part this is true of the hierarchies surrounding occupational status that I discuss in this dissertation. Because women have limited access to urban occupations they do not compete for status through work in the same manner as men. For this reason, much of my analysis of status should be understood as applying specifically to men. Certainly issues of gender and masculinity have implications for occupational status. Status concerns are also closely related to the limited opportunities available for women in the urban labor market, but in this case hierarchies of status are different than those related to occupation for men.

The examination of status that I offer in this dissertation should be useful for explorations of prestige and inequality in relation to gender, race, or other sites of stratification. Ortner and Whitehead (1981:22) note that the position of women within kin or marriage relationships is key for understanding status based stratification in terms of gender. In the same manner one’s position within the relations that surround work or

exchange is highly relevant for stratification in terms of gender. Differential abilities to access prestige through involvement in high status employment partially condition stratification between genders.

### **Class, Status, and Occupational Choice**

My approach to examining occupational choice does not deviate dramatically from past ethnographic analyses. As I explain above, status refers to positive or negative evaluations of a lifestyle. These evaluations have their base in particular sets of shared values. If individuals avoid certain occupations because of status issues, this implies that the lifestyle associated with those occupations is not supported by their values. When values are shared along lines of class or other forms of social organization, then groups tend to gravitate towards or away from particular occupations.

A classic study of this process of occupational choice is Paul Willis' *Learning to Labor*. Despite Willis' very different ethnographic context of 1970's England the manner in which he examines occupational choice among working class youth is similar to the approach I adopt here. Briefly, Willis argues that the values of working class young men ("the lads"), particularly surrounding issues of masculinity and camaraderie, lead them to devote little effort to education and enter into working class jobs. The lads evaluate a working class lifestyle positively and therefore within their peer group factory work is a high status occupation. It is in order to access this status that the lads are willing to accept a subordinate class position.

Clearly my use of the term "choice" does not imply that individuals are freely choosing between equally possible options. The values that direct individuals towards



different occupations are often contingent on class, meaning that to some extent occupational choice is determined by class. The relationship between class and values in my study may be conceptualized in a similar manner to Bourdieu's habitus (1977:81). Like habitus, the values of Ethiopian youth were generated by their economic and social position, and in turn reproduced that position. Much of Bourdieu's discussion in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* takes the approach of structure producing individual dispositions and practices in a manner that reproduces structure, and this has rightly been criticized for leaving little or no room for social change. However, in other writing Bourdieu makes it clear that empirically, reproduction of economic stratification rarely takes place in this manner (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:129). Individual variation and historical change are always present and often subvert the reproduction of class hierarchies. Certainly in the case at hand there was a wide range of economic behavior among youth with similar class backgrounds, and therefore understanding differences in occupational choice is a matter of examining variation in the construction of values within these groups.

Aspirations are also closely intertwined with this process. As Bourdieu (1984) notes, aspirations are conditioned not only by values, but by expectations for one's future. In terms of occupation, aspirations are often based on what one can typically expect given one's educational background and other relevant factors for obtaining employment. Particularly after dramatic historical shifts there may be changes in the opportunity structure for employment. In these cases aspirations do not match the level of opportunity and individuals are unable to "choose" their occupation as they would like. As I explain in chapter 4 this is the case in Ethiopia, and it is perhaps the major area

where changes associated with neoliberalism have impacted the lives of young people. A rise in education combined with a dramatic reduction in public employment has caused many young men to be unemployed, which in turn has important implications for urban class structure.

### **The Interrelationship Between Class and Status**

Weber explains that occupational status is an important area of study because the status of the worker is frequently associated with the occupational lifestyle instead of the position in the process of production (1978:54). Cases of disjuncture between class and occupational status have provided the basis for a number of interesting anthropological analyses (Bourgois 1995, Freeman 1999, Kondo 1990, Paules 1991). Each of these works provides a detailed examination of how prestige or non-material advantages lead individuals to accept or even seek out occupations in which their class position is compromised. Similar to earlier studies of occupational status, my interest is to explore different forms of stratification that are interrelated with status and class among young men in Jimma. In doing so I hope to develop a theoretical framework that may be used to better understand relations of power.

Ferguson's (1999) examination of the importance of identity for establishing rural households among retired urban mineworkers in Zambia draws attention to the notion of performance for understanding the interrelationship between class and status. Ferguson argues that identities are best understood as performed styles that evoke meanings that vary with context. In his study mineworkers are not intrinsically "rural" or "urbanized," rather their actions continually define them along a continuum between rural and urban.

In the same manner the urban young men that I studied did not have fixed “high” or “low” status. Occupational status, which is where I devote the bulk of my attention, was not innate but dependent on the social interactions associated with the type of work that one performed.

The notion of performance facilitates the incorporation of consumption into analyses of status as well. In Ferguson’s case consumer choices in beer, clothing, and music were all key for performing rural or urban identities. The importance of consumption for the performance of style has been widely discussed in work on youth elsewhere in Africa (Friedman 1994, Gondola 1999, MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000, Newell 2005). As one consumes and performs a style, status is generated by referencing symbols associated with positively or negatively evaluated lifestyles. In this sense the performance of style may open or close different relationships.

In an African context the relationship between class and status has often been analyzed with the concept of wealth in people/wealth in things (Guyer 1993). Based on traditional modes of agricultural production it is argued (Fallers 1966, Goody 1971 & 1976) that in Africa wealth in people has been more important for power than wealth in things. The same logic has been applied within urban settings in studies like Ferguson’s. Through the cultivation of style, mine workers in Ferguson’s study have varying abilities to create relationships with others. These relationships in turn have economic implications in the form of one’s ability to successfully establish rural households. In an urban African context Hart (1973, 1975, 1988) and Barnes (1986) have also argued that information and political support that is accessed through people are important for the accumulation of material wealth.

The wealth in people/wealth in things dynamic in these studies is complicated because the performance of style that enables one to create valuable relationships with others is often highly dependent on the manner that one shares with others. In Ferguson's study, performance of a rural lifestyle for urban mineworkers involved consistently providing remittances for rural kin. The notion of performance is especially useful here, because relationships were not created directly through gifting in the sense that the relationship was purchased. Rather, through giving mineworkers were able to establish a particular identity that in turn allowed them to engage in valuable relationships. In these analyses the end result is the accumulation of material wealth – in the form of a comfortable retirement for Ferguson's Zambian mineworkers or business opportunities for Hart's Ghanaian entrepreneurs - but this possibility depends on first investing in relationships.

Investing in relationships need not involve gifting. Consumption is also frequently a means of investing in relationships. When the Congolese sapeur purchases an expensive suit for himself he is acquiring a powerful symbol that will change his relationship with others. Although he is not directly giving his wealth to others, consumption in this case is not significantly different than gifting in that material wealth is invested in the construction of an identity that has implications for one's ability to create relationships with others.

Exchange is inevitably shaped by varying levels of influence from the cultural logics of the gift and the commodity, or investment in people versus investment in things (Appadurai 1986, Piot 1999, Strathern 1988, Weiss 1996). For example in Piot's study of Togo, selling one's labor as a migrant worker enables one to return home and build tin-

roofed houses for kin. Thus the accumulation of relationships through gifting is dependent on engagement in what is essentially a market economy. My analysis of work and identity assumes that employment is both a means of accessing material goods and the performance of an identity that positions one in relation to others.

Analyses of commodities and gifts, and wealth in people/ wealth in things are useful for rethinking neoliberal capitalism as a basis for understanding cultural and economic processes. These analyses provide a means of conceptualizing inequality in a manner that is not dependent on macro level theories of capitalism or assumptions about private property. In chapters 7 and 8 I describe patterns of reciprocity among young men in order to generate insights into issues of inequality. Like Carla Freeman (2000, 2001), I seek to breakdown the dichotomy between production and consumption, commodity and gift, and global and local. In doing so I examine the particular implications of work and exchange as processes that are related to both identity construction and production.

While I seek to deconstruct these dichotomies I believe they are also useful. The material and the social are inevitably intertwined, but their relationship varies with time and space. Examining the interplay between status and class based forms of stratification enables a better description of power in turn of the century Ethiopia. In chapters 8 and 9 I explore intersections between policies associated with neoliberal capitalism and local economic practices in order to assess how class or status may take precedence at a given point in time.

### **Understanding Status-based Inequalities**

Given the apparent inextricability of class and status the next portion of my argument may be surprising. While much of my analysis is devoted to exploring the interrelationship between class and status, in chapters 7 and 8 I also seek to analyze status as a source of stratification that may operate independently of class. In Willis' study of working class British youth, notions of status and evaluations of lifestyle are important because of their implications for class. In performing a lifestyle valued by their peers, Willis' "lads" inevitably take on working class jobs. Willis never addresses the intrinsic importance of achieving a lifestyle that is positively evaluated. Instead he argues that the decisions made by working class young men that place them on a trajectory towards working class employment are inevitably to their disadvantage. However, it seems that in subjugating themselves in terms of class, the lads are also achieving a dominant position within a relative hierarchy of status. This status hierarchy does not extend beyond the working class culture that the lads inhabit, but at least among their peers prioritizing displays of masculinity over education and eventually obtaining factory work invites a positive evaluation and high status.

Bourdieu's *Distinction* has become a classic analysis of status in relation to class. Similar to Willis he clearly demonstrates that lifestyles valued by different classes leads to the reproduction of economic stratification. For Bourdieu "symbolic capital" and "cultural capital" are important because of their roles in reproducing class hierarchies. Symbolic capital can be considered as capital only in so far as it influences one's access to material wealth or position within the process of production. Bourdieu states, "Symbolic capital, a transformed and thereby disguised form of physical 'economic' capital, produces its proper effects inasmuch, as it conceals the fact that it originates in

‘material’ forms of capital which are also, in the last analysis, the source of its effects” (1977:183). In other words symbolic capital is always dependent on material forms and cannot be a source of stratification in its self. Analyses like Bourdieu’s or Willis’ avoid problems of economic determinism in the sense that they acknowledge the role of culture in influencing one’s economic chances in life, and they argue that the two are inseparable. However for both, one’s chances in life are only defined in economic terms. The intrinsic value of status is never acknowledged.

The problem of why people often act in a manner that does not appear to be in their best interests can be partially solved by expanding the definition of interest beyond class. In analyzing the interrelationship between class and status, I argue that status evaluations are significant in themselves, not simply because of their implications for class. Anthropologists have often critiqued purely economic notions of value, but for the most part they have not offered alternative means of understanding inequality. I argue that variation in the ability to live a life that is evaluated positively by one’s peers forms a particular kind of inequality, often interrelated with class, but important even when it is not.

Ethnographies of gift exchange provide useful direction in evaluating power in terms of status without reference to class, in that they demonstrate that economies do not necessarily operate based on a logic of accumulation. Giving enables the creation of relationships between people instead of the accumulation of profits. However, this does not imply that gift exchange is an egalitarian practice. In relation to Gregory’s analysis of gift and commodity economies Strathern explains, “In a commodity oriented economy, people thus experience their interest in commodities as a desire to appropriate goods; in a

gift oriented economy, as the desire to expand social relations” (1988:143). Within a gift economy stratification is based on differential abilities to control social relationships. As noted above, I follow Strathern and others in avoiding a strict separation between gift and commodity economies. That said, analyses of gift exchange are useful for undermining assumptions about material accumulation and humans.

Strathern’s (1988) offers a compelling critique of Marxian notions of exploitation. The assumption behind defining power in terms of exploitation is that humans are inherently individual producers. A Marxian analysis assumes that there is an intrinsic relationship between the individual and the product of his labor, and at a fundamental level a separation of the two causes the individual to suffer. Strathern questions this assumption by arguing that in societies that prioritize gift exchange, things are often understood as being the product of relationships not individual labor. In this context what appears to be the appropriation of a woman’s labor by her husband must be reevaluated based on the notion that neither the labor or its product are thought to be privately owned. “Work cannot be measured separately from relationships” (Strathern 1988:160). In this manner Strathern establishes control over relationships as a source of power that is only indirectly related to production.

While Strathern’s analysis is valuable it deserves further clarification. Particularly in chapter 7 I examine patterns of reciprocity among young men in order to better explicate the links between working, sharing, and status. In doing so I move towards an understanding of stratification that is based in social relationships. It is also significant that analyses of gift exchange in Melanesia typically assume that these exchanges are isolated from a global capitalist economy. As I have noted above,



although I avoid a simple application of theories of neoliberal capitalism to the Ethiopian context, I do not deny the relevance of economic globalization for the lives of young men in Jimma. Therefore this study is able to examine non-material forms stratification within a context shaped by capitalist processes.

### **Sunsets and Kangaroos: Preliminary Notes on Research Methodology**

There is a hotel on the main road to the Jimma market that has a balcony overlooking the street. The hotel is always empty and there were some days when I had to go sit on that balcony by myself and drink cold bottles of beer while I stared down at the city. It was a feeling of detached escape that I occasionally craved.

The evening sun is burning into my neck and I am looking out at the road lined with stalls selling clothes and shoes. Stalls covered with plastic tarps that have been stretched over frames made from eucalyptus limbs. Men walk by in their grey jackets and thick-soled leather shoes. Sometimes a woman in a white shall, a barefoot boy, or a young man in a faded t-shirt printed with a giant picture of Leonardo DiCaprio. The asphalt is brown with dirt and is bordered by the piles of clothes and blue plastic of the shops. Behind that the trees obscure the tin roofs and then there is a ring of green hills surrounding the town. Gradual layers of poverty and beauty that fade into each other like a sunset made out of dirt, cloth, and vegetation. From up here everything fits together in a way that somehow feels right. There is the Teddy Afro pop song that I've heard a thousand times echoing up from the street. A woman is squatting behind a charcoal burner lined with ears of corn. She fans the coals and looks straight ahead. A one-legged

man pulls himself down the street on crutches. A kid on a red bicycle pedals up the hill. These are all pieces in a giant collage that is a place called Jimma.

Most days I submerged myself in the density of these layers and layers of people. On these days I was lost within the sunset, knowing that I am surrounded by much more than I am able to see. As I walk from my house towards the city center, the sun burning into my skull, a line from a Lou Reed song echoes through my head, “The city is a funny place, something like a circus or a sewer.” The piles of trash gradually grow until they reach the river where everything seems to accumulate. Dogs, vultures, and men in rags pick through the trash as it spontaneously smokes and bursts into flames. I cross the river and then I am in Mahel Ketema, the Center of the City. Walking in the city, it is difficult to see anything beyond the continuous flow of people. Boys play table tennis on the streets, women wash clothes in front of their house; every business is a home and every home is a business. Intoxication and sex are sold everywhere. Intoxication is through green leaves and yellow honey wine. The sex is not available in the heat of the afternoon, but later as the sun goes down the red lights in the doorways will flicker on. In the afternoon it is time for chat. Crowds surround the men sitting behind their piles of branches and leaves, shouting and grabbing, and then stuffing a bundle under an arm and hurrying away. I knock on a big wooden door and then enter before anyone answers. I know I am welcome at Abdu’s house. In the heat and noise of the city, this square room with twelve-foot ceilings is an oasis. Abdu sits on the floor mats smoking a cigarette and chewing on a giant wad of green leaves. He flashes me a toothless grin and hands me a branch as I take off my shoes and join him on the mat. Other men come and go and the conversation moves in waves, rising and falling. For some men Abdu’s house is an

office and the single piece of furniture is a chair called “the kangaroo.” Like its namesake the chair has a pouch that seems to magically produce things on demand. Books, files, attachments for Abdu’s hookah, they are all inside the kangaroo’s pouch. It is a space within a space within a space. As I chew the bitter green leaves I stop worrying about making sense of it all - the endless places and histories. I stop worrying about abstractions and details. For now I can lose myself in one of the many pockets that exist in Jimma and forget about the storm of humanity that rages outside.

For myself the process of research and writing is a continual movement between the abstraction of the sunset and exploring the various kangaroo’s pouches that exist within the city. In the chapters that follow I will move back and forth between these two perspectives, but in general I spend more time in the pouches. Particularly as I interrogate the relationship of processes associated with neoliberal capitalism to the experience of young men living in Jimma, Ethiopia it is necessary to examine the spaces within spaces. There is a tendency to conceive of capitalism as a boundless entity covering the globe, from which the only escape is the obscure, the local, and the hidden. However, as Ferguson (2006) demonstrates in his discussion of resource extraction in Africa it is often these pouches that provide the ideal environment for capitalist relations to thrive. Therefore, in investigating local spaces I do not seek to classify them as capitalist or non-capitalist. Rather, I assume that what I find may have a place within the abstract image of the sunset, but that it also has meaning and significance in its own right. Just as Abdu’s house is one piece of the complex collage that forms Jimma, it is also a specific space that supports specific types of interactions.

As I will describe in the section below, my research often took the individual as its unit of analysis. In this dissertation I describe different young men and attempt to explain their particular cultural and economic behavior. In doing so I seek to crawl into that space that we often conceive of as being the most hidden and personal, that space that is thought to exist in one's head that contains values and ideas. I used a number of methods for eliciting values, particularly surrounding work and status, and based on these values I attempt to understand the cultural and economic behavior of young men. I continually contextualize my analysis of the individual within local, national, and global discourses. However, I also assume that each one of my informants is in some way unique and can never be fully explained with any theory. My goal as a researcher and writer is to arrange these observations into a meaningful pattern. I do not assume that this pattern exists independently of myself. Just as lines of color that appear in the sky can only be called a sunset at a particular point in the evening, my observations are only coherent within a particular analytical perspective.

### **Research Methodology**

This dissertation is based on eighteen months of research conducted in Jimma, Ethiopia. I conducted all interviews myself. Unless the interviewee was fluent in English, interviews and casual conversations were held in Amharic. Approximately half of the interviews were recorded, and the rest were documented with written notes only.

Generally the young people in my study were not married and did not have children, but there were exceptions. All of the youth in my study were between the ages of eighteen and thirty, and most were in their early to mid-twenties.

The decision to focus my research on men rather than women was more pragmatic than theoretical. I began my research by including roughly equal numbers of men and women in my sample of unemployed youth. In terms of formal interviews it was possible for me to gather the same quality of information regardless of gender. However, it quickly became apparent that it was very difficult for me to conduct participant observation with women. Unemployed young women spend the majority of their time working in the home. Where it was easy for me to join groups of young men at street corners, barber shops, video houses, and cafes, it would have been culturally inappropriate to make casual visits to the homes of young women. This meant that I had no means of checking the data that I gathered in formal interviews. For example, if a young woman told me that she did not have a boyfriend I simply had to take her word for it, whereas with young men the casual conversation that occurred among friends on street corners would quickly support or deny claims that were made in interviews.

The second issue in relation to my focus on young men was that in terms of many of the basic issues at play in my study – aspirations, opportunities, values concerning status, and class – the experience of young men was very different than that of women. For example, the generation of young women in my study was the first in Ethiopia to complete secondary school in large numbers. While the number of male secondary school graduates had also increased, the meaning of education was entirely different for women, and is a much more important source of a generation gap than for men. Another key issue in my study was the contrast between working and unemployed youth. However, many of the informal economic activities that young men engaged in were not available to women. For cultural reasons women did not work as barbers, bicycle

mechanics, and street side vendors. In this sense the choices between unemployment and work for women were very different than for men. Clearly a study of young women would have been as interesting on both a theoretical and applied level as my work with young men. However, I felt that all of my attention was required in order to do justice to the complexity of the issues at play for either gender. Through out this dissertation I point out areas where the experience of young men was particularly gendered, but I do not attempt an in-depth analysis of the lives of young women.

I used a number of different sampling methods for selecting my primary informants. I began my research at the Jimma Technical School where I taught English as a Second Language to all 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade students for one semester. Over the course of that semester I assigned students essays with themes that were relevant for my research (for example, describing themselves ten years in the future), and I analyzed these essays in order to gain insights into student values and ideals. I do not discuss these essays in this dissertation. I also randomly selected three grade 12 students from each department (departments were organized on the basis of trades like electronics or woodworking) and held group discussions with them. I interviewed each of these students individually concerning their life history and plans for the future and attempted to track their activities after graduation. The ideas and values that these students expressed are discussed in chapter 5 in relation to occupational choice and status.

I relied on the assistance of neighborhood *iddirs* in order to select my initial sample of unemployed youth informants. An *iddir* is a burial association that is generally organized on the basis of neighborhood and includes almost all residents, regardless of class, gender, ethnicity, and religion. I selected three neighborhoods with the intention of

choosing places with differential incomes and proximities to economic activity. These neighborhoods are described in more detail in chapter 2. Although I intended that each iddir would select ten unemployed youth to participate in my study, in one case, Qottebe Sefer, the iddir only selected five. That neighborhood happened to be where I resided, and I was able to use contacts that I developed over time to locate five more unemployed young people.

The initial thirty unemployed informants were divided almost equally in terms of gender and they represented a variety of different ethnicities and religions, although the majority were Orthodox Christians. I interviewed each of the thirty on topics concerning their past, opinions on education, occupational status, plans for the future, and reasons for unemployment. In most cases I also interviewed one of their parents. In some cases I returned to interview their parents a second time in order to collect more detailed life histories that could be used to construct a history of Jimma. The interviews with youth formed a base from which I could begin to understand the issues surrounding unemployment in Ethiopia and this structured the second half of my research.

In the second half of my research I focused my attention on young men. I continued to work with most of my original sample of unemployed young men, and I asked them to suggest friends who might be willing to participate in my research. In this manner I developed a sample that consisted of twenty young unemployed young men. Many of these young men resided in my original three neighborhoods, but in some cases I included youth from other neighborhoods that resembled the original three in spatial and economic dynamics. I intentionally selected these informants so that approximately half came from middle class and half from lower class backgrounds. In selecting

informants, I evaluated class status primarily on the basis of parental income. In chapter 8 I develop a locally relevant assessment of class that is based on data gathered during my research.

I met with each of these twenty primary informants four times over a period of one month. During that month informants kept journals that documented all of their income and expenses, as well as their day-to-day activities. The results of these budgets are discussed in chapters 7 and 8. Documenting the income and expenses of young men provided valuable insight into actual relations of inequality that are based in work and patterns of reciprocity. With this data I am able to draw preliminary conclusions about stratification within a diverse economy.

During each of the four monthly meetings with informants we would review their journals and discuss a particular topic. Meetings were devoted to passing time and day-to-day activities, enumerating kin, discussing the dynamics of giving and receiving, life histories, and an exercise in which informants evaluated different characters in terms of prestige and their potential for friendship. A more detailed discussion of this final exercise is included in chapter 6.

From the beginning of my research my working youth informants were almost entirely male. This is because very few occupations are available to young women in the informal economy with which they can derive substantial income. One exception is sex work. I did interview female sex workers, but the results of those interviews are not discussed in this dissertation. Women are often involved in petty trade but for the most part these are older women who support families and cannot be classified as “youth.” The selection of working youth informants was opportunistic. I would simply approach



these young men as they worked and make casual conversation. After I felt that we had a comfortable relationship I would set up an appointment away from their workplace where I could conduct a formal interview. During the first half of my research I interviewed fifteen working young men and then narrowed this group down to ten primary informants. Selection of primary informants was based on maintaining a diverse group of professions and the level of comfort in my relationship with the individual. Working primary informants completed the same journals and series of interviews as unemployed primary informants.

During the course of my research I conducted numerous other opportunistic interviews. Usually I would become interested in a particular topic like friendship, videos, or chat and then pull together different groups of “experts” to discuss the issue. At times I also sought out government administrators in order to discuss policy regarding youth. Numerous non-governmental development projects aimed at youth were also operating in Jimma. Although I spoke with organizers and youth from all of these organizations I do not discuss the results of these interviews in this dissertation. Through out my research I sought out “elders”, usually wealthy men, to interview regarding the history of Jimma city. Particularly in chapter 2 I draw on these interviews to complement information that I have gathered from secondary sources.

Finally, perhaps the most important source of information for my research was participant observation. I spent countless hours with young men as they hung out on the street corner, chewed chat, sipped coffee, watched videos, and occasionally worked. It is often the conversations and interactions that I had during participant observation that

make their way into my dissertation, and these anecdotes are generally supported with data gathered through formal interviews.

### **Synopsis of Chapters**

Chapter 2 discusses the historical and cultural background for this study with particular attention to the manner that urban class structure has shifted over time. A major theme in most writing that concerns stratification in Ethiopia has been ethnicity. I do discuss historic ethnic relations in the Jimma region in chapter 2, but in fact these relations generally do not figure into my analysis of stratification that occurs in later chapters. Due to a number of interrelated economic and cultural shifts that have taken place within the last fifteen years I argue that among urban youth ethnicity is less salient for urban stratification than it was in the past. I make this argument in spite of the general consensus that under a policy of ethnic federalism, ethnicity is the most important source of differentiation between individuals and groups.

Chapter 3 begins with an examination of day-to-day life among unemployed young men. The everyday passage of time for young men is experienced as a source of stress and activities like consuming chat and international film are utilized in order to alleviate the problems time. In this chapter I examine both the spaces in which chat and films are consumed as well as the discourses that surround these activities, in order to better understand the processes through which imaginative possibilities for the future are constructed. The chapter closes with a discussion of a government shutdown of video houses in relation to the imagination and the production of the social category of youth.

In Chapter 4 I discuss narratives of progress. I argue that young men's notions of progress are based in part on their engagement with formal education. Progress is conceptualized in terms of experiencing improvement in one's position within social relationships. Young men's difficulties in actualizing their desires for progress represent an additional temporal problem. I analyze the temporal problems of young men in relation to discussions of time, progress, and boredom that have emerged out a western context. Young men sought to solve their problems of time with the spatial solution of migration, and the chapter closes with an exploration of the practices and discourses surrounding international migration.

Chapter 5 deals occupational status. I describe notions of stigma and prestige as they relate to occupation. I argue that the stigma attached to some occupations is a result of locally specific values concerning hierarchy and social relationships. In this chapter I present results from my research among technical students in order to demonstrate the manner in which technical education may be leading to a shift in notions of occupational status. Chapter 6 builds on chapter 5 by examining how values surrounding occupational status influence one's choice in employment.

In Chapter 7 I examine contrasting patterns of reciprocity between working and unemployed young men in order to analyze the construction of status through sharing behavior. I argue that differences in sharing behavior are related to the construction of multiple hierarchies of status.

In Chapter 8 I present the detailed data that I gathered from unemployed and working young men concerning their expenses and income. I use this data in order to develop a local model for class. I then argue that class and status are inextricably related

in the construction of stratification. This chapter also contains an analysis of changing patterns of stratification in contemporary urban Ethiopia.

## **Chapter 2: Historical and Cultural Background**

In this chapter I take up a number of topics that provide background for the analysis to come in later chapters. One of my goals is to write a brief history of Jimma. It is a history that does not always appear to be relevant to the arguments that I form elsewhere in the dissertation, but perhaps this in itself is interesting. Although the history of Jimma can be approached from different perspectives, I tell it as a story of the movement of Oromo people from the south and the process by which they became sedentary, developed a centralized government, and gained political and economic control over many of the ethnic groups that had previously inhabited the region. It was this centralized state that enabled Jimma to remain independent from Christian Abyssinian expansion until after the Italian occupation. In many ways the history of Jimma is one of ethnic interactions focused around different centers and peripheries.

I expand on the issue of ethnic interactions in my analysis of ethnic federalism. While I explore issues of ethnic identity in this chapter, I also argue that ethnicity had little relevance for the economic behavior of young people in Jimma at the time of my research. While academic and political discourse in Ethiopia continues to be dominated by ethnicity, for the young men in my study it was rarely a topic of discussion. I am not arguing that ethnicity is irrelevant for the lives of youth, but I do believe that its importance for the class structure of urban Ethiopia is changing. The issue of urban class structure is one that I take up in this chapter and I describe its development during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As the reproduction and subversion of class stratification is one of the primary issues that I explore in later chapters, my discussion here is important for

contextualizing the economic decisions of young men. I also describe the interrelationship between class and status, and the stigmatization of particular occupations. This provides important background for the discussion of occupational status that is a key topic of analysis in the latter half of the dissertation.

In this chapter I address quantitative data concerning youth unemployment, and its relation to global economic shifts that have occurred within the past twenty years. I combine this data with more detailed descriptions of individual young men who participated in my research in order to provide a sense of the lives on which this dissertation is based. Finally I describe the economic and social dynamics of the neighborhoods where I focused my research. The relevance of the qualities of space of different neighborhoods for sharing relationships is discussed in detail in chapter 8.

### **A Brief History of the Gibe Valley Region (16<sup>th</sup> Century to 1941)**

By the 16<sup>th</sup> century the Gibe River Valley where Jimma is located was the home to a polity known as Ennarya<sup>1</sup> (Hassen 1990:27-83). Beginning in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century Oromo pastoralists migrating from Borana in the south occupied the areas to the west, east, and north of Ennarya. While other polities in this area became involved in the wars between Orthodox Christians and Muslims that raged throughout the horn of Africa in the mid to late 16<sup>th</sup> century, Ennarya remained neutral. These wars left other areas weak and vulnerable to Oromo invasions, and through military force and peaceful assimilation the Oromo were able to easily dominate much of what is now Ethiopia. Ennarya's neutrality

---

<sup>1</sup> It is not clear how far back the Ennarya kingdom dates. In interviews with Yem elders they claimed that their ancestors were the Ennarya.

allowed it to preserve its military strength and maintain its sovereignty until the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

Following the Muslim/Christian wars, at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Ennarya developed an alliance with the Christian, predominantly Amhara, empire based in what is now northern Ethiopia. The leader of Ennarya converted to Christianity and their already strong military was bolstered with northern support. Ennarya was a center for long-distance trade and this provided wealth that was also useful for strengthening its military, and Ennarya was able to repel Oromo attacks throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The downfall of Ennarya came when it spread its military strength too thinly in an attempt to crush the Oromo. The Oromo were strengthened by continual migration from the south and the east and they were able to take advantage of the vulnerable state of Ennarya and finally complete their conquest of the region. While the leaders of Ennarya fled across the Gojeb River to the Kafa kingdom, the bulk of the population remained and gradually mixed with the new Oromo emigrants. The pastoral Oromo “settled among the sedentary agricultural population, especially in Ennarya, whose people initially may have outnumbered them, but through extensive intermarriages and the constant stream of new emigrants, the Oromo eventually equaled and probably came to outnumber the Ennaryans” (Hassen 1990:82).

At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Gibe River Valley region that had formerly been home to the Ennarya developed into five small Oromo kingdoms, one of which was Jimma. One of the questions that has interested scholars of Ethiopia is why

the relatively egalitarian *gada*<sup>2</sup> system was abandoned among Oromo in the Gibe region in favor of a hereditary kingship. Recent scholarship on the question has argued that while the rise of Islam and interregional trade were important, internal factors led to the transition from an age-grade system to a kingdom (Hassen 1990, Guluma 1984, Lewis 1964, Tekalign 1986). I find Guluma and Hassen's explanations to be the clearest and therefore I rely primarily on their work, but others develop a similar argument.

Beginning in the 17<sup>th</sup> century two primary factors related to the process of migration contributed to a shift in Oromo concepts of hierarchy and seniority (Hassen 1990:60).

One factor was that with migration over greater spatial distances communication within Oromo clans became increasingly difficult, and the traditional "*chafe*" meetings at which major decisions were made could no longer be held regularly. A second was that there was an increase in non-cattle wealth. Even before occupying the major trading center of Ennarya, the Oromo conquered the region separating Ennarya from Gojam to the north. For the first time Oromo began to be involved in trade and to accumulate forms of wealth beyond cattle. With the gradual adoption of sedentary agriculture, ownership of land became another marker of stratification. Claimed land was inherited by offspring with the approval of the ruling *gada* age grade. Eldest brothers inherited land and their younger brothers were forced to either work for them or leave in search of new uncultivated land. Differential access to land created various forms of inequality between brothers.

Younger brothers who remained at home to work for their elders were placed in a materially subordinate position that did not exist when pastoralism was the primary mode

---

<sup>2</sup> Put simply, *gada* is a political system based on age grades. All of the men within a given age grade have equal power in making decisions for the clan and therefore *gada* is thought to be a relatively egalitarian system. For a more detailed discussion see Asmarom 1973.



of production. Even brothers who departed their homes were placed in a position of competing with others for access to the best land (Guluma 1984:134-135). Individuals who were able to accumulate wealth either through land or trade exerted increasingly greater amounts of control within chafe meetings and were able to subvert the traditional rule of the majority.

In addition to creating stratification within kin groups the process of migration and competition for land generated tensions with other clans and neighboring ethnicities. In order to succeed in accessing the best land, greater power was given to traditional war leaders and soldiers (Guluma 1984:136). Clans chose a king or “*moti*” who was provided with a compound and given offerings of food and cattle so that he would be free to carry out administrative duties, but this was eventually “transformed to obligatory payment of taxes and corvée labor” (Guluma 1984:141). The need for greater leadership in competing for economic goods created momentum that eventually allowed particular families and individuals to access more power. The rise of long distance trade and Islam solidified this change by providing more wealth and resources with which a leader could use to retain power and a religious ideology that supported a hierarchical political structure.

Abba Faro of the Diggo clan established the first Jimma state, but the kingdom of Jimma did not begin to fully flourish until the rule of Abba Jifar I<sup>3</sup> (1830 – 1855). Abba Jifar I’s rule was marked by the rise of Islam and a struggle to control trade in the Gibe valley region. Mohammed Hassen (1990:114-161) explains that this process was

---

<sup>3</sup> Abba Jifar I’s given name was Sanna but he eventually took on the name of Jifar after his famous horse. The horses of Jimma are legendary and Adul Karim, a great grandson of Aba Jifar II, claims that they were sometimes fed roasted chickens.

interrelated with the development of an Oromo merchant class. The *afkala* first made their appearance around 1775. They were generally younger brothers who turned to trade because of their inability to inherit land (Hassen 1990:138). The *afkala* were in competition with the wealthier Arab *jabarti*<sup>4</sup> merchants. At the beginning of Abba Jifar I's rule trade in the Gibe valley was dominated by the Oromo state bordering Jimma to the north, Limmu-Ennarya. The Gibe valley formed a trade center where goods (primarily slaves, gold, ivory, musk from civet cats, coffee, and spices) from Kafa and further southwest were traded for European manufactured goods that had arrived via the Christian north. The *afkala* convinced the king of Limmu-Ennarya to deny the *jabarti* merchants direct access to Kafa, thus giving the *afkala* a monopoly on this important source of goods. This move forced more *jabarti* traders to move through Jimma, and provided Abba Jifar I with an incentive to conquer neighboring areas in order to open up a direct trading route from Kafa through Jimma to the north. The military strength of Jimma combined with the economic support of the *jabarti* allowed Hirmata<sup>5</sup>, in the present location of Jimma city, to take over the role of the major market for southwest Ethiopia in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The size and importance of the Hirmata market continued to grow during Abba Jifar II's (1878 – 1932) reign and the number of visitors to the main market held on Thursdays was estimated to be between twenty and thirty thousand (Pankhurst 1985).

Although some Oromo had contact with Islam beginning in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, conversion in the Gibe valley region began only in the 1800's. Hassen describes

---

<sup>4</sup> In Contrast to Hassan, Levine (1974) claims that the *jabarti* were Muslim Amhara.

<sup>5</sup> According to Abdul Karim, Hirmata is the Oromo word for "the place where goods obtained from war are divided."

conversion to Islam as beginning with the Oromo nobility who adopted the religion primarily for strategic economic reasons. The leaders of the Gibe states saw that conversion would improve their relationships with Muslim traders and increase their access to the wealth associated with trade. In Jimma, Abba Jifar I was the first leader to fully embrace Islam and this facilitated the shift of the primary market in the region from Limmu-Ennarya to Hirmata. By the end of Abba Jifar I's rule, Jiren, located on a hill around five kilometers from Hirmata, had become the major center for Muslim learning in southwest Ethiopia. Abba Jifar II was a great supporter of Muslim education and it was during his rule that Islam spread from the nobility to the peasants.

The political situation in the Gibe Valley changed drastically in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Menelik II led the Abyssinian expansion into what is now Southern Ethiopia. The expropriation of land that accompanied the movement of northern settlers into southern Ethiopia during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries described by Bahru (2002a) and Donham (1986) also occurred in Jimma. However, in Jimma the process was delayed by the peace treaty that King Aba Jifar II made with Menelik II. By the time Menelik's troops reached the Gibe Valley they had already decimated Oromo states in Wallegga and elsewhere. Menelik's troops were led by the famous Christian Oromo, Ras Gobana, who is thought to be the first Oromo to receive the title of Ras (Hassen 1990:198), and the leaders of all five Gibe states submitted to Menelik rather than risk destruction in a battle. For most of the Gibe states peaceful submission was transformed into armed resistance that was quickly put down and led to the complete dismantling of the local political structure. The exception was in Jimma, where Abba Jifar II agreed to pay Menelik tribute in order to retain sovereignty. Abba

Jifar II was allowed to retain power and the construction of Orthodox Christian churches was prevented in Jimma in return for the payment of a yearly tribute. This relationship was maintained up until Abba Jifar II's death in 1932, and the heavy taxation and loss of land experienced in the rest of southern Ethiopia did not occur in Jimma until the reign of Haile Sellasie, after the Italian occupation ended in 1941.

An interesting story behind the lack of resistance in Jimma comes from Abdul Karim, great-grandson of Abba Jifar II. Apparently Abba Jifar II's mother<sup>6</sup> played an important role in politics and she briefly ruled Jimma prior to Abba Jifar II's reign. Following the treaty between Menelik and Abba Jifar II, plans begun to be made among local leaders to revolt against Menelik. Abba Jifar II's mother heard about this and she sent a letter to Menelik informing him of the planned uprising, and Menelik was able to quickly put the plot to rest. Abba Jifar II's mother feared that an attack on Menelik would lead to all out war and the loss of what little sovereignty the kingdom of Jimma still possessed. In this sense her actions were intended to preserve Jimma's relative independence.

Abba Jobir was the grandson of Abba Jifar II, and he briefly served as the king of Jimma after his grandfather's death. The story behind Abba Jobir's ascendance to power comes from Oromo elders that I interviewed in 2002 while conducting preliminary research. In 1930 Haile Sellasie invited Abba Jifar II to his coronation ceremony. Abba Jifar II was too ill to attend so he asked his son Abba Dula to go as his representative. Abba Dula demanded to be given full power over the kingdom of Jimma in exchange for acting as a representative. Abba Jifar II refused and sent Abba Jobir who agreed to act

---

<sup>6</sup> Abba Jifar II's mother was the daughter of Abba Dula, king of the Gibe state Gumma (1854-1879). She was married to Abba Gomol, son of Abba Boka who was a brother of Abba Jifar I.

simply as a representative. By attending the coronation ceremony Abba Jobir was able to establish a relationship with Haile Sellasie and after the death of Abba Jifar in 1932, Abba Jobir was given control of Jimma. A different story claims that Abba Dula was interested in religion not politics and this is the reason why leadership was passed to Abba Jobir, but in either case Abba Jobir's position of authority did not last long. Haile Sellasie quickly put an end to Abba Jifar's agreement with Menelik and imprisoned Abba Jobir for exchanging, presumably treasonous, letters with the Italians.

Abba Jobir was reinstated as the king of Jimma during the brief Italian occupation (1936-1941), and I discuss stories about this period below in relation to ethnicity. After the fall of the Italians in 1941 and Haile Sellasie's return to power Abba Jobir was again captured. Rather than kill Abba Jobir for treason Haile Sellasie allowed Abba Dula to decide his punishment. Abba Dula, who is thought to have secretly resisted the Italians, argued that Abba Jobir should be put to death. Haile Sellasie chose to give Abba Jobir amnesty, but this was the end of the royal "Diggo" family's rule of Jimma. Although one member of the royal family was given a minor administrative role, after 1941 the government of Jimma was composed primarily of Amhara Orthodox Christians. The royal family continued to be wealthy landowners until the 1974 revolution, when Abba Jobir and many of the other family members fled to Saudi Arabia after the Derg seized their land.

Some members of the royal family remained in Jimma and have been able to maintain positions of power within the local political structure. Abdul Karim, the great-grandson of Abba Jifar II, became a government administrator during the Derg regime. Although he is not part of the current government in many ways he has managed to retain

power in a position that is uniquely suited to the current era. He runs the local branch of Action Aid Ethiopia, one of the largest NGO's in Jimma, meaning that few people in the city are better placed than him to distribute economic goods to others. At the time of my research he had developed a prodigious belly, but he was still known as "Pélé" due to his skills on the soccer field as a young man. Although he was not the wealthiest man in town he was one of the most respected and generally took a leadership position at the NGO/ city government meetings that were among the most important political events in Jimma. From landowner, to Derg cadre, to NGO administrator the great-grandson of Abba Jiffar II has done a remarkable job of adapting to the changing political environment of Ethiopia.

### **The Development of Jimma City, Urban Occupational Status, and Class Structure (1935 to Present)**

Although I describe Jimma's early history largely from a somewhat "Oromo-centric" perspective, it is the culture of the Amhara that informs much of my analysis in this dissertation. My interest is in the values concerning occupational status and employment opportunity structures that emerge in urban contexts. Although Jimma has been a center for trade for hundreds of years, it is only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that it became a city occupied by families and full time urban residents. The development of Jimma as a city coincides with Amhara political domination and the development of a local government bureaucracy.

Within the traditional rural highland Amhara culture that serves as a reference point for much of contemporary urban Ethiopia, the range of occupational choice was

limited. During the era of modern Ethiopian history that Bahru Zewde (2002a) defines as beginning in 1855 with the reign of Tewodros until the expansion of modern education, the privatization of land, and increased growth of cities that took place under Haile Sellasie, the most common profession was that of a farmer. Some men did choose to become soldiers or priests, and it was also common for farmers to occasionally take part in military expeditions. All of these occupations brought varying amounts of prestige depending on one's success in his field. Because most men opted for one of these three professions, occupation was generally not a primary variable in determining status. More important was one's position within hierarchical relations with others. The local lord, or holder of "*gwilt*" over an estate, was able to foster patron/client relations with peasants who needed their lord's assistance in order to access land. In this sense, status was based in relations of production, and was gained by holding political office and using that office to distribute favors to others (Hoben 1970).

Although less has been written about occupation and power relations among Oromo in the Jimma area it would appear that similar opportunities existed. Farming was the most common profession and this was valorized as being good work. No study with the ethnographic detail of Hoben's work concerning the Amhara exists, but Hassen (1990:92-93) does note that a class structure developed in the Oromo states of the Gibe region. Nobility owned most of the land, free peasants had rights to some land, and landless tenants worked on the land of the nobility. Below them were slaves and despised craft workers. It is not clear if religious study and soldiering were options as full time professions, but certainly men did engage in these activities and particularly within the Oromo kingdoms of the 19<sup>th</sup> century leadership in military battles was a

proven means of accessing power. In contrast to the Amhara region where merchants were generally viewed with suspicion if not contempt, in Jimma trade had long been established as a viable means of making a living. Although the afkala traders discussed above have had a clear role in shaping the history of the region the significance of their continued influence is unknown. Little has been written about their presence during Haile Sellasie's reign and if any wealthy Jimma Oromo merchants remained after the 1974 revolution they are thought to have fled to Saudi Arabia.

Among most Ethiopian ethnic groups and in East Africa generally, artisan professions like carpentry, blacksmithing, weaving and pottery were highly stigmatized. Although important ideological differences do exist, the treatment of artisan workers was similar to that of lower castes within the Hindu caste system (Levine 1974, Pankhurst 2001:10-15). Pankhurst (2001) explains that artisans were marginalized in terms of space, economics, politics, and social life. Marriage with non-artisans was prohibited and artisans frequently lacked locally defined rights to land. In most cases they worked as tenant farmers on the land of others, were required to give the products of their work to their patrons and received only token amounts of grain in return. Artisans did not observe the same religion-based food taboos as Muslims and Orthodox Christians. For example, artisans are said to have eaten animals like the pig that do not have a cloven hoof and certain forbidden wild game like monkey or hippopotamus. While sharing food and eating from the same dish is an important part of most Ethiopian cultures, artisans were not permitted to share the same utensils or dishes with others. If artisans were guests in the home of a non-artisan they would eat from banana leaves or some other item that could be disposed of following the meal. Artisans frequently were thought to



possess an evil eye (“*buda*”), which also contributed to the general discrimination they faced throughout their day-to-day lives. Although discrimination against artisans was officially banned during the Marxist Derg regime, as I will explain below it continues to influence notions of occupational status in rural and urban areas.

The traditional stigma against artisans combined with the prestige of administrative authority appears to form a base for a relationship between occupation and status, that was further complicated by the process of urbanization. Mitchell and Epstein’s (1959) foundational model for African urban occupation status is based on the colonialism experienced by other African countries. In this model it is the association with a European or “civilized” lifestyle that motivates many urban residents to seek out white-collar professions instead of higher paid blue-collar positions. In the Ethiopian case the brief Italian presence does not appear to have impacted values surrounding occupation, and examining local history is much more useful for understanding status.

It is with the growth of permanent cities that notions of occupational status began to develop beyond the traditional stigmas applied to artisans. Although it lasted only five years Italy’s occupation of Ethiopia was very important for the transformation of Jimma from a trading center to a city. The Italians made Jimma the capital of the “Sidamo/Galla” region and together with Dire Dawa and Addis Ababa it was one of the three capitals in the nation. It was during this period that the administrative center was moved from Jiren to the area surrounding the Hirmata market. Many of the major buildings and neighborhoods that still exist in Jimma were built during the Italian era. The Italians constructed a hospital, large hotels, a cinema, the structure that continues to house the municipal government, and numerous other government buildings and private

residences. The city was segregated according to race and the Italians lived in what is now called Ferenj Arada and Mahel Ketama<sup>7</sup>. Although many of the buildings constructed by Italians have fallen into disrepair walking through Ferenj Arada or Mahel Ketema has an entirely different feel to it than other neighborhoods. Wide roads are lined by buildings with large verandas supported by pillars that today provide shaded spaces for street-side commerce. In Mahel Ketema city blocks are organized so that storefronts line the street and behind the stores, in the center of the block, residential spaces open onto a shared courtyard.

Abdul Karim, great grandson of Abba Jifar II, described the reign of Haile Sellasie after the fall of the Italians as a “golden era” for Jimma City. The coffee business was booming and this brought numerous investors to town. A number of factories were constructed and work was said to be plentiful, attracting high numbers of immigrants from the countryside. The surplus of disposable income led to numerous thriving business, particularly hotels, bars, restaurants, and nightclubs. Jimma had 27 hotels in 1953 (National Urban Planning Institute). Trade in the city center came to be increasingly dominated by Arabs and of the 1188 foreigners living in Jimma in 1953, 846 were Arabs, who primarily worked as merchants (National Urban Planning Institute). Three new schools and an Agricultural College were also constructed under the reign of Haile Sellasie.

---

<sup>7</sup> “*Ferenj*” means foreigner and “*arada*” is something that is elevated or held in higher esteem than others. While the label “*ferenj*” clearly stems from the Italians’ residence in this neighborhood, “*arada*” implies both that the neighborhood is at a slightly higher elevation than other areas and that the Italians sought to elevate themselves by living separately from Ethiopians. Mahel Ketema translates as city center and this neighborhood is often referred to as Shoa Berr (the door to Shoa), or Arab Terra (the place of Arabs).

While government seizure of land and the introduction of high taxes meant that some Oromo peasants lost their land, compared to other regions in the south, farmers generally were wealthy enough to pay these taxes (Guluma 1987:114). Haile Sellasie gave Amhara and Shoa Oromo land grants in the Jimma area based on their role in resisting the Italians, and these individuals were able to expand their wealth primarily through growing coffee and trade. Although many Oromo farmers may have retained enough land for subsistence farming the vast majority of regional and city administrators who also owned large coffee plantations were Amhara or Oromo Christians. The pattern was to grow coffee in the countryside that would fund the construction of a house in the city and support involvement in trade.

With the creation of a wealthy land-owning class in Jimma others were also attracted to the city. In particular high numbers of local people from the Dawro, Kambata, Yem, and Kafa ethnic groups living in the area surrounding Jimma moved to the city in search of wage labor. Some came only to earn money during the coffee harvest but others stayed and found work as servants or manual laborers for landowners. With little education or knowledge of Amharic (the national language) it was difficult for these new migrants to find anything but the most menial of jobs. It is during this period, beginning after 1941 that the prestige and desirability of government employment as an urban occupation appears to have developed in Jimma. The prestige of government work was partially based on the traditional hierarchical relationship between nobility and farmers. As Hoben (1970:222) notes in describing Addis Ababa under the reign of Haile Sellasie, the authority of the “*gwilt*-holding lord” had been replaced by the government administrator and education had taken the place of military activity as a means for

accessing social mobility. Markakis (1974:183) also claims that higher education almost “automatically” implied state service, which in turn guaranteed status and economic privilege. Owning land and a longer presence in the city increased one’s chances of obtaining an education and these qualities were concentrated mostly among recent Christian Oromo and Amhara settlers from Shoa. At this point an occupational and ethnic hierarchy between those with or without government work began to develop. Government workers had both political and economic power while the others generally performed the service work and manual labor necessary to maintain life in the city. To some extent a patron/client relationship existed between these two strata. In much the same manner that a lord could provide access to land, government administrators and landowners could give their clients urban employment, better housing, and other opportunities.

Bjeren (1985) offers the most detailed description of urban stratification for the period prior to the 1974 revolution. Based on research conducted in Shashamene in 1973, Bjeren explains that ethnicity mapped onto economic and status hierarchies. Although their historical development as towns is different, Shashamene was (and in some ways continues to be) similar to Jimma in that it was an ethnically diverse regional center. Both are located at crossroads and host a large amount of market activity. Bjeren measured occupational status by having five elder city officials (all Amhara) rank different occupations in terms of prestige. This measurement is problematic in that individuals from different economic and cultural backgrounds most likely had different notions of occupational status. However, her ranking system does most likely accurately represent Amhara values. Shack (1973) argues that most urban residents strove to

assimilate to Amhara culture and it seems reasonable to assume that during the early 1970's the opinions of these men represented a significant portion of the population in cities like Shashamene or Jimma. The rankings of the elders fit with the dynamics I have described above with high level administrators ranked near the top and manual laborers and craft workers at the bottom. Based on a survey of five percent of the urban population Bjerer found that among men, "Amhara domination was most pronounced in the occupational groups with relatively high status" (148). With some exceptions these occupations also tended to earn the highest incomes. At the low end of the spectrum there were very few Amhara daily laborers or craft workers. Individuals working in these low status and low-income occupations predominantly came from the Wolayita ethnic group<sup>8</sup>.

Among single women there was much less differentiation based on ethnicity (Bjerer 1985:153). With the exception of a few successful former sex workers who had been able to open their own bars, all women worked as prostitutes or petty traders. However, Bjerer argues that gender was not a primary factor for organizing stratification because most women did not remain single for more than a few years, after which they were not economically active. They usually married men of their own ethnicity and therefore their economic position was influenced largely by ethnicity. Bjerer does not consider the importance of marriage for the class position of men, and instead assumes that all adult men are married. I will discuss head of household gender in more detail in chapter 8, but in my study it was clear that even if most fathers had wives (only one single, male, household head was present in my sample of twenty unemployed young men), their economic and social position depended on women. In this sense women's

---

<sup>8</sup> The Wolayita are a historically oppressed group in the area surrounding Shashamene, with a history of subordination similar to the Kafa or Dawro living near Jimma.

class status was intertwined with, not determined by, their relationship with their husband.

This ethnic/occupation hierarchy described by Bjerer appears to be applicable to pre-revolution Jimma. Amhara and some primarily Orthodox Christian Oromo performed government administrative work and/or owned factories and coffee plantations while other ethnicities did service work or manual labor. It was not clear if this was by choice or if their urban land was forcibly removed, but local Muslim Oromo predominantly lived outside the city and worked as farmers. The low number of Muslim Oromo involved in the urban government may explain the dominance of Amhara Christian values in what was largely an Oromo Muslim region. Gurage gradually took over most of the trade activities in the city especially after the 1974 revolution when many Arabs were expelled from the country. More menial jobs were performed by ethnic groups from the surrounding area like the Yem, Dawro, and Kafa. In this manner ethnicity, wealth, and status overlapped to form relatively clear class groups. A lack of marriages between ethnic groups and unequal access to education allowed class hierarchies to be reproduced from one generation to the next. Dominant ethnic groups were better represented in education and because education was necessary to access government work, social and economic power were inherited<sup>9</sup>.

The last period of positive economic growth in Ethiopia took place prior to 1974 (Arrighi 2002). With the Marxist revolution of 1974 all land was nationalized. Private ownership of coffee plantations and factories ended, thus facilitating the transition to associating local power predominantly with government work. A fall in the price of

---

<sup>9</sup> In a survey conducted by Donald Levine of secondary and college students, 55% were Amhara, 22% Tigrean, 15% Oromo, 4% Gurage, and 4% other (1965:114).

coffee also led to a decline in the coffee industry and an increased reliance on public sector employment. This had already begun to occur in urban centers like Jimma where owning land for agriculture was becoming less common and urban residents were relying primarily on income derived from trade and government employment. Before 1974 the children of most landowners were already established within the government. While some of these individuals were arrested or killed following the revolution, based on life histories gathered from elder Jimma men it appears that many of them were able to make the transition successfully and find high-ranking positions within the new Marxist regime. During the Derg nightclubs and factories shut down and opportunities for private employment disappeared, leading to a decline in the number of migrants moving to the city. While the Marxist Derg regime officially promoted equality among ethnic groups, institutionalized power differences meant that at least initially the cultural and economic dominance of Amhara and Oromo Christians continued. In general the upper class from the pre-revolutionary era maintained their power in the form of government employment.

The youth I studied were generally born during the final ten years of the Derg regime. Although the economic shifts associated with liberalization were just beginning, in terms of class these young men appeared to be in a very different situation than their parents. In Jimma and most likely in other cities as well, the emergence of a generation born in the city during the 1970's and 1980's has gone hand in hand with changes that have destabilized the close relationship between ethnicity, class, and status. Public education is free, and regardless of ethnic and class background children living in Jimma have been able to attend school. Many of these youth were able to complete secondary school and become eligible for government employment. During the Derg regime post-

secondary education was guaranteed government employment (Krishnan 1998). The urban environment also facilitated assimilation to the Amhara norm. At the time of my research, many individuals born in Jimma did not speak their parents' native language and were fluent only in Amharic, meaning that ethnicity was not always a social marker. Also important was that youth of all ethnicities were able to integrate into the Orthodox Christian Church and predominantly for Oromo youth Islam provided access to powerful social networks as well.

As I will detail in chapter 4 on aspirations, educated youth born into the city were no longer willing to accept the low-status work performed by many of their parents. These educated young people had a sense of entitlement to socially and economically desirable employment. In this sense the class situation of oppressed ethnic groups was not smoothly transmitted to the next generation. The expectations of youth for the future prevented them from willingly entering into the economic and social relations associated with the occupations of their parents. Differing expectations combined with long-term unemployment disrupted the reproduction of class relationships, and I will detail this process throughout the dissertation.

An additional factor in changing class relationships is the emergence of households headed by single women. If women in Shashamene did not remain single long during Bjerer's research this was not the case at the time of my work in Jimma. Many of my primary informants came from families headed by women who had been single for at least five years, and did not have plans to remarry. Similar to Bjerer's description of Shashamene the economic opportunities for these women were limited primarily to petty trade and domestic work. The presence of women as household heads



is one more factor reducing the salience of ethnicity in relation to class. It also raises the question of how best to understand class when gender is a key determinant of one's productive and status position.

### **Ethnic Federalism and the Significance of Ethnicity in Turn of the Century Jimma**

Although I do not discuss it extensively in this dissertation, the introduction of a system of ethnic federalism is often considered to be the most significant policy change to have occurred during the post-1991 period. The implementation of ethnic federalism was based on the specific manner in which the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) came to power. The EPRDF is strongly associated with the Tigray region. Tigray is located along Ethiopia's northern border with Eritrea, and was involved in a long civil war with the central government during the Derg regime. As the civil war progressed and the suffering of Tigrean people increased, the conflict began to take on ethnic dimensions. The ethnic and linguistic homogeneity of the Tigray region caused the conflict to be viewed not simply in political terms but as a case of ethnic oppression. The EPRDF's decision to implement ethnic federalism was partially a result of this civil war and partially in recognition of the diverse needs of Ethiopia's over seventy ethnic groups. Under ethnic federalism, Ethiopia is divided into eleven states - two cities and nine regions- based primarily on historic ethnic boundaries. States have a broad range of power covering education, economic development, health, police forces, and legal courts. Regions may conduct government business and education in the language of their choice, and in theory they have the right to secede and form their own nation, although it seems unlikely that this would actually occur peacefully.

The government rhetoric is that ethnic federalism unites a diverse nation by giving rights to regions and ethnic groups. Ideally, through decentralization local power should be in the hands of individuals who are responsible to the needs of the immediate community. Two primary critiques of the EPRDF and ethnic federalism have emerged, especially among Ethiopian intellectuals. The first is associated with an ethnic regionalist perspective and argues that regional leaders are appointed by the ruling party and do not represent the needs and desires of local people, regardless of their ethnicity. This perspective encourages the formation of stronger regional parties that will promote ethnic interests without influence from the central government. The alternative nationalist perspective promotes the notion of Ethiopia as a country with a single national identity. Ethnic federalism is seen as divisive and destructive to the needs of the country as a whole. This perspective is usually associated with the Amhara who tend to self identify as "Ethiopian" to a greater degree than other ethnic groups.

I have argued elsewhere (Mains 2004) that although aspects of both of these perspectives are present in the everyday discourse encountered in Jimma, the rumors and stories that people tell express a far more complicated view of political change, in which ethnicity, religion, and nationalism are intertwined. The narratives of Orthodox Christian Amhara and Muslim Oromo are related to their respective positions in contemporary political and economic relations. In the case of Orthodox Christians rumors concerning the behavior of Oromo Muslims serve to question ethnic and religious identity, and imply that tensions between ethnicities have been generated by the recent introduction of ethnic federalism. In contrast, interviews concerning the history of Jimma that I conducted with Muslim elders depicted a long past of religious and ethnic conflict. It is worth

reproducing this section of my paper because in addition to illustrating variation in narratives concerning ethnicity it describes an interesting period in Jimma's history.

Both Oromo elders that I interviewed in regards to Jimma's history spent considerable time discussing the brief reign of Abba Jobir during the Italian occupation of Ethiopia (1936-41). Following the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1936, Abba Jobir was released from prison and made "sultan" of the "Sidamo/Galla" region. The elders characterized Abba Jobir as aggressive and headstrong, and having a strong dislike for Haile Sellasie and Amhara people in general. While Abba Jobir's collaboration with the Italians would seem to make him a traitor, this was not the way he was described. One of the elders claimed that Abba Jobir was a hero, especially for his courage in leading attacks against local *shifta* (bandits). The other elder acknowledged Abba Jobir's strong will but questioned his intelligence and competence as a leader. Neither elder criticized Abba Jobir's collaboration with the Italians and both described the five-year occupation as a relatively positive era in Jimma's history. In addition to the construction of the buildings described above the Italians built a large mosque near the Hirmata market. This is still one of the largest and most popular mosques in Jimma. The praise of the elders for the Italians should be understood both as an acknowledgement of their accomplishments, and as a critique of Amhara domination. Both elders proudly claimed that Abba Jobir put a price on the head of Amhara Christians. Although he was said to have paid thirty Ethiopian birr for the head of any Amhara, neither elder could remember a specific instance of Amhara people being killed for a reward. Abba Jobir was also said to have led random attacks on Amhara towns during his reign, but again this could not be confirmed with details about attacks on specific towns.

While rumors that are shared among Amhara Christians often highlight the flexibility of ethnicity and the recent development of ethnic difference, the histories gathered from Oromo elders assert the deep roots of conflict in Ethiopia. By asserting that ethnic difference is a historic rather than recent phenomenon these narratives support the perspective that regional political and cultural autonomy is necessary and desirable. Herbert Lewis' (1996) discussion of political consciousness among the Oromo is useful in contextualizing recently gathered historical narratives. Lewis notes that while conducting research in Jimma in 1959 Oromo were certainly aware of their ethnic identity, but were not actively expressing opposition towards local Amhara. He did not observe high levels of ethnic nationalism until he returned to Ethiopia in the 1990's. It would seem that in focusing on ethnic conflict, the historical narratives that I gathered are at least partially a product of the current context of ethnic federalism.

An examination of the position of ethnic minorities, who as a group form the largest portion of the population in Jimma, adds an additional layer to this analysis. Particularly in discussions with young men and women of Kaffa, Dawro, and Yem descent ethnic federalism and language policy were raised as the primary reasons for high levels of youth unemployment. These youth argued that one must be fluent in Oromo in order to access government work and therefore they had little chance of obtaining employment<sup>10</sup>. The irony of this argument was that youth from ethnic minorities were critiquing a policy that in theory was designed to benefit them. Rather than conduct

---

<sup>10</sup> I do not discuss this argument extensively in my dissertation because I do not believe it was particularly relevant for youth unemployment. Regardless of language ability the number of unemployed youth far outnumbered the amount of government positions available. Furthermore, Jimma University, the largest employer in the city, was under federal jurisdiction and therefore fluency in Oromo was not a requirement for employment.

government business in the language of the region, these youth argued that Amharic should be the language of governance in all areas.

In my previous work I have argued that rumors spread by Orthodox Christians concerning the behavior of Oromo Muslims are a means of coping with the loss of political and economic dominance and changing notions of what it means to be Ethiopian. In the case of young ethnic minorities they were not facing a loss of power as they belonged to groups that had long been confined to the bottom of the urban class hierarchy. The problem appeared to be that ethnic minority youth had invested in a cultural hierarchy that was no longer relevant. They had learned Amharic and for the most part they were Orthodox Christians. They had adopted the dominant culture and suddenly this culture had lost much of its value.

A different but similar perspective comes from an elementary school teacher, Ato Mekonnen Wolde Yesus, who I interviewed on the subject of Yem history and culture. I met Ato Mekonnen after interviewing leaders of opposition parties in Jimma prior to the May 2005 national election. The leaders of the United Ethiopian Democratic Front (“*Hibret*”) were all members of the Yem National Democratic Movement (YNDM). According to the national census Yem make up a small minority of the Jimma population and I was curious how they came to have their own political party (similar parties for other ethnic minorities do not exist in Jimma) and form the leadership of one of the major opposition parties in Ethiopia. Although Ato Mekonnen was not one of the leaders of the YNDM he was suggested as an excellent source of information regarding Yem history and culture, as he had helped past researchers gather Yem oral histories.

Ato Mekonnen presented Yem history as a process of both assimilation and resistance to the Oromo. At times he argued that in the Jimma region it is not meaningful to distinguish between Yem and Oromo because so many aspects of their cultures are shared. For example, while many Yem converted to Islam, Ato Mekonnen claimed that the term “Abba” that traditionally prefixed adult Oromo men’s names was adopted from the Yem. On the other hand Ato Mekonnen highlighted Yem resistance to the Oromo and noted that although the Yem had a long period of military conflict with the Oromo, they were never actually “conquered,” until Aba Jifar II’s alliance with Menelik. According to Ato Mekonnen the Yem maintained a resistance to the Oromo long after other ethnic groups had been defeated. Menelik provided Abba Jifar II with modern weapons and military support that allowed him to finally conquer the Yem. At that time a Yem man named Abba Bogibu traveled to the Wolo region and converted to Orthodox Christianity. When he returned to Yem he reintroduced Christianity and built a large church. When Menelik discovered that the Yem were Christian he halted any military activity against them and divided their land into two. The Muslim Yem were ruled by Abba Jifar II while the Christian Yem were incorporated into the Amhara kingdom.

It is interesting that in Ato Mekonnen’s narrative the Oromo are seen as conquerors while the Amhara are depicted as somewhat benevolent in the sense that Menelik prevented the incorporation of all Yem into Abba Jifar II’s Oromo kingdom. Mekonnen’s portrayal of the past appears to be based on a critique of ethnic federalism that is not unlike that of young people who lamented the change in language policy. Under ethnic federalism the Yem population has been divided so that approximately half

their population is located in the Yem Special *Wereda*<sup>11</sup> in the Southern Ethiopian Peoples' State, while the other half live predominantly in the Oromo State in the area surrounding Jimma. Ato Mekonnen claimed that in general Christian Yem live in the Southern Peoples' State while Muslim Yem live in the Oromo State. For the Yem living in the Oromo region the problem appears to be that while they were once encouraged to assimilate, they are now marked as being "Yem" despite speaking Oromo and practicing Islam. Mekonnen claimed if an individual is thought to be of Yem ancestry he is often forced to give up his land.

According to Ato Mekonnen the Yem occupy a very awkward position. Under a government in which ethnicity has been constructed as the means by which political and economic power are accessed, the right to assimilate within a given region becomes a privilege. Whereas in the past the Oromo practice of "*moggaasa*" meant that other ethnicities were quickly assimilated as Oromo (Hassen 1990:21), there is no longer any incentive to create a more inclusive Oromo identity. Within the Oromo region an increase in the population of Oromo creates more competition for resources, thus encouraging authentic ethnic identity to be called into question. For the Yem, the strategies of adopting a Muslim Oromo or Christian Amhara identity are no longer viable. Their status as an Oromo is not accepted and speaking Amharic or practicing Orthodox Christianity brings no advantage within either the Oromo or Southern People's regions. In this context the Yem National Democratic Movement's call to redraw regional boundaries makes more sense. For the first time it has become advantageous for the Yem

---

<sup>11</sup> A *wereda* is an administrative unit similar to a county in the US. Following the introduction of ethnic federalism certain *wereda* were assigned to particular ethnicities, thus allowing that ethnicity to determine the local language of governance and education.

to assert their ethnic identity. However, asserting this identity only brings problems unless it is done within a region that is officially recognized as being their own. Thus the problems of Amhara speaking urban youth of Yem descent and Oromo speaking Yem farmers are similar in that both have attempted to use assimilation in order to access economic goods, but they have not been successful. In the city, Yem youth have not assimilated to the current culture of power, and in the countryside the assimilation of Yem farmers is not accepted.

As I have explained above despite both the historic importance of ethnicity and the occasional role it played within youth narratives it does not figure largely within this dissertation. The 20<sup>th</sup> century dynamics I outlined above concerning class structure may partially explain the decreased significance of ethnicity. The lack of government employment means that there are very few economic goods that youth may compete for on the basis of ethnicity. Although ethnic federalism has meant that in Jimma youth who do not speak Oromo cannot access government employment, even if this restriction were not present the change in availability of work would be negligible. Perhaps the one group to have been significantly impacted by ethnic federalism is Amhara youth who previously dominated government employment. The Amhara are a numerical minority and therefore even a small number of government jobs would have been important if they were concentrated entirely within that population. This may explain the slightly higher rates of urban unemployment among Amhara young men noted below.

My discussions of ethnicity in this chapter should serve as a continual reminder that historic ethnic tensions are still present and are frequently the source of debate at the national level. Following the 2005 national elections opposition leaders were imprisoned



and accused of making statements intended to incite ethnic genocide. While I personally doubt the validity of these accusations it clearly illustrates the power of ethnicity within political discourse. In November 2006, there were reports of religiously motivated violence between Muslims and Christians in the countryside surrounding Jimma. I believe it is highly likely that this violence is also intertwined with ethnicity. These tensions have the ability to reemerge in the daily lives of young people, and I anticipate that as youth age and continue to struggle with becoming an adult in a context of economic decline, ethnic and religious identity may increase in salience.

### **Post-Revolutionary Ethiopia and Youth Unemployment**

Other changes unrelated to ethnic federalism, but specifically associated with the post-1991 EPRDF government have been important for disrupting patterns of stratification. These shifts must be contextualized within the global rise of ideologies and policies of neoliberalism. Although the EPRDF originally espoused a generally Marxist doctrine, with the fall of the Soviet Union the government was forced to adopt neoliberal policies in order to access international funds. As noted in the introductory chapter, these policies have created patterns of uneven international investment and spiraling debt that have resulted in economic decline throughout Africa.

The implications of the more liberalized economic policies of the EPRDF government were just beginning to become apparent in Jimma at the time of my research. The expansive Jimma Hotel was returned to its pre-revolution owner, Qeñazmach Teka Genu. Two or three story hotels were being constructed near the bus station, one of which was the first in town to have a swimming pool. Jimma College was made into a

university meaning that the number of students, faculty, and staff was mushrooming and shifting the economic center of the city towards the university. Certainly a few businessmen in Jimma have become extremely rich within a neoliberal context. At the national level no one has benefited more from these policies than Mohammed Al-Moudi, a billionaire of Ethiopian and Saudi descent. He is active in virtually all sectors of the Ethiopian economy including gold, petroleum, and coffee and he was a vocal supporter of the EPRDF government during the 2005 election.

Despite the success of a few individuals, like much of Africa the last fifteen years have been experienced as a period of economic stagnation or decline for most Ethiopians. With the failure of the International Coffee Organization in 1989 to set a minimum international price for coffee, prices have steadily dropped. Over 15 million Ethiopians earn a living from coffee and it is the nation's largest export. Jimma is located in a coffee growing region and although none of my primary informants were directly involved in the coffee trade, its decline certainly had negative implications for economic opportunity in the private sector.

In terms of youth unemployment, the problem of economic dependence on the export of a single unstable commodity has been compounded by IMF mandated reforms. In order to receive loans necessary for infrastructural development Ethiopia was forced to drastically downsize its public sector. This was particularly devastating in urban environments where education has conditioned young people to expect government employment after graduation. That secondary school graduates are no longer virtually guaranteed government work is one of the causes of the massive youth unemployment that began in the mid 1990's (Krishnan 1998). Based on government surveys conducted

in 1990, 1994, and 1997, Krishnan (1998) explains that unemployment among youth (ages 15-29) increased by 60 percent between 1990 and 1994 and then only decreased slightly in 1997<sup>12</sup>. While the spread of education beyond the traditionally dominant ethnicities has diminished the relationship between ethnicity and class, more important has been an overall disappearance of economic opportunity. In Krishnan's study the single factor that exerted the greatest influence on one's likelihood of being unemployed was a secondary education. A secondary education had a higher correlation with unemployment in 1994 and 1997 than 1990, indicating that political change was an important factor in changing the opportunity structure for educated youth (1998:17-18). In a context in which desirable forms of employment are eliminated, there is no means of maintaining stratification between ethnic groups, thus breaking down the relationship between ethnicity and class. Analyses of census and survey data from urban Ethiopia also indicate that ethnicity does not have a major impact on employment (Genene et al 2001, Serneels 2004). Gurage men are less likely to be unemployed and young Amhara men are more likely to be unemployed, but these differences are small relative to the variables described below (Genene et al. 2001).

Measuring unemployment in an urban African context is difficult because of the high level of involvement in the informal economy. According to the censuses and surveys that provide some of the best data on Ethiopia, "in the urban areas persons aged ten years and over who were engaged in an economic activity of at least four hours in any one of the days in the reference week, were considered working" (Genene et al. 2001:13). For a person to be considered unemployed he or she had to have worked for less than

---

<sup>12</sup> Among urban youth, 37.8% of the labor force was unemployed in 1990 and then 59% and 54.3% in 1994 and 1997.

four hours in the past week and to be actively looking for work. This is not the standard that I use in applying the terms “unemployed” and “working” within this dissertation<sup>13</sup>, but I do believe the statistics based on this data are useful for understanding urban unemployment in Ethiopia.

The total urban unemployment rate for individuals between the ages of ten and sixty-five rose from 7.9 percent in 1984, to 22 percent in 1994, to 26.4 percent in 1999. Addis Ababa residents make up around a third of Ethiopia’s approximately 11 million urban residents and therefore data for all urban residents is skewed towards the characteristics of Addis. However in this case unemployment rates in Jimma appear to be comparable with the national rate and in Jimma unemployment rose from 6.7 percent in 1984 to 21.2 percent in 1994 (Genene et al. 2001:69).

Based on a different survey conducted in 1994, Serneels (2004) claims that unemployment among urban young men (ages 15-30; does not include active students) is over 50 percent<sup>14</sup>. Data for this survey is based on a definition of unemployment that appears to be more similar to that which I used in my study. Interviewees were asked to describe their main activities and this was used to determine employment status. Individuals who were not “actively” seeking work were also considered unemployed because they were often waiting for work or hoping to eventually access work through extended social networks. The average length of unemployment was three to four years and most unemployed were first time job seekers.

---

<sup>13</sup> For my study I allowed youth to define their own employment status and many youth who occasionally worked, even one or two days a week considered themselves to be unemployed. All unemployed youth desired employment but they were not necessarily actively searching for work in the sense that they were looking for job opportunities on a day-to-day basis.

<sup>14</sup> This data does not necessarily contradict Genene et al.’s analysis of the census data as Serneels is focusing on a narrow age group. Serneels (2004:4) argues that after the age of 31 there is little variation among the unemployed in terms of age and other characteristics.

Half of the young unemployed were looking for government work, while a quarter claimed that they would accept any type of work. Aspiring to government work had a positive correlation with unemployment, while aspiring to self-employment had a significant negative effect on the likelihood that one would be unemployed (Serneels 2004:19). Serneels argues that public sector work is more desirable than self-employment because it is associated with higher wages, but he does not take into account the type of government work that most young people can expect to access. As I detail in later chapters the lower level government work typically aspired to by youth with secondary education did not generally provide wages greater than could be earned through self-employment. Furthermore, based on a 1997 survey, Krishnan (1998) claims that differences in wages between the public and private sector have been decreasing during the 1990's, but that this did not appear to have impacted the behavior of job seekers who still desired government work. Serneels does briefly acknowledge the possibility that notions of "good" and "bad" work may be influencing youth employment decisions. I explore this relationship between occupational status and economic choices in great detail in this dissertation.

Among young urban men and women having a secondary education greatly increased the likelihood that one would be unemployed (Genene et al. 2001, Krishnan 1998, Serneels 2004). Unemployment rates were approximately 50 percent for those with a secondary education and less than 30 percent for those with a primary education. Differences in unemployment in relation to education status level off around the age of thirty-five when all groups have unemployment rates of roughly 10 percent (Serneels 2004). I discuss this relationship between education, aspirations, and employment in

more detail in chapter 4. Factors that increase one's likelihood of receiving economic support from others also correlated with high rates of unemployment. Unemployment is highest among young people who are non-migrants (recent migrants have the lowest unemployment), members of families of high or middle economic status, and who are not married or the head of a household (Genene et al. 2001). Each of these variables indicates that if an individual is able to receive economic support then he or she may be able to remain unemployed for a longer period of time. In general, there appears to be a strong correlation between dependence on others and unemployment. Like education, differences in unemployment levels in relation to each of the variables related to dependence tend to level off after the age of thirty-five (Genene et al. 2001). Genene et al.'s analysis is based on a census and it is difficult to draw conclusions based on data gathered at a single point in time. For example it is not clear if unemployment levels decrease with age because individuals eventually find jobs or if this is a result of differing opportunity structures between generations, meaning that as the current cohort of unemployed youth ages, unemployment levels will increase for older age groups.

Serneels (2004) notes that 85 percent of the unemployed claim that they rely on their parents for financial support, and youth unemployment is predominantly a "middle class" phenomenon, where "class" is based on income. Serneels (2004:18) states, "To maximize expected future earnings, middle class families support their sons in queuing for a public sector job. Because the queuing takes so long, this is a drain on household resources. Lowering consumption or selling assets is the household's coping mechanism." Although I do not dispute the claim that the extremely poor and wealthy may have lower rates of unemployment, to argue as Serneels does that these income

groups constitute different classes with distinct economic behavior does not seem valid. As I argue in chapter 8, class in Ethiopia is far more complicated than household income earned from work, because of sharing relationships between households. My analysis of neighborhoods, presented in chapter 8 indicates that social networks extending beyond the household are very important for youth unemployment. Furthermore while dependence on family support is important in relation to youth unemployment, Serneels' argument gives too much power to the family in decision making, and not enough autonomy to individual youth. It is not surprising to find these flaws in what is essentially an analysis of survey data, and on the whole the work of Serneels and others that I have discussed in this section provides a useful foundation for the more qualitative discussion that I offer in the chapters to come.

### **Case Studies of Youth**

Much of the analysis in this dissertation is based on the lives of individual young men. Therefore I introduce two - one working and one unemployed - of these youth here in order to provide a better qualitative sense of their lives that goes beyond the data described above. I make reference to these individuals throughout the dissertation.

I begin with Afwerk because he was one of my favorite people in Jimma. He fixed bicycles on the side of the road near a hotel where I stayed during my first extended visit to Jimma in 2002. I would walk by him everyday and we quickly developed a friendly relationship. He was a sort of philosopher, always ready to put his tools aside and talk to me about anything from religion to local gossip. For this reason he was one of

the people who I always turned to when I needed a bit of information about something, related to my research or otherwise.

Afwerk worked on a busy street approximately one block from the bus station. Both sides of the street were lined with teahouses, barbershops, and various small shops selling butter, coffee, and household goods. The street received a fair amount of foot traffic and was also one of the two main lines that mini-bus taxis traveled down. Afwerk's workstation was positioned on a side alley so that he was able to take advantage of the shade from a high, corrugated metal fence and stay out of the way of pedestrians.

Afwerk worked seven days a week. His days usually began around 8 am when he left the small house he shared with his mother and sisters and bicycled to a teahouse for coffee and a bite to eat. From there he would set up his workstation. This consisted of dragging a heavy wooden box of tools from where it was stored at a nearby shop to the corner where he worked. After this Afwerk's day was more or less unstructured. If someone came by needing a bicycle repaired or a tire filled he would do this, but if this did not happen he would simply sit on his box of tools, chatting with who ever happened to stop by. Chewing chat and eating lunch were the only activities that broke up the day. After breakfast Afwerk would buy a small bunch of chat. Chat that is chewed in the morning is called an "*ehjebena*" which is an Oromo word that translates roughly as "eye opener." For Afwerk, lunch was usually a hearty meal and he was especially fond of a dish called "*cha-cha*" that is made from a sheep's stomach. After lunch he would purchase a larger bundle of chat and chew this during the afternoon. Afwerk also smoked cigarettes whenever he was chewing chat. At around 5:00 or 6:00 pm Afwerk would



usually have a plastic bottle of *tej* (honey wine) concealed by paper wrapping that he would sip from. He would stay at his workstation until around 6:30 pm and then pack up his tools and cycle to a *tej* house. After drinking until around 9:00 pm he would return home and fall asleep.

Afwerk had been working as a bicycle repairman in the same place for around four years. He originally learned the trade from a friend, working as an apprentice until he was able to operate on his own. He enjoyed his work and took a great deal of pride in developing innovative solutions in order to fix cycles without the proper tools or technology. Everything was repaired and reused. I once pointed out that the inner tube that he was patching appeared to be more patch than tube and he responded that this was far better than spending four times as much money on a new tube. Occasionally Afwerk would have a younger assistant working for him in hopes of learning the trade but these helpers never lasted more than a week or two.

For Afwerk business had its up and downs but he always seemed to have money in his pocket. On a bad day he might not have any business and on a good day he could earn up to twenty birr. Occasionally someone in the neighborhood would offer him a day's work doing light construction or unloading goods and he was always happy to do this. During the month when I tracked Afwerk's income he earned 266 birr. Sometimes Afwerk would supplement his income by renting out his bike. This brought the risk of theft and on more than one occasion he had to spend a few days at the police station trying to recover a stolen bicycle. The large amount of money that Afwerk spent on alcohol, chat, and restaurant meals meant that he had little or no savings. He owned a

high quality bicycle, which was rare among young men in Jimma, but other than that all of his money went towards his recreational habits.

As I have noted above Afwerk was very sociable and he did have a number of friends who would stop off for a cigarette or a bit of chat and some conversation. However, these friends were not well respected even among youth. Many of them lived on the streets and made money by carrying loads at the bus station. In terms of social status, among working young men Afwerk was at the low end of the spectrum. This was partially due to the nature of his employment. Like all of my primary informants he was not a government employee, but his work was also literally dirty and it did not require an education. Also important was the fact that he worked on the street. This meant that he was constantly exposed to the gaze and the judgment of anyone who passed by. Afwerk's lifestyle was also a source of his low status. While working he would usually wear a ragged t-shirt and a couple layers of grease covered pants and his after work outfits generally involved removing one layer of pants. He chewed chat and smoked cigarettes in public, and even worse than this he drank tej on the street. I know of no other person in Jimma who would drink in public. Although he was extremely personable when I was around him during the day, every night he would drink large quantities of alcohol and sometimes this led him to get involved in physical fights. He was missing a couple of teeth and he had a number of large scars on his face and head from fights at the tej house. A person who fights as a result of drunkenness is not looked upon highly in Ethiopia.

Ahmed was unemployed and lived with his parents in Qottebe Sefer, which is described in more detail below. He was a stylish young man who dressed in popular

youth fashions, and generally kept a neat and clean appearance. His father was a secondary school teacher and his mother was a government administrator, and therefore his family was relatively well off. Both of his parents were Oromo Muslims. His father was from the Wolo region and his mother's family was from the area surrounding Jimma meaning that Ahmed had extensive family support.

Ahmed finished grade 12 and then attended a mechanics program at a private school for one year in Addis Ababa. He did not think that he had received a good education and was not seeking mechanics work. At the time of my research he had been unemployed for three years. He occasionally worked, usually performing odd jobs for neighbors. Like many middle class youth the payment that Ahmed received for his work was relatively high. While some unemployed youth received eight birr for laying tile all day, Ahmed would receive twenty birr for going to the market and purchasing a cow for his neighbors. Ahmed also received a high amount of gifts and cash from family and friends. During the month that I tracked his income Ahmed received 93 birr from work and the equivalent of 450 birr in gift income, including room and board. For Ahmed gifts of five to ten birr from his parents were common, and friends or zemud sometimes paid for expensive meals like *kitfo*<sup>15</sup> and beer that would cost over twenty birr. The prevalence of gifting among unemployed youth is an important dynamic for my analysis and is described in more detail in chapters 7 and 8.

Like most unemployed youth, Ahmed had an abundance of time on his hands, but he managed to keep relatively busy. He was not a regular chat chewer, but he would indulge with friends at least a couple times a week. He often ran errands for friends and

---

<sup>15</sup> Finely chopped beef mixed with butter and spices that is usually served raw or lightly cooked. Kitfo is considered to be a great delicacy and is especially prized by Gurage people.

family and this was a source of spending money. Unlike most young men, he openly acknowledged having a girlfriend and he enjoyed spending time with her. Perhaps Ahmed's favorite activity was relaxing at a café with friends, sipping coffee and enjoying each other's company.

Although Ahmed had a driver's license he had not been successful finding work. He explained that much of the work available to him was not desirable or suitable for someone with a grade 12 education. He claimed that in Ethiopia there is a problem of "talk" and he did not want an occupation that would cause others to speak about him negatively.

It is these differences in consumer behavior, social networks, family support, and work that account for much the analysis that takes place in subsequent chapters. In order to further understand the individual lives of young men, it is necessary to place them within the specific context of their city and neighborhoods.

### **The City, Housing, and Neighborhoods**

Although Jimma is one of the largest cities in a nation of over 70 million, its population is only around 120,000. Much of what has been written about "global cities" cannot be applied to Jimma or other cities in Ethiopia. Direct linkages between Jimma and a global economy are few. The coffee grown in the area surrounding Jimma is often sold internationally, but it is not necessarily moved through the city. While goods do pass through Jimma it is not the interregional trading center that it once was. Much of the economy in Jimma is based on its status as an administrative center and the presence of the university. Desirable employment is available at various government offices, Jimma

University, and Jimma Agricultural College. While these institutions do not create nearly enough work to match the demand of job seekers, one person with employment can often support numerous others.

At the time of my research newcomers were not necessarily attracted to the city by economic opportunities. It was often commented that work was easier to find in the countryside and the cost of living was certainly higher in the city. However, the city did provide access to electricity, healthcare, education, media, and consumer goods. Despite the economic difficulties, life in the city enabled access to those things associated with modernity.

The importance of notions of modernity for city residents is reflected in the houses in which they live. Like much of urban Ethiopia, the home is a private place that is often hidden from the view of the passer by with walls of stone, tin, or bushes depending on one's finances. While young men passed very little time at home except to return for meals and to sleep, young women are generally always in the house working and visiting with friends and family. Based on a report issued by the Central Statistical Authority (Gebeyehu et al. 2001), the majority of families in Jimma live in one or two room houses with walls made from a mixture of mud and straw. Around 90 percent of these houses have a tin roof. Approximately 60 percent of houses have dirt floors, while most of the others have concrete. Jimma's long history is reflected in the fact that close to 60 percent of houses are at least 20 years old, more than most other cities of a similar size like Bahir Dar and Awassa (25 and 30 percent respectively). Less than half of housing units have access to piped water, a number that is relatively low compared to other Ethiopian cities. Twenty-seven percent of housing units in Jimma have no access

to a toilet of any kind, and for the most part the others rely on private or shared pit toilets. All but 20 percent of Jimma houses have access to electricity. Thirty-seven percent of Jimma houses are considered overcrowded in that they are occupied by an average of three or more people per room.

My neighbors during the first year of my research provide a good example of the standard of living for a middle class family. Like myself they lived in a two-room apartment within a compound occupied by four other couples. The mother and father were both schoolteachers and they had three children, all of school age. The house had walls made from mud and straw that were covered with plaster. The walls were adorned with all types of posters and calendars, although advertisements for Pepsi were particularly prominent as the mother's brother was employed by Pepsi-Cola. A single glass-less window, covered by a wooden shutter was present in each room. The tin-roof was separated from the living space by a thin manufactured ceiling. One bare light bulb hung from the ceiling in each of the two rooms. A faucet and cement floored pit toilet were shared with ten of the other residents of the compound. Although the compound did have a cold shower the family did not have access to it because the landlords felt they did not pay enough rent (access to the shower was limited by removing the handle on the faucet). The dwelling had cement floors that were covered with a thin patterned vinyl floor covering that was meant to simulate the appearance of tile. While wealthier families would have this floor covering neatly stretching from wall-to-wall, my neighbors had clearly purchased theirs many years ago and it had many sizable holes. Relative to other Ethiopian cities, wood was cheap in Jimma and carpenters were highly skilled, meaning that most families had a large amount of high quality wood furniture. The walls

of my neighbors' home were lined with bureaus and shelves full of books, plates, clothes, papers, and other small items. A single bed sat in one corner of the room. A large wooden table with four wooden chairs sat next to the bed but these were generally only used for guests. Like most Muslims, my neighbors preferred to spend most of their time on the floor mats and pillows that filled a large portion of the room. This is where meals would be eaten, coffee drunk, chat chewed, and where the children would sleep. The family owned a small television and a CD/DVD player. Everything in the main room was covered in handmade yarn doilies. The other room in the dwelling was used primarily for storage and occasionally for food preparation, although this usually took place outside. Near the end of my research my neighbors had a phone line installed in their home. Until that time they could only receive calls on their landlord's phone and outgoing calls had to be made at a public phone. Like most families they kept the phone's dialing apparatus locked in order to prevent the children from making outgoing calls.

The presence of the television, telephone, manufactured ceiling, cement floors, and access to running water were all strong indicators of my neighbors' economic standing. The houses where many of my informants lived were not located in a locked compound and instead opened directly onto the street. In most houses the tin roof was exposed and floors were made of well-packed dirt. Furniture generally was limited to a few wooden stools, a large bed, and perhaps a wooden bureau. Toilets were pits dug directly into the earth and water was accessed at neighborhood spigots. A radio was the primary source of news and nighttime entertainment, but it was common for young men without a television to watch programs at their neighbors' homes in the evenings. Where

my neighbors had high quality posters other families might rely on photos from newspapers or magazines to adorn their walls. Most Orthodox Christian families would have at least one glossy poster of a saint on their wall. Handmade doilies were common regardless of class.

While the home is an important place within Ethiopian social life, my research was focused on streets, cafes, video houses, and other spaces where young men gathered away from home. Walking in urban Ethiopia it is very difficult to see anything past the waves of people on foot that one encounters throughout the day. If the pedestrians are the first layer of experience then the vendors and beggars are the second. While the informal economy of urban Ethiopia is not as well developed as other parts of Africa the streets are still lined with women selling mangos, boys with portable scales who weigh customers for a small fee, shoe shines, and sellers of lottery tickets. Especially near churches and mosques the beggars have a strong presence, each one exhibiting his or her particular deformity. Jimma is not a city that one experiences through expansive views and majestic urban architecture. Jimma is the people.

The density of life, the sounds, and smells all change from neighborhood to neighborhood. It was not common for young men to go outside of their neighborhood of residence. Occasionally a trip to the market or a walk through Ferenj Arada (described above) might lead one to leave his home neighborhood, but in general youth preferred to stay where they were comfortable. In order to examine the importance of space for day-to-day life I focused my research on three types of neighborhoods, those with low incomes and low market activity, mixed incomes and high market activity, and mixed incomes and low market activity. While I do not offer a detailed analysis of the



importance of neighborhood until chapter 8 I want to briefly describe these different types of neighborhoods now, because I will refer to these places throughout the dissertation. By describing various neighborhoods I hope to provide a sense of what it “feels like” to live in Jimma and how these sensations change in different spaces.

Sa’ar Sefer – a lower income neighborhood with low market activity

Sa’ar Sefer literally means “grass neighborhood.” One explanation for this name was that “there is nothing there but grass,” but a more accepted explanation was that it was the last neighborhood in Jimma to have a house built with a tin roof. This second explanation seems more likely because neighborhood residents could remember the owner of the first tin-roofed house and the date in which it was built. Sa’ar Sefer blended into an adjoining neighborhood called Matric Sefer. Matric Sefer takes its name from the matriculation exam that students take on completion of 10<sup>th</sup> grade (previously it was 12<sup>th</sup> grade) in order to advance to post-secondary education. It was said that the young men in Matric Sefer fear this exam so much that they drink large quantities of *tella*, the local beer, before the exam and then fail miserably. The reputation for poor academic performance was also applied to youth in Sa’ar Sefer.

Sa’ar Sefer had some of the worst poverty in the city and had the highest rates of HIV. This was partially because of the presence of a large military camp in the neighborhood that eliminated space for economic growth and provided a source of disease transmission. The population of Sa’ar Sefer was predominantly Orthodox Christian, most of whom were very pious. Most of the parents of youth who I worked with had emigrated to Jimma from the surrounding countryside at a young age and this

was typical for the neighborhood. They were generally of Dawro or Kafa ethnic descent and they worked as domestic servants, day laborers, or low-level government employees. All of my informants in this neighborhood belonged to households headed by single women.

Sa'ar Sefer had a distinctly different feel from other neighborhoods. The paved road turned to dirt upon reaching the neighborhood and then soon became impassable for motorized vehicles. There were more trees and the air always felt a little cleaner and cooler. Instead of straight roads and large compounds, twisting trails meandered among clusters of houses, many still with grass thatched roofs and no exterior fence. This meant less privacy for residents as the passer by could easily see into one's house. Where young men in other neighborhoods gravitated towards the city center, in Sa'ar Sefer recreation was found by moving in the opposite direction. My male informants would sometimes take me for walks in the fields that began where the neighborhood and the city ended. They pointed out favorite trees for sitting and watching for wildlife and the best places for picking wild guavas. The young men I worked with in this neighborhood did not chew chat and had very little gift income from their families or friends. They generally passed their time by attending Orthodox Church and taking long walks outside of the city.

Kulo Berr – a mixed income neighborhood with high market activity

The name Kulo Berr translates literally as Kulo (a somewhat pejorative term for the Dawro ethnic group) gate or door. This neighborhood was clustered around the road that led to the area populated by the Dawro and thus the name was given. Kulo Berr was

also near the bus station and was one of the major trading centers in the city. Particularly for chat and other agricultural products this was one of the first stop off points where merchants would sell their goods. The main market for sheep was also located in Kulo Berr. The streets were lined with small restaurants, drinking houses, barber shops, and other locations where any money earned could be quickly spent. The dynamics of Kulo Berr were very similar to another neighborhood where I focused my research, Mahel Ketema (literally “city center”). Mahel Ketema contained businesses that necessitated a higher level of capital investment like shops selling clothing, gold, or shoes and therefore was perhaps a slightly wealthier neighborhood, but the density of economic activity was similar.

In terms of ethnicity and religion the neighborhood was very mixed but there were particularly high numbers of Dawro Orthodox Christians and Oromo Muslims. Most of the money in the neighborhood was generated through trade and many people were small-scale merchants. The wealthier members of the community were often owners of hotels or shops. Working youth felt that there was always money to be made in Kulo Berr and they sometimes contrasted it with Sa’ar Sefer. Walking through Kulo Berr was a sensory overload, and I never ceased to be impressed by the density. Children, men carrying loads, donkeys, and the occasional vehicle crowded the main street. It reminded me of smaller Ethiopian towns with businesses lining a single asphalt road, separated from the houses by small bridges stretching across a mud filled ditch. Businesses often sold locally brewed liquor and beer or simple meals. Crowds of grubby children playing everywhere; donkeys tied up outside of various drinking houses while their owners enjoy profits earned selling goods at the market; chat sold at all times of the

day. This was Kulo Berr. It filled with me with a sense of exhilaration but I was careful to wash my hands when I returned home.

Many of my working and unemployed informants passed time, resided, or worked in Kulo Berr. With few exceptions the unemployed youth were serious chat chewers and this dominated their free time. They tended to have high levels of gift income and they always had enough money to attend a video, buy a bundle of chat, or have coffee at a café. It was not common for them to leave their neighborhood and if I needed to track them down I could always find them simply by making a few queries.

Qottebe Sefer – a mixed income neighborhood with low market activity

This was the neighborhood where I resided throughout my research. Qottebe means “savings.” The name was given to the neighborhood because of the presence of a high number of government workers who were thought to be saving large amounts of money because of their regular salary and inexpensive government housing. The neighborhood was actually constructed specifically for government employees by the Marxist Derg regime. The heart of the neighborhood consisted of a neat grid of well-maintained dirt roads and large single-family compounds. Although it was illegal to rent out these houses for profit this did sometimes occur. The name “Qottebe” came from the grid of government housing but in practice it referred to the surrounding area as well. Although these residents were not necessarily government workers they were still highly influenced by an ethos of public employment.

The neighborhood was dominated by government administrators and teachers, but it also contained private employees, domestic servants, and day laborers. Most of the

government workers were Christian Oromo, and not from the Jimma area. It was explained to me that because they were Muslim, Jimma Oromo had initially been resistant to education and therefore did not occupy many government positions. It was not clear if this was the case or if they did not have access to education, but Oromo from Shewa and Illubabor held most of the government administrative positions in the city. Other neighborhood residents represented a range of ethnicities and religions.

There was very little economic activity within Qottebe Seffer. During the day a few shops were open and a couple of women sold vegetables on the side of the street but compared to Kulo Berr the streets were empty. After around 7:00 pm the gates to compounds would close and everyone would be remain indoors. The lack of street life made the constant presence of unemployed men even more conspicuous. There was always a crowd standing on what I called Qottebe Corner, hands in their pockets, eager for a new topic of conversation or some distraction from their day-to-day life. Chat was popular among Qottebe youth but not as universally consumed as in Kulo Berr. Although many youth came from relatively wealthy families, money did not flow so easily and it was common for some youth to have little to do except wait out the day under the shade of a tree.

## **Conclusion**

I have covered a wide range of topics in this chapter concerning Jimma's history and the contemporary context for my study. This discussion provides the necessary background for understanding the analysis I will present in subsequent chapters. The early history of Jimma that I have described here will not figure prominently in the

analysis that follows. However, I believe this information has value in itself and I hope that by documenting it here, it may be of use to future studies of Jimma and the Gibe Valley Region.

### **Chapter 3: Time, Consumption, and Imagination**

“Youth are simply sitting and chewing. Today’s generation is not interested in working; they are only interested in chewing.” This statement expresses a widely shared opinion among adults concerning the behavior of young men. “Chewing” refers to the consumption of chat, and in Jimma it was felt that chat chewing had taken the place of work for the younger generation. For many adults, chat chewing among youth represented a lifestyle associated with unemployment, crime, and disrespectful behavior. Videos were the topic of a similar discourse. Videos and the houses in which they were shown were thought to expose young people to negative influences and encourage substance abuse, crime, and irresponsible sex. Within both adult and youth discourse videos and chat were connected with issues of time and unemployment. Unemployed young men conceived of excessive amounts of unstructured time as a potentially serious problem for one’s mental well being. Chewing chat and watching videos were activities that provided effective, if temporary, solutions to this problem. In contrast, among adults it was common to argue that chat and videos were at the root of youth unemployment and idleness. While the consumption of chat among young men was grudgingly tolerated (largely because most adult men also chewed regularly), video houses were sites where interventions were made into youth lives, and during the course of my research a police sweep shut down all but one of the video houses in Jimma.

In this chapter, I argue that the economic conditions faced by young men caused them to experience time as a potentially dangerous abundance. The activities of chewing chat and watching videos are analyzed in order to understand how they alleviated much

of the tension experienced by youth in relation to time. These activities were key for both youth imaginations of their future, and adult imaginations of youth. On one hand in consuming chat and videos young men were able to imaginatively construct solutions to problems faced in everyday life. On the other hand, adults saw these activities as a source of moral corruption. The government shutdown of video houses is analyzed in order to understand how these contrasting discourses contributed to a construction of “youth” as a category that refers not only to age, but to gender, urban residence, and moral behavior.

### **The Dangers of Unstructured Time**

Brad Weiss (2004a:10) argues that the compression of time/space described by David Harvey (1990) has also been experienced by urban youth in Africa. He explains, “time may seem to rush forward and temporal spans may seem to narrow precipitously, while in the same moment, the grounding of the future in the present – the ability of persons to comprehend and anticipate even their day-to-day routines – seems markedly insecure.” Among young men in Jimma, the economic conditions associated with neoliberalism were associated with an experience of time quite different from Weiss’ description. Space and time are relevant concepts for understanding the interrelationship between economic conditions and cultural practices, but concepts like “time/space compression” cannot be mapped onto an urban African context in a simple manner.

In describing their condition of extended unemployment young men frequently complained about an excess of time. Time was seen as an overabundant and potentially



dangerous quantity that must be “passed” (“*yasallafal*”) or “killed” (“*yasgedal*”)<sup>1</sup>. The problem of time was in fact that one did have an ability to anticipate one’s day-to-day routine, and this routine was not expected to bring change or enjoyment. It was precisely the lack of change that young men often lamented.

While there was a wide amount of variation in the actual activities that young men engaged in, their day-to-day life conformed to certain patterns, which may be illustrated with a day in the life of Mulugeta. Mulugeta was an unemployed young man who lived in Qottebe Sefer. His father worked as a laborer at a government saw mill and his mother worked in the home. He was of Dawro ethnicity and a practicing Orthodox Christian. The following is a description of a typical day for Mulugeta.

At 6:00 am he wakes up and walks to the stadium where he meets his best friend Berhanu and exercises. They run up and down the stairs at the stadium and then do upper body exercises on a set of parallel bars. After exercising Mulugeta returns to his parents’ house, washes, and eats breakfast. By 9:00 am he is standing on the corner in Qottebe Sefer where one of the main dirt roads meets the asphalt. Two other friends have also gathered there to take in the morning sun and watch the traffic of people going to school or work. They talk for a while about a European Premier League soccer match from the night before and crack jokes at the expense of different passers by. At around 10:00 am one member of the group announces that he has a couple of birr and invites the others to go to a video house with him. They walk to the town center and watch an action movie

---

<sup>1</sup> It is interesting that the same idiomatic terms are used in Amharic and English. I am uncertain about the origins of the expressions “to kill time” and “to pass time” in Amharic. While the young men that I worked with did not have adequate experience with English to be aware of these phrases, I did occasionally hear educated adults make statements in both English and Amharic like “Today’s youth are just killing time.” It’s possible that young men adopted the phrase from educated English speakers. The use of these terms may reflect the notion that in contrast to the lives of unemployed young men, time should be used productively.

starring Steven Segal. After the film Mulugeta returns home for lunch, takes a short nap, and then returns to the corner. At this time of the day the heat is oppressive and with the sun straight overhead there is little shade to be had. After standing around for twenty minutes Mulugeta goes to Haile's house, the popular gathering place that I described at the beginning of the first chapter. Although Mulugeta does not chew chat, he enjoys the conversation and he spends two hours at Haile's, mostly listening to the others as they chew and tell stories. As the afternoon heat begins to dissipate Mulugeta emerges and returns to the corner where a crowd of young men gradually forms. Other youth come and go and Mulugeta stays for over an hour before his friend Berhanu arrives and suggests they take a walk. They walk to Ferenj Arada, a neighborhood that is particularly popular among young people for evening strolls. Ferenj Arada is lined with pleasant cafes and many students from Jimma University can be found there in the evening. By chance they run into another friend who invites them to a café for coffee. They accept the invitation and sit talking for an hour. When Mulugeta finally returns home it is around 8:00 pm. He eats his dinner and watches television with his family until 11:00 pm when he retires to sleep.

Although many of the events in Mulugeta's day were contingent on running into friends certain patterns were present. He almost always exercised in the morning. Not all youth exercised but most engaged in a regular activity like attending church or chewing chat that provided some structure to their day. Meals were generally eaten at home, meaning that three times a day he would return to eat and in most cases immediately emerge again. Unemployed youth from middle class backgrounds would take more of their meals at restaurants, but returning home for lunch and dinner was still

very common. The heat of the afternoon provided another source of regularity, as there was always a need to be somewhere cool.

For young men the most salient characteristic of time was its lack of structure. The burden of too much time was a privilege of gender and urban residence. In terms of family background, all of the young men in my study were born in the city and therefore at least had the minimal social networks necessary to meet their daily needs for food and shelter. Young men were expected to perform very little household work and were generally free from participating in any activities directly associated with the reproduction of the household. In contrast young women spent nearly all of their time doing tedious housework. While young men expressed an interest in working partially as an escape from unstructured time, young women explained that the best part of their day included activities like drinking coffee with friends when they were free to relax and socialize. The work that women freely provided at home was essential to the reproduction of the household. The food preparation, craftwork, and gathering of firewood and water performed by young women all saved the household money, allowing a single income to support a large number of people. Where young men were often given cash in exchange for their household work, this was extremely rare for women.

Unstructured time was problematic because it led to thinking about one's prospects for the future. Activities were evaluated in terms of their ability to focus one's mind away from his present condition. "Thought" (*assab*) was a key term in these narratives representing a broad range of concepts including stress and depression, and a state of "thoughtlessness" was often described as the desired goal. Weiss (2005) explains that the Swahili term for thought is also used by young men in urban Tanzania in order to

describe worries associated with one's relationship to his future<sup>2</sup>. In Jimma the problem of thought was also related to the future, but this was not because of a gap between the present and "limitless prospects of the future" (2005:110). As I have indicated above, the stress of thought and unstructured time was a result of the perceived lack of potential for achieving one's aspirations in the future. Young men explained that excessive amounts of time led to introspective contemplation of one's long-term unemployment. They did not want to think about their continued dependence on their family, their inability to marry, and the indefinite continuation of their joblessness. Time stretched in front of young men, and the future seemed relatively certain but definitely not desirable. It was not simply thinking that young men sought to avoid, but specifically introspective thought in which one contemplated the bleak future that he faced.

My intent is not to suggest that evaluations of time in relation to work existed on a continuum with not working as the least desirable and full employment as the most desirable. While there was no culture of "waiting for the weekend" or desiring more free time, it was also clear that no one envied day laborers who generally performed physical labor with minimal breaks for eight hours a day. Young women who were expected to perform large amounts of housework never complained of excessive unstructured time. The ideal relationship between time and work was not fully conceptualized among unemployed young men, but they did speak about the value of work in terms of enabling them to be busy and avoid the stress of introspective thought. Libraries and gymnasiums were sometimes mentioned as potential solutions to the problem of unemployment

---

<sup>2</sup> Weiss (2005:109) notes that both the Swahili and Haya terms for thought describe "worries/troubles," and he speculates that this might indicate a "widespread semantic association in East Africa." It is interesting that the Amharic term for thought also expresses similar meanings.

because they would provide young people with a productive means of passing their time. In other words unemployment was not simply an absence of work, but a problem of time.

This is a theme that I will explore in later chapters. Work was not necessarily, or even primarily, conceived of in relation to the process of production. If work was valued because of the structure it added to one's life, the process of working was also essential for establishing one's social position. Working in different occupations placed one in particular relationships to others, and evaluations of these relationships were often interrelated to occupational choice. I will return to issues of occupational choice in chapter 6. For now it is necessary to emphasize that the stress associated with the lack of structure in their day-to-day lives was interrelated with the activities pursued by young men. As I will explain below, activities like chewing chat and watching videos were conceived of specifically in relation to their utility in alleviating the anxiety of excessive thinking.

### **Spaces of Escape: The Video House and The Chat House**

Both the spaces and practices associated with watching videos and chewing chat were ideal for dealing with the problem of excessive unstructured time. For myself, the video house was always an overwhelming sensory experience that I could only withstand for short periods of time. Upon entering one was met with a blast of heat generated by the tightly packed bodies and the sun radiating off the tin roof. The houses were medium sized rooms, usually not more than 15'x20', and they often held as many as one hundred customers, mostly young men. The customers sat on low wooden benches facing a television, which provides the only source of light in the room. After adjusting one's

eyes to the sudden darkness it was more or less possible to find a place on a bench, depending on the popularity of the film. Video house customers were often younger than many of my primary informants, ranging in age from around twelve to their early thirties. The older customers usually chewed chat as they watched the film. Chat is said to produce a “heat” within one’s body and this combined with the temperature of the room created an intense experience that heightened the customer’s enjoyment of the film. Talking between customers was rare. Audiences were fully engaged with the films, cheering for the heroes and occasionally shouting words of warning when the villain prepared an ambush. The video house provided a feeling of total escape. After entering, the outside world was forgotten and presumably that world forgot about you as well. Although one could be sitting with one hundred people, the darkness and intensive focus of attention on the film provided a sense of anonymity in which one could forget himself.

While the interior may be a space in which the individual interacted directly with the film, outside the video house was a site for socializing. Small groups of young men sat on stools talking, chewing chat, and drinking tea and coffee. Table tennis and other games that could be played for a small price were usually found nearby making the video house a center of activity for young men. Films were a common topic of conversation among the small groups of youth who gathered outside video houses. These discussions frequently took the form of comparing and contrasting what one has seen in a film with day-to-day life in Ethiopia. The physical space of the video house enabled distinctive experiences of inside and outside. Within the house heat, darkness, and consumption of chat all provided an intense connection between the viewer and the film. Outside in the

bright afternoon sunshine that connection quickly dissipated as young men discussed and debated the relative merits of different films.

Chat was consumed in a variety of locations, but it is worth briefly exploring the chat house in order to understand the relationship between space, imagination, and an escape from time. Chat houses were generally smaller than video houses, often no more than 10'x10'. The houses were run by women who earned money selling tea and coffee. Although the crowd was smaller the charcoal burner for boiling coffee, meant that the heat of the chat house was often even more intense than the video house. Smoke from charcoal, cigarettes, and incense created a haze in the room that enhanced the experience for chewers. In contrast to the video house, the chat house was usually not a center for other youth activities. Small groups of chewers converged on the house from different directions. They entered, chewed (sometimes for hours), and left. Socializing was confined to the house and not the space surrounding it.

The social dynamics of chat houses varied considerably in terms of the space that was present for interaction. At one house that I spent time at young men lounged on mattresses chain smoking. Some young women were present and they were chewing as well. Ja Rule and Eminem (popular American rap artists) blasted from a small boom box, making conversation nearly impossible. Youth on the mattress leaned on each other sometimes joking with the person sitting next to them, but mostly staring off into space or singing along with the music. At another house that I frequented with one of my primary informants, Teodros, the atmosphere was entirely different. This house was known as the "Hola Café." It was explained to me that *Hola* is the Oromo term for sheep and the name was given to the house because of its close proximity to the daily sheep market. The

house was made from sheets of corrugated tin and had wooden benches instead of mattresses. At the Hola Café the main attraction was conversation. This house attracted a crowd that was interested in talking about current events, and chewers would sometimes bring a newspaper with them in order to initiate conversation. The customers were usually in their twenties and although they were all unemployed, they frequently had a year or two of post-secondary education. Where the clothing of the youth at the first house tended towards baggy jeans and sports jerseys, the young men at Hola Café preferred the more conservative style of button down shirts tucked into pants. While the customers appeared to be segregated roughly in terms of class, both houses were in the same neighborhood and the price of coffee was not different.

Like videos, chat provided an escape from time, but the spatial dynamics were very different. The video house created an isolated interaction between viewer and film. The area outside the video house supported conversations among peers, but these did not have the same intensive focus as the chat house. The chat house constricted interactions to clusters of people. At the first house described above interactions might be with one other person, while at the Hola Café it was a small isolated group. Both the chat house and video house manipulated the relationship between the individual and social group. The inside/outside dynamic of the video house created sites for individual experience and social interaction. The chat house facilitated interaction, but within a highly controlled setting. By constricting interactions with others the chat house provided the chewer with more control over his experience.



The escape from stress that chat provided was often explicitly described in terms of the problem of excess time. One young man who occasionally worked as an assistant at a video house explained:

“Mondays are the worst day of the week. On Monday everyone is going to work or school and running errands. No one comes to the video house because they are too busy. If I had a real job or I was a student I would love Mondays. On Mondays I have to chew chat. There is nothing else to do. On other days I can take it or leave it but on Mondays I have to have it. How else can I pass the time?”

In alleviating the depression that accompanied one’s inability to live his life as he desired, chat served the dual function of passing time while also making it more enjoyable.

Videos also served the function of using time. Youth often commented that one of the factors behind the popularity of Indian films is that they are up to twice as long as American films and therefore are a better value for one’s money, and more importantly use up the excessive quantities of time that young men experienced as a source of stress. The value of films was sometimes described in similar terms to chat – “films kill time” or “films pass time.” Some youth claimed that they had an “addiction” (*sus*) to videos, and they often watched two or three films a day. Video houses generally screened the first film at 10:00 am, followed by a showing at 1:00 pm, the most popular time slot was at 4:00 pm, and then there was an evening showing at 7:00 pm. One young man who regularly watched two videos per day commented, “In America no one would watch a film at ten in the morning, but here in Ethiopia we have nothing else to do.” There was a

sense among young men that the experience of time was specific to their location and economic condition. In contrast to much of the rest of the world in Ethiopia there was no work and in this absence activities like chat or videos used time while providing a mental escape.

Videos and chat were not the only activities that enabled young men to deal with stress induced by over abundant quantities of time. Sport, conversation, and participation in organized religion were also very important. Each provided the same combination of using time and allowing a mental or physical escape from the stress of day-to-day life. Particularly religion and conversation are very much rooted in local values and culture and deserve a more extensive discussion than I am capable of offering here.

### **Videos and the Negotiation of Desire**

Brian Larkin's (1997) analysis of the role of Indian films in the production of "parallel modernities" among Muslim youth in Nigeria provides a model from which to understand the consumption of films among young men in urban Ethiopia. Larkin explains that Indian films provided "a way of imaginatively engaging with the changing social basis of contemporary life that is an alternative to the pervasive influence of the secular West" (434). Although the spatial and religious dynamics were different in Ethiopia<sup>3</sup>, like Larkin's study films were tools that youth could use in examining their

---

<sup>3</sup> Opinions were often split regarding Indian films in Ethiopia. On one hand, like Larkin's study some young people found them more appropriate for the relatively conservative culture of Muslim and Orthodox Christian Ethiopia. The emphasis on family and the theme of transformation from poverty to wealth were generally appreciated. On the other hand some youth argued that Indian films are "for children" and they tired of the choreographed dances and songs. In the Ethiopian context, American films were not as "ideologically loaded" as Muslim Nigeria, and Western culture was not perceived as something that must be resisted.

own identity in a context where desires for the future often did not match economic realities.

Arjun Appadurai argues that the imaginary is something “new in global and cultural processes” (1996:31). This claim is largely based on the emergence of new forms of technology of which Appadurai gives particular attention to cinema, television, and video. He also acknowledges the importance of stories passed from person to person in creating a world in which “more persons in more parts of the world consider a wider set of possible lives than they ever did before” (1996:53). The increasing amount of possible lives that individuals now have available to them creates a myriad of possibilities for social change that did not previously exist.

Appadurai’s argument that the emergence of the imagination is new should be viewed critically. The description of Jimma’s history that I have offered in the previous chapter reveals that this region, like many other places in the world, has been a center for the movement of people, ideas, and commodities for hundreds of years. That said, the massive exposure to international films, extensive conversations concerning global politics, and stories regarding family members residing abroad are certainly something new. Whether or not there is something distinctive about the manner in which a film or a story about a Diversity Visa lottery winner interacts with one’s imagination is debatable, but each of these activities does generate new possibilities for living, in a manner that is particular to the medium.

Intuitively it seems that films that expose young men to lifestyles, technologies, and commodities that are vastly beyond what they are capable of attaining would generate a sense of anguish and unfulfilled desire. However, in discussions concerning

videos young men generally did not speak about films as a source of desire but rather as a means of negotiating problems that they already faced. Youth frequently spoke about the value of videos in terms of “learning.” Videos were seen as an educational tool. Youth listed everything from English words to models for dating as information that could be obtained from videos. Action films were thought to be particularly educational. Like Paul Richards’ (1996) study of youth in Sierra Leone, young men spoke of learning how to solve difficult problems from watching heroes in action movies extract themselves from seemingly impossible situations. James Bond and Jackie Chan were mentioned as great teachers in this regard. Loyalty was also noted as a trait that could be learned from action movies in which soldiers “left no man behind.” In the process of learning young men felt that they were accessing a window into the realities of life abroad. Glimpses of technology and cultural behavior were remembered for future use. Young men did not simply aspire to become part of the worlds observed through film. As Lila Abu-Lughod (2005) notes, consumers of visual media are often ethnographers in their own right, critically evaluating other places and cultures. In some cases young men positively evaluated aspects of foreign cultures like the traits associated with action films or the prevalence of personal automobiles. In other cases foreign cultures were perceived negatively, and different young men drew conclusions about the racism in the United States based on the common portrayal of African Americans as criminals in Hollywood films.

Youth entered the video house with some notion of what they needed to learn, and the lessons that they took from the films conformed to those desires. While learning English and dating skills may seem very distinct in fact they were both related to the

anxieties of young men regarding becoming an adult in an environment of limited economic opportunity. As I will detail in the following chapter, developing intimate relationships with women was seen as especially difficult due to a lack of employment. In the video house young men sought and found solutions to this problem. A lack of comprehension of English was regarded by many youth as preventing them from advancing to post-secondary education. Although many consumers of films were no longer students, learning English while watching films provided them with the sense of moving in a direction associated with advanced education and desirable employment. English was also associated with travel abroad, a key element in youth narratives for future success. Similar to discussions fueled by chat that will describe in the following section, in consuming films youth developed elaborate plans for the future that often involved international travel.

The manner in which youth used films in order to explore problems associated with massive unemployment is particularly apparent in relation to Ethiopian films. While American and Indian films were discussed abstractly, particular plots and themes were less likely to be analyzed. The language barrier and the contextual differences prevented many youth from fully engaging with foreign films. The handful of Ethiopian films that were released in theatres and video were quickly seen multiple times by nearly all young men and became common points of reference for discussions regarding issues of love and money. Youth noted that watching Ethiopian films filled them with a sense of pride and excitement. There was a sense that these films were part of a movement away from “backwardness” (*hwalakerinet*) because local realities were being represented through cinematic stories. During my research two films were released by Tewodros Teshome, a

director who was born in the Mahel Ketema neighborhood of Jimma. While these films were well received throughout Ethiopia they were especially popular in Jimma where the young director had many friends among the local youth population.

The first and more popular of these films was titled “Kezkaza Welafen” (Cold Flame). It tells the story of a beautiful college student, Selamawit, who loses her boyfriend in a car accident in the first scene of the movie. Her older godfather pressures her into accepting a marriage proposal by refusing to give her mother money for medicine and evicting Selamawit’s family from their home. Selamawit is saved from marriage at the last moment in a scene in which her mother intervenes during the wedding. Just as the suitor lifts her veil to kiss Selamawit, her mother announces that there can be no marriage without an HIV negative certificate (it is not clear how it is known that the suitor was HIV positive). Selamawit’s mother is confident in intervening because another suitor has given her a large sum of money. The second suitor is a nice but somewhat homely man who repeatedly has sought Selamawit’s affection, and during the first half of the film his lack of success brings much in the way of comic relief. After Selamawit learns about the gift to her mother, she becomes close friends with the second suitor. He supports Selamawit through college, and immediately gives her a job in his office after she graduates.

After the first marriage proposal is resolved the second relationship is largely based around economic need. Selamawit’s opinion about this young man, Biruk, changes drastically after he helps her financially. He drives a high priced SUV, talks on a cell phone, and has a decent sized belly – all signs of wealth. They discuss the issue of love and her indebtedness to him in a scene that was shot at Lake Langano (a popular vacation

site among the international community in Addis, and extensive shots of a white family enjoying themselves at the lake are interspersed with their discussion). In the end, Selamawit does fall in love and agrees to marry Biruk.

The second film, *Fiker Siferd* (“Love Verdict”) is more of a thriller with a plot that contains many twists and turns, but it also features a love story that crosses boundaries of class and religion. In this case the beautiful young woman is from an extremely wealthy family and she is pursuing a poor policeman<sup>4</sup>. She is Christian and he is Muslim, but neither their class, nor religious differences stand in the way of their love.

For young men these films contained models of Ethiopian modernity and success. Values such as religious piety and honesty are combined with symbols of success like university education, personal vehicles, and international vacations (in the second film the lovers travel to Kenya on their honeymoon). After expressing his appreciation for the references to HIV running through the plot of *Kezkaza Welafen*, one unemployed young man commented that the male protagonist in the film could have never succeeded in winning the love of Selamawit without money. This was true to life. In young men’s narratives sex was continually linked with money and employment status. Young men argued that in Ethiopia there is no love; there is only money. Without work or access to money it was very difficult for young men to marry or have girlfriends. According to one unemployed young man, women want “*business*” (material support) for the simple reason that “there is no work” (*sira yellem*). He did not appear bitter about this situation; it was simply a fact of life. A film like *Kezkaza Welafen* exaggerates conditions – the difficulty

---

<sup>4</sup> One of the most striking things about this film is that the woman’s family only eats imported packaged foods and never injera. The common explanation for this among the Jimma audience was that the owner of an import business had sponsored the film in exchange for numerous product placements.

of love in an environment of extreme poverty – that youth are already quite aware of, thus providing an excellent medium for discussion. In general young men were empathetic with the conditions faced by Selamawit, and her dependency on different men for economic support. In the end she found a benefactor that she was able to love, but most young men saw this as a happy coincidence and not a condition that should be expected.

The film *Fiker Siferd* provides a contrasting message, in that the poor policeman was able to marry a beautiful and wealthy woman. Their class differences are highlighted in a scene that cuts from the policeman taking a bucket bath in his squalid apartment to the young woman luxuriating in a huge tub full of bubbles. In this film love is not bound by economic necessity. At one point the young woman's father refuses to support her love for the policeman and she leaves her father's mansion to move in with her lover. The film provides another shared story that young men could insert into their preexisting discourse on love and money. While youth may not have found the possibility of a wealthy woman pursuing a man of limited economic means to be realistic, the story was happily consumed and discussed.

It also seems that young men were evaluating the meaning of love through the consumption of film. The contrast between love and money assumes a possibility for a "true love" that is independent from exchange. Although I do not have adequate evidence to substantiate a comparison with the past, it seems that this conception of love may have been new and closely intertwined with the stories told in both national and international films. If economic conditions that created a greater need to receive material goods in exchange for intimate relations were thought to be a relatively new phenomenon, then



perhaps so was the notion that relationships between men and women could exist without some level of financial dependence.

In contrast to Abu-Lughod's (2005) discussion of melodrama and the creation of modern subjectivities in relation to Egypt television serials, young men's narratives did not conform to the melodramatic love story that was common both in Ethiopian films and televised dramas. Telling stories about themselves or others was not common among young men. Instead ideas were conveyed with more generalized statements, logical arguments, and often with proverbs or riddles. Love was a topic of interest, but at least among young men there was no marked tendency to insert one's self into the format of the love story.

In a context in which ideals of wealth and marriage were clearly unattainable for most young men, Ethiopian films provided stories with which different possibilities could be explored. These stories were particularly compelling, partially because they were told in Amharic and partially because they dealt with locally relevant issues like HIV and religion. The escape from time associated with film was important, but so was the construction of narratives that enabled youth to think through an uncertain future. Fitting with Appadurai's argument, youth interacted with films in order to "imagine" other possibilities and worlds. It was not simply that films created a false belief among young men that bridged the gap between their desires and economic realities. The process of imagination allowed young men to contemplate this gap in a way that did not necessarily imply success or failure. Like chat, youth interactions with film reconstructed their relationship to time. In rethinking their future through interactions with films youth were able to avoid many of the anxieties associated with introspective thought.

As I have noted above, unstructured time was not problematic simply because it existed in excessive quantities. It was the presence of negative introspective thoughts that caused large amounts of time to be potentially dangerous. Videos and chat not only used time, but they allowed young men to temporarily conceive of positive futures for themselves and avoid the stress associated with contemplating one's future.

### **Chewing Chat and Imagining the Future**

Jimma is widely believed to be one of the centers in Ethiopia for chat consumption, and many residents claim that after Harrar and Dire Dawa, Jimma has the highest per capita rate of consumption. In the absence of official statistics on chat consumption, I simply asked youth to estimate how many young men chew chat regularly. Nearly all informants estimated that 70-85 percent chew at least weekly, and at least half this amount chews daily. Informants stressed that chat use in Jimma varies significantly with neighborhood and religion. For example in a predominantly Christian neighborhood approximately 50 percent of youth may chew, while up to 90 percent of Muslim youth may chew chat. While these figures do not necessarily correspond with the actual number of young chewers they certainly reveal a perception that chat consumption is very wide spread.

Chat has traditionally played an important role for Muslims in prayer, celebrations, and community discussions (Gebissa 2004). In areas of Ethiopia with high concentrations of Muslims it has been popular for day-to-day use for some time. Heavy chat use among Christians is a new phenomenon in Ethiopia and largely confined to

young men in urban areas. In the popular press and adult discourse, chat is associated with unemployment and is said to make the chewer lazy.

For habitual chewers, especially among the unemployed, the first half of the day is usually spent trying to scrape together a few birr for chat. The price of chat is relatively low in Jimma and two or three birr is usually enough for one person, although five birr is the preferred amount if finances are available. Among the unemployed, money for chat sometimes came from odd jobs, but gifts from friends or family were more common. Most young consumers of chat had a few friends that they regularly chewed with, and if one could buy chat he would share with his close circle of friends. The process of sharing and chewing together was important for creating bonds between young men and I will discuss sharing relationships in more detail in chapter 7. In general, despite being unemployed it seems that that one way or another most habitual chewers managed to obtain chat on a daily basis.

For the unemployed chat chewing usually began in the early afternoon after lunch. Chat chewing was nearly always a social activity involving at least two or three friends. If one of the young men had access to a house where they could chew without being disturbed this was the ideal location. However in many cases parents did not permit their children to chew at home, and youth utilized the chat houses described above.

Approximately one hour after beginning to chew a high is reached that is known as *merkana*. For most youth the purpose of chewing chat is to reach merkana. During merkana the heartbeat is noticeably faster, one begins to sweat, and there is a general sense of happiness and satisfaction with life. It is during merkana that thoughts and

conversations turned to hopes for the future, youth begin to dream (“*hilm*”), and the particular social interactions associated with chat emerge. Chewers described the opening of the mind (“*amro yikefetal*”) and a sense of unlimited possibility. The following discussion of merkana comes from a group discussion I conducted with Habtamu and two of his friends as they chewed chat. At the time of my research Habtamu was in his mid-twenties and unemployed. Together with his friends he chewed chat almost daily.

Habtamu: During merkana you *arrange*<sup>5</sup> your mind. Now, for example you might be thinking about doing some kind of work or some kind of study. That thing becomes very broad. Your mind thinks about it.

Anything that you want to do, your mind is able to grasp it very quickly.

Daniel Mains: For example, if one person has a problem and he chews chat he will find a solution very quickly?

H: Yes. *Around the table* a good *diplomat* will be created. This is the main thing about chat. When there is an argument about something for example if there is a problem between husband and wife among Muslims they will give the elders one sheep and a lot of chat. The elders will chew the chat and solve the problem.

Friend 1: Yes. There is another thing. When you chew chat you think tomorrow I will buy a car. Tomorrow I will get money from the bank and buy a house.

Friend 2: When you're chewing.

---

<sup>5</sup> Italics denote words that were spoken in English.

Friend 1: But in the morning if you ask me, I have nothing.

H: Usually it is like this.

Friend 1: It is merkana.

If possible youth preferred to chew with the same two or three friends. These were friends that they were comfortable with and who had similar interests and conversational styles. Individuals usually came in and out of the conversation, sometimes giving passionate monologues that lasted five to ten minutes, and at other times staring off into space, lost in one's own thoughts. For youth who watched videos while chewing conversation was limited. In their case the video appeared to act as a stimulus that allows one's thoughts to travel outside the boundaries of normal life.

At the time of my research Alemu, was twenty-nine and had been without regular work during most of the nine years since he finished grade 12. He lived with his mother who owned a small shop, and he had been chewing chat daily since finishing secondary school. Some of his friends called him "*mulu qen*" or full day because he chewed during the entire day. He explained that during merkana his future seems "very bright" and all of his dreams are within reach. "When I chew chat I get happiness, if I think about New York City it is like I am actually living there." It is this process of "dreaming" that appears to bond chat chewers together as a social group. Alemu classified others in terms of chewers and non-chewers. Especially during merkana he preferred to be around chewers. He described chewers as dreamers who are able to go places in their mind, while non-chewers are continually caught up in day-to-day affairs. During merkana everyday reality seemed very dull. Chewers did not want to talk about anything

“normal.” They preferred an atmosphere that allowed them to escape into explorations of hopes and desires for the future.

In terms of identity, young chewers also considered themselves to be more knowledgeable and experienced than non-chewers. While non-chewers sometimes insulted chewers by calling them “*duriye*,” chewers referred to non-chewers as “*farra*” (rural or backwards; the opposite of cosmopolitan). Many of the non-chewers that I spoke with were students at the Jimma Technical School. For the students, dreaming and discussions about seemingly unrealistic hopes for the future were cited as one of the key reasons for avoiding chat. They gave examples of the sort of wild fantasies that chewers entertain during merkana. Chewers talk about owning seven airplanes or building a four-story hotel. Non-chewers argued that this type of conversation is meaningless. The students were still in the process of pursuing their future goals through the traditional means of education. For them it was better to focus on more realistic aims that are close at hand and can be attained by passing through clearly defined levels of education and work. Critiques of chewing and dreaming also made the point that all of the planning and discussing of the future that takes place during merkana is lost the following morning. While chat stimulates the mind to form detailed plans for achieving even the most impossible desires, chewers cannot seem to remember these ideas once the merkana has passed.

Chat chewers also acknowledged this problem. In the group discussion quoted above, Habtamu described how one feels the morning after chewing chat.

“In the morning I don’t want to talk with anyone. I won’t even greet my friends. You try to remember what you were thinking about the day

before, but it just won't come. Nothing helps, you can drink coffee or try anything, but you just feel bad. In the afternoon, after chat, you can deal with people again and all of the plans from yesterday come back.”

Most of the unemployed chewers spoke of an intense depression that occurs on the days when one does not obtain chat. Chewing with a group of friends in the back yard of his mother's house, an unemployed man in his mid-twenties explained that without chat in the afternoon the only way to pass the time is to wander around. The sun burns into one's head and he begins to think about all of his problems - the lack of a job, friends who have died of AIDS, and the hopelessness of the future. He claimed that if does not get chat he inevitably ends up spending a night or two in jail. I found this to be very surprising because this young man had an extremely calm and polite demeanor. However, without chat he wandered around in a cloud of depression. He would eventually run into an acquaintance and begin exchanging insults, which then escalate into a fight that will attract the attention of the police<sup>6</sup>. Only partially in jest, some of the technical school students argued that this is the reason why the Ethiopian government does not ban chat. It prevents people from thinking too much about the problems in life, and as long as they obtain their daily chat, they are unlikely to disturb the government.

For unemployed youth consuming chat played a key role in both the construction and fulfillment of desire. Although it was not always openly discussed, sex was often the most immediate desire experienced by young men. Young men claimed that during

---

<sup>6</sup> This appears to be partially related to notions of public space in Jimma. To wander around (“*mezor*”), especially in the afternoon, is associated with being a “*duriye*” (delinquent – described further below). To be seen in public like this frequently leads to insults. One of the advantages of chat is that it is chewed in private and it consumes a large amount of time. Although one may be unemployed at least his idleness will not be visible if he is hidden away chewing chat. Some of the few unemployed youth who did not chew chat resented the fact that because they spent more of their time in public areas they were considered to be *duriye*.

merkana, once a person begins thinking about sex it is nearly impossible to think about anything else<sup>7</sup>. One unemployed young man described a process in which the chewer's desire is so intense that a woman may absorb his "heat" and increase her sexual appetite. For some young men, having sex after chewing chat was described as a physical necessity.

The narcotic effect of chat combined with intense conversation in order to escalate sexual desire to potentially uncontrollable levels. The need for sex was intertwined with the condition of unemployment. As one young chewer put it, "Without money I must sit with my desire." At least temporarily, chat allowed this problem to be overcome. The notion that the heat of desire that is produced during merkana may be transferred to a woman illustrates how something that is made very difficult by economic constraints not only seems possible during merkana, it is believed to actually be facilitated by the act of chewing chat.

Other youth conceived of chat very differently in terms of its relationship to sexual desire. In a group discussion among unemployed young men regarding chat the conversation took a tangent towards women and relationships. These young men argued that relationships with women could lead to a number of problems including illegitimate children and HIV/AIDS. One member of the group argued that the solution to this problem was to chew chat. He explained:

"Usually if you don't chew you get these problems. If you don't chew and you are on the street, some women will come, you greet them, invite them for coffee, *communication* is created, and a relationship begins. After that

---

<sup>7</sup> Although chat was perceived by some as increasing one's libido to uncontrollable levels, for others it caused impotence that could sometimes be overcome with heavy drinking.



you will enter into bad problems. Therefore if you chew, you enjoy merkana, you go home, you watch TV, you read, that's enough – you sleep. *Morning*, you get up at ten, you eat breakfast, you eat lunch, and then you chew chat.”

Chewing chat removed one from the public space that enabled interactions with women that could lead to potentially serious consequences. As the conversation progressed these young men soon adopted the exact opposite point, arguing that in fact chat leads to irresponsible sex.

Like my discussion of film, my intent is not to establish a causal relationship between chat and sexual behavior. Young men experienced intense desires that were interrelated with issues such as unemployment and HIV/AIDS. In addition to passing time chat facilitated an exploration of these desires and the barriers to their fulfillment. Contrary to claims of adults and some youth, chat did not so much cause the spread of HIV/AIDS or unemployment as much as it provided space for constructing one's own position in relation to these issues. An idea was presented (for example, chat leads to irresponsible sex) and then evaluated and critiqued. As noted the conclusions that were reached in discussions fueled by chat were often forgotten, but the process itself was important. The simple act of discussion allowed young men to momentarily come to terms with the gap between their desires and economic realities.

Conversations that took place while chewing were often repetitive and as many young men chewed daily, what began as fantasy could eventually be perceived as a realistic possibility. Possibly even more common than discussions of women and sex were conversations about migration, especially to the United States. Through these

fantasies aspirations were developed in a manner that was intertwined with economic behavior. The following comes from the conversation between Habtamu and his friends that I have quoted above. They are describing the types of conversations that they have during merkana. They are also experiencing merkana as they are describing it, and this most likely influences the flow of the discussion.

Friend 2: If you are thinking about the *future* or another thing....

Habtamu: *Future?! In the name of God! Stop!* [implying that this is something that he could talk about all day]

Friend 2: If you buy chat today you will become bright. You will plan ten years ahead. [He names off one thing after another – work, marriage, children – snapping his fingers between each one.] Now if I am experiencing merkana and you ask me I will tell you about America.

After arriving in America I will go to Atlanta.

H: Is it Atlanta today?

Dan Mains: My town.

Friend 2: Yes, yours. There, good work. A private car. A good house.

Friend 1: *Palace.*

Friend 2: After I win the DV, I will do all of this. But sometimes it gives me a headache. Thinking, “why can’t I do this?”

Friend 1: Why is it this way? *America life* and *Ethiopia life* – there is one hundred years *difference*. An American will never think about finding

something to drink or something to eat. For us we eat breakfast at home, after that we don't know where we will find lunch. This is a problem.

In this manner the relationship of young men to their future is shifted, and during merkana time is no longer a source of anxiety because introspective thought about one's future brings pleasure rather than stress. The shift is not complete. As the comment about the headache indicates, the ability to achieve this fantasy is continually questioned. However, these doubts appear to be overcome by the patterned nature of the conversation. It is not only electronic media that facilitate the imagination of possible lives in the manner envisioned by Appadurai. In this case, chat fueled conversations generate imaginative futures. When Habtamu's friend mentions that he plans to go to Atlanta, Habtamu's response indicates that they have had this conversation before and the only difference is the name of the city<sup>8</sup>. The conversation is creative but within boundaries, and these boundaries shape the construction of the possible.

In Brad Weiss' discussion of imagination among urban young men in Tanzania he notes that it may be useful to theorize the interconnections between imagination and habitus (2002:98). Aspirations are one of the key areas through which habitus is expressed. While I will discuss aspirations in more detail in the following chapter, it is worth noting that activities like chewing chat and watching videos were processes through which both limits and new possibilities for one's own life were constructed. In building detailed fantasies around the diversity visa lottery and migration to the United States chat chewers were both opening and closing certain possibilities. As I detail in

---

<sup>8</sup> It was not simply my presence that caused these young men to reference Atlanta. Both Habtamu and his friend had family living in the Atlanta area.

subsequent chapters, the option of working locally was avoided both because of a lack of opportunity and stigmas that were associated with available occupations. Through conversation while chewing chat, migration became a real possibility for one's future. As this possibility is imagined the economic behavior that links habitus to class is potentially changed. The creative construction of fantasy is one factor leading young men to accept long-term unemployment as they anticipate an eventual opportunity to travel abroad. This in turn has implications for the reproduction and subversion of class hierarchies.

The consumption of film functioned in a similar, yet distinct manner. In the case of chat, ideas were continually interrogated with the assistance of active partners. As I have argued above, young men did not simply adopt the values that were conveyed through films, but there is something necessarily passive about interacting individually with a form of technology that cannot respond to questioning. While the creative role of young men was reduced in consuming film, it was still possible to appropriate received messages in a manner that had new and unusual implications for one's life. In the example I have described above young men grappled with issues of love, money, HIV, and gender relationships with the help of film. A singular synthesis of these issues did not emerge in youth discourse, but in general the experience of viewing and discussing films enabled young men to come to terms with a new and challenging situation. Contrary to Appadurai's analysis new possibilities for living were not generated specifically by film. Regardless of their exposure to film, young men in Jimma were forced to engage with new economic and social conditions. However, film did influence the manner in which youth experienced these new conditions by enabling them to

compare and contrast individual experiences with fantastic stories that were well known among their peers.

In the final section of this chapter I move beyond the personal experience of film and chat in order to examine the primarily adult discourse that surrounded these activities. This discourse reveals the manner that “youth” as a social category was particular to turn of the twenty-first century Ethiopia. First, I offer a brief discussion of the term “duriye” because in some ways it was synonymous with “youth” or “*watat*”.

### *Duriye*

When I asked for the English equivalent of duriye from Ethiopians the most common response was “vagabond” or “hooligan,” but neither of these terms really works in contemporary American English. Perhaps “punk” or “thug” might be a better equivalent, depending on the Western subculture that one wishes to reference, but the terms are still not quite right. Brad Weiss’ (2002) discussion of “thug realism” in Arusha, Tanzania does resonate with the use of duriye in an Ethiopian context, but there is one key difference. In my experience it was very rare to find someone who referred to himself as a duriye. Where a “thug life” has been valorized in popular American rap music, and young men in Arusha referred to themselves as *wahuni*, which appears to be the Swahili equivalent of duriye (Weiss 2002:108), there was no sense that a duriye life or *duriyenet* was desirable among young men in Ethiopia<sup>9</sup>.

---

<sup>9</sup> In contrast to Biaya’s (2005) discussion of youth in Addis Ababa, crime was not valorized among young men in Jimma. While Biaya is correct to note that becoming a *shifita* (bandit), was common among nobility who wished to access power in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, I never observed the term *shifita* being used in a positive manor or to describe young men at all.

I was never able to find a satisfactory English translation for duriye, and my notion of what a duriye is was often contradicted. My sense was that all of the young men who spent the majority of their time standing on the street corner near my house were duriye. These men were generally unemployed, lived with their families, devoted much of their leisure time to videos or chat, and were not above tossing out an insult at the occasional passerby. Hands in the pockets of their loose fitting jeans, they followed the shade from one side of the street to the other, and similar groups could be found on corners in every residential neighborhood in Jimma. Coming and going from my house I would often join these fellows for a bit of conversation and on one occasion it came out that I considered them to be duriye. They were shocked and very defensive. These young men explained that a duriye sleeps on the streets and lives from crime. They lived with their parents and were well behaved. While they may not have work, this was common and they certainly were not duriye.

In other situations I encountered much looser definitions of duriye that would have definitely encompassed these young men. Sometimes it seemed that the term duriye was associated with unemployment, ample free time, and hanging about in public. Particularly during the first half of my research I had people shout insults at me to the effect that I was a duriye because I was perceived to be wandering around aimlessly. I eventually came to the conclusion that almost every young man who was not a student or gainfully employed was in a losing struggle to avoid being defined as a duriye. The occupation (unemployed or working in low status jobs), recreational habits, and social position of young men made it very difficult to avoid this identity. Although it was not

likely that one would self-identify in this manner, the discourse surrounding youth made the duriye label an ever-present reference point.

### **Video House Raids and Conflicting Imaginations**

Around six months into my research I ran into Yonas, the dread-locked owner of a video house in Ferenj Arada. After exchanging greetings I asked him about business, and he told me that the police had shut down all fifteen video houses in Jimma. All of the owners were arrested and then released with dates to reappear in court for sentencing, and their equipment (DVD and video cassette players) had been confiscated<sup>10</sup>. Most video houses were back in business within a few weeks, but the loss of their equipment was a significant set back. At various times after the shut down, video houses would close on their own because they feared a police sweep, and this resulted in the loss of income. By this point in my research I had made contacts with a number of youth involved in the video industry. Compared to other youth businesses, video houses created high profits and jobs for multiple young men. Given the high rate of youth unemployment I was curious why the government would suddenly close these houses down.

I heard a variety of explanations as to why the shut down had been ordered. Like many businesses, video houses operated without a license and this was one possible

---

<sup>10</sup> It is worth noting that there was one video house that escaped harassment. Tesfaye's video house, located in Kulo Berr, continued to operate throughout the shutdown, thus drawing enormous crowds because of the lack of competition. He was also able to hire the best Hindi-to-Amharic translator in Jimma away from another video house. Tesfaye explained that he was able to capitalize on the shutdown because he only showed Indian movies, which were not considered to be a negative cultural influence. While this may have partially explained the lack of police attention he later acknowledged that because he grew up in Kulo Berr most of the police were his friends and he was always generous with them. Whatever the reason, Tesfaye's ability to expand his business during a phase when others were suffering losses meant that his monthly profits were 300-400% of other video houses that I examined. His take home pay was greater than that earned by a doctor at Jimma university.

reason behind the shut down. Others argued that it was a copyright issue. In Addis Ababa local musicians had recently staged a march in protest of the money they were losing due to pirated audiotapes, and many youth and adults assumed that the government was reacting to this in preventing the unauthorized showing of films. Another possibility concerned the environment within the video houses. Video houses were thought to be places where *duriye* pass their time and there was a fear that younger children were being exposed to bad habits like smoking cigarettes and chewing chat. Others argued that violent or pornographic films exposed youth to negative influences and this was the reason for the shut down.

Clearly there was no shortage of reasons why the government might seek to regulate video houses. In order to investigate the matter further I sought out the government office that had ordered the shut down. After a week of phone calls I was able to get a meeting with the head of the Jimma Office of Youth and Sport, who then referred me to Ato Seifu, the head of the Culture and Tourism office. I knew Ato Seifu when he was employed as a teacher at the preparatory school and he was willing to speak with me. Unfortunately he had only been at the office for a few weeks and was not present when the order to shut down the video houses was given. However, he was able to explain that the government actually raids video houses every year. Their policy seemed to be one of organized harassment, confiscating the equipment of video house owners but not actually holding them in prison. Ato Seifu explained that the logic behind this was that films were considered to be a negative cultural influence. A culture that was explicitly defined as “foreign” (“*wich hager bahil*” or “*ferenj bahil*”) was responsible for



encouraging young people to engage in irresponsible sex, crime, violence, and disrespectful behavior.

Many adults repeated this idea and argued that there is a distinction between foreign and local culture<sup>11</sup>. Adults explained that young people lack the knowledge to understand foreign practices they observed in films and simply imitate what they see. They claimed that without maturity, young Ethiopians were not ready for “foreign culture.” In other words this culture was not inherently negative, it was just not right for young people. Near the end of my research I presented some suggestions for solving the problem of youth unemployment at a community meeting. Many adult members of the audience responded that “the problem of youth” could not be solved without addressing underlying factors like the negative cultural messages conveyed through videos. While youth saw videos as being a temporary solution to the problem of time associated with unemployment, adults argued that unemployment was caused in part by viewing videos.

A similar discourse was common among adults regarding chat and this was occasionally expressed in the popular press as well. A quote from Dr. Nigussie, a professor at Alemaya University, in an article in the local English paper *Fortune* on the closure of chat houses in Addis Ababa is typical. Dr. Nigussie states, “No question about it khat [chat] is a stimulant, it kills work enthusiasm, wastes time, deflects the working force from productivity, shortens one’s life span, and thus it hurts the economy as a result” (Deresse 2004:3). Within this discourse, chat is the force behind unemployment and the idleness of youth. While both adults and youth used phrases like killing time in

---

<sup>11</sup> This discourse concerning foreign and local can be usefully contrasted with narratives of “bad culture,” discussed in chapter 5. In this case Ethiopian culture is positive and foreign culture represents a dangerous influence, while the narratives I discuss in chapter 5 construct Ethiopian culture as an impediment to development. This contrast illustrates the multiple ways that culture may be conceived of within a given time and space.

discussing chat, the implied meanings were very different because of contrasting conceptions of time. Adults did not express any awareness of the difficulties associated with the experience of time for urban young men, and how chat or videos may be useful in dealing with these problems. For adults killing time meant wasting time that could be devoted to productive activity. Among young men there was no assumption that time could or should be used productively. As noted above, time's lack of structure was its most salient quality and to kill time was to negotiate this lack of structure.

The reactions of young men to the closing of video houses were mixed, and reveal that a simple dichotomy between the views of adults and youth cannot be made. A few weeks after the shut down I caught up with Yonas hanging out at the "Titanic" Barber Shop, across the street from his video house. In a voice dripping with sarcasm he told me that the government radio had described the raids on video houses in Jimma and claimed that 51 *adegeñña bozeni*<sup>12</sup> had been arrested. Yonas argued that most of the youth who were arrested at his video house were around the age of twelve and posed no threat to anyone. He clearly felt the shutdown was a waste of everyone's time and looked forward to being able to reopen his business.

More surprising were some of the opinions expressed by video house customers. Many of the same young men that expressed an interest in action and pornographic films also claimed that these were a bad influence and could lead to irresponsible behavior.

Two unemployed young men in their late twenties explained:

"At video houses anyone can watch these films. It doesn't matter how old you are or what the film is. Children go to the videos and learn very bad behavior. They watch films and imitate crime and the sex from the erotic

films. The films are all right for some people but not these children. Kids skip school to watch films. Parents do not enforce the idea that some time is for films and some is for studying. There are also a lot of duriye at video houses. These people chew a lot of chat, smoke cigarettes, and do not live with their family or attend school. Young kids will learn bad behavior from these duriye.”

Other youth commented that although they missed watching films they believed the video house closure was for their own good. Consumers of chat often adopted a similar perspective, arguing that although they enjoyed chewing chat, in the long term they believed it would have negative consequences.

The contrasting perspectives surrounding chat and videos as sources of negative youth behavior are based in a differing understanding of the process of imagination. On one hand for many youth chat and videos act as a stimulus that allows them to envision desirable futures. From this perspective, imagination is an essentially creative act that facilitates one’s ability to move beyond economic constraints. In the case of sex and gender relationships, films allowed young men to think through problems they were facing concerning issues of love and money. From the other perspective the economic behavior and values associated with unemployment or delinquent behavior are directly generated by chat and videos, and there is no interaction between the individual and the stimulus. Young men were simply acting out behavior they had observed in video houses. Watching a pornographic film (referred to as “love films” or “*erotix*” by young men) would lead young men to engage in irresponsible sex and action films would cause violence.

The second perspective conceives of chat and video houses as sources of beliefs and behavior that young people are unable to control, and therefore legitimizes the intervention of the government into youth lives. This contrast cannot simply be defined in terms of generation. Young men also expressed the notion that videos may produce negative behavior in youth, but as the quote above indicates, this logic was generally applied to those who were younger than the speaker. In other words the ability to consume videos appropriately was thought to come with experience and maturity. Educated adults often used the English terms “use” and “abuse” to differentiate between different ways of consuming chat. Adult chewers felt that they were able to chew responsibly and enjoy valuable discussions during merkana, while chat fueled heavy drinking and delinquent behavior among youth.

In discussing chat and video consumption adults and to some extent young people were constructing what it meant to be a “youth.” Youth were passive receivers of information and not creators. Videos and chat acted on youth, and youth were not capable of using them for their own purposes. Related to this notion of youth was a lack of understanding regarding the problems faced by young people. The difficulties of negotiating time and one’s relationship to the future were generally not understood by adults. The same is true of students who did not yet face vast amounts of unstructured time and an unknown future. As a result it was difficult for adults to comprehend how youth were in fact using chat and videos to solve a particular problem.

The discourse surrounding chat, videos, and the problem of youth also serves to indirectly construct youth as a very narrow social category. In this discourse “youth” refers to a young underemployed urban male and is almost synonymous with duriye. In

chapter 2 I described the economic factors associated with the emergence of an extended period of one's life referred to as "youth." Controversies that surrounded chat and films created an opportunity to talk about youth and through that discourse the category has been further defined. In describing youth culture in Nepal Mark Leichty writes "In Katmandu young men are more likely to be implicated in the cultural construction of 'youth' than are women.... To say that 'youth culture' in Katmandu is largely a male experience is to underline again the fact that 'youth' is a culturally constructed category: 'youth' is a specific cultural construction not only of age but also class and gender" (2002:233-234). Jennifer Cole argues that in Madagascar youthful femininity is constructed as one of the primary qualities of youth (2004:576). Like Katmandu and Madagascar, in urban Ethiopia youth refers to more than age. In speaking of the "problem of youth" in relation to chat and video houses, specifically male activities defined the category of youth. With few exceptions young women did not chew chat or watch films<sup>13</sup>. The problems of crime or disrespectful behavior that were thought to be generated by exposure to films were not associated with women. Furthermore, the experience of time that conditioned the consumption of chat and films was particular to men, as unemployed young women did not experience unstructured time as an overly abundant quantity.

Discursive practices that addressed youth in relation to specific leisure activities, also excluded rural young people. The privilege of too much time that contributed to the interest of young men in chat and films was also a product of a relative class position associated with urban residence. Most young men born in Jimma had families who were

---

<sup>13</sup> Also similar to Leichty's study, women usually only watched films when their brothers brought videos home and shared them with the family. In Ethiopia this practice was confined to the relatively small portion of the population who had access to a DVD or video cassette player.

capable of providing them with at least minimal economic support. Especially compared with young people living in rural areas, they were better educated and possessed a social network that allowed them to exist without work for long periods of time.

Finally, there is a clear moral dynamic to discourse surrounding chat and video houses. These were activities associated with *duriye* – an intrinsically negative identity. In this sense youth was not simply an age group but a problem. Interventions like police raids of video houses were necessitated because consuming chat and videos was perceived as threatening the well being of the community. Young men did not always dispute this perception, and often accepted the notion that their behavior was problematic. Consuming films and chat were effective tools in temporarily dealing with their economic problems but many young men still felt that these activities were somehow morally reprehensible, and it was in their own interests for the government to exert control over their use of leisure time. Employment did not necessarily provide exemption from this moral discourse and the label of *duriye*. Working young men engaged in many, if not more of the same consumer activities as unemployed youth. Even worse, due to the nature of their work, working young men also had ample idle time, meaning that they were frequently in public view, sitting along side the road, chewing chat. Being a young urban male in Ethiopia brought many privileges but it also meant that one's existence was defined as a social problem. In seeking to overcome their problem of time young men inevitably engaged in activities associated with *duriye*, and this dynamic was at play in many of the struggles over status that I will examine in later chapters.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed the consumption of chat and videos among young men. I have argued that these practices were intertwined with some of the basic issues that structure youth lives. In the absence of employment, time presented its self as a potentially dangerous quantity. Chewing chat and watching videos were effective means of both using time and escaping from the stress associated with long-term unemployment. These activities provided young men with a means of thinking through the gap between their desires and economic realities. While youth used chat and videos to negotiate the problems of unstructured time and an unknown future, adults generally conceived of young people as passive consumers. In this discourse youth were acted on by videos and chat in a manner that produced negative behavior and this legitimized police raids on video houses. The discussions that surrounded the regulation of chat and video consumption contributed to the construction of youth as a category that refers specifically to urban young men, or *duriye*.

One final point is that contrary to Appadurai's conception of cultural flows, my discussion of video and chat houses draws attention to the importance of particular spaces in relation to understandings of imagination. If video houses provide a space in which youth can interact with film and imagine possible futures, this is clearly not a process in which all are free to participate. Occasionally young women did attend videos but for the most part they were occupied with household work and had restrictions placed on their movement outside the home. It would have been very shameful for a young woman and her family, if she were to be seen at a video house. It was rare for families to own VCRs

or DVD players and therefore young women had little exposure to films. It would seem that their ability to imagine possible futures through film was constrained.

It was also considered shameful for adult men to visit a video house and in this sense they were similarly constrained in their engagement with international media. The video house and the chat house were places for young men. However, while adults may have been limited in their exposure to film, this did not prevent them from directing their own imaginations towards video houses, chat, and youth. Particularly in the case of the video house, the actual space provided a site of contestation. The isolation of international culture within a specific space was key to the conflicting imaginations of adults and young men. Rather than Appadurai's notion of flows, Ferguson's (2006) discussion of isolated capital investment and extraction appears to more accurately describe the spatial dynamics of international culture in this case. Cultural goods may only be accessed within particular spaces, and that isolation often creates struggles over the right to imagine possible futures.



## Chapter 4: Aspirations, Progress, and Migration: Solving Problems of Time Through Spatial Movement

“We live like chickens, we are just eating and sleeping.” This phrase was commonly repeated to me by young men who were frustrated with their inability to achieve their aspirations. A life of “eating and sleeping” or “simply sitting” was contrasted with one that involved change or “progress<sup>1</sup>.” Living like chickens implied that life lacked meaning, simply moving here and there without any purpose besides filling one’s stomach. Ideally for young men life should have been a series of incremental improvements, but most youth saw themselves in the future living with their parents and unable to marry or start a family of their own. Even working youth often did not see their employment as a potential means of escaping their current situation, and many young men did not work because they believed available employment opportunities would not allow them to experience progress.

James Ferguson (1999, 2006) argues that the economic shifts associated with policies of neoliberalism have derailed Africans from progressive narratives of development, creating a situation in which improving one’s standard of living through linear progress is no longer possible. In other words under a regime of neoliberal capitalism the separation between experience and expectations that Koselleck (1985) associates with progress is never actualized in the form of a new and improved experience. Expectations that are different than previous experience are imagined, but they do not become a reality. As noted in chapter 1, scholars have emphasized the role of

---

<sup>1</sup> I use “progress” in place of the Amharic “*lewt*.” *Lewt* is sometimes used to refer to any type of change but in youth narratives it took on a meaning of gradual improvement over time. “*Idget*”, meaning growth, was sometimes used as well.

neoliberal economic policies, particularly structural adjustment, in creating a gap between the aspirations of youth and economic realities within an African context (Cole 2004, Hansen 2005, Howanda and De Boeck 2005, Masquelier 2005, Jua 2003, Weiss 2004a, Silberschmidt 2004). A key aspect of these studies has been a discussion of the inability of young people, particularly men, to take on the responsibilities of adults. Hansen states, “young people are not so much a ‘lost generation’ as they are a segment of the population of whom many may in fact never become an adult in a normative social and cultural sense” (2005:4). Masquelier also notes how aspirations of economic independence and marriage have become distant dreams for young people (2005:64). The inability to experience changes associated with adulthood, extends one’s existence as a youth, potentially causing what has been conceived of as a temporary stage to continue indefinitely (Cole 2005).

One’s existence as a “youth” is largely defined in terms of his or her relationship to the future. A youth is thought to be in the process of becoming something else. As this process is interrupted, progress and movement through time become key issues for young people. An analysis of these issues supports insights into the relationship between neoliberal capitalism and local cultural and economic processes. The struggle to experience progress is clearly constrained by policies associated with neoliberalism. On the other hand, a close examination of the discourses and practices of young men reveals the limits of theories of neoliberal capitalism as explanatory mechanisms.

I begin this chapter with an exploration of young men’s notions of progress. I argue that the aspirations and expectations of youth are closely intertwined with the expansion of formal education that began in the mid-twentieth century. The importance

of education in securing employment combined with the progressive nature of the education process led young men to expect progress in their own lives. This progress was often conceptualized specifically in terms of one's position within social relationships, and involved the movement from a position of dependence to providing support for others. In the absence of the ability to attain progress, young men experienced something like boredom in the sense that they were dissatisfied with the passage of time. Their experience of time provides an interesting contrast with Marxian analyses like Postone's (1993), in that an abstract notion of time appears to have been applied to social relationships rather than the process of production. Young men in urban Ethiopia sought out spatial solutions to their temporal problems, especially through international migration. I examine discourses and practices concerning migration from a number of perspectives including their relation to modernity, accessing wealth, and reconstructing one's social position. Migration was also closely related to values surrounding occupational status, an issue that I discuss in more detail in subsequent chapters. I conclude by arguing that my analysis supports a rethinking of unemployment, and the relationship between time, space, and production.

### **Narratives of Progress**

The aspirations of young men followed a general narrative that placed individual success secondary to one's relationship to family and community. Assuming that one was able to find quality employment, young men often explained that they wanted to first help their parents and siblings before starting a family of their own. Younger brothers and sisters should be supported through education in order to progress in the same

manner as one's self. Once this was accomplished young men expected to leave their parents' home, usually for the purpose of marriage. After marriage, children were thought to be a natural consequence. In keeping with the principles of good family planning, most youth expressed a desire to have only two or three children. A small number of children would be easier to educate so that they could live a better life than one's self. For most young men, after first helping one's parents and siblings, then starting his own family, the ultimate goal was to help one's community. This was often conceived of as starting an NGO or business that would help youth and create jobs.

More short-term consumer based aspirations were certainly present as well. Youth often spoke of the good life in terms of wealth and "getting the things that you want," which was defined largely in material terms with clothes being commonly mentioned as an example. However, it was also explained that this type of consumption was particular to youth. Young people were thought to have especially high levels of desire for consumer goods, but it was assumed that as they aged and took on more financial responsibilities this money would be directed away from personal expenses and towards one's family.

Unemployed young men often criticized other youth who earned regular incomes but devoted much of their money to consuming clothes, food, alcohol, and chat. I questioned a group of unemployed young men about the success of young owners of video houses who were able to dress in the latest fashions and easily visit cafes and bars. They were not impressed and argued that this type of consumption was meaningless. Although it provided certain benefits in the present, in the long-term it would not allow one to significantly change his life. After five years of hanging out and chewing chat

these youth would not have advanced to a “better place.” A similar criticism was often directed by unemployed youth towards Afwerk, a bicycle repairman. Jokes to the effect that if chat chewing and tej (honey wine) drinking were Olympic sports Afwerk would easily earn two gold medals, served to highlight the lack of success that other youth predicted for him in life. While it was debatable whether or not Afwerk earned enough money to significantly change his life, most youth were very critical of his lifestyle and argued that spending time and money on excessive chewing and drinking was simply wasting one’s life. In this sense abstract notions of progress were generally given more value than day-to-day consumption.

In contrast to a life that was not marked by significant improvements progress was perceived as good in itself. Siraj, a watch vendor, worked closely with a good friend named Mohammed. Both had migrated to Jimma from the Wolo region within the last five years, but while Siraj was from Kombulcha (a city similar in size to Jimma) Mohammed was from a rural area. Siraj often criticized Mohammed as someone who could be happy “just eating.” Mohammed was married and had two children. He earned enough money from his work to support his family in a very simple manner and he was satisfied with this. He worked, chewed chat, attended the mosque in the evenings, and then ate with his wife and children. Mohammed argued that if a person was happy with life he should not always be striving for change. Always dreaming of progress just brought stress when one had no hope of achieving his goals. Siraj countered that this was fine for someone like Mohammed who was from a rural background and was satisfied with electricity and a full stomach, but someone like himself who had been raised in the city needed to see progress in his life.

Although Siraj's comments about Mohammed were laced with humor, in some ways his stereotype accurately described the experience of a previous generation of rural-urban migrants. Ato Bashu was the father of an unemployed daughter. He lived in Kulo Berr but worked as a self-employed tailor in Mahel Ketema (see chapter 2 for a description of neighborhoods). He moved to Jimma in the 1950's at the age of ten in order to attend school. He was from the Dawro region and he lived with his brother in Jimma. He attended school until grade five and then quit for economic reasons. He gradually learned his trade by working as an assistant in a tailor's shop and eventually opened his own business. Life in the countryside had been very difficult for him. He lived a day's walk from the nearest school. Although his family was never without food, day-to-day sustenance was a constant struggle. In this sense movement to the city provided a significant and positive change in his ability to access education, work, and a more comfortable lifestyle. After establishing his business he married a woman from his birthplace and brought her to the city. He had four children. At the time of my research Ato Bashu had been the head of Mahel Ketema iddir (a burial association) for a number of years. Despite the fact that he was employed as a tailor, a traditionally stigmatized profession, he occupied a respected and powerful position within his community.

The contrast between Siraj and Ato Bashu illustrates two key points about the condition of young men in Jimma at the time of my research. The first is that they had extremely elevated desires. Like Ato Bashu, Siraj had migrated to Jimma and worked in a low status occupation. However Siraj was not satisfied with his position and frequently complained of a lack of progress in his life and spoke of a need for change and improvement. Mohammed was essentially living a similar life to Ato Bashu, but Siraj

was representative of most other young men in that he evaluated this lifestyle negatively. The young men in my study were born in the city and therefore took things like access to education, electricity, and health care for granted. These amenities were the status quo and did not constitute improvement. The second point is that as I argue through out this dissertation, the opportunity structure in urban Ethiopia was very different for the previous generations. Although children and marriage were a possibility it was very difficult to imagine someone from Siraj's generation advancing to such a respected position like that of an iddir head, if he were employed as a tailor with only a fifth grade education. Educational inflation and reduced opportunity had left an entire generation with little chance for experiencing the progress they desired.

This generation contrast was even more dramatic for women. Most of the mothers of youth in my study did not have more than an elementary education and if they were employed at all it was in extremely low status and low paid occupations like baking injera or brewing local beer. Life histories revealed that although urban life and divorce had forced many of them to work for money, employment had not formed a significant part of their childhood aspirations. Their daughters had completed secondary school and aspired to professional employment. Although some daughters did help their mothers in injera baking or brewing tella they never voiced the idea that this might be a potential career. For both young men and women the day-to-day life of work, marriage, and raising children experienced by their parents did not bring satisfaction. It was not that youth did not desire marriage or children, but they expected these processes to be qualitatively different for them than they were for their parents.

## **The Value of Education**

At the base of youth narratives of progress was the notion that education should enable one to achieve his goals. Both adults and youth often repeated the Amharic proverb, “The one who eats and learns will never fail” (*yebelana yetemare wodeko ayewodikim*), that expressed the widespread belief in the value of education. Being well fed and well educated are similar in that both provide one with the resources to withstand difficult times. In chapter 2 I explained that access to education was a virtual guarantee of government employment during the mid-twentieth century, but that with the expansion of education and changes in the urban opportunity structure the value of education had declined. Despite the apparent decrease in the utility of education in creating access to employment, the majority of young people in Jimma were still convinced that education was the key to their success. During my research I became very interested in this faith in the power of education, and in discussions I often pushed young people to differentiate between valuing education as a means to knowledge versus accessing more material goals. For the most part young people argued that it is difficult to differentiate between knowledge (“*uket*”) and wealth (“*habt*”), and that for practical purposes the two are inseparable. For example, youth explained that an engineer is someone who is thought to have a high level of knowledge, and because this knowledge is valued by society the engineer will be able to earn a large amount of money as well. Even a person who inherits wealth still must be educated, or this money will be quickly squandered. As the proverb indicates education is valued for utilitarian reasons, but it is also assumed that knowledge is always useful. Levine (1965:109) describes similar ideas among students in Addis Ababa during the early 1960’s. He explains that students, “have become



obsessively aware of the ‘value’ (*tiqem*) of further schooling, namely, as the surest way to a job that pays well.” It would appear that education as a means of obtaining work and achieving aspirations has been an established narrative in urban Ethiopia for at least the past fifty years.

At times the belief in the value of education in allowing one to improve his or her life appeared from an outside perspective to be irrational. Early in my research I conducted a series of interviews with a group of young men who worked as waiters at a medium sized restaurant/hotel. Of the three the highest level of education was grade seven and all came from other regions of Ethiopia. Their salary at the restaurant was very low and they all hoped to move on to something better in the near future. When I asked them how they expected to improve their life the answer was always the same: education. After an interview one of the young men continued to sit with me, repeatedly explaining that his only hope in life was to return to school. The hopes of these young men were very unrealistic on a number of different levels. All of them were at least eighteen years old, and returning to elementary school at that age would have been very difficult, especially given the fact that they had to work in order to support themselves. Aside from practical difficulties if they were to return to school and graduate from grade 10, the types of employment available to them would not be significantly different than their present situation. I pushed them on this issue and asked about the large number of unemployed secondary school graduates. They explained that these young men were unemployed because they failed their examination to advance to post-secondary education, but there was no sense that they might also find themselves in this situation.

The notion that education is the primary solution to achieving one's goals was voiced time and again by young men and women from a variety of different backgrounds.

My line of questioning placed my informants in a difficult position. It was probably emotionally difficult for them to acknowledge the hopelessness of their situation and education provided them with a possibility for future success. However, education was by no means the only option available to them. While it may have also been unrealistic in practice, the possibility of saving money from work in order to open a small business was no less likely than advancing through education. Achieving goals through education was a conceivable option. It was an established narrative for success and in this sense it existed while other options did not. This was interrelated with the stigmatization of available forms of work, as conceiving of success through education did not bring the stigma associated with working in a low-status profession. For young men like the service workers who were already performing low status work it would seem that their evaluation of education was not based so much on a fear of stigmatized occupations, as a general cultural milieu in which education was constructed as the primary narrative for success.

The rapid growth of private schools and colleges is good evidence of the widely held belief in the value of education. Despite the poverty faced by most Ethiopian families, money could often be scraped together to send a son or daughter to school. During an interview with Ato Uta, the father of an unemployed son and daughter, he tightened his belt as he spoke about paying for his son to attend an evening engineering program at Jimma University. At the time of the interview Ato Uta was working irregularly as a day laborer and his wife sold traditional bread, *ambesha*, at the market.

The cost of his son's education was literally taking food away from his family, but Ato Uta saw it as an investment in the future.

In Jimma one private elementary school had been established in 2002<sup>2</sup>, but for the most part private schools focused on post-secondary education. Computer schools were especially successful, but schools also existed for English, typing, hairstyling, cooking, and various other trades. One particularly successful school trained students to become teachers at private kindergartens. The owner of the school also owned at least one private kindergarten in Jimma and she was able to hire many of her first round of graduates. The apparent success of students in finding work attracted many more student/customers in subsequent years, but the job market had already become saturated.

The utility of private education in securing employment is debatable. While I knew many young people who remained unemployed after obtaining a "certificate" from a private institution, there were also some who had found work. What is clear is that parental investment in private education reveals that it was not only a primary option for achieving success, but that it was such a highly valued narrative that parents were willing to endure great personal sacrifice in order to support their children's education.

Education was conceived as the first step towards government employment and a good life, while other possible options were generally not acknowledged.

The widespread belief in the value of education created an environment in which symbols of education were taken to represent real skills and provided an advantage in

---

<sup>2</sup> Like many of the private elementary schools in Addis Ababa the quality of education at Eldan School in Jimma was excellent, and the price was high. Including transportation the monthly fee was 100 birr, nearly half the monthly salary of a day laborer or low-level government worker, but within reach of most urban professionals. Based on observations at Eldan School, I would predict that the majority of these students are able to advance to post-secondary education and access desirable employment. In this sense private education may be drastically changing the class structure in urban Ethiopia as well as the urban/rural divide.

securing employment. An interesting conversation I observed at the Hola Café (a chat house described in chapter 3) illustrates this point. An advertisement for a private school teaching cooking and furniture making sparked a heated argument among the resident chat chewers. Both cooking and furniture construction are skills typically learned through experience and one young man questioned the necessity of passing through a training program and gaining a certificate before working in these fields. He argued that experience (“*limd*”) was more important than a degree or certificate (“*wereqet*” – literally paper). The rest of the chewers quickly shot his argument down. They pointed out that all of the better hotels in Jimma hired cooks with degrees and it was generally agreed that even the traditional Ethiopian food these cooks prepared was by far the best in town. It was assumed that if the best hotels hired cooks with *wereqet*, then clearly education could provide cooking skills beyond that gained through experience. While the logic here is questionable it is clear that if education is valued by employers, it is in a person’s interests to become educated.

The notion that education leads to work not because it provides skills but because it provides a certificate is clear in the fervent obsession of students with the Ethiopian School Leaving Certificate Examination (ESLCE). This standardized exam was given to twelfth grade students beginning in the 1950’s. The highest scoring students were able to advance to post-secondary education. Levine describes protests occurring in Addis Ababa when the percentage of students failing the exam was increased to sixty in the early 1960’s (1965:110). Although the ESLCE was recently abolished, in practice it was simply replaced with another exam that is administered two years earlier, after grade 10. Essentially, the ESLCE was the test that determined if one’s twelve years of schooling

were wasted time or the first step towards government employment. During my experience teaching English in an Ethiopian secondary school as a Peace Corps Volunteer, students with little speaking ability could easily conjugate English verbs in the present perfect tense. This was a reflection of students' prioritization of preparing for the grammar portion of the ESLCE over learning English communication skills. For most students the process of education was about preparing for a test that would eventually provide them with access to government employment.

Results from the ESCLE also determined the field that a student would enter after graduation. In describing students in the early 1960's, Levine (1965) explains that many of them were uncertain about the work they would like to engage in because they were not familiar with modern urban occupations. While young people in Jimma were quite aware of the different occupations available they also had few aspirations regarding specific forms of work. They wanted "good work" or "government work." Those who had failed to pass the ESLCE wished to return to school in order to pass their exam, advance to higher education and obtain "good work." Even with knowledge of the options available to them, one's future was not conceptualized as something that could be controlled. The path to a good life was clearly defined as participating in education, passing a test, and then receiving employment.

The decrease in the value of education described in chapter 2 created a gap between one's probable life trajectory and aspirations, and the development of a situation similar to what has been described as a "diploma disease" (Dore 1976, Gould 1993) or "diploma inflation" (Bourdieu 1984:142-143). In the absence of jobs that young people believe are fitting with their educational status many youth accept extended periods of

unemployment. This is a dynamic that is common in African countries, but where a decrease in the value of education and access to government work has led youth to create opportunities in the informal sector elsewhere (Cole 2004), in Ethiopia this is not the case. While dissent was occasionally expressed, for the most part values surrounding occupational status and education appeared to be quite rigid. In the absence of jobs that young people believed are fitting with their education status urban Ethiopian youth of all class backgrounds frequently accepted extended periods of unemployment.

The expansion of education also provides a point of generational contrast that contributed to differing perceptions of time and progress. Reinhard Koselleck (1985) explains that notions of “progress” appear at a certain point in history when the relationship between experience and expectations shifts. Expectations for the future are generally based on what one has experienced in the past, but with the development of a belief in the inevitability of progress this changes. In discussing the advent of progress in Europe Koselleck explains, “What was new was that the expectations that reached out for the future became detached from all that previous experience had to offer” (1985:279). In other words progress is the expectation that the future will not be like what one has experienced in the past, and instead it will be qualitatively better. Not only has education created expectations among urban youth that they will be able to access high status government employment, but it has conditioned them to expect continual progress in their lives.

Contrasts between unemployment and life as a student are revealing. Many primary informants had completed secondary school within the past five years and remained unemployed after graduation. For these young men school was the last time

they were involved in a structured activity. One difference from unemployment is simply that school makes a person very busy and therefore eliminates the problem of passing excessive amounts of time. Possibly more significant is one's relationship to his future. As one young man who had been unemployed for two years after completing grade 12 put it, "When I was a student I had no thoughts. I learned, I studied, and I didn't worry about the future. Now I always think about the future. I don't know how long this condition will last. Maybe it will be the same year after year." As a student, time is divided into neat units, and change is experienced as linear improvement. When one advances from grade to grade it is assumed that this movement has created a change within one's self as well. The educated individual expects to be transformed so that his future will be better than the present. Unemployment is the absence of change. Days pass but one's material and social position remains the same. Long-term unemployment prevents youth from imagining a desirable future and placing their day-to-day lives within a narrative of progress.

Due to the expansion of education and urbanization, the young men I studied were far more embedded in an ideology of progress through education than previous generations. Most urban youth were the sons and daughters of parents who were raised in rural environments and did not advance beyond primary education. Despite living through a Marxist revolution that was associated with particular notions of modernity (Donham 1999b), their lack of education meant that the parents of youth in my study often did not internalize an ideology of progress as it pertained to their own lives. The mother of an unemployed young man explained that, "Today's generation is different. They are educated and they have knowledge about the world. Today they want so many

things.” In describing their life histories most parents spoke of the movement from a rural area to Jimma as a major shift in their life. Upon arriving in Jimma they generally accepted whatever work was available and were not as concerned with issues of status as their children. Parents often argued that their children’s lives should be different than their own specifically because of their higher level of education, and they were disappointed when this was not the case.

### **Progress, Relationships, and Becoming an Adult**

The particular nature of young men’s notions of progress and the manner in which their expectations have been ruptured are best described with a case study. At the time of my research Solomon was twenty-nine and had been unemployed for around three years. Like many of the unemployed young men in my study he had graduated from secondary school and therefore completed the first stage in the narrative of progress. After completing 12<sup>th</sup> grade, he spent an additional year studying mechanics at a vocational school. He was able to find work in a garage but he quit in order to pursue a government position. He did not get the government position and he did not return to the garage because the pay was too low. He still lived with his parents and his days were generally passed by visiting with friends, chewing chat, and drinking alcohol. Despite his education, Solomon was not experiencing progress and he was not happy with his life.

For Solomon the day-to-day passage of time was very similar to what I described in chapter 3. His continued dependence on his parents was an additional burden. Although living with one’s parents until marriage was common, Solomon constantly had to deal with the stress of knowing that at his age he should be helping his family instead



of the reverse. He spent as little time at home as possible. In the mornings he would leave and pass his days talking with friends and chewing chat at teahouses. At night he would return after drinking honey wine and sit quietly watching television, trying not to disturb his family. Young men in their early twenties pointed out those who were like Solomon, approaching thirty and still living at home, relying on daily handouts from their parents, as models to be avoided. This was a critique of both marital status and economic dependence.

Although I have described the emergence of a desire for progress as being specific to the current generation of youth in that it was related to urbanization and education, this does not imply that youth possessed a completely new set of values in relation to aspirations. As described in chapter 2, educated urban young men sought an established lifestyle that was associated with government employment and high status. Within this model, relationships defined success. Progress may be conceived of as a movement from dependence on one's parents to a position in which one has the ability to offer assistance to one's family and community. The situation faced by Solomon was the antithesis of progress in the sense that he was unable to move beyond a period of extended dependence.

Marriage was a key marker of becoming an adult and experiencing change within one's life. Older men who were not married were often the objects of disdain even if they were otherwise successful. The value of marriage was often noted in the exercise I conducted in which I asked youth to evaluate different fictional characters. The one character in the exercise who was married frequently received positive evaluations. Although the character was only employed as a barber, young men claimed that he would

be respected within his community. Marriage meant participating in the local iddir, having children, and essentially becoming a full adult. Regardless of all other indicators of status, marriage generally brought a certain level of respect that was otherwise unavailable to young men.

Without quality work marriage was thought to be impossible. Solomon explained to me that he wanted to marry but a person must “first pack his bags before setting out on a trip.” One cannot live with his parents and be married. He has to be able to provide money for food, rent, clothing, and all of the other expenses associated with living independently. Even before marriage, money was thought to be necessary in order to attract a potential wife. As noted in chapter 3, in general young men felt that women were only interested in a romantic partner who was capable of supporting them financially. Young men were not bitter about this, and often explained that in the current environment of poverty and unemployment it was only natural that women should seek out wealthier men.

Women on the other hand provided a different perspective. Although they certainly did not object to the possibility of a wealthy spouse – as one young woman pointed out, “the poor marrying the poor is meaningless” – young women usually claimed that they would not marry until after they had found work. This would provide “equality,” and make for a better, longer lasting relationship. Very few of the young women that I spoke to complained about the lack of wealthy marriage prospects, and they did not assume that they would eventually be supported financially by their husbands. However, given that employment prospects for young women were even bleaker than for

men, it is unclear how these women would ever have the means to move out from their parents' homes.

In addition to the difficulty of attracting a wife, hosting a formal wedding required a significant monetary investment. Weddings in urban Ethiopia had become sites for conspicuous consumption and the performance of class differences. It was not uncommon to rent out large hotels, hire musical groups, professional photographers, and numerous cars for transporting guests. On his own initiative Solomon once wrote for me what was basically a rant concerning marriage and money. Money was necessary to attract a wife and then a wedding was also very expensive. All neighbors had to be invited to a lavish feast in order to avoid gossip or "backbiting." In the end unless a person was wealthy, marriage was impossible.

The notion that nearly insurmountable financial barriers prevented them from dating, marrying, and having children was very common among young men. They often claimed that they would not marry before the age of thirty or thirty-five and then only if they had become wealthy. Children were seen as a natural and desirable result of marriage – the next step in youth narratives of progress - and the financial burden of raising children was an additional factor preventing young men from achieving their aspirations. To simply raise children did not involve any great costs, but most young men desired a future for their children that would be better than their own. As Kebede, an unemployed young man who first explained to me that he would not accept available forms of work like carpentry or waiting tables because they would not allow him to change his life, put it:

“Without something big [a source of money] I won’t even think about marriage or children. Even if I am rich I will never have more than two children. With two kids I can educate them properly so that they can reach the university. If they don’t reach the university I will send them to America. Of course I could get a job and have children now. Even if I was only making 100 birr a month I could feed them *shuro*<sup>3</sup>, but that kind of life is not good for children. They will not learn properly and they will end up shining shoes or something like that. You want your children to have a better life than yourself. You want them to improve and have a good life.”

A similar perspective comes from a young man who earned money by making and selling sandals made of tires but continued to live with his parents:

“I don’t want to marry unless I have a different type work. I need something different before I try to start a family, but once I arrange my own life I definitely want a family. I only want two children. In the past people have just been having kids without saving money or thinking about the future. In my neighborhood, kids are everywhere. This is fine if you have a big compound but in my neighborhood there are no compounds, all of the houses are packed in together. People sleep three or four to a bed. At my house we all sleep in one room. We all come home at night and watch TV and then when the programming ends at 10 or 11pm, we turn off the TV and go to sleep. If you want to stay up and study you can’t

---

<sup>3</sup> *Shuro* is a spicy chick pea paste that is a popular dish with most Ethiopians, and generally eaten daily by poor families.

because there is only one light for one room and you can't keep everyone else awake. Then in the morning we all wake up at the same time.

Everyone in my neighborhood is like this.”

In these statements education and small families<sup>4</sup> are contrasted with symbols of lower class urban life like shuro and sharing rooms, in order to construct different future trajectories. One is based on repeating what were seen as the mistakes of one's parents, while in the other it is assumed that fewer children would allow a heavy investment in education, and open up more opportunities for higher learning and desirable employment. The notion that education and smaller families should lead to modernization and progress resonates with a discourse of development (Escobar 1995, Karp 2002) that youth were regularly exposed to through school and government mass media. Smaller families and education as means to realizing this goal were development based strategies, and the desire to progress was contrasted with previous generations who had been satisfied simply getting by and raising children (“living like chickens”).

While the aspirations of young men were closely linked with development, in a context where attaining progress was difficult youth behaviors were not necessarily what one would normally consider to be desirable outcomes from a development based perspective. The underlying problem here was that the smooth transition between education and government employment had been ruptured. Returning to the case of Solomon, like many young men he was capable of finding employment. Particularly

---

<sup>4</sup> It is interesting to note that fertility rates in urban Ethiopia have dropped dramatically in recent years, to the point that they are below replacement levels in Addis Ababa (Kinfu 2000). The common explanation for this decline is that increased education and empowerment of women, combined with increased availability of contraceptives has caused more women to delay marriage and childbirth. Like Bledsoe (2000), my study indicates that attention must also be given to the roles of economic decline and the desires of young men surrounding child birth in order to understand falling fertility rates.

with his technical education in auto mechanics, he could have found work in a garage. However, garage work would not have allowed him to fulfill his particularly urban Ethiopian notions of progress and success. Furthermore, as I discuss in more detail in subsequent chapters, social pressure prevented young men from accepting employment in low-status occupations. The cases of Mohammed and other young, married workers with children demonstrate that starting a family was possible, but it was not simply a family that Solomon and other young men desired. It was a family in which his children would lead modern progressive lives that involved more than “eating and sleeping.” As I explain in more detail in later chapters, aspirations also centered on valued government employment. Progress was defined in terms of the types of relationships that one developed with others. To lead a progressive life was to avoid the undesirable relationships associated with low-status occupations, move from a position of dependence to one of support in relation to others, and offer one’s dependents the chance to lead similar progressive lives. As achieving these relationships was felt to be impossible, Solomon and many others elected to remain unemployed.

### **Progress, Time, and Boredom**

The experience of time among unemployed young men has interesting parallels to Elizabeth Goodstein’s (2004) discussion of the emergence of a discourse of boredom in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe. Goodstein argues that progress, as it is described by Koselleck (1985), “constitutes the condition of possibility for modern boredom” (2004:122-123). In Goodstein’s analysis the production of boredom is based on the existence of a notion of progress similar to what I have described above in which the future is expected to be

different and better than the past. This is combined with a sense that the actual reality of life is not equal to what one had imagined. Boredom is not only the feeling that one has too much time, but that that time is not meaningful because it is not passed in the progressive manner that one has come to expect.

The problem of time for unemployed young men in Jimma is that they are unable to actualize their expectations of progress. In this disjuncture, unstructured time in which young men experience their lack of progress most acutely is spoken of as a source of stress and unease in the manner detailed in chapter 3. However, unlike Goodstein's discussion of western discourse on boredom there is no sense that "the subject both registers and rebels against the regulation of lived, subjective time by the inhuman demands of technological progress" (2004:124). Goodstein links the emergence of boredom with romanticism and an intense desire for meaning that often valorized the experience of the individual. The Ethiopian case is different in two important ways. First, rather than being overwhelmed by technology so that a sense of individual humanity is lost within waves of progress, in Ethiopia there is simply a lack of progress. It is not just that progress is not occurring in the utopian manner that one imagined, but that progress is not occurring at all. Second, a notion of romantic individualism is very far from the experience of unemployed youth. As I will describe in relation to occupational status in the following chapters, young men sought to conform to traditional norms for social relationships. Unease and frustration with an abundance of unstructured time were not based in romantic visions of the self, but in an inability to experience progress in the form of desirable social relations with others. Ethiopian boredom<sup>5</sup> is the

---

<sup>5</sup> Young men often used the Amharic term "*debirt*" to describe their condition. *Debirt* is close in meaning to depression. Both the sight of a person suffering from a physical injury and a day

combination of unstructured time and an unfulfilled desire for a self that is constructed through social relationships. Employment is the barrier to the construction of relationships that would alleviate the stress of unstructured time, and therefore the problems of time and youth unemployment are inseparable.

The interrelationship between unstructured time, work, and social relationships is illustrated in the following parable told to me by a young man. An Ethiopian was resting under a mango tree. A *ferenj*<sup>6</sup> approached the Ethiopian and suggested that he gather up all of the mangos and sell them in the market. The Ethiopian did this and made a large amount of money. He found the *ferenj* and asked him what he should do with all of the money that he made. The *ferenj* advised him to take his money and go on a vacation and relax.

The obvious interpretation of this story is that it questions the need to work in order to access leisure when it is already possessed in abundance. However, if this story is placed in the context of local conceptions of occupational status then the interpretation changes. From an Ethiopian perspective the absurdity of the western contrast between work and leisure is that it divides activities into the categories of productive and non-productive without regard for their implications for constructing social relationships. Bourdieu (1979) describes a similar dynamic in the context of the development of a market economy in Algeria. In that case, work was appreciated less as a means of reaching an economic goal than conforming to the value of industriousness. For the young men in my study, decisions regarding employment were based primarily on how

---

spent alone with nothing to do could be described with the adjective form of *debirt*, but the term is more likely to be applied in the case of the latter.

<sup>6</sup> Although the term *ferenj* literally translates as “foreigner” in practice it is not used in reference to Africans of a non-Ethiopian nationality. In most cases a *ferenj* is of European or sometimes Asian descent.



working or not working would shift the manner in which they related to others. Youth sought government work in order to transform themselves from one who gives rather than receives support. At the same time available work was often declined because it did not offer the potential for one to experience progress in his social relationships. In this sense work is not evaluated simply on the basis of what one receives in exchange for a particular quantity of labor, but in terms of how the performance of that work allows him to reposition himself in relation to his future.

If work is measured in terms of relationships, then relationships are measured in terms of an abstract notion of time. In his Marxian analysis of time and labor Postone (1993:200-216) explains that within capitalism time becomes an independent rather than a dependent variable. In classic anthropological analyses of time in non-capitalist societies like Evans-Pritchard's *The Nuer*, time is measured on the basis of seasonal changes in nature or daily activities, and in this sense time does not exist independently. Postone argues that with the advent of capitalist production, time is increasingly abstracted and measured in terms (i.e. hours or minutes) that do not reference human activities. E.P. Thompson (1967) has described in vivid detail the process by which notions of time change with industrialization and the spread of wage labor. Time is no longer measured in terms of tasks, rather the reverse is true and tasks are quantified on the basis of the abstract time they require to be completed and the monetary value of that time.

In the case at hand it seems that time is also functioning as an independent variable. Unemployed young men conceive of progress and the passing of time independently of human activity, and activities are assessed based on this abstract notion

of time. However, even in the case of work, activities are generally not quantified in terms of production. Instead activities are assessed on the basis of their ability to shift one's relationship with others. Time is taken as a measure of human activity but it is used to measure and quantify relationships rather than labor. Ethiopian young men experience their unstructured time as a potentially dangerous quantity because it does not match their progressive expectations, in which they are able to achieve linear improvement in their relative social position with the passage of time. Stress is generated for youth not because of a lack of productivity, but because their social relations are not changing in accordance with an abstract notion of time.

### **Migration and Spatial Fixes to Temporal Problems**

Many young men believed that their interrelated temporal problems could be addressed with the spatial solution of migration, preferably to the United States or Europe. In the narratives of young men time was experienced differently outside of Ethiopia. As one unemployed young man in his late 20's put it, "I can do more in six months in America than I can in five years in Ethiopia. In America there is progress." The rise of the Diversity Visa (DV) Lottery as a means of experiencing change or progress represents the transition from temporal to spatial strategies for attaining one's aspirations. Although few American born US citizens know about the annual DV Lottery, it is eagerly anticipated in much of the world. Every year 50,000 winners from countries around the world are selected to receive a United States visa. In order to be a DV applicant, one must be a secondary school graduate, have a sponsor in the United States (someone who will provide initial support), and a job skill. Many Ethiopians who

have entered the US in the last ten years have a family member with a Diversity Visa, or won a lottery themselves. Although Ethiopia receives a relatively high number of Diversity Visas<sup>7</sup>, the roughly 4000 winners who migrate to the United States every year via the lottery are a small fraction of those who enter the lottery. For most, the lottery is a dream that takes the place of working locally and participating in a temporal narrative of becoming.

Winning the DV Lottery does not fit into a larger narrative of progress. Unlike education, one does not win the DV Lottery because he or she has followed a set of rules for development, or passed through a series of stages. It simply happens or it does not, according to chance. Access to technology, wealth, and the prestige of living in the United States is acquired not through disciplining one's self in order to advance from education to employment, but through good luck. In the absence of a temporal process of *becoming* the DV Lottery is a spatial strategy that instantly allows one to *be* modern.

Fitting with the lottery, youth narratives often constructed migration as facilitating a transformation of identity. The notion that migration and the appropriation of stylistic practices (particularly fashion) may allow a recreation of one's identity has been effectively explored in other studies of urban youth in Africa (De Boek 1999, Friedman 1994, Hansen 2000, Gondola 1999, MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000, Newell 2005). In relation to the Congolese subculture of la Sape, Gondola (1999) writes that "popular culture allows African urban youth to build a dreamlike order, otherwise unreachable" (24), and "the sapeur does not dress like a CEO to imitate the CEO. He is a

---

<sup>7</sup> For the 2006 DV Lottery, 6,995 Ethiopians were finalists, more than any other country in the world. Of these approximately two-thirds will actually receive visas. An obsession with the DV Lottery is not unique to Ethiopia and Piot (2005) has described economic networks surrounding brokers arranging false marriages for DV winners in Togo.

CEO" (32). Newell (2005) extends this analysis of popular culture and argues that migration is also a form of consumption. Migration is in part a symbolic process that allows the traveler to accumulate cultural capital through an association with “modern” or “developed” world areas. In conceiving of migration as a symbolic act, one’s identity is transformed through association with place without personally undergoing a temporal process of becoming.

During an afternoon that I spent with Habtamu and his friends as they chewed chat and talked, Habtamu told me about a dream he had the night before. “I was in New York City at an amazing club. We were dancing and drinking and it was wonderful. Jennifer [Lopez] was singing. You were there too. I didn’t want to wake up.” As I have explained elsewhere (Mains 2004b), “dreaming” about life in America was also a common activity among young men during the day as they chewed chat and talked. Hours were spent talking about different cities, speculating about life there, and the possibility of meeting different celebrities. From Ethiopia this lifestyle can only be dreamed of, but if one wins the DV Lottery this dream becomes a reality.

Actually moving to this world that was usually accessed only through dreams was believed to cause an internal transformation in one’s self. That same afternoon one of Habtamu’s friends showed me “before and after” photographs of his brother – one before his departure for America and one after. The difference was not immediately apparent to me, but he explained, “Of course he has become fat, but the really beautiful thing is his skin. His skin glows. Before he was old and starving but now in America he is young and healthy.” According to these young men America is a land where there are no beggars, everyone is fat, and people pay the equivalent of half a month’s salary for a low-

level Ethiopian government worker, in order to have their dogs washed. In response to my attempts to provide a more complete picture of life in the United States Habtamu shouted, "Listen Danny, the life of dog in America is better than a human in Ethiopia!"

In discussing western pop culture and comparing Ethiopia to the US young men were defining their own lives in terms of absence - the absence of entertainment, the absence of health, and the absence of modernity. These narratives are similar to Charles Piot's (2005) notion of "living in exile" within one's own country. To migrate was to transform one's self completely and access the life that one deserved. It is interesting that like the statement "we live like chickens," the comparison with the life of a dog implies that there is something not quite human about life in Ethiopia. One cannot really be a full person without leaving the country.

In seeking to migrate to America, young men were attempting to access qualities of place associated with an imagined lifestyle. The United States had certain symbolic qualities and young men sought *being*, or instant transformation, through association with those qualities. In order to solve the problem of over accumulation, late capitalism depends on the production of signs in a manner that generates qualitatively different opportunities to consume (Baudrillard 1981; Harvey 1990:287). Like Newell's discussion of youth in Cote d'Ivoire (2005), the semiotic processes that some Ethiopian youth narratives of migration depended on, functioned in a similar manner to the consumption of symbols that is associated with a late capitalist economy. To migrate or to appropriate western goods was to reference place in a manner that allowed one to instantly be modern.

In their discussion of the symbolic manipulations of the spectacular subculture of la sape, MacGaffey and Bazenguissa draw attention to the potential for subverting power relationships that exists in relation to these practices. “They [sapeurs] have created their own world with its own status and value system and its own scale of achievement and satisfaction, and they have rejected the values of a system that has excluded and marginalized them” (2000:157). In other words referencing other places through stylistic practices enables youth to transgress the economic constraints that they are faced with, thus reconstructing relations of power. Although a specific argument regarding power relations is not necessarily made, other discussions of consumer practices among African youth have argued that identities constructed through consumption serve to place youth in a different and perhaps better world (Masquelier 2005, Weiss 2002). I do not dispute the transformative potential of discourses and practices that are associated with consumption and referencing other places. Analyses of these practices reveal that they are potentially liberating for dominated groups and individuals. However, this type of analysis does not address power relations associated with lived social relationships and economic stratification. Knowing that youth create their own world does not bring us any closer to understanding the productive or social inequalities that may exist in that world.

James Ferguson (2006) offers a similar critique of “alternative” or “African” modernities. Ferguson explains that anthropological analyses of modernity have tended to examine locally specific modernities that emerge within different spaces. While Ferguson acknowledges the insights that these analyses provide he also notes that they are “a happy story about plurality and non-ranked cultural difference,” that neglects “relatively fixed global statuses and a detemporalized world socioeconomic hierarchy”

(2006:192). In other words while sapeurs may employ stylistic practices to excel in a specifically urban Congolese form of modernity, this does not change their subjugated position within a global economic hierarchy. Ferguson makes the same argument that I develop above in relation to the DV Lottery, that when economic changes prevent progress or development through time, difference is mapped onto space. This spatial difference becomes more or less fixed, meaning that individuals may only access progress through movement.

While I believe Ferguson offers a powerful argument for giving more attention to global socioeconomic hierarchies in relation to analyses of modernity, I do have two minor qualifications. First, in Jimma I did not find that my informants saw themselves “not as ‘less developed’ but simply as less” (Ferguson 2006:189). While young men clearly felt that Ethiopia was “backwards “(*hwalaker*) they did not transpose this evaluation onto themselves. As the narratives surrounding migration described in this chapter indicate, it was thought that one’s personal relationship to modernity could be overcome with spatial movement. Second, Ferguson’s argument is based primarily on the implications of neoliberalism for Africa. It is this macro-level perspective that leads him to conceive of the current situation in Africa as being characterized by a prioritization of space over time. While this is certainly an important insight, my research indicates that the problem of experiencing progress through time was closely related to local values surrounding occupation and status. Ferguson’s insightful analysis may be complemented with a close examination of local conditions. In the sections that follow I describe the importance of migration for repositioning oneself within social relations. Like space and time, social relations and their relative importance for

economic stratification are key for understanding the place of urban Ethiopia within a global economy.

### **Migration and Social Relations**

While narratives surrounding migration did reflect a desire to transform one's self through symbolic association with particular qualities of place, they were also concerned with repositioning one's self in relation to family and community. During the course of my research Solomon became so frustrated with his inability to progress that he left Jimma to go to the Gambella region, near the Sudan border, where it was rumored that well paid work could be had on a Chinese oil-drilling project. Although Gambella was very unstable at the time and outbreaks of violence were common Solomon explained that it was better to die there instead of just waiting for death in Jimma. This way at least a good story would be told about him, but staying in Jimma would be to continue a life that lacked meaning.

Solomon's case reflects the manner in which the aspirations and consequent economic behavior of young men were related to a desire to reposition one's self socially. Solomon had some practical experience and technical education, and he was capable of working in a garage. However as he explained, marriage, supporting a family, and experiencing progress required far more money than he could access through this type of work. Therefore he chose to migrate in order to transform his life from simply passing day after day without change, to one that involved improvement in his relationship with his parents and community. Solomon's example is perhaps a little extreme in that he actually chose to leave Jimma in search of work. While most men did not actually leave,



in their narratives migration was often a solution to the problem of fulfilling one's aspirations regarding family and community. The desire to leave Ethiopia was nearly universal, and the plan to return was almost as common. Youth spoke about sending money home while they were abroad and then eventually returning with enough resources to raise a family and start a business or development project that would benefit the community. Young men claimed that before marriage they first needed to help their parents and siblings. Once one's immediate family was in a good situation one could start a family of one's own. This aspiration may be contrasted with the actual situation in which young men were dependent on parents and family members for meals, spending money, and a place to sleep.

The notion that migration enabled one to access the resources necessary to change one's relationship with his community was based largely on almost mythic stories about Ethiopians living abroad. One such story comes from an unemployed young man who had completed secondary school but failed the matriculation exam to advance to the post-secondary level. During the Marxist "Derg" regime a friend of his family received a low exam result and was not able to advance to the university. A friend in America wrote letters and did everything necessary to get him a visa. In the States he worked at small jobs and took classes on piloting airplanes. In time he was able to get a pilot's license, return to Ethiopia and buy two airplanes. He currently runs a successful business in Ethiopia and he supports his entire family. The young storyteller emphasized that travel to America was essential for this man's success. There is no opportunity to study airplanes in Ethiopia. In Ethiopia failing ones matriculation exam closed off all

possibilities for a successful future, but migration to America enabled opportunity and success that could eventually be brought home.

In contrast to being modern through the symbolic transformation described above, in these narratives spatial movement allowed young men to reenter linear processes of progress through time. Instead of taking the place of a temporal process, spatial movement facilitates progress. Migration enables one to engage in the process of education and reposition one's self within local social relationships. The narrative of progress that was fractured with the failure to find employment after leaving school is reconstructed.

These stories were reinforced by the easily observed accomplishments of those who had left the country. At the time of my research an Ethiopian American was building a new hotel that would eventually be the tallest (four stories) building in Jimma outside of the university. I sometimes pushed youth on the notion that progress could only be accessed abroad and brought up examples of successful businessmen in Jimma who had begun as shoe shiners. They would acknowledge that this had been possible in the past, but claimed that today working at small jobs no longer brought the opportunity for progress. Quite simply, progress could not be had without spatial change.

This attitude was based partially on a conception of the west as a place that was far more open in terms of opportunity, and partially on a raw economic calculus. Ahmed, an unemployed young man, once explained to me that if he had 30,000 birr he would not invest it in a business in Ethiopia. Instead he would use the money to travel abroad. Once he was abroad he would work sixteen hours a day at different jobs and quickly reap a great profit from the money he had invested in migration. Young people were quite

aware of the exchange rate between dollars and birr (around 8.5 birr to one dollar at the time of my research), and that in America workers were paid by the hour, not by the day. Youth frequently said that they wanted to work two jobs or simply “24 hours a day” once they were out of Ethiopia.

Both the narratives and practices of changing social relationships through migration were highly gendered. In practice young women were far more likely to leave Ethiopia than any other population group. Most of these young women traveled to the Middle East<sup>8</sup> where they worked primarily as domestic servants. Salaries for domestic servants appeared to be a standard 100 USD/month plus room and board. Although workers sometimes had to pay their employers back for the price of transportation in most cases they were able to consistently send money home. In some cases young women would return home after completing a two-year contract and in others they would continually renew their contract with the apparent intent to stay in the Middle East indefinitely.

Unlike travel to the US or Europe, working in the Middle East was a realistic possibility for many urban young women. Young women on the spatial or economic periphery of the city had more difficulty contacting potential employers, but with persistence it is likely that they could have found work. More opportunities were available for Muslim women, but Christians could certainly find work as well. The primary factor preventing young women from seeking work in the Middle East was the potential for abusive (sexually, physically, and mentally) relationships with their employers. Some women reported very positive relationships with their employers, but

---

<sup>8</sup> The Middle East was referred to as “*Arab hager*” (“Arab country”) and the most common destinations for migration appeared to have been Saudi Arabia, Dubai, and Lebanon.

one never knew the character of the family she would be working for until arrival and abuse was always a serious risk.

Domestic work in the Middle East had a very different role than travel to the US or Europe in terms of reconstructing the social position of young people. The money earned provided a significant amount of support for one's family while the young woman was abroad<sup>9</sup>. Together with the household work that women freely provided at home, support from those who worked internationally meant that unemployed young women were essential for the reproduction of the household. However money earned as a domestic worker was generally not adequate for saving and after returning to their families many young women entered a state of extended unemployment. Temporarily earning an income and supporting one's family provided a sense of independence that made unemployment particularly difficult.

I often asked young men why they did not pursue work in the Middle East. They explained that differences between men and women made it impossible. Workers in the Middle East were expected to be very submissive and work within the house, and men are not capable of doing this. It was explained to me that men need to "wander around" and this would not be permitted. The low income earned by workers in the Middle East was also a factor. While 100 USD/month was more than any of my primary informants were likely to earn in Ethiopia it was still not adequate for accessing the types of change they hoped migration would bring them. Even among pious Muslims, whose cultural and spiritual centers were found in the Middle East, migration to the west was desirable for economic reasons.

---

<sup>9</sup> In some cases unemployed young men were supported by their sisters who labored in the Middle East. Unfortunately I do not have adequate data to determine if this was a common pattern.

Young men constructed a loose hierarchy of space based on the potential for shifting one's social position. On one occasion a young man who I did not know well joined the group of unemployed youth who normally gathered in the shade of Haile's house in Qottebe Seffer to chew chat in the afternoons. He showed the group a receipt for 22,000 birr and explained that it was for costs associated with a trip to Saudi Arabia that he would make the following week. This immediately became our topic of discussion. Everyone agreed that while a trip to Saudi may be lucrative, the money would have been far better invested on transportation to South Africa. A friend of theirs who had recently migrated to South Africa sent his family 5,000 birr yearly, which seemed to be more than one could hope to send from the Middle East. While South Africa was a good option one young man pointed out that America was by far the best option. He claimed that one could do more for his family in one year in America than he could in ten years in South Africa.

Young men sought out spaces that would allow them to fulfill local notions of what it meant to be an adult. Although the personal transformation into a modern individual described in the preceding section was an important element of youth narratives it was secondary to the reconstruction of one's social position. Young men were not simply attempting to reference a lifestyle. They sought to solve their temporal problem of becoming, or progressing, with the spatial solution of migration. In this situation the qualities of space and the experience of time were embedded in social relationships. Young men were using the distinctive qualities of space to navigate through a shattered temporal process in order to reach a goal that was determined largely by relationships with family and community.

In practice this process never occurred as smoothly as young men envisioned. Solomon is the best letter writer of my youth informants and I have been fortunate to receive regular reports from him. After moving to Gambela he spent a month waiting for work at a Chinese run oil-drilling project. Once again dealing with the problem of excessive time, but with no friends to provide companionship he described long days of anxiously waiting for something that might not arrive. Eventually Solomon was hired as a guard, a dangerous job in the politically unstable territory surrounding the Sudan/Ethiopia border. The work was temporary and when the job finished he returned to Jimma. If the money he earned had changed his standing locally he did not mention it in his letters. Solomon writes (in English), “Here in Jimma the things are going to the same ways. Young people just like me who that jobless, each day, morning and afternoon going to chewing chat [at] every small coffee or tea shop. In this ceremony someone think about himself, ‘how to get the job,’ another one think about ‘how to get the satisfaction in my life,’ and somebody with another doing investigation about his country, ‘why our country is backward? How to developed?’ In my side everything is difficult for the future because I haven’t job. So always chewing chat. Maybe I will go to Gambela. If the company call for me I will go there. If they are not call I don’t know what I do.”

### **Occupational Status and Migration**

Spatial movement was thought to enable the accumulation of wealth in a manner that would allow the reconstruction of one’s relationship with family and community, but migration and progress were intertwined with social relationships in an additional and

possibly more powerful manner. By physically separating oneself from his community, migration allowed a temporary escape from stigmas associated with occupation and in this sense provided the mental freedom necessary to work. In general the west, and the United States in particular, was conceived of as a space in which social freedom was possible. One vocational student with a particularly strong interest in travel abroad explained, “In Ethiopia there is *yiluññta*<sup>10</sup>. We are not free here. In America I would do so many things. I like to play sports but in Ethiopia I cannot wear shorts. People will talk and insult me. In America I could wear shorts. I would be free to do whatever I wanted.”

While the example of feeling free to wear shorts may seem trivial, it illustrates the overwhelming social pressure to conform experienced by many young people. Spatial movement was conceived of as the only means of escaping from this pressure, and in relation to narratives of progress social concerns surrounding low status occupations were of particular importance. The notion that migrants left Ethiopia in part to escape stigmas surrounding particular occupations was very common. A popular Amharic newspaper published a weekly article titled “Our People in America.” The article was written by an Ethiopian journalist who had traveled in the US interviewing different Ethiopian Americans. One of the common themes in these interviews was that no one wanted to speak about their occupation and it was considered impolite to ask. The anonymity of urban America made it possible to work without concern regarding how this might affect one’s social relationships. The newspaper article was widely read by educated urban Ethiopians and there was a general understanding that Ethiopian Americans worked in

---

<sup>10</sup> As noted in chapter 1, to have *yiluññta* was to experience an intense shame based on what others were thinking and saying about one’s self and family (see Poluha 2004: 147). *Yiluññta* and its relationship with occupational status are described in more detail in chapters 5 & 6.

occupations that would not have been acceptable at home, but the spatial distance prevented local stigmas from becoming an issue.

The following quotes from young people illustrate the relationship between occupational status and a desire to migrate.

From a group of unemployed young men:

“We would never work as a porter here. There is *yiluññita* here and that kind of work is not respected. People will shout orders at you and you are expected to obey. If we go abroad we can work without being insulted. We don’t care about seeing other countries, but we want to be free to work and help our families.”

From a group of vocational students:

“Everyone wants to go to leave Ethiopia. This is because work is not appreciated here (*“sira yinaka!”*). A person who does street work like shining shoes and washing cars will be insulted, especially if they are educated. They won’t be accepted by society. My father has a friend who works in South Africa selling socks on the street. He is an adult with a good education. Someone like him would never do this in Ethiopia. Of course he can make more money in South Africa, but also there is no *yiluññita* there. An educated person like my father’s friend will be insulted here and he may have to fight.

From a different group of vocational students:

Student 1: “The best reason for leaving Ethiopia is to work and make money, but *yiluññita* is also important. A shoeshine can make fifteen or



twenty birr a day. This is good money but they will be insulted. If I have to do this kind of work I would have to go to a new city first.”

Student 2: “I want to work part-time while I am a student but there is yilugnta. Even if they don’t insult you they won’t respect you, they will order you around, and no one wants to be known as a shoeshine.”

Student 3: “I’ve seen in movies that comedians make money telling jokes on the street in America but you can’t do this in Ethiopia.”

Migration within Ethiopia was also common. Siraj left his home in Kombulcha largely because he knew that occupational stigmas would prevent him from ever working. Choosing to live without the support of family or friends was no small sacrifice to make. A different young man from the Wolo region left his rural home and worked as a waiter in Jimma. He explained that he had moved so far (two to three days by bus) in order to avoid shaming himself in front of family and friends. Unlike Siraj he did not have even a minimal social support structure in Jimma. At one point during my research the room he rented was robbed, he lost all of his possessions, and he had no one to turn to for aid. Despite these hardships he felt he had made the right decision by leaving his home.

The shame of working in a low status occupation was entirely social. If one was surrounded by strangers then the stress of yiluñña was forgotten. I have argued above that the choice to migrate instead of working locally was motivated by a desire to experience progress in one’s social relationships but that is only a partial explanation. In some cases working locally would have been an option for achieving one’s goals, but

social pressure prevented youth from doing so. In this sense spatial movement as a solution to problems of time was embedded in local values concerning occupation. Local culture norms were experienced as barriers to one's aspirations for progress, and it was only by temporarily escaping those norms that one could return and reenter one's community with a different and more desirable social position. Factors such as the rise of education combined with a decline in government employment were also important in preventing young men from achieving aspirations, but these factors were inseparable from *yiluññita*. It was not simply a difference in the qualities of space in relation to being modern that motivated migration, but a difference in the types of social relationships that were thought to exist within those spaces.

Youth discourse surrounding migration and *yiluññita* indicate that a fundamental quality that allows spatial movement to solve problems of time is a shift in the manner that productive activity is evaluated. Within Ethiopia work is evaluated primarily in terms of how it allows one to interact with others. Outside of Ethiopia work is essentially the exchange of one's labor power and time for wages. For unemployed young men, progress in terms of one's position within relationships at home is achieved by moving to a space in which work is not assessed in terms of relationships. The choice to work as a taxi-driver in the United States is based not on the interactions that are associated with that occupation, but on the possibility of earning money. This is not to say that working outside of Ethiopia is divorced from *yiluññita* and social relationships. Money earned elsewhere is usually invested in Ethiopia, and work and time in Ethiopia continue to be evaluated in terms of relationships. However, the government employment that previously allowed one to simultaneously work and engage in positive relations is no

longer a realistic possibility within Ethiopia. This has led young men to conceive of the construction of positive relationships as being possible only by moving to a space where work and time function differently.

The interrelationship between work, time, social relationships, and spatial movement did not only exist in relation to yiluñña. It was often commented that the heightened importance of social relationships in Ethiopia prevented economic development. Near the end of my research, a friend won a Diversity Visa and was able to move from Jimma to Oakland, California and I have been fortunate to see him regularly while writing my dissertation. He noted that the exchange rate works for both dollars and visits with friends. For one US dollar you can get nearly nine Ethiopian birr and for one meeting with friends in the US you would see them nine times in Ethiopia. In youth discussions it was common to draw this same comparison between social life and economic development. This discourse was concerned more with the time that was invested into social relations than reciprocity or the social pressure to redistribute wealth. This was a topic that Habtamu and his friends would sometimes dwell on during their daily chat chewing sessions. They argued that as economic development increased, social relations decreased. They cited the continuum from rural Ethiopia<sup>11</sup> to Jimma to Addis Ababa to the United States, as evidence. With each step technology and economic activity increased, and it was less likely that one would know his neighbors or spend time talking and socializing. They drew the conclusion that if development is impeded by time devoted to social interaction, then social life must be reduced in order to foster development.

---

<sup>11</sup> This continuum is flawed in that despite technological differences, at least among young men, in rural Ethiopia more time is spent working and less socializing in comparison to urban Ethiopia.

Similar to *yiluññita*, a distinct culture surrounding social relationships was thought to be present in Ethiopia. While this culture was not necessarily evaluated negatively, it was definitely thought to impede economic progress. Young men conceived of culture as being bounded by space, and therefore movement outside of Ethiopia provided a potential escape. Human interactions shift in the same way that economic currency changes when a national border is crossed. If currencies can be manipulated for economic gain, then the same should be true of social relations. A shift in social relationships is essential because they are conceived of as being inextricable from time. It is only by simultaneously repositioning one's self in terms of time and social relationships that one can engage in the economic processes associated with progress.

### **Conclusion**

The behavior of urban young men may be conceptualized in terms of different temporal and spatial strategies and problems. Problems associated with an inability to progress and an overabundance of unstructured time were sometimes negotiated through the manipulation of the meanings attached to different spaces. In this case consumption and migration may be partially conceived of as symbolic practices that enable an instant change in identity. Young men's narratives also constructed migration as an activity that enables one to reengage in processes of progress. In theory, spatial movement allowed the gap between education and employment to be bridged so that it was possible to reposition one's self within local social relations. While the problems and strategies of young men were related to the structural adjustment and uneven investment associated with neoliberal capitalism, they were also inseparable from local values concerning work

and status. Yiluñña prevented youth from seeking to progress through working locally and often led to migration.

Yiluñña also highlights the importance of social relationships. In the case of urban Ethiopia (and possibly elsewhere in Africa) recent cultural and economic shifts are best conceived of in terms of a combination of the social, spatial, and temporal. This chapter establishes some of the groundwork for the analysis of local stratification that will take place in the following chapters. The particular aspirations of young men and the possibilities that they envisioned for fulfilling these aspirations conditioned their economic and social behavior. Young men who experienced yiluñña most acutely felt that to work locally would undermine the quality of their relationships with family and community. In this sense migration, both in discourse and practice, was also an investment in relationships<sup>12</sup>. While working young men also voiced interest in leaving Ethiopia their actions reveal that in practice they were willing to work at low status occupations and accept qualitatively different relationships.

The importance of social relationships for conceptions of time and space highlights the significance of status. Based on my analysis in this chapter it is evident that while notions of progress among young men have been influenced by the expansion of education, exposure to western media, and discourses of development, progress is still largely conceived of in terms of repositioning oneself within social relationships. At the same time anxieties concerning the judgments of others are at the heart of youth spatial strategies for achieving their aspirations. Returning to my goal of developing an

---

<sup>12</sup> It is interesting that where analyses like MacGaffey and Bazenguissa (2000) have constructed youth stylistic practices as subcultural in the sense that they contravened local norms, among urban young men in Ethiopia those who adopted spatial narratives were in fact supporting widely shared values concerning occupation status and relationships with family and community.

understanding of the current moment in urban Ethiopia that extends beyond simply mapping analyses of neoliberal capitalism onto an African context, the relative importance of status for stratification is one means of assessing historical difference. In the following chapters I examine the interrelationship between status and class based forms of stratification.

This chapter has also established a foundation for rethinking unemployment. Young men evaluated time and progress not so much in terms of production or accessing economic goals as repositioning themselves within social relationships. The passage of time was evaluated positively if one was able to achieve a progressively better social position. The reasons behind differential evaluations of occupations are explored in subsequent chapters. For now it is enough to note that among urban young men, employment was not simply a means to an economic end. This calls into question strategies of economic development aimed at creating employment, without giving attention to the meanings associated with different types of work. The problems faced by urban young men were not only a result of joblessness, but an inability to engage in activities that would situate them positively in relation to others.

## **Chapter 5: Occupation and Status**

In many ways the relationship between occupation and status is at the root of much of the analysis in this dissertation. Local notions of occupational status highlight the variable and often contradictory ways in which young men conceived of value. Although material wealth was clearly essential for the attainment of young men's aspirations, these desires had to be balanced with a need to maintain a positive social position.

In this chapter I explore the relationship between occupation and status. I begin by describing how youth spoke about stigma and prestige in relation to particular occupations. The discourse of youth surrounding occupation and status provides a sense of how different types of work were evaluated negatively and positively. In order to fully understand the construction of status it is necessary to place these valuations within the context of local culture and history. Through an examination of local notions of power and personhood I argue that occupations are accorded status largely in relation to their correspondence with valued models for social interaction. Low status is produced when the worker subordinates him or herself without a corresponding personal relationship. In the end I qualify this analysis by presenting a counter-discourse concerning work that was especially prominent among young male technical students.

### **Youth Notions of Occupational Stigma**

At the time of my research in Jimma, traditional stigmas against artisan occupations were combined with contemporary notions of what defined "good" and

“bad” work. After the 1974 revolution discrimination against artisans was formally banned and for the most part it disappeared in large urban areas like Jimma, but informants claimed that a powerful stigma was still present. Even professions that did not exist in the past like that of a welder had negative connotations because of the association between metalworking and the previously stigmatized occupation of a blacksmith. A similar dynamic is described by Mustafa (2006) who explains that despite the use of modern technology in a non-hereditary occupation, tailors in Dakar are still exposed to discrimination due to their association with traditionally low status artisans. In Jimma, the nature of the stigma had changed significantly from the past, but young men often claimed that it was a major deterrent from engaging in artisan professions. For example, a grade 12 student in the woodworking program at the Jimma vocational school explained to me that although he enjoyed carpentry, if he were to pursue this career he would prefer to do it away from Jimma in a place where he did not have family or close friends. In his case he did not come from a family of woodworkers and would not have been thought to have an evil eye or face any traditional forms of discrimination. In fact he was very popular among other young people partially because of his reputation as an excellent soccer player. In his case the fear was that by working in a stigmatized occupation he would expose himself and his family to insults and disrespect. How this would specifically impact his life was unclear but in any case the fear was a powerful enough force that it prevented him from wanting to do woodwork in his hometown of Jimma.

The key contrast between occupational stigma in the past and present is that in recent years individuals have not been born with stigmatized identities. One is not a



carpenter or a welder because one's parents worked in these occupations. Although workers in these occupations are almost exclusively from relatively poor families, at least in theory occupations are chosen. In this sense young men are able to exert a degree of control over their status position, with the choice to work or not to work in a low status occupation. In order to understand how young men made this choice it is necessary to examine how particular occupations were perceived as being stigmatized.

Stigmas against artisan professions appeared to have a particularly strong impact on the values of young people living in outlying neighborhoods of the city. Perhaps not coincidentally residents in these neighborhoods tended to have less exposure to education and media than those in the city center. In discussing the desirability of different professions a group of young people living in a poor outlying neighborhood, Sa'ar Sefer, ranked carpenter as very low, despite the fact that carpenters earn more money than many of the better-ranked occupations. They explained that carpentry is "dirty" (*qoshasha*) or "bad" (*metfo*) work. Even youth who explicitly rejected this perspective as ignorant or belonging to the past acknowledged that others may think this way and that it could impact their lives. One young man claimed that although he was not concerned with how his friends might think of him, working in an artisan profession would make it very difficult to attract a girlfriend and therefore he preferred to avoid this type of work.

Youth discourse surrounding traditionally stigmatized occupations was not significantly different from that regarding forms of work that are generally considered to be "lower" or "inferior" ("*ziqqiteñña sira*"). In regards to carrying loads at the bus station for money, one unemployed young man claimed, "In this country no one wants to do that sort of work, it disturbs your mind." He explained that in Ethiopia work is not

appreciated (“*sira yinakal*”). This phrase “*sira yinakal*” was repeated again and again by youth in regards to local attitudes about work. Youth were intent on conveying the idea that work was not a valued activity and many types of employment would not bring prestige, regardless of one’s effort. These types of work included unskilled manual labor (e.g. breaking rocks), petty trade, and various street side professions like shining shoes. Waiting tables was also thought to be a lower form of work but was slightly different in the sense that it allowed one to work indoors and did not involve a large amount of physical exertion. In the urban economy it was very rare for young women to work in artisan professions like carpentry or metal work but it was common for them to work in other “lower” professions like waiting tables, breaking rocks, petty trade, and recently in Jimma – shining shoes.

While youth did occasionally comment on the social slights that they would suffer from performing certain types of work, fear of what others might think or say about them appeared to be the greatest threat. As I noted in chapter 1, this almost obsessive fear of what others are saying and thinking about one’s self and family is described with the Amharic term *yiluñña*. In speaking about work young people would frequently explain that “in Ethiopia there is *yiluñña*,” and this prevented them from working in many of the occupations that were available. The thought of what others may say about them and how this would impact their family caused such a great degree of mental distress that they preferred not to work at all.

The power of *yiluñña* can be seen in its relationship with spatial movement. Among my primary informants who worked in lower occupations it was very common for them to have migrated from other areas in Ethiopia. This was especially true among

young men working as waiters. Only two of the twelve waiters that I conducted formal interviews with were raised in Jimma. Their choice to move to Jimma was often based on nothing more than the fact that it was not their home. They chose to leave the support of their families and friends simply so that they could work in an area where they were not known and their behavior would not have negative implications for their family. Unemployed youth frequently claimed that if they were to leave their hometown they would do any type of work, but as long as they stayed they could not handle the stress of having friends from their neighborhood seeing them shine shoes, carry loads, or wait tables. The relation between migration, social status, and work is discussed in more detail in chapter 4 on aspirations, but here it is enough to note that it reveals the power of fears of performing certain types of work.

In discussing occupation and status it is important to note that unlike traditional stigmas against artisan professions, most youth claimed that working in a low status profession (including artisan occupations) would not have a significant material impact on their lives. It would not affect their income or their overall economic chances in life. For the most part young men explained their avoidance of lower work first in terms of a fear of what others might say about them and second in relation to how this talk would make their family feel. I often questioned informants about specifically what would be said if they worked in a lower occupation, and they claimed that they would not necessarily be insulted. Instead youth described working and having acquaintances pass by and look at them and comment, “Did you see Kebede? He is working as a shoeshine now.” In youth discourse it was the act of being recognized, evaluated negatively, and spoken about in relation to a particular occupation that was at the root of their fears.

### **Youth Notions of Occupational Prestige**

The role of government work in shaping urban class structure that I have described in chapter 2 also meant that it had significant implications for perceptions of occupation and status. Although “government work” (“*mengist sira*”) encompassed different types of employment ranging from administrator to clerk to janitor in everyday discussion the single term was often used to refer to all types of public employment. When asked what type of work he or she wanted it was very common for a young person to respond with the answer “government work.” The specific type of position desired was usually based on what could be expected given one’s education level but in most cases the classification of government work was more important than the particular job.

In assessing values concerning occupational status I asked youth to individually rank different professions in terms of prestige and income, and then we discussed these lists as a group. While “government worker” was not generally placed first on the occupational hierarchy lists it was always near the top, especially in terms of prestige. There was some debate over whether the government worker was actually feared instead of respected for doing good work, but all agreed that a government administrator wielded a large amount of power. The power of the government administrator was visible on various trips to government offices that I made to deal with different bureaucratic issues. Waiting is always part of a visit to a government office. The government official will usually be at least fifteen minutes late to a meeting and in some cases he (in my experience it was always a male) will not show up at all. At large meetings government officials are always the last to arrive – indicating that they have the power to make others

wait and that their time is of particular value. On one occasion I visited with a friend of mine, Alemu, who was an older man, the head of his *iddir*, and quite respected in the city. Normally walking down the street with Alemu meant that everyone would stop to greet us always addressing us in the most respectful form possible. In the government office this suddenly changed and it was Alemu's turn to show deference. Standing to greet officials who were far younger than him and patiently waiting for our appointment with a man who never arrived.

Youth pointed out that the government worker did not receive a particularly high salary but did have access to a number of perks and benefits. For all workers these included very basic benefits like a pension after retirement, working only forty to fifty hours a week (most workers in the private sector worked at least 70 hours/week), and having time off for holidays. Depending on the level of the worker other fringe benefits might include the ability to place one's family in other jobs, access to education opportunities, better housing, and bribes. These benefits were important not only for one's self, but for one's family, and a government worker had a heightened degree of ability to redistribute wealth. Even low-level workers who could not directly provide these benefits had day-to-day access to administrators who were capable of delivering help. The definite knowledge that a paycheck was coming at the end of the month also allowed workers to budget money for a child's education or to support extended family. To some extent the ability to redistribute wealth allowed government workers of all levels to participate in the patron/client relationships that Hoben (1970) describes as being crucial for the development of prestige in traditional Amhara culture. I describe this dynamic in relation to the construction of status in the following section.

There were also more intangible benefits to being a government worker that could be observed in day-to-day life. Regardless of one's specific position the government worker was part of a larger community composed of all other public employees. It provided an identity in a way that many other forms of employment did not. In describing Sa'ar Sefer an older man noted that it was a neighborhood full of government workers. This was a poor neighborhood and the workers were mostly cleaners or guards. While the authority of the high level administrator was certainly desired, for those who could not hope to reach that level, simply identifying oneself as government workers was still a source of pride. It was a mark of quality that revealed something about the people and the neighborhood where they lived.

That tight community and sense of camaraderie that existed among government workers was clear during the semester I spent teaching and conducting research at the technical school. The predominantly male staff formed an informal men's club providing support for each other in times of joy and sadness. The staff had a soccer team that competed with other city teams. Post-game celebrations usually involved consuming large amounts of meat and beer, at least partially at the school's expense. Twice during the course of my research the staff used the school bus to take tours of the country, visiting tourist destinations and other technical schools. On both occasions they returned bleary eyed and tired with stories of late nights carousing in different cities.

Being a government worker also gave individuals some ability to transcend boundaries of class and power. This was especially apparent at weddings and funerals. If a government administrator sponsored a wedding all employees of his office including cleaners, guards, gardeners, and others would be invited and expected to attend. For

those who lacked funds to host a lavish wedding, co-workers would contribute so that a celebration could still be enjoyed. When a government employee died all of his or her co-workers were expected to attend the funeral. Government vehicles were often made available for the transportation and contributions were made at the office in order to help pay for the costs associated with feeding all of the mourners. Both weddings and funerals were extremely important events in establishing and revealing social status in Ethiopia. Young men sometimes commented that no one would attend the funeral of a wealthy person who was not generous with his money. He may be given deferential treatment in life, but in the end the funeral was far more important.

This must be contrasted with the lower occupations described above where workers were often left out of these important social events. Even high-level private employees were often unable to attend funerals because they would not be given permission to leave their work. In day-to-day life the lower worker was spoken to only to give orders, while the government worker was generally treated as an equal regardless of the nature of his or her work. The government worker would be greeted on the street where the lower worker would be ignored. As I will discuss in the following chapter, status hierarchies were often expressed as qualitative differences in one's interactions with others.

The positive discourse surrounding government employment was by no means universal. In the final section of this chapter I discuss a critique of government work that was especially strong among students from the technical school. Neighborhood was another important factor in shaping the opinions of youth concerning government employment. Generally youth from neighborhoods where a relatively high percentage of

adults were government employees evaluated government work favorably. In Sa'ar Sefer, the same neighborhood where young people were especially critical of traditionally stigmatized professions, youth were very positive in regards to government employment. In this outlying neighborhood many adults had been low-level government workers and there was little opportunity for engaging in trade or creating one's own business. In Mahel Ketema (literally "city center") where most of the city's successful merchants were located youth were less interested in government work. In contrast to youth who desired the stability of a monthly paycheck, Mahel Ketema youth noted that a shop owner received income daily and was able to invest his or her money without any restrictions.

#### Education

In positive evaluations of occupation, an association with a high level of education was also very important. In terms of income many youth felt that teachers were not paid adequately for the amount of work that their job required. However, although they were sometimes conceived of differently teachers were employed by the government and engaged in positive social interactions similar to other government employees. The teacher's knowledge and educational background also brought a high amount of prestige. While it was often claimed that the teacher was far more respected in the past, all youth ranked the occupation near the top of their occupational hierarchy. As two unemployed youth noted, a teacher is a "father of knowledge" ("*uket abat*"), and will derive a degree of respect from both children and adults. The title "teacher" also sometimes preceded one's name in order to show respect.



It is also important that the two professions that were consistently ranked the highest – doctor and engineer – both required very high levels of education. Youth specifically noted that these professions were valued for that reason. Professions like a mason, carpenter, or a metal worker that could potentially earn an income similar to that of a teacher but had held little status in the past were beginning to gain small amounts of prestige because of new educational programs. As I have noted above, for the most part these professions were considered to be lower forms of work, but some youth (especially vocational students) argued that because one could now earn a diploma in these occupational fields they did have some degree of prestige. The value of education for social status is also seen in the medium to low ranking received by truck drivers who generally earned incomes well above that of a teacher and even approaching a doctor. While youth were quite aware of the advantages that this income could bring they did not believe that the occupation would bring status partially because drivers were generally uneducated.

### Helping the Community

Professions that were seen as beneficial for the community also received high rankings. Students at the college preparatory school explained that a doctor is a very high status occupation in Ethiopia because health is such a major problem. In addition to providing significant and direct assistance for those suffering from health problems, the doctor is a profession that has existed in Ethiopia for a long period of time and people are very familiar with it. For this reason many people recognized the significance of doctors and they may have more prestige than a newer profession that also contributes to the

community like that of the engineer. In contrast other youth explained that shop owners may earn very high amounts of money but “they have no name.” They were seen as making their living at the expense of their community. Although their wealth is important they did not have the status of a doctor. In addition to their lack of education, truck drivers were also critiqued for similar reasons. Truck drivers earned a large amount of money but they had a reputation for wasting it on alcohol and prostitutes instead of helping their family and community. A truck driver was not contributing to the development of the community and therefore this was not a prestigious profession.

The contrast in status between a truck driver and a teacher or a doctor reveals some of the ambiguity surrounding the relationship between modernity and status. The association between a driver and a modern vehicle certainly did bring some degree of prestige. However, the driver’s lifestyle was decidedly not modern in the sense that it did not fit into local narratives of progress as described in chapter 4. In both everyday and government discourse there was a powerful notion that individuals and communities should develop in the sense of gradually experiencing linear improvement over time. Education was the first step in that process and drivers were not thought to be educated individuals. Where the doctor, teacher, and engineer molded children, saved lives, and built roads the driver was simply working for profit. Some youth pointed out that a career as a driver would inevitably end in an early death, as the occupation was inseparable from alcohol abuse, irresponsible sex, and HIV. The driver would never experience “progress,” and therefore was not respected in the same manner as occupations that fit into the narrative of development through education and improving

one's community garnered. In this sense prestige was more closely linked with one's position in relation to others rather than the ability to accumulate material wealth.

### Being Clean and Comfortable

Although informants did not specifically mention this in their analysis, an important aspect of all of the valued professions was that the work was performed primarily indoors and it was not necessary to use one's hands. Exposure to dirt, wind, and the sun was mentioned as a drawback to the types of work that were available to young people and working in an office was highly valued. Even students at the vocational school who were being trained in professions like welding or woodwork often envisioned themselves working in an office in the future and not actually performing the trades in which they were trained. Among young men who were students or unemployed it was very common to grow out the fingernail of one's little finger to lengths of more than a half-inch. This was also a fashion favored by male teachers and government administrators. The explanation for the long fingernail was that it is useful as a pick, but it also showed that one did not work with his hands. Regardless of their employment status women were unable to fashion a similar identity because of the expectation that they engage in physically demanding household work. Even professional women were often expected to wash clothes by hand and perform large amounts of food preparation. The ability to remain clean and avoid manual labor did not necessarily cause an occupation to be respected, but it was associated with prestige. In this sense cleanliness and comfort were often reference points for status. They were also potential sites for

redefining the relationship between status and occupation as some working youth critiqued the unemployed for their clean clothes and well groomed appearance.

To summarize, prestigious occupations were those that combined all of these qualities and generated high incomes as well. Having an education (especially a degree or title) and helping one's community provided certain socially transformative powers. Regardless of class or ethnic background, to become a teacher gave one the ability to offer something important (knowledge) and possess a level of authority within the classroom. Like the government worker a teacher was a person who was an acknowledged part of the community. Outside of a work setting the teacher was acknowledged, greeted, and respected where the stigmatized worker was ignored. This was true of other professions associated with formal education and when discussing someone it was often important to establish his or her level of education (for example degree or diploma for an engineer). To some extent educational level determined the type of interactions that one could have with that person. In the same manner, one who helped his or her community was also a person to be recognized, discussed, invited, and generally interacted with in a particular manner. By engaging in occupations that had a positive fit with status evaluations, individuals were able to transform their interactions within the community.

### **The Construction of Status Through Work and Unemployment**

The analysis of prestige offered above begins to get at the roots of the construction of status in urban Ethiopia. The prestige of government work, education, and helping one's community were all based on the manner in which they positioned one

in relation to others. In the introductory chapter I explained that status is based on the manner that one is evaluated by others. Differences in status may be assessed in terms of the implications of these evaluations for one's social interactions. In this sense the relationship between status and social interactions may be understood in a cyclical manner. Status is based on evaluations of how one interacts with others. These evaluations have implications for one's future relationships, and participation in these relationships in turn influences the reproduction or subversion of status evaluations. Therefore, the contrast between prestigious and stigmatized work can be further understood through a close examination of the actual personal interactions that surrounded low status employment.

As noted above, it was not common for youth to mention the consequences that working might have on their social interactions. However, the occasional comment from a young person and my day-to-day observations revealed that to some extent workers in lower occupations did form a distinct social category. As one young man put it in regards to lower work, "If someone says "come" you've got to come." The relationship between the owners of the compound where I rented a room for the first half of my research and their domestic servant is an excellent example of the type of social relations associated with low status work. The owners of the compound were a young couple, and the husband's younger sister moved from the countryside to work for them as a servant and nanny. In exchange for this work she was given a place to live and support in her schooling. In the year that I lived in this compound I never saw her brother or his wife speak to her except to give orders or chastise her for something that she had failed to do. She also did not ask them questions or speak to them about issues unrelated to her work.

This was especially true when guests were present but even on relaxed afternoons when the women in the compound were lounging around playing with their children under the mango tree that stood in the lawn there was an invisible wall between her and her masters. Eva Poluha (2004) describes similar interactions between adults and children in Addis Ababa, but in this case age does not seem to have been an issue. The servant was not significantly younger than her brother's wife and other young women living in the compound (but not as servants) enjoyed much greater freedom in their interactions. Obviously in this case family or ethnicity was not an issue either because the treatment came from her brother. Outside of the compound when the young woman was wearing her school uniform her behavior was not distinguishable from any other 10<sup>th</sup> grade student, and in fact she was much more comfortable speaking directly with me. However, upon reentering the compound she was transformed back into a servant with extreme limitations on her behavior. It is quite possible that her brother and sister-in-law may have faced a loss in status if they had treated her differently. A friend of mine once told a story about his family's neighbors reacting with shock and disgust when they allowed their servant to share meals with them.

One had to be prepared to accept this transformation in social relations in order to work in a "lower" occupation. When I met Yosef he was working intermittently as a barber and an assistant at a video house. His casual employment afforded him a large amount of freedom. He was able to spend much of his time chewing chat and hanging out with friends. Around one year into my research he took a job as a waiter at one of the nicer hotels in town. With this job he obtained a steady source of income but the manner in which he was able to interact with others completely changed. The relaxed young man

who spent much of his day sprawled on a chair with a bunch of green leaves in his mouth, wearing a tank-top and stylish jeans, and earning a little money taking tickets at a video house was suddenly dressed in a blue uniform, running from table to table, and responding to shouts of “you” and “come.” While Yosef considered his income to be worth the change in social status others did not feel this way.

It is unlikely that this type of worker would be invited to weddings or other important social events. If they were to arrive on their own they would not be turned away but their presence would be generally ignored and no one would greet them or encourage them to eat. While lower forms of work did not have the established culturally prescribed restrictions on social interactions found in the past with artisan professions, performing these types of work still placed one in a different social category – a type of person who is treated differently from others. While young people rarely acknowledged the social limits faced by lower workers or directly denigrated different types of work, the constricted interactions that workers had with others must have contributed to the fear that youth experienced at the thought of taking on certain occupations.

Working in lower occupations meant placing one’s self at the bottom of relations of authority. Hierarchical relations were very common in Ethiopia. In their early ethnographies of the highland Amhara, Allan Hoben and Donald Levine claim that hierarchies are a key aspect of Amhara culture, and that they are partially rooted in Orthodox Christianity. Hoben states, “it is a fundamental postulate of Amhara culture.... that social order, which is good, can be created and maintained only through hierarchical, legitimate control deriving ultimately from God” (1970:194). In her recent ethnography of school children in Addis Ababa, Eva Poluha (2004) claims that hierarchy and social

order continue to be highly valued, and as I explained in chapter 2, Amhara culture acts as a point of reference for much of the social interaction that takes place within urban Ethiopia. However, there is a significant difference between the hierarchical relations associated with the patron/client model and in subordinating one's self within the process of exchange. In these cases showing respect or deference was thought to be a sign of good character. The individual who was being deferred to was expected to provide some level of protection or guidance for his or her subordinates. As Poluha (2004) explains, the parent/child or teacher/student relationships are good examples of this dynamic that roughly adhere to a patron/client model. In contrast, showing deference in the context of work does not involve a personal relationship. The worker is simply following orders to access money and there is no expectation of a deeper relationship. The worker exists at the bottom of a power hierarchy without a corresponding personal relationship of protection and obedience.

Although hierarchical relations in Ethiopia are often gendered, the relationship between masculinity and occupational status is not entirely clear. On one hand to be in a position of authority like the government administrator was intrinsically masculine and lower workers were certainly excluded from this gendered form of prestige. On the other hand the subordination of lower occupations was distinct from the hierarchical relations that generally existed between a man and a woman. In subordinating himself the lower worker was not overtly feminized. In contrast to the relationship between a man and a woman the worker subordinates him or herself without a corresponding personal relationship. It was this dynamic that appeared to be most significant in constructing the low status of many occupations.



Pankhurst and Freeman (2001:341-344) note that notions of personhood are important for maintaining the marginalization of artisans in rural areas. In their study, farmers asserted that artisans are not fully human. Despite a discourse centered on factors like cleanliness or eating habits, Pankurst and Freeman argue that the continued low status of artisans is based on their lack of access to land and the social relations that are involved with land rights. Even when artisans are able to improve their wealth this does not translate into status and full personhood unless they are able to obtain land rights. The inability to own land constricts one's interactions and this in turn leads to negative status evaluations, which may manifest themselves as social relations. Like marginalized rural artisans, in Jimma it was the particular dynamics of subordination and exchange that was responsible for the low status of many occupations. Money alone was not enough to transform a status position that was determined largely by their position within social relationships<sup>1</sup>. In the Ethiopian case, work is evaluated primarily in terms of social relationships rather than income.

In some cases a form of relationship did exist between the worker and his customers. In Amharic both the vendor and customer are referred to as *demibeña* if a relationship exists between them. To have a *demibeña* relationship implies a degree of loyalty. The customer should not buy elsewhere, and the vendor should give a favorable price. While the *demibeña* relationship is important it only exists at the moment of the transaction. The vendor and seller are on equal terms for a moment, each helping the other to obtain his or her needs, and then that relationship ends until another purchase is

---

<sup>1</sup> As noted elsewhere the importance of money in social relations was changing. Extremely wealthy individuals were able to access status. However, while working youth often had more access to money than their unemployed peers, their greater purchasing power did not appear to bring them respect at the community level.

made. It does not generally encompass other aspects of social life. One's demibeña would not be expected to attend the funeral or wedding of a family member. It is a means of establishing civility in an otherwise tense interaction, but it does not imply the existence of a relationship that resembles the patron/client model.

The demibeña relationship may be contrasted with the prestigious position of the government worker described above. The government worker and low-status working youth engage in different models of exchange, and this is related to the differing levels of status associated with their occupations. The government worker is embedded in vertical flows of power. One receives goods from one's superiors and then in turn redistributes these goods and opportunities to others. Like the low status worker, giving, receiving, and subordination are present here. However, there is no sense that one is exchanging one's labor for what is received. Giving and receiving take place because a relationship exists based on one's particular position within a hierarchy of power. In other words the presence of a positive relationship changes the manner in which exchange and subordination are perceived. That relationship is not finite and it extends beyond the moment of exchange to open opportunities for future reciprocation.

This contrast should not be conceived of as exchange for profit versus relationship-based forms of exchange, in which exchange for profit represents the intrusion of a market economy (Taussig 1980). As Parry (1989) has argued, antipathy towards commerce is largely based on the ideology that social relations and accumulation of wealth should be separate spheres of activity. In order to understand evaluations of exchange it is necessary to examine locally specific values. In the Ethiopian case, accumulation through exchange was not necessarily evaluated negatively. Successful

business owners depended on impersonal exchange in order to accumulate wealth, and they possessed high levels of prestige. Unlike working youth, business owners were never in a position to directly sell their labor to a customer. This meant that their interactions with others did not entail subordinating one's self with the intent to access wealth. Business owners did engage in hierarchical relationships with their employees but they generally instilled these relationships with personal qualities that went beyond a simple exchange, and extended into all aspects of life. When a business owner sought to confine relationships with employees to the realm of work, conflicts would frequently arise. It was not the intent to accumulate profits that resulted in low status, but the subordination of one's self within relations of exchange that did not extend to other aspects of life.

It should be emphasized that compared to traditionally stigmatized artisans, the situation was far less extreme in the urban setting of Jimma where rigid boundaries of marginalization were not present. Unlike traditional stigmas, the negative status associated with lower occupations was not permanent and showed a high degree of variability in its influence over one's social interactions. While Ellison (2006) cautions against constructing occupational status groups in the past as overly rigid, it is clear that flexibility in identity and status has increased in a contemporary urban setting. For example, one of the wealthiest and most powerful men in Jimma, Qeñazmach Teka, was said to have begun his working life as a shoeshine. He became very wealthy under Haile Sellasie's reign, lost much of this wealth during the Derg, and then regained many of his previous properties with the coming of the EPRDF. The fact that he came from such a low background was seen as a sign of strength on his part and not anything inherent about

him as a person. Another example is Afwerk, the bicycle repairman described in chapter 2. On one occasion I observed Afwerk greeting a small girl and her mother quickly pulled her away, scolding her for touching someone who was dirty from working on bicycles. Similar greetings between strangers and small children were very common and accepted in Jimma. Despite this woman's avoidance, Afwerk did have close relationships with other small children from the neighborhood where he worked and sometimes served as a temporary caretaker for one child whose parents owned a nearby shop. In this sense the discrimination faced in one situation might not be present in another, and one's status at the moment was not permanent.

### **Unemployment, Development, and “Bad Culture”**

Additional insights into the relationship between occupation and status can be gained through an investigation of a common discourse concerning culture, work, and unemployment. In discussions surrounding unemployment and development, critiques of “Ethiopian culture” (*Habesha bahil*) were frequently made, and it was argued that a bad culture was preventing economic change. The most basic bad culture narrative was something like the following: “Ethiopians do not have a culture of work. It is considered shameful to work on the street, or exert one's self physically. If unemployment is to end this attitude must change.” It was common to argue that jobs are available but young people choose not to work because “Ethiopian culture” does not value work. One young man even went so far as to lament the fact that Ethiopia was never colonized because other African countries were able to learn “a culture of work from whites.” Other related narratives addressed specific aspects of this “bad culture”. One of these centered on the

dependence of young people on both the government and their parents. It was often argued that youth expect work from the government and that levels of unemployment are so high because young people are simply waiting to be given a government job. The dependence of youth was attributed to a culture that does not expect anything from young people or encourage them to work at an early age. A related narrative centered on a lack of innovation. It was common to argue that youth were not creative, and this led them to depend on the government for employment. A successful business was always imitated, leading to a saturation of the market and bringing everyone down. A third narrative was that of pride. It was often commented that work was categorized as “small” or “large” and people are too proud to use small work to reach a higher level. In describing attitudes towards work one young man claimed, “Cutting hair and cleaning shoes is called poor kid’s work. The ones who say this are poor on the inside and rich on the outside.” A final narrative focused on work ethic. It was common to compare Ethiopia where “everyone sits” to the U.S. where everyone works “twenty-four hours a day.” The reason given for this was simply that Ethiopians are lazy. “They prefer chewing chat and sitting and talking.”

This discourse concerning “bad culture,” may be usefully contrasted with my discussion in chapter 3 of the primarily adult critiques of exposing young people to “foreign culture” through films. In the narratives surrounding film Ethiopian culture is positive and foreign culture represents a dangerous influence, while in the discourse described above Ethiopian culture is an impediment to development. Clearly “Ethiopian culture” has multiple meanings that depend on context, and one’s purpose in invoking the concept. Within both discourses, culture is something fixed and bound to a particular

place. Culture guides behavior and it is very difficult to act in a way that contradicts one's culture. However, other cultures associated with other places are seen as having the potential to influence local practices. In relation to videos Ethiopian culture is a source of protection from potentially corrupting foreign culture, while in terms of economic development foreign culture is a potential savior that may eliminate the "backwards" practices that continually trap Ethiopia within poverty. The wish that Ethiopia had been colonized reveals the power of this association between place, culture, and behavior. The discussion of *yiluñña* from chapter 4 provides an additional point of contrast. In the case of *yiluñña*, the power of local culture was considered to be so strong that it could not be changed thus necessitating actual spatial movement.

It is difficult to know how to understand such a strong indictment of one's own culture. It should be noted that in my experience self-criticism is a very common trait among Ethiopians, and is associated with humility and politeness. *Injera*, the national food of Ethiopia that is eaten at every meal and is a major part of Ethiopian life is the frequent object of abuse. People criticize its low nutrient content (relative to its weight, *teff*, the grain used for *injera*, is actually one the most nutritious in the world) and even call it "worthless" claiming that, "it only produces shit." That said, there is no doubt that Ethiopians love *injera* and would gladly eat it more than three times a day if that were possible. To an extent, self-criticism is a way of being polite, and one should not necessarily take this discourse as a direct reflection of Ethiopian views of their own work ethic. However, the consistency of this critique does demand serious attention. Even the criticisms of *injera* draw a contrast between development (health) and culture (*injera*). At some level it was believed that culture was impeding development.

Another possible explanation for this discourse of bad culture is that individuals had internalized a development discourse that was promoted by the government<sup>2</sup>. Culture was critiqued as a barrier preventing progress. In order to progress Ethiopians had to become more like westerners in terms of their creativity, use of time, and work ethic (compare with Escobar 1995 and Karp 2002). The Ethiopian government has recently taken measures to change values surrounding work and dependence. The most significant of these interventions is the creation of a “civics” curriculum that was instituted in grades 9-12 beginning in 2003. The civics curriculum devoted entire units to “industriousness” and “self reliance” for each of the four grades. Topics covered in these units include “avoidance of discrimination towards work,” “giving respect for physical labor,” “work as the only rational legal route to development,” and sections on the risks of “dependency” (Bedru 2003). This was not the first time that the Ethiopian government had made an attempt to change attitudes about work. In 1908 Menelik issued a proclamation that is worth quoting in full:

“Let those who insult the worker on account of his labour cease to do so. Discrimination is the result of ignorance. God said to Adam: “in the sweat of they brow shalt thou eat bread.” If we do not carry out this injunction, if everyone is idle, there will be neither government nor country. In European countries when people undertake new kinds of work and make cannon, guns, trains, and other things... they are praised and given more assistants, not insulted in account of their craft. But you by your insults

---

<sup>2</sup> It is highly ironic that government employees espoused this discourse of industriousness and self-reliance given that they were at the center of the technical students’ critique. While the behavior of government employees may have symbolized the prioritization of social relations over work ethic for many, government workers were subject to frequent “refresher” seminars in which they were indoctrinated in the present state ideological position.

are going to leave my country without people who can make the plough; the land will thus become barren and destitute. Hereafter anyone who insults these people is insulting me. From this time forth anyone found insulting another on account of his work will be punished by a year's imprisonment. If Officials find it difficult to imprison such a person for a year let the former be arrested and sent before me.”

(From Pankhurst 1968)

That one hundred years have passed after Menelik's proclamation without major changes in attitudes towards work indicates that people have not easily absorbed government discourse. Regardless of opinions voiced regarding “bad culture,” insults and stigmas directed towards certain occupations have not ceased. It is also important to note that at the time of my research most Ethiopians questioned any statement that came from the government. It is likely that some students, teachers, and government workers were echoing ideas that they had received through government training, but unemployed youth were frequently voicing ideas that they had developed on their own through a critical examination of society.

In expressing a narrative of bad culture individuals were engaging in a number of discursive practices including modesty through self-criticism, repeating government development discourse, and constructing cultural critiques. However, regardless of the motivation for generating a discourse of bad culture, it is clear that very few individuals actually changed their behavior. Unemployed youth continued to avoid work because they feared social stigmas. Government workers continued to leave work in order to



attend funerals. In practice, most people continued to prioritize social relationships over economic activities.

Where the stigmas surrounding lower occupations structured the social interactions of working youth, this was not often the case with unemployed young men. Unlike working in a lower occupation, unemployed youth expressed no fear regarding being unemployed. Where *yiluñña* gave youth a sense of shame that prevented them from working, I never encountered a case of a young person choosing to work as a result of being ashamed of unemployment. This is not to say that young people did not experience mental distress as a result of being unemployed, but if working locally (some youth did migrate in order to work) was conceived of as a solution to this problem I did not observe it being practiced<sup>3</sup>. When I directly questioned youth about shame or low status associated with being unemployed they claimed that this did not exist. The vast majority of young people were unemployed and therefore they perceived their condition as normal, and felt there was no need to place blame on themselves.

In many cases unemployed youth were able to develop strong relationships within their community, partially because of the large amount of time that they had. Unemployed young men were usually able to attend funerals and it was common for them to help with publicly visible and symbolically important tasks like carrying the casket and filling in the grave with dirt. They were also generally able to attend each of the seven days of mourning after the funeral. Although socializing between youth and adults was rare at these occasions, youth were seen behaving in a positive manner and this boosted their esteem within the community. Unemployed young men were often

---

<sup>3</sup> Although it was not voiced in interviews, it is possible that working youth chose to work as a result of shame associated with unemployment and then explained their occupational choice in other terms.

able to attend local weddings with their families, and this was another site where positive social relations were built. There was certainly no prestige associated with the absence of work in its self. Unemployed youth were able to do none of the things that brought the admiration associated with the high status occupations described above. However, despite a negative discourse directed towards their work ethic, to a large extent unemployed youth were not impacted by a stigma directed towards their lack of work.

### **Technical Students and Cultural Critique**

Technical students had a peculiar position in relation to this critique of culture in that through education they were indoctrinated into a specific set of values that were intended to influence economic behavior. Unlike most other youth and adults, their cultural critique was accompanied by a behavioral change. Technical students voiced a particularly intense critique of “bad culture” and the nature of their education placed them on a trajectory in which it was likely that they would work in stigmatized professions. These were the same students that I describe critiquing government workers earlier in the chapter. They argued that government workers accomplish nothing and lose all of their time to coffee breaks and holidays. Holidays and funerals were two cultural institutions that technical students singled out as preventing work and economic growth. Mourning after a death continued for seven days and there was a high degree of social pressure to attend on each of these days. Members of neighborhood *iddirs* (burial associations) were fined if they did not attend funerals. Especially among Orthodox Christians, holidays were numerous as each day of the month was linked to a particular saint and could therefore be used as an excuse for feasting instead of work. Technical

students argued that unless these cultural activities were curtailed, development would never occur.

The following comes from a group discussion with male students from the woodwork and building construction departments:

“There is no government work and we know that if we don’t work we won’t eat. If you think you will get government work then you will never create something for yourself. Of course it is difficult to create work with no money but you have to do something.”

“The old culture is useless. Simply visiting friends and celebrating holidays will never lead to change. The hospital, the university, the hotels – everything good in Jimma was built by the Italians. This is why South Africa is so far ahead of us. Now the new generation is beginning to improve things, but the old generation has given us no foundation. Of course there is less time for friends when there is more work. People say the new generation is selfish but this is only because we are working and we have more money but less time. Today’s generation is for its self. When people work with their own strength they do not want to share what they have earned. This culture of always inviting others will disappear. Today people want different things. They don’t want to wear the same clothes for a year. They want new clothes every month. They want to look around and see different things. They don’t want to eat injera everyday. If they want all of these things they have to work.”

In this narrative “today’s generation” is contrasted with the past. The association between education and a rejection of tradition is not new in Ethiopia and has been described by Levine (1965) and Bahru (2002a). However in the past, educated young people were a politically potent but numerically small group. The case of technical students is also distinct from others in terms of their specific relationship with stigmatized occupations. While other educated youth sometimes voiced opinions similar to that of technical students, like previous generations (who also often expressed a critique of bad culture) their actions appeared to be embedded within a set of values that prioritized social relationships over potential economic gains from employment. Youth chose not to work because the money that could be earned was deemed less important than the changes in social relations that would accompany employment. The technical students’ prioritization of the ability to consume and provide for one’s self over social relations was an implicit statement that money earned through work was more important than a loss of social status. The students’ references to a generation divide are not quite accurate here. Regardless of generation, those who were educated generally expressed ideas that were similar to that of the technical students, but did not put these ideas into practice.

This narrative also makes explicit the division between social relationships and economic advancement. As I detail in chapter 7, the interrelationship between the economic and the social was key for both working and unemployed youth, but many technical students argued that the two are incompatible. Their claim was that one cannot hope to achieve material aspirations without cutting off social relations. Associated with this way of thinking is the notion that money earned from work is private. The students

assumed that government employees are not really “working” for their money. They are paid to drink coffee and socialize and therefore they are happy to share their incomes with others. Real “work” for the technical students was associated with accomplishing something tangible, particularly through physical exertion. Wages earned in this manner could justifiably be spent as one wished, even if this was deemed selfish.

In attacking government employment and the prioritization of social life over work technical students were seeking to reconstruct a system of values that placed them near the bottom of status hierarchies. Their values were intertwined with the role they expected to play within the productive process, and these values were oppositional towards other occupational groups. In chapter 6 I argue that the values of many working young men concerning status were deviant in the sense that the negative stigmas associated with their occupations did not prevent them from working. The technical students were different in that they were not simply deviant but oppositional to traditional values concerning status and work. In contrast to working youth, technical students often saw themselves as having common values and desires for the future. Their notions of work and time were key aspects of this value system. Technical students felt that time should be devoted to productive labor rather than social life, and the outcome of that labor could legitimately be used for personal consumption.

In chapter 4 I argued that most young men in Jimma had an abstract conception of time that was used in order to evaluate social relationships. This was based on a notion of status determined by one’s position in relation to others. Among technical students a different perspective on status is advanced. The individual becomes the primary unit for evaluating status. This leads to a dynamic in which economic activity, rather than one’s

position within social relationships is evaluated on the basis of an abstract notion of time. The emergence of a distinct hierarchy of status in which prestige is based in the accumulation of wealth rather than social interactions is explored further in relation to working youth in chapter 7.

The attitudes of technical students raise the interesting possibility of the emergence of a “working class culture” in urban Ethiopia. By this I mean a set of acknowledged practices associated with class position that are a source of pride for those who participate in them. On a personal level I was often struck by the lack of valorization of the practices of the working poor. I had trouble explaining to my informants that males who perform manual labor in the United States are often idealized as being particularly masculine. The notion that any type of positive value could be associated with manual occupations was difficult to comprehend for most young men. The few activities like drinking honey wine or locally brewed liquor that were specifically associated with the working poor were generally looked down upon and considered shameful. It is not clear if the occupations available to technical students will be more financially lucrative than other forms of manual work. However, it does seem that with their unified attempt to shift values surrounding occupation and status, they may be able change the manner in which a working class lifestyle is evaluated.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have examined the interrelationship between occupation and status. Young men claimed that they avoided certain types of work because of concerns with status. They feared what others would say or think about them and their families if

they were to be seen working in low status occupations. The types of work that were considered to be low status were those that resembled traditionally despised artisan occupations and those involving manual labor and petty trade. Among young men, prestigious occupations were those that required a high level of education, involved helping one's community, and provided generally clean and comfortable working conditions. In many ways government work was the model occupation for youth as it had all of these qualities and conformed to valued traditional models for relations of power.

I argue that the fundamental reason for the stigmatization of particular occupations is that they did not conform to valued models of exchange and social interaction. Historically, valued relationships have resembled the patron/client model in the sense that one individual submits to the demands of another in exchange for his or her assistance and support in other aspects of life. Workers in low status occupations subordinated themselves within hierarchies of power that did not have a corresponding close personal relationship. Relationships for low status workers were confined to the moment of exchange and did not continue into other areas of life. For this reason their behavior was evaluated negatively. This negative status evaluation in turn placed constraints on the potential interactions that workers could engage in.

A discourse based in a critique of Ethiopian culture provides an interesting perspective on the relationship between occupation and status. Especially among educated Ethiopians of all ages it was common to argue that a "bad culture," that placed too much emphasis on pride and social relationships was inhibiting economic development. Despite this discourse behavioral change was rare and criticism of

Ethiopian culture did not lead to the stigmatization of the unemployed. Technical students were unusual in that not only did they voice a critique of a culture that valued social relationships over material accumulation, but they were preparing to put this critique into action. While many technical students feared the stigma associated with the occupations for which they were trained, they also planned to work in these occupations after graduation. In this sense, technical education may represent an important shift in which a discourse of bad culture begins to coincide with behavioral change.

In this chapter, I have established a correspondence between value and status. Although I have argued that a dominant set of cultural values exists in urban Ethiopia, the case of the technical students clearly indicates that this culture is contested. To claim that evaluations of status are based on cultural values is not particularly interesting. However, for two reasons the arguments I have developed in this chapter are essential for the analysis I will carry out in later chapters. First, variation in values concerning occupational status implies behavioral variability as well. In the following chapter I explore the relationship between values and occupational choice. The intersection between values and economic behavior is taken further in chapters 7 and 8 as I explore changing patterns of stratification among urban young men. Second, I have argued that occupational status is determined largely by values concerning social relationships, power, and exchange. This indicates that in the Ethiopian case value is not understood primarily in material terms. In other words the value of work comes from the manner in which it situates one in relation to others, and not simply the income that it generates. It is common for anthropologists to identify the limits of economic rationalism. In the



following chapters I take this point further by not only critiquing economic rationalism, but developing an alternative perspective on inequality.

## **Chapter 6: Occupational Choice and Values**

In the previous chapter I described the interrelationship between status and occupation. Concerns regarding stigma often prevented young men from taking on low status work. In this chapter I examine the manner in which some young men chose to ignore stigmas surrounding occupation, and accepted low status work. My use of the term “choice” is not meant to imply a free willing individual selecting between equally possible options. The choices available to young men were clearly conditioned by class and gender among other factors. For example, none of the working young men in my sample came from middle class families, indicating that if one had substantial social support then taking on low status work was generally not an option that one could conceivably choose. That said, the vast majority of urban unemployed young men were from lower class families, implying that occupational choice was based on more than class. In many cases working and unemployed young men came from very similar economic backgrounds. In order to understand why one person chose to work while another did not it necessary to examine youth values. These values functioned in a similar manner to Bourdieu’s habitus (1977) in the sense that they created patterns of behavior that repositioned young men in relation to economic structures. My discussion of technical students in the previous chapter indicates that there was clearly variation among young men in terms of their values. In this chapter I explore the manner that variation in values produced differences in young men’s economic behavior.

I begin this chapter by examining case studies of different working young men. In order to understand the variable manner in which young men chose to work it is

necessary to closely examine their lives. Individual case studies reveal great variation in the reasons why some young men did not allow concern with occupational stigma to prevent them from taking on lower forms of work. However, within that variability in each case that I describe working young men were distanced from social judgments and norms. Although working young men represented a range of backgrounds and perspectives, all of them were able to position themselves so that the power of *yiluñña* in relation to occupational status was reduced.

### **Working Young Men**

A variety of different types of employment were available to young men with a secondary education. These included low-level government work, service work, manual labor, petty trade and manufacturing, and various other informal entrepreneurial activities. With the exception of government work all of these were conceived of as the lower occupations that I have described above. In the first half of my research I examined both service workers and youth working in the informal economy, but I chose not to focus on service workers in the second half of my research. The reason for this was that the payment for service workers was extremely low (50 – 80 Ethiopian birr/month) and therefore lack of income provided a reasonable rationale for the low status and lack of desirability of service work. The types of employment that I focused on provided a large range of incomes but they were all at least 200 birr/month – equal to or better than one might earn at a low level government position. I also chose types of work that were not particularly physically demanding as this might provide an additional non-status related reason for decreasing their desirability.

Over the course of my research I developed detailed case studies for ten working young men. They include a bicycle repairman, two owners of small shops (both of whom also rented bicycles), an assistant in a video house, two barbers, a Hindi-to-Amharic translator who was employed at a video house, a watch sales/repairman, an assistant on a mini-bus taxi, and a maker/seller of tire sandals. In this section I focus on four case studies in order to demonstrate some of the variation and common themes that existed among working young men. I have already described Afwerk, a bicycle repairman, in chapter 2 and although I discuss his case here I will not repeat my description.

#### Getanet – Barber

Getanet had the air of a very cosmopolitan young man. He had been raised in Jimma's commercial center and therefore was accustomed to being around all types of business, music, and nightlife. He generally dressed in youth fashions and his name was well known among other working young people. Getanet was unique among my primary informants in that he was married. During the course of my research he experienced the birth and the death of a child.

Both of his parents died at a young age and this pushed him to leave school and begin working. He began by shining shoes and selling lottery tickets. Lottery ticket sellers rove the streets looking for customers and in doing this he began to spend a large amount of time hanging out at barbershops and gradually learned the trade. Getanet had worked as a barber in many of the different small towns around Jimma. Over the course of my research he worked at three different barbershops in Jimma. In each case he left because of a falling out with the owner.

Especially for young men, barbershops are sites where people gather to listen to music, talk, chew chat, and generally hang out. This may have been part of the reason that Getanet was so well known. Different levels of barbershops are available that vary in terms of cleanliness, the skill of the employees, and price. Getanet always worked at the highest standard of barbershops. These shops charged five birr for a haircut. The barber kept half of the fee for himself and gave the other half to the owner. The barber also kept any tips that he was given. The owner was responsible for all expenses. The barber did not receive any additional salary from the owner. The high level of social and economic activity that surrounded barbershops sometimes brought additional opportunities and Getanet would occasionally make money on the side by acting as a broker between buyers and sellers. During the month that I monitored his income he earned 432 birr. Getanet's wife did not work outside the home and he was responsible for all of their household expenses. Although rent was very low because he had a government owned house other expenses prevented him from saving much money from month to month.

Getanet generally worked seven days a week. He began each day at around 9:00 am and worked until 10:00 pm but he was able to take numerous breaks through out the day. Especially when business was slow in the afternoon he would often leave for a few hours to hang out with friends or run errands. Usually two or three barbers would work at any shop and serve the customers on a rotating basis. This meant that even at the shop Getanet had plenty of time to socialize with friends, read, or listen to music. It was common for barbers to chew chat as they worked and Getanet usually chewed small amounts throughout the day.

Unlike many of the other lower occupations that I examined, cutting hair had the advantage of being indoor work. It was possible to maintain some privacy and conceal one's self from the public's gaze. However some barbers commented that others consider their work to be "dirty" because it involves touching another person's hair. Like other forms of lower work cutting hair was thought to require very little education and was not seen as an important profession. Despite these negative associations among some youth, working at a barbershop had the advantage of immersing the barber in youth culture. Getanet always wore a unique but generally admired haircut. He sometimes gave free haircuts to friends meaning that he had the power to dispense style and fashion. His time spent at the barbershop was used to familiarize himself with local and international music and Getanet occasionally worked as a disc jockey at a bar that was popular with young people. In general, Getanet and other youth workers involved in the culture industry were often seen as cool or "*arreef*" by their peers.

#### Siraj – Watch Repair and Sales

Like Afwerk, Siraj was someone that I developed a relationship with during my first extended visit to Jimma in 2002. The nature of his work meant that he often had time to talk and I was always welcome to pull up a stool and sit with him as he worked discussing news, politics, America, religion, and whatever else was on our minds. Siraj worked side-by-side with his good friend Mohammed. Mohammed was only a couple years older than Siraj but he was married and had two children and was therefore on a very different trajectory in life. The contrast between Siraj and Mohammed is discussed

in chapter 4, and reveals how two young men with the same occupation may have very different goals and expectations in life.

Siraj worked at a shady spot on the side of a busy road that led to Jimma's main market. In terms of foot traffic the road was one of the busiest in the city. He was positioned next to a small shop selling bread and in front of an unmarked café that sold various local nonalcoholic grain based drinks. Around five other watch vendors were spread out in front of this café and Siraj shared one particular corner with Mohammed. There was no difference in the services that any of these young men provided but there appeared to be adequate business for all of them. Working in close proximity allowed them to watch another person's goods if he needed to leave, and they would occasionally refer customers to another vendor if they did not have the desired part or watch.

All of these watch vendors were Muslim and most of them were from the Wollo region – two to three days travel from Jimma. Siraj moved to Jimma in search of work in 2001. When he arrived he quickly found acquaintances from his birthplace. They were all working with watches and they invited him to join them. He was able to learn the trade within a month. He did not particularly enjoy his work but it was a way to pay the bills. The watches sold in Ethiopia were generally poorly made meaning that there was no shortage of customers and he was able to earn a decent income. During the month that I monitored his income he made a profit of 554 birr. Watch sales involved a large amount of negotiation. Customers would look at a watch, a price would be stated, counter-offers were made, haggling ensued, and in many cases the customer elected not to buy. The price was usually relative to the perceived wealth of the customer and individuals who appeared to be from the region of Gambella were given especially high

prices. Although bargaining is a part of many transactions in Ethiopia the price of watches seemed to be especially flexible and this may explain the lack of a friendly relationship between Siraj and most of his customers.

Siraj lived alone and was responsible for all of his daily expenses but he was still able to save money. He estimated that he saved 2000 birr in his first three years of work. All of this money was spent on gifts for his family when he made his first and only trip home, around halfway through my research

Siraj's day-to-day life followed a consistent pattern. He worked seven days a week, sometimes only working a half-day on Fridays. He would arrive for work at around 9:00 am and stay until 6:00 pm. Although he sometimes chewed a morning *ehjebena* ("eye opener"), he usually only chewed chat in the afternoon. He would break for lunch and to go to the mosque for afternoon prayers. Particularly in the afternoon there were not a large number of customers and he was free to chew chat and talk with the other vendors.

Working as a watch vendor brought a decent income, but it was not a prestigious occupation. Working on the street meant that Siraj was exposed to dust, mud, exhaust from cars, and the constant gaze of the public. I never observed this directly, but Siraj explained to me that he was sometimes insulted by pedestrians. They would call him a "thief" as they passed by. Although the shouters of these insults were generally not respected individuals, to be insulted in public like this was still extremely unpleasant. Siraj did make an effort to carry himself in a respectable manner. Although he did chew chat in public this was less of a stigmatized behavior for a Muslim and he did not smoke cigarettes. He always dressed in neat, clean clothes. For these reasons and because of his



close ties with other migrants from Wollo and active faith in Islam, Siraj did have a large social network. He was friendly with a range of wealthier men who would sometimes stop by to visit him. He could also rely on these friends to provide economic aid in times of need.

#### Kassahun – Street Side Shop Owner

Kassahun seemed to be a born businessman and he was always interested in discussing trade and profits. He began his working life at the age of thirteen by selling fruit at his school. Kassahun also shined shoes and performed a number of other small jobs until he was able to purchase a small portable shop. When I met him he had been operating the shop for around two years. The shop was similar in size to a wardrobe and he positioned it in front of an abandoned storefront in the Ferenj Arada neighborhood. Kassahun also owned three bicycles that he rented. Although Kassahun needed permission from the surrounding businesses in order to operate, he did not pay any rent. When I began my research Kassahun's shop was near the post office, but after around six months the post office moved and the foot traffic on the street greatly decreased, especially during the day. The main street in Ferenj Arada was a popular place for walks in the evening but during the rest of the day the traffic was limited to people coming to and from their homes. With only around a month remaining in my research Kassahun received assistance from the government to open a larger kiosk style shop in a very busy area of the city. It appeared that he was doing well at this location but the data that I have for him is based on his original portable shop.

Kassahun worked six days a week, taking Sundays off to attend church and relax with his girlfriend. He generally opened his shop early at around 7:00 am. Although customers were steady he still had plenty of time to socialize with friends or other young men working in the area. Kassahun did not chew chat and would only leave his shop to take a break for lunch. During most of the time that I was conducting research Kassahun was attending evening classes in the electronics program at the vocational school. He was absent from work during these hours, but he would usually reopen the shop upon returning and stay until around 10:00 pm. During the month that I monitored his income he profited 460 birr. Kassahun lived with his mother but he covered his own expenses for meals and school fees. I do not have exact figures for his savings, but he was able to purchase all of the supplies necessary to open a new, larger shop and this must have cost at least 1000 birr.

Most of Kassahun's customers were from the neighborhood and he was able to develop a good relationship with them. Although haggling was still common, prices were generally known and it was usually a friendly process. Kassahun's main difficulty in relation to work was renting bicycles. On multiple occasions during the course of my research he had a bicycle stolen. Each time he did manage to retrieve the cycle but in some cases this took months causing him to lose time and income.

Kassahun did work on the street and there was definitely some stigma attached to this. However, particularly in the community in which he worked Abiot was well liked and respected. He took a great deal of care in his appearance and always wore clean fashionable clothes. His ownership of the shop and bicycles made him far wealthier than other young men. He was also a member of an *iqub* made up of other small business

owners in the neighborhood. An *iqub* is a savings organization. Members contribute equal amounts of money and once a month a different member receives an amount based on the size of the total group contribution. Kassahun's effort in continuing his education also brought him a certain amount of admiration. He finished the two-year program at the vocational school near the end of my research and planned to pursue a diploma in electronics in the future.

### **Occupation and Values**

In chapter 2 I described the general class structure of urban Ethiopia. While Bourdieu's notion of habitus is useful for understanding the interrelationship between class background, values, and economic behavior, his (1977:85-86) claim that classes have a shared habitus, and individual aspirations and values are often determined by the objective class situation has a peculiar fit with the Ethiopian case. In terms of occupational choice and class background none of the working youth in my sample came from families in Jimma that could be described as middle class. Generally, youth who had parents with high paying and high status occupations did not work in low status occupations. However, occupational choice was not simply determined by class. The majority of unemployed young men in Jimma were of a lower class background. These youth had a high economic incentive to work, but they chose not to. As I noted in chapter 4, the aspirations of youth were generally the same across classes, partially due to the common experience of education. In urban Ethiopia education had been established as the primary means of accessing the government work associated with the dominant class. The increasingly equal access to education among all classes created a similarity in

aspirations. The economic behavior of young people was also similar in that many of them remained unemployed for long periods of time, regardless of class background. The implications of this relationship between values and economic behavior for stratification will be discussed further in chapter 8. In this section I examine the individual variation in values concerning status among young men and how this variation mapped onto choices concerning occupation.

In attempting to assess evaluations of occupation and lifestyle I performed an exercise with most of my primary informants<sup>1</sup>. I developed simple descriptions of different young men based on occupation, family background, aspirations, and leisure habits. I asked each of my primary informants to evaluate these characters giving special attention to the likelihood that the characters would achieve their goals, potential for personal friendship, and the respect they would receive from their community. For many of the characters there was no marked distinction between the responses of unemployed and working young men. However, responses surrounding one character showed a definite difference of opinions that is useful for illustrating the contrasting value systems.

I read the following description in Amharic to each of my primary informants:

“Tilahun is 19 years old. He finished grade 10 but was not able to advance to 10+1. He lives with his parents. His father is a guard and his mother bakes injera. Tilahun does not have work. His goal for the future is to have a government job. In his spare time he likes to play sports. Sometimes he goes to video houses. He does not chew chat or drink alcohol. He dresses neatly and likes to wear clean clothes.”

---

<sup>1</sup> Two unemployed youth did not perform the exercise because they were unable to meet with me.

The great majority of unemployed youth evaluated Tilahun in a positive manner while only a few working young men had positive responses for Tilahun and others were distinctly negative in their evaluations. Typical responses from unemployed youth include:

“This is the sort of person that I can talk with. Tilahun wants to work and improve his life. He has no addictions and this will allow him to improve his life.”

“He has a beautiful goal. He has no addictions and this will allow him to succeed where others fail.”

“We have the same idea. He will find work because he wants to work and there is nothing standing in his way.”

Particularly Tilahun’s avoidance of chat and alcohol was cited as evidence of his good character and ability to find work in the future. As I noted in chapter 3 chat plays an important role in adult critiques of the younger generation. Responses in this exercise reveal that some unemployed youth held the belief that chat was responsible for unemployment. If chat were absent then a young person would naturally find work and lead a good life. The moral evaluation was based on consumption and not on one’s working behavior. Most unemployed youth felt that he would be respected in his neighborhood and thought to be a “good kid” (*tiru lij*), but some remarked that although Tilahun was definitely a good person others might assume that because he was unemployed that he was a “duriye”. This appears to reflect the tension surrounding moral evaluations of youth described in chapter 3. Even for those young men who did not chew chat, their employment status and presence hanging out in public areas defined

them as duriye. This tension sometimes produced the moralizing discourse described above as unemployed youth sought to distinguish themselves from others.

In contrast, many working youth were very critical of Tilahun:

“I don’t support this sort of person. He doesn’t have work and he is a burden on his family. You don’t find this sort of person in our neighborhood. What is the use of playing sports? He has to do something to earn money. We don’t like this kind of person in our neighborhood. He won’t get work because he has no habit of working. He just wanders around with no purpose.”

“Just waiting for work is not good. Everyone would like to have government work, even me, but just waiting is not a good plan. I don’t want to spend time with this type of person.”

“Playing sports is a waste of time. Tilahun could be using that energy for work instead of being a burden on his family. He has no experience of working and if he gets a chance he won’t know how to use it.”

For the most part working youth gave very little attention to Tilahun’s lack of chat and alcohol consumption. Instead they focused on his dependence on his parents. They argued that this was particularly problematic because his parents were poor and should not be forced to support someone of Tilahun’s age. They questioned where he was getting money from in order to attend videos or wear nice clothes. In this sense working young men evaluated Tilahun in terms of his economic relationship with others while unemployed youth focused on his consumptive behavior. To some extent both of these evaluations of Tilahun were relationship-based. Working young men were critiquing

Tilahun for his lack of independence. Tilahun should be able to pursue the leisure activities of his choice without relying on his parents. The support of the unemployed for Tilahun was largely based on Tilahun conforming to basic social standards of what was good and bad. Tilahun avoids bad things (chat) and wants good things (government work) and therefore he is a good person.

The same contrasting systems of value may be illustrated through my case studies of working youth. To varying degrees Afwerk, Getinet, Siraj, and Kassahun had low statuses due to their occupation. While Afwerk's lifestyle certainly decreased his status, many people perceived this behavior as being an intrinsic part of working in a lower occupation. Regardless of their actual behavior it was thought that people performing menial labor on the street were likely to chew chat, drink excessively, and generally be dirty. In chapter 3 I argued that all young men could potentially be classified as "duriye." Low-level workers were even more likely to be given this label. Even young women who did not adopt any of the other practices associated with duriye sometimes faced this label because of their occupational status. A good example of this is a young woman who was part of a team of women who worked as shoe shiners. By all accounts these were the first women in Jimma to ever work as shoe shiners. Although their occupations were unprecedented, by local moral standards their behavior was exemplary. All were religious, polite, and used their income to support their families. However, this woman still complained that in her neighborhood people called her a duriye after she began shining shoes. Her occupation determined her character regardless of behavior and to an extent this was true of all low level workers.

In interviews most working young men claimed that they did not experience significant mental distress due to their employment. It appears that this was partially due to the construction of a set of values concerning occupation that were distinct from their community. In the case of Afwerk he had separated himself from his community at a very young age and social norms and judgments had little importance for him. Afwerk dropped out of school in the seventh grade. After briefly attempting woodwork, in his own words he became a *duriye*<sup>2</sup>. He left home and for the next three years he lived on the streets or in hotels, traveling through the small towns surrounding Jimma and making money through theft. “Thief” is one of the worse insults in Ethiopia. While a known thief may not necessarily be physically removed from a community he or she will lose any sense of belonging. After living the life of a *duriye* for three years Afwerk returned to his mother’s house and began working as a shoeshine before engaging in bicycle repair. It was very difficult for him to reestablish his relationship with his family and neighbors in the community. Eventually people observed him working and that his behavior was changing. At that time he did not stay out at night or drink heavily. People were surprised to see him acting like this and trust was built slowly. Although people may no longer have viewed him as a criminal it was impossible for him to ever fully reintegrate himself into the community.

To some extent Afwerk no longer belonged to the society in which he lived and this allowed him to engage in a number of unique activities. Drinking in public was one. Afwerk also took his dog for walks, he shared cigarettes with madmen, and he wore some of the strangest haircuts I have ever seen. In one case when he shaved off everything

---

<sup>2</sup> This is one of the rare situations when one refers to himself as a *duriye*. In this case, by associating past behavior with being a *duriye* Afwerk implies that in the present he is not a *duriye*.



except for a square of hair on the back of his head (a style he claimed to have found in a book of “African” hair cuts), a passing police officer took him to a barber and forced him to shave his head completely<sup>3</sup>. Afwerk had very little regard for what others thought of him, as long as he was able to earn enough money to enjoy his life. He developed his own standards of moral evaluation that reversed the relationship between cleanliness and prestige described in chapter 5. He was very critical of unemployed young men and would mock the pride they took in their clean clothing. He described how they all owned one outfit that they would wash once a week and then take care not to soil. Afwerk argued that this sort of person does not look like he wants to work and no opportunities will come his way. In other words, the cleanliness that was a source of prestige for others was negatively evaluated by Afwerk. For Afwerk, the stigma that accompanied his occupation and lifestyle was not an issue because it did not prevent him from working, chewing chat, and drinking honey wine.

A different form of deviancy came from youth like Getanet who took a leading role in developing what might be called “urban youth culture.” On one occasion when I visited Getanet he had his hair styled into an elevated peak with a big orange stripe running down the middle. He was wearing a grey suit with giant lapels that set off his hair nicely. Getanet always had the latest European soccer jerseys that were very popular among young men. His devotion to European soccer was so great that he named his son Henri after the famous French player. Getanet’s fashion and dedication to soccer definitely separated him from the norm. While Afwerk’s deviant behavior was seen as crude or dirty, particularly among youth Getanet’s style was admired and even imitated.

---

<sup>3</sup> Weiss (2005) offers a similar description of hair styles as a source of conflict between young men and authorities in urban Tanzania.

Most young people were interested in international soccer, fashion, music, and films but did not pursue this passion to the same degree as Getanet. Cultivating a more pronounced youth style was common among young men who were involved in disseminating international and local popular culture. While these youth did not work in prestigious occupations, at least among other youth there was something to be admired in their lifestyle. Getanet may not have cultivated an identity that brought respect from adults in a position of power, but by referencing valued international symbols he was able to instantaneously win prestige among his peers. He also controlled the distribution of style among other young men through his position at a high-end barbershop. By accessing prestige through a style that referenced international popular culture some working young men were able to avoid much of the fear and stress experienced by other youth in relation to low status work.

Urban youth culture was not isolated to working youth and not all working youth participated in it, but it did provide a realm associated with an alternative set of values that enabled young men to access status regardless of their occupation. Youth culture was not only defined through consumption. Particularly young men who were skilled at performing this culture were said to speak an “*arada qwanqwa*.” *Qwanqwa* is language and *arada* means something that is elevated or held above others. The *arada qwanqwa* consisted of various words and phrases, many borrowed from Arabic or English, that were mixed into standard Amharic. While some terms like “*arreef*,” meaning “cool” (in the western slang sense) were commonly used and known by many adults, special terms for things like money and food were isolated to young men. Fluency in the *arada*

qwanqwa did not necessarily bring prestige, but it helped to mark out a social sphere in which a particular set of values persisted.

Weiss (2005b) also describes an urban youth culture in Tanzania that surrounded institutions like barbershops. While Weiss does not examine the economic implications of this culture it appears to be similar to the Ethiopian case in that it provides an alternative source of value and prestige. It is interesting that young men in Jimma did not appear to engage in youth culture to the same degree as young men in Arusha. Weiss describes young men adopting identities and attitudes through the consumption of popular western rap music. Ethiopian youth were also very interested in western media but they did not generally appropriate narratives from this media in order to conceptualize their own life. As noted in chapter 3, young men did not valorize the identity of a *duriye* that adults often associated with youth culture, and did not see themselves as engaged in a “thug life” that was associated with “the streets.” Young men like Getanet were able to access status within youth culture but there was no attempt to construct this culture as oppositional to society as a whole.

Kassahun provides another example of the different manner that the interrelationship between one’s values and engaging in low status work could function. Kassahun’s decision to devote his life to business came at a very young age. The economic success of Kassahun’s siblings meant that working was not an economic necessity, but he had a love for profits and selling. The narrative of starting small and gradually reinvesting one’s profits until reaching a position of wealth and power was extremely attractive for him. In discussing his life each decision was portrayed as a step towards something bigger and better. He started by selling fruit at school and he used his

profits to buy a goat. He eventually sold the goat and used that money to buy the supplies necessary to start shining shoes. He also earned money from doing contract work for the government and combined this with his shoeshine profits to purchase and stock his portable shop. In contrast to youth who prioritized the relationships surrounding a particular occupation, in Kassahun's narrative the end result was always given precedence to the means by which it was achieved. Any unpleasantness associated with work was worth the cost if it resulted in progress. When I asked Kassahun about other youth who would never work as a shoeshine or sell small items on the street for fear of what others might say about them, he acknowledged that this attitude was common. However, he argued that these youth would never amount to anything. Maybe he would hire them someday to open the gates to his compound when he drove up in his car. Kassahun's ability to set the past behind him and enjoy his current status was very apparent. Although he had been a shoeshine just three years before, when I met him he would never shine another person's shoes. In fact it was common for him to have his expensive leather boots shined while he sat waiting for customers. By constructing a narrative surrounding work that focused on the future instead of the present Abiot was able to endure the social stress that often accompanied working in a lower occupation.

Siraj lacked the distinct value system that I have described in relation to Afwerk, Getanet, and Kassahun. Instead, he used migration as a strategy for coping with the low status of his work. Siraj's decision to move to Jimma was not because he could not find work in his hometown of Kombulcha, but that he did not feel comfortable working there. In addition to the discomfort of being seen in a low status position by friends and family, there was less of an incentive to work because he could always rely on his family for

support. “In Jimma I have to work. There is no choice. If I do not work, how will I eat? For me it is better here,” he explained. By separating himself from his family he was able to force himself into the working life and once that transition had been made there was no turning back. While Siraj admitted that if he had stayed at home he would probably be unemployed he was still very critical of youth who made this decision. “They are just boasting,” he argued. “They don’t want to work on the street.” Working with a group of young men who shared a similar background and choices regarding occupation also made it easier for Siraj to ignore the stigma that was attached to his work.

Unlike the others, Siraj’s attitude about employment did not involve a different set of values. Siraj still adhered to basic social standards of morality in terms of dress, religion, and general behavior. His only aberration was his choice of occupation. As discussed in chapter 4 on aspirations, Siraj was still very much attached to local notions of success and progress, and he applied these to his own life. His adherence to these values caused him to evaluate his own life in negative terms, probably more so than the other working young men who were primary informants. That he felt the need to leave home in order to work reveals that Siraj was strongly motivated by *yiluñña*, or fear of the judgment of others. While spatial distance from his primary community in Wollo helped to alleviate this fear it was clear that he still felt the stigma of his occupation. He was sensitive to the occasional insult and the way he was viewed by others. While his acceptance of these social standards helped him to conform in other ways it also instilled him with a degree of anxiety that he had to struggle with on a day-to-day basis.

While fears concerning the social implications of engaging in low status employment prevented many young men from working there were clearly exceptions to

this dynamic. The discourse surrounding low status occupations that I describe in chapter 5 comes primarily from unemployed youth. Kassahun, Getanet, Siraj, and Afwerk reveal the variation in how young men experienced low status employment. In some cases like that of Siraj the low status brought on a considerable amount of distress and forced him to migrate a long distance from his family in order to work. For Afwerk and others like him low status was not a cause of worry on a day-to-day basis. However this social distance also meant that Afwerk had fewer people to call on if he was in need of significant help. For different reasons, Kassahun and Getanet also seemed relatively immune from a fear of what others might think of them. While the values of working young men cannot be summarized with neat categories, they all deviate from social norms defining good and bad work. This deviation is the key to the ability of these young men to work in low status occupations without complaining of mental stress.

### **Conclusion**

I am not arguing that there was necessarily a causal relationship between occupational choice and values concerning occupation and status. The values of youth “fit” with their occupation in a way that stabilized the relationship between economic behavior and its consequent status implications. The social evaluation attached to unemployment and lower forms of work created the potential for mental distress on the part of young men. Working young men separated themselves from communal status evaluations and created a counter-discourse that valued different combinations of economic independence, urban youth style, and progress. This enhanced their ability to work in a low status occupation and earn an income without suffering large degrees of

mental stress. Unemployed youth were invested in communal notions of status and therefore feared working in lower occupations but experienced little distress at being economically dependent on others. These values encouraged them to remain unemployed and prevented them from accessing money through work.

The argument I have developed in this chapter is similar to perspectives associated with economic substantivism. I have argued that particular types of economic behavior are associated with systems of value. This type of argument has been rightly critiqued for being overly deterministic and leaving little room for change. Values and economic behavior fit together so that they appear to endlessly reproduce each other. The detailed descriptions of working young men that I have offered above are important because they reveal the variation in values that exists within a given space and time. Variation in terms of economic behavior was based not in class but in values concerning status. Working youth had similar class backgrounds to the majority of unemployed young men, but they differed in terms of their evaluations of the social relations surrounding different forms of work. This variation is so important because it provides the stimulus necessary to account for change over time.

In relation to economic change, Bourdieu claims, “Everything suggests that an abrupt slump in objective chances relative to subjective aspirations is likely to produce a break in the tacit acceptance which the dominated classes – now abruptly excluded from the race, objectively, and subjectively – previously granted to the dominant goals, and so to make possible a genuine inversion of the table of values” (1984:168). I have argued that “objective chances” for youth to fulfill their aspirations had decreased due to the proliferation of education and reduction in public employment. It would seem that in the

case of urban Ethiopia there has been no “inversion of the table of values.” Lower class youth continue to have values that support their aspirations to government employment. The divergent values of working youth are not necessarily related to changes in the opportunity structure. Although the attitudes of the technical students described in chapter 5 were related to economic shifts, the values of working youth appeared to be based primarily in their particular life histories. The lives of working young men demonstrate the potential for variation and change that always exists, even without broader structural shifts.

Regardless of the root causes behind variation in values, it certainly placed working young men differently than unemployed youth in relation to processes of stratification. In the following chapter I examine the contrasting value systems of working and unemployed young men further. My analysis of occupational status provides further evidence for a critique of material rationalism that has been well established within anthropology. Although it is clear that economic behavior is motivated by values that are not related to maximizing material goods, alternative means of assessing stratification have not been well developed. I work towards this goal in chapter 7, by examining the multiple status hierarchies that exist in a society and how stratification may be conceived of in non-material terms.



## **Chapter 7: Patterns of Reciprocity and Hierarchies of Status**

In chapter 5 I examined the values that motivate status judgments in relation to occupation, and in the following chapter I explored how those values impacted occupational choice. The employment status of young men was intertwined with specific patterns of reciprocity, which in turn shaped evaluations of status. In this chapter I explore the different sharing behavior of working and unemployed young men, and the implications that these patterns had for the construction of status. This exploration provides an opportunity to further examine the lifestyles of young men. For working young men relations with others were essential for their economic success. Relationships were also economically important for unemployed young men, but these relationships were highly marked by tensions surrounding dependence. Particularly as young men grew older their continued dependence on their parents developed into an often unspoken, but clearly present source of conflict. While sharing among young men was idealized as being a simple process in which wealth is redistributed on the basis of need, an examination of conflicts surrounding sharing reveals that reciprocity between friends was also fraught with tension. It is these cases of conflict and tension that reveal underlying values supporting patterns of reciprocity and their relationship to hierarchies of status. In the end I argue that the variable ways that reciprocity functions to produce and constrain relationships among young men provides insights into the construction of multiple hierarchies of status.

In this chapter, I engage with theories of exchange that have emerged out of anthropology. In the previous two chapters I have developed the argument that young

men's behavior was often guided by values that were not associated with economic rationalism. However, the fact that young men did not necessarily seek to maximize material goods does not imply that inequality and stratification were not present. Analyses of gift exchange offer the basis for rethinking stratification in a way that is not necessarily materially based. In particular, I build on the work of Marilyn Strathern in order to clarify the manner in which stratification may be conceived of in terms of social relationships. I argue that the ability to construct one's self through social relationships constitutes a distinct source of inequality.

This is also an important step towards my goal of querying theories of neoliberal capitalism that I discussed in the introductory chapter. Analyses of wealth in people/wealth in things and gift exchange draw attention to the manner that stratification is often constructed on the basis of local dynamics. Rather than assume that inequality may be conceived of in terms of processes associated with neoliberalism, I argue that difference is based in local values surrounding social relationships and the construction of the self through reciprocal exchange.

### **Relationships, Reciprocity, and Accumulation**

The concrete implications of hierarchies of status can be further understood by examining processes surrounding reciprocity. Sharing is both a sign of events that have occurred in the past and expectations for the future. It is a process that redistributes possessions in a manner that may have implications for one's relationship to the total social product, and one's future position within the process of production. Sharing is especially relevant for the comparison that I am exploring between working and

unemployed youth. Working and unemployed youth were involved in distinct forms of sharing relationships that influenced the manner that gifts were given and received. An examination of sharing provides a much more complicated understanding of status based inequalities. Although I have argued above that working youth were stigmatized, this did not prevent them from participating in some relationships that were unavailable to unemployed young men. In this sense, status differences were related to different styles of sharing that have implications for both status and class based hierarchies.

The notion that aspirations are attained through social relationships is common in Ethiopia and is expressed in the Amharic proverb, “*sew be sew teshome*,” meaning that one person improves through another person. As I discussed in the introductory chapter, within Africanist anthropology, power has been conceptualized in terms of the interconnections between social and economic relationships, or wealth in people versus wealth in things (Guyer 1993). The wealth in people/wealth in things model for power assumes that social and material wealth are inseparable. Individuals invest in social relationships in order to accumulate things, and in turn things are invested in social relationships. Although this model was originally developed based on the economic and political conditions of rural Africa (Fallers 1966; Goody 1971, 1976) it has been successfully applied in urban areas (Barnes 1986, Hart 1975). Sharing relationships engaged in by working youth appeared to follow this model, but relationships among unemployed youth were distinct in that they did not directly facilitate the accumulation of material wealth. I argue that the literature on gift exchange (Gregory 1982, Mauss 1990, Strathern 1988) is useful in exploring this distinction between the sharing behavior of unemployed and working young men.

Although I argue that unemployed and working youth engaged in different types of sharing relationships, my intent is not to draw a rigid boundary between money from work and money from gifts. In contrast to Sharon Hutchinson's analysis of exchange among the Nuer (1996), for urban youth money was not conceptualized as belonging to different categories depending on how it was accessed. Differences in sharing were based on the social dynamics surrounding particular occupations. In terms of relations of reciprocity it was not so much money from gifts that was different from money from work, but workers who were different than the unemployed. In the same manner that things have social value that goes beyond the labor that has been invested in them (Appadurai 1988), occupations produce identities in a way that is independent of their position in the process of production. The difference between working and unemployed youth was not simply that one worked for money while the other did not. The relations associated with particular occupations were bound up in valuations of high or low status, meaning that occupation was inseparable from patterns of reciprocity and other aspects of social life.

### **Gift Income**

I use the term "gift income" in order to represent the monetary value of gifts. I am primarily contrasting gift income with income from work, which is received in a more or less direct exchange for one's labor. While gifts are linked with relations of reciprocity, unlike income from work there is no assumption that they are given or received directly in exchange for labor. While *sitota* is the Amharic word for gift, *gibza* (literally invitation), is perhaps a better equivalent for gift income because its use is very

flexible. A gibza may include a present, purchasing a meal, telling a good story, playing music, and many other types of offerings. “Gift income” represents the monetary value of all of these invitations and includes cash, meals or drinks, or any other material item that is thought to be given freely. In-kind gifts are measured based on their value in birr. Distinctions between cash and in-kind gifts depended on the context in which they were given, and this will be delineated as I progress. The most common types of in-kind gifts were invitations for coffee, alcohol, meals, and chat and if young men received cash it was generally directed towards these items. I have translated these items into cash values because in general to receive a meal did not have a significantly different meaning than to receive chat. Both types of gifts served a similar social function. That said, a gift with a greater cash value (for example a bottle of beer instead of a coffee) had a greater impact on relationships and therefore translating gifts into cash does provide a means of quantitatively and qualitatively comparing different levels of sharing. There were forms of sharing like offering services or advice that are not easily translated into a cash value, and these will be assessed through an analysis of their significance for building relationships and accessing income or other desired goods.

### **Working Youth: Sharing and Accumulating Profits**

For working youth the bulk of gift income did not come from their parents. Most working youth did not live with their parents, and those who did were for the most part economically independent, only returning home to sleep and taking their meals outside the house. Both in the short and long term, *zemed* relationships were far more important for working youth. *Zemed* formed a blurry social category that generally encompassed

biological kin and close friends. Levine (1965:77) simply defines zemed as “close ones.” All biological kin that one is acquainted with were considered to be zemed. It was sometimes argued that friends should not be referred to as zemed but in popular usage this was common. One of the means by which a friend (*gwadeñña*) was differentiated from zemed was by the level of support that he or she was willing to provide. For young men a non-kin zemed was usually someone who could be called on for a gift or a loan of a significant sum of money. For women who generally did not have access to cash, providing help with domestic responsibilities was important. Especially someone who could be counted on to help with the extensive preparation that was required for a celebration or a funeral was considered to be zemed.

In addition to material support, in order for non-kin to be considered zemed, a long period of time was required. Activities that were helpful in forming zemed relationships included working together, eating together, passing holidays together, and living in the same neighborhood. Young people often explained that their age had prevented them from having the time necessary to develop as many zemed as their parents. Although youth did not directly mention this, an additional factor appeared to be shifts in the nature of urban life. Among adults close relationships were often a result of having attended school together. Youth did not emphasize attending school as a means of forming zemed relationships, and sharing a common neighborhood was far more important. At the time of my research the number of students in a grade ten classroom was usually close to eighty and even higher at lower levels. For earlier generations this number was far lower and especially those who had completed secondary school together had a close bond. The density of urban life had increased and close relationships with

peers appeared to be less frequent. Both young men and women claimed that it was not common to have more than three or four zemed, outside of one's biological kin.

Among working young men, most of one's valuable zemed relationships were formed through the process of work. These relationships were generally with other working youth and adults. Both of my informants who worked at video houses had very close relationships with the owners. They were the same age as the owners and both of them would describe themselves as friends, or because of their closeness, zemed. Their relationships were also marked by a particularly high level of flows of things and services between them. Yosef, a young man discussed in chapter 5 who worked as an assistant at a video house, selling tickets, making advertisements, and monitoring the audience, did not receive a regular salary. Instead he would appeal to the owner of the video house, Bekele, whenever he had a particular need for money. Bekele would also frequently invite him for coffee, chat, or meals. The lack of regular payment created a dynamic similar to a family business in which labor and payments were given because of a personal relationship and not because of a contract between worker and owner. This was important for Bekele because it allowed him to invest more trust in Yosef. The nature of the work meant it would have been very easy for Yosef to pocket small amounts of money from ticket sales, but he did not do this because it would have been like stealing from his zemed. Fostering a zemed relationship was one means of creating the trust necessary to run certain types of businesses in the informal economy.

Teddy offers another example of the role of zemed relationships among working youth. Teddy translated Indian films from Hindi to Amharic. A number of youth in Jimma claimed to perform this service but Teddy was known to be the best. In the two years that he had been living in Jimma he had established a reputation that drew crowds of young customers from neighborhoods throughout the city. Tesfaye, the owner of the video house where Teddy worked, recognized Teddy's value and paid him accordingly. Unlike Bekele and Yosef a regular system of payments was in place, but it was still necessary for Tesfaye to solidify his relationship with Teddy by providing him with regular invitations for meals and chat. Teddy was from Addis Ababa and Tesfaye also provided him with a level of social support that made up for his lack of family in Jimma. Providing Teddy with high levels of in-kind gift income (the highest among working youth in my study) ensured that he would continue to work for Tesfaye and bring him large daily profits.

Other youth workers received very little in terms of gift income but relationships with zemed were essential for their ability to work. This was particularly true of street workers who lacked a formal right to a place of work. Kassahun and Siraj were both dependent on permission from shop owners in order to access the space where they operated their trade. The owner of the café that Siraj sat in front of while selling watches would often stop by to visit, and Siraj would occasionally be invited to his home for holidays or other celebrations. While they clearly had a close relationship, Siraj was unhappy with his condition of dependence. He often complained that he could be asked to leave at any time. Despite their friendly relationship he did not enjoy being beholden to the owner of the café. Others like Afwerk were dependent on nearby shop owners to



watch their equipment while they took breaks. Afwerk also stored his tools in a shop so that he would not have to take them home every night. Street workers were also dependent on neighboring businesses for continued social and political support.

Although it was rarely enforced, working on the streets was technically illegal. Generally if there was no complaint from the surrounding business owners the violation was overlooked. Business owners could also step in if the police were harassing a street worker and vouch for his character.

Street workers would generally reciprocate the non-material aid that they received in a subtle manner. Occasionally they would participate in the general upkeep of the property surrounding their work place. For example, I once paid a visit to Siraj and found him and the other watch vendors putting in concrete in front of the café where they sold watches. Possibly more importantly, the presence of loyal street workers provided a certain level of security for surrounding businesses. Not only were they an additional set of eyes, they generally were well informed regarding gossip and rumors and could easily identify potential thieves.

The value of receiving social or political support from working youth varied with the individual. Support from someone like Afwerk may have done more harm than good. For more respectable workers like Kassahun or Siraj social support within the right circles of people did have some value. As I will discuss later in relation to religion, workers who demonstrated good business sense and a strong set of morals were the most likely candidates for receiving help from other business owners in expanding their business. While these youth may have only been able to offer limited support at the moment, they had the potential to become valuable allies in the future.

While working youth tended to be on the receiving end of the zemed relationships that surrounded the workplace, they were sometimes providers for zemed. For example Getanet, the barber described in chapter 6, had a brother learning in secondary school in another city. He frequently sent him money and occasionally gave small amounts of money to an uncle who lived in Jimma. This was difficult for him financially but he felt that he did not have a choice in the matter. It was his responsibility to help his family and to do otherwise would not feel right to him. Particularly youth like Getanet who had no living parents tried to provide some support for their family. However, the earnings of young workers were generally not adequate to provide significant help to zemed. Typically working young men were not able to give more than thirty birr per month to their families. Youth like Siraj who did not live near their parents would occasionally send money, but most gifts were reserved for rare trips home. During Siraj's first trip home after three years he spent 2000 birr he had saved on gifts for friends and family

Taddesse, a particularly enterprising young man who managed to advance from shining shoes to renting bicycles to owning a small shop in a matter of a few years, was able to provide consistent support for his zemed. His shop did excellent business and he was able to support his mother and three young men that he referred to as "brothers" although only one shared Taddesse's biological parents. Taddesse was also able to provide his brothers with work and they took over his old business of shining shoes and renting bicycles. While Taddesse's success was rare it does reveal that given the chance, some young men were eager to reverse the flows of social income between themselves and their zemed. In the last month of my research when Kassahun followed a similar path as Taddesse and moved into a full shop he also passed on his old business to a young

male zemed. Like Tadesse he continued to receive profits from the business and therefore trust was essential, but he was also providing a chance for a young man with an interest in working to move up the economic ladder. In doing this Tadesse and Kassahun were spreading their system of values to other youth. They financially rewarded other youth who were willing to do lower jobs like shining shoes, thus putting their values into practice and encouraging others to access money and the “good life” through hard work.

Both Tadesse and Kassahun were pious Orthodox Christians who did not chew chat and preferred to socialize with other Orthodox youth. In addition to helping youth who shared their interest in business, they supported practicing Orthodox Christians. In the case of working youth involvement in religion appeared to be an effective means of channeling the redistribution of wealth. Unlike unemployed youth, working youth had regular access to money and therefore it was useful for them to restrict many relationships while maintaining others. As other studies have described (Parkin 1972) religion enables the maintenance of some contacts while limiting others. The strong piety of Tadesse and Kassahun meant that unemployed youth would never ask them for money for chat or alcohol. In contrast a person like Afwerk with a known love for honey wine and chat would be an easy target for unemployed youth looking for a handout. At the same time that religion closes off some channels of redistribution it opens others. Religious piety enables the creation of a bond with older, more successful followers of that religion. In the same manner that Tadesse and Kassahun helped younger men who they saw as following in their footsteps, they had the potential to appeal to their seniors for assistance. It may not be coincidence that the three working young men who

successfully expanded their business during the course of my research were also the most pious individuals in my sample of ten.

The third young man who achieved this success was Siraj. Although he did not have family in Jimma it was clear that within the Muslim community he had developed a number of useful contacts. In contrast to most other working and unemployed Muslim youth in my study, Siraj wore a beard, which was a sign of piety among Jimma Muslims. He also attended the mosque daily. Walking down the street with Siraj it was common for him to stop and greet older Muslim business owners. This may be contrasted with other working youth, who were generally ignored by their elders. The utility of Siraj's contacts became apparent towards the end of my research when he took his business to the next level by purchasing a large amount of clothing and watches and moving to a rural area where goods could be sold at a much higher profit. In order to make this move he had saved money on his own but he also needed to ask friends for start-up capital. All of these friends were Muslim and they provided him with the money that he needed. The value of zemed relationships for working youth is not always reflected in their gift income that I documented with daily journals. In Siraj's case he received very few gifts on a day-to-day basis, but when he needed to expand his business he was able to quickly access close to 1000 birr.

Flows of social income between working youth and zemed served a number of purposes. For youth like Yosef and Teddy it was a bonus to their salary that implied an obligation to remain loyal to one's employer. Youth like Siraj who accessed workspace through zemed relationships, were dependent on zemed for their day-to-day ability to work. These same zemed relationships could be utilized at times of need to obtain capital

necessary to expand one's business. In the case of Kassahun and Tadesse supporting zemed who shared similar values enabled them to diversify their business and access income from multiple sources. The common theme in each of these cases is that mutually beneficial relationships were constructed with other entrepreneurs. These relationships followed a "wealth in people/wealth in things" model. By accumulating people (zemed) to aid in their business Kassahun and Tadesse were increasing their profits. As profits increased, wealth was distributed among one's zemed, often in a manner that would facilitate the accumulation of further profits. In the same manner, older, more established businessmen were receiving economic benefits through their relationships with working young men, and in turn they often provided support for working young men.

If working young men's occupations led to low status within certain spheres, it also promoted the development of positive relations in other areas. Other workers often positively evaluated occupations that were generally thought to be of low status. It is perhaps not surprising that sharing relationships among working youth and adult business owners were not directly conditioned by negative stigmas attached to youth occupations. As noted in the previous chapter, working young men often did not share widely held values concerning occupational status. Values that promoted economic independence encouraged working youth to develop alliances that would be effective for the accumulation of wealth. These relationships did imply a level of interdependence with others, but they also provided working young men with a means of accessing economic goods that could in turn impact their social position. In this sense it is useful to follow Ferguson's (1999) suggestion to analyze identity in terms of performance. Working

youth were not inherently of low status. Evaluations of their lifestyle/performance were relative to the audience. Within the right context the behavior of working youth was evaluated positively, thus generating social connections that had implications for hierarchies of both class and status. While some working young men did not see their work as a means of attaining their aspirations, as I will discuss in more detail in the following chapter, for others it created possibilities that would not have otherwise existed.

### **Unemployed Youth: Sharing Relationships with Parents and Zemed**

A comparison between total income (including gift income and room and board) received by working and unemployed youth is quite interesting. During the one-month period that I monitored their income, eleven of twenty unemployed youth received at least 70 percent of the average income for working youth ( $n = 9$ ; mean income = 457 birr/month), despite the fact that they were not working. Four unemployed youth had incomes greater than the monthly average for working youth. My sample of unemployed youth was selected with the intent of including roughly equal numbers of lower and middle class youth, and therefore it over represents the number of middle class youth in Jimma's population as a whole. However, it does reveal that primarily through gift income, unemployed youth from a particular background were able to acquire material goods roughly equivalent to that received by working youth.

I will return to this data on incomes in the following chapter. Although it is very interesting that unemployed youth of a particular class background had incomes comparable to working youth, I think it distracts from the primary contrast between

unemployed and working youth, which was expressed through status and sharing relationships. A simple comparison of incomes is not possible, primarily because giving and receiving among unemployed youth followed a very different pattern than among working young men. Income for unemployed youth was used differently. While working youth shared in a manner that appeared to offer economic benefits for both the giver and receiver, the benefit of giving to unemployed youth was not clear. Unemployed youth were not in a position to offer valuable economic assistance. Gifts received by working youth were frequently invested in one's business or were in the form of support for their ability to effectively work (for example access to workspace). In contrast, money received by unemployed youth was often shared with others and directed towards immediate consumption. In no cases did unemployed primary informants save money received from gifts for investment in a future employment opportunity. Many unemployed young men received substantial gift incomes and saving would have been possible, but it was not even voiced as a potential option. If accumulation of things and people were inseparable in the sharing behavior of working youth, the same cannot be said for unemployed young men. Reciprocity among unemployed young men did not appear to facilitate the accumulation of material wealth. I will investigate this contrast further after briefly describing the manner in which unemployed young men accessed gift income.

Among the unemployed the most important sharing relationship for accessing income were with one's parents and zemed. All but three of the unemployed primary informants in my study lived with his parents. Parents were at the base of young men's ability to exist without work because regardless of their wealth, they always provided

food and a bed to sleep on. One's parents were often a source of social identity as well, that facilitated or constrained potentially valuable economic relationships. Although youth discourse concerning dependence focused primarily on relations with one's parents, it was just as common to receive cash and other gifts from zemed. Zemed potentially provided the additional benefit of access to work and youth sometimes explained their unemployment by simply saying, "I have no zemed."

In general young men spent very little time at their homes and therefore direct interactions with parents were kept to a minimum. Around half of the unemployed youth in my study did not live with their biological fathers, and around one quarter did not live with their biological mothers. The little interaction that did take place between parents and young men usually occurred with one's mother. While young men did not spend a lot of time with their mothers, it was easier for them to have a casual conversation perhaps because of the greater time spent together during childhood. Relations with fathers were generally distanced. Men of all ages spent little time at home and therefore fathers and sons rarely crossed paths. Although they would acknowledge each other's presence it was not common to observe fathers and sons speaking directly to each other in a conversational manner. Simple questions or orders were possible but an exchange of ideas was rare.

The process by which unemployed young men received gift income from parents and zemed took a variety of forms. Some young men appeared to take every opportunity available to accompany zemed to the bus station. Before the bus departed their zemed would give them a *wichey* (departing gift, given by the departer), often of five or ten birr. Many young men were able to see off zemed up to twice a week. Visits to the homes of



zemed were not as common but if the host was wealthy it was expected that at the end of the visit he might give the unemployed visitor a small gift of money. Unemployed young men sometimes directly asked their parents for money as well, usually under the pretext of needing cash for an acceptable activity like watching a soccer match on digital satellite television. Once the money was received it would be spent almost immediately on chat, meals, drinks, or other items that could be shared with friends.

Although young women could potentially access opportunities for work or further education through parents and zemed it was extremely rare for them receive money that could be spent at their own discretion. In general young women were encouraged to stay in the home and therefore there was no need for them to have money that could be used for recreational activities in the city. On the other hand there was a sense that men need to be active outside of the house and therefore giving a young man five birr to eat breakfast was a means of encouraging him to leave the home and engage with others through the act of consumption.

Particularly in discussing relationships with their parents, the most common theme among unemployed young men was dependence. One of the first things young people wanted to know about life in the United States was if it is true that young Americans leave their home at the age of eighteen. The thought of leaving at such a young age was fascinating for many informants and they would explain to me that in their “culture” young people waited much longer to leave the home. In fact it was not uncommon for working youth or students to live independently beginning in their teens, especially rural youth who had moved to the city in order to attend school. Despite these

counter examples most unemployed youth claimed that it was impossible leave one's parents' home before the age of twenty-five.

Unemployed youth had a strong sense of ambiguity regarding their dependence on their parents. They insisted that their parents appreciated having them in the house. This was true even for older men who were working but living with their parents. Although a man in his forties who had not married was sometimes the subject of derisive gossip, it was generally agreed that he was doing a good thing by living with his parents. Working young men who elected to live on their own sometimes felt great stress regarding leaving their parents' home. One friend of mine in his late twenties rented an apartment of his own, but told his parents he was staying with friends in order to study and continued to spend at least one night a week at his parents' home. It was a great relief for him when his parents found out about his apartment through another source and he did not have to confront them directly.

Despite the culturally accepted model of living with one's parents until marriage, young men still expressed significant stress regarding their situation. Although direct conflict with their parents was rare, young men explained, "You feel something." The experience of long-term dependence on their parents was described as "difficult" and "stressful". In some cases youth reached a point where their relationship with their parents began to become strained. This was particularly true for young men who stayed with their parents until their late twenties and spent most of their time and resources on chewing chat. At the time of my research Alemu was thirty years old and had been unemployed for around five years. His mother was the owner of a small shop and she would give him two or three birr almost daily. He also occasionally received money

from his sister who worked at Jimma University. Despite receiving consistent economic support Alemu felt that in recent years his relationship with his family had changed.

“They don’t need me,” he explained. His family was willing to provide enough support for him to get by but they appeared to be unwilling to invest emotionally in his future.

Occasional tension with their parents did not prevent young men from continuing to rely on them for daily handouts in order to avoid working. Alemu made an interesting comment during an afternoon I was spending with him at the Hola Café, a chat house described in detail in chapter 3. Outside we could hear the sound of day laborers at a construction site breaking rocks for eight birr a day. Alemu pointed to each of the young men who sat chewing chat on benches lining the walls and claimed that they could all afford to be there instead of working because of their parents. Even if they did not receive money they always knew that they could go home to eat. They would never resort to working as a day laborer unless all other sources of support were exhausted. It seems that while a cultural model existed that allowed youth to depend on their parents, the boundaries of this model were continually being pushed by young men who remained unemployed for unprecedented periods of time. The subtle tension between youth and parents appeared to be gradually emerging out of a time period in which long-term unemployment had suddenly become the norm. At the time of my research the implications of these tensions for status differences between working and unemployed youth were unclear, but if and when the dependence of young men on their parents grows in significance, evaluations of occupational status may shift.

Sharing relationships among unemployed youth were marked by dynamics of dependence in a manner that did not exist with working youth. Unlike working youth,

the unemployed earned little income on their own, and therefore they were in a position of need, causing parents and zemed to feel obligated to assist them. The relations of dependence here can be understood partially in terms of the high levels of economic need experienced by unemployed youth. However, this does not fully explain the contrasting sharing relationships between working youth and the unemployed. Sharing was also very common between unemployed young men, and in this case both parties often had approximately equal need. As I will detail below, among peers sharing did not necessarily provide an economic advantage to either party. However, as I argue in the following chapter, sharing relationships did not always cross boundaries of class and neighborhood meaning that some young men were excluded from this seemingly equitable process. In the following section I examine the implications of reciprocity for the relationship between the giver and receiver.

### **Reciprocity Between Friends and The Importance of Relationships**

Although the ability to provide support, economic or otherwise, was often mentioned in discussions concerning friendship it was not the primary factor in defining a good friend. More frequently mentioned was the desire for a friend that would take one to a “good place” (*tiru bota*). This comment was related to both morality and success. A good place was generally associated with positive moral behavior. Activities associated with education were contrasted with those associated with sex or substance abuse. As this contrast indicates, morally positive activities like education were also thought to bring economic success. It was assumed that friends could help a person reach good places by setting an example for positive behavior. While these aspects of friendship

were certainly important, in keeping with the overall theme for this chapter I will focus on the redistribution of gift income among friends.

In the exercise that I discussed in the previous chapter in which youth were asked to evaluate different characters on their potential for friendship many youth were skeptical of befriending those who had “nothing to offer.” In some cases this took precedence over similar interests when evaluating an individual’s potential for friendship. Young men occasionally explained that they did not want to befriend those who “are like me” because there was nothing of value to be gained from them. A friend should have “use” (*tikam*) for one’s self. This benefit could be the ability to directly give cash, teach a skill, or provide access to work. For example, one young man commented that he would like to befriend a barber because then he would be able to get free haircuts.

Among friends, redistribution of wealth usually took place in the form of invitations. The activities that were associated with invitations were essential for building positive relationships. With the exception of wealthy university students from Addis Ababa, in Jimma these types of invitations were generally restricted to men. Partially because of a lack of disposable income and partially because of cultural norms regarding spending time in public it was very rare for two young women to visit a café together. In this sense the relationships that surrounded sharing were particular to young men.

In chapter 3 I described the hours of intense conversations and mental traveling associated with chewing chat. More mundane activities like drinking coffee at a café were also important. A café in urban Ethiopia is an oasis of tranquility within the chaos and dust of the city. For one or two birr it is possible to escape to a shaded table and

enjoy a delicious beverage. On a personal level I have always been struck by how streets filled with trash are also lined with so many well-maintained cafes. In comparison to other countries I have visited in East Africa, the number and quality of cafes found in urban Ethiopia is striking. To enjoy time with a friend and to be seen by others creates status on multiple levels. At a café conversation is enhanced and a positive relationship is produced. To visit a café or restaurant is also an act of conspicuous consumption. It was not uncommon for young men to linger for more than thirty minutes over an espresso. Seating at cafes was usually within public view, allowing the customer to see and be seen. It was an activity occasionally affordable by even the poorest members of my sample, enabling young men to both solidify and demonstrate their friendships.

In theory the distribution of invitations was based on one's ability to give and his friend's need. Depending on one's social network these types of invitations could be received once or twice a day, or less than once in a week. Not sharing what one had contradicted the definition of friendship and therefore it was clear that one who did not share was not a friend. If one person had money in his pocket today he would buy coffee for his friends. If the same person had money in his pockets tomorrow he would again buy coffee for his friends. Although in the following chapter I will argue that class influenced individual access to gift income, the social pressure to share among friends was thought to act as a leveling force.

While giving was generally conceived of as a freely chosen action from which one expected nothing in return, it was highly constrained along lines of gender. When a gift was passed from a man to a woman there was nearly always an expectation that an exchange was occurring, either at the time of the interaction or sometime in the future.

The man provided money and the woman provided intimacy that could take the form of sex, domestic help, or general affection<sup>1</sup>. The idea that either party might give freely to the other was not considered by most young men. The expectation that sharing between men and women was always self-interested combined with the general inability of women to access shared consumer activities meant that the process of producing relationships and status through sharing was highly gendered. Inviting a friend for chat, coffee, or lunch was a masculine activity in that it specifically produced relationships and status between men,

Sharing between men was thought to be based on the presence of a mutually valued relationship, but in practice it did not always occur so smoothly. During the month that I monitored the income of an unemployed young man named Tsehay, he won a small lottery. The lottery was sponsored by Pepsi-Cola and the prize was a bicycle. Well before the prize was received Tsehay had arranged a buyer for the cycle, and his friends eagerly anticipated their *finter*. *Finter*<sup>2</sup> is an informal word commonly used among young people to refer to a particular type of gift that is given to friends after one has acquired something good. It was explained to me that the word *finter* also describes the expansion of a spring after it has been released. Just as items that rest on the expanding spring are elevated, friends of an individual who has come into good fortune expect to benefit as well. The value of the *finter* depends on the value of one's good fortune. If one is wearing a new shirt for the first time then buying his friends a round of tea or coffee will probably suffice, but a bicycle that could be sold for five or six hundred

---

<sup>1</sup> Based on their monthly journals two of my unemployed primary informants actually received substantial gifts from their girlfriends. While other young men sometimes claimed that it would be shameful to receive a gift from a woman in practice both of these men were happy to accept gifts.

<sup>2</sup> *Finter* is an example of the *arada qwanqwa* discussed in chapter 6.

birr was thought to require a sizable finter. At the time that he won the prize Tsehay had been unemployed for around five years. He had an extensive social network and was never short on pocket money but he had not had a considerable amount of cash for a long time and he was looking forward to buying himself new clothes and shoes. He budgeted some of his money for the finter, and purchased lunch and chat for a group of his friends. The problem came when his friend Alemu, who is discussed elsewhere in this chapter, felt that the finter was too small and refused to accept it. Tsehay and Alemu were good friends but they did not speak for nearly a week as a result of this conflict. Eventually Tsehay purchased extra chat for Alemu and although this did not satisfy his demands he accepted the gift in order to preserve their friendship. On a much smaller scale these sorts of interactions took place everyday. In order to preserve relationships continual invitations were necessary and when it was felt that one had the ability to invite, but chose not to, a serious conflict could arise.

The pressure to invite and share with one's friends was especially problematic for working youth who had grown up in Jimma. Getanet and Afwerk were two examples of working young men from Jimma who had once spent large amounts of time with their unemployed peers. Their work meant that they always had money in their pockets and they were frequently the objects of small requests for handouts from their peers. Both claimed that nothing could be done about this. If a friend asked them for money they had to give it. Maybe if they were asked for two birr they would only give one, but they had to give something. To not give would lead to negative gossip. It would be said that they "did not eat with other people" (*ke sew gar aybelam*). They might not personally mind this sort of gossip, but certainly for their families it would be difficult. Especially for



someone like Getanet who was married, if he were to not share his wealth, his neighbors might not help his wife with day-to-day problems. It is interesting to note that while Getanet and Afwerk expressed little concern with the social pressures associated with working in a low-status occupation, the need to redistribute wealth to their peers was still felt strongly.

Flows of money from working youth to their unemployed peers did not always move smoothly. A bicycle repairman who worked on the same corner as Afwerk, often complained of the “duriye” who watched him work from the chat houses across the street. He claimed that when he was eating his lunch they would approach him and help themselves to large handfuls of injera. It appears that a behavior that would normally be extremely shameful (eating uninvited) was made possible due to the bicycle repairman’s relative wealth and possibly the low status of his occupation.

Although working young men did sometimes express annoyance with requests for money, in general they supported the value of sharing one’s wealth. On two different occasions Getanet told me a story about an altercation he had observed in one of the bars in the city center. A wealthy young man was out drinking late at a bar that was known to be popular with many of the rougher duriye<sup>3</sup> that lived in the city center. A duriye requested that the wealthy youth buy him a drink and he was refused. He repeated his request, but he was still refused. As the wealthy youth was leaving the duriye stabbed him in the back with a knife. The wounded young man was taken to the hospital and it seemed likely that he would die. Getanet explained that the wealthy youth would have avoided all of this trouble if he had simply bought the duriye a beer. Two or three birr

---

<sup>3</sup> As noted in chapter 3, although most young men could potentially be called duriye the term was often used to describe someone further on a continuum of negative social behavior than one’s self. In this case duriye is associated with petty crime and occasionally violence.

was nothing to him and now he might die or be permanently injured. The actions of the assailant were not necessarily approved of, but the point of the story was to illustrate the dangers of selfishness. Getanet argued that either the wealthy should avoid contact with the poor, or they should be prepared to share their wealth.

The atmosphere of the bar and the presence of alcohol were certainly factors that led to this confrontation and similar stories of violence in regards to sharing among youth were not common. That said, these types of stories are important for understanding the tensions that surrounded sharing and friendship. While youth narratives surrounding conflict typically focused on betrayals of friendship, this was inseparable from sharing. The conflict over the finter and the fight in the bar were caused by one individual having more than another and refusing to share. When individuals did not share, social pressure or in rare cases physical violence was employed in order to induce sharing. However, the pressure to share was only exerted in particular situations. In the case of Tsehay's finter, he won a large sum of money through a lottery, a source completely detached from social relationships or work. However, this money was perceived by his friends as belonging to all of them. By seeking to invest that money in himself, Tsehay was denying the presence of a relationship with his friends. The literal meaning of the word finter is useful here. To receive good fortune without sharing it would be like a spring expanding in a vacuum – physically impossible. The movement of goods from one person to another was thought to operate according to laws of physics in that each force created an equal and opposite force. To receive was also to give. Tsehay was not transferring the positive energy of his acquisition to others and was therefore denying the presence of relationships that had previously seemed natural. In critiquing Tsehay's behavior, his

friend Alemu drew attention to gifts that he had given Tsehay in the past as a sign that a relationship existed between them. Alemu was not demanding a particular sum of money, but that Tsehay acknowledge their friendship through sharing. The issue of ownership or rights to property was not relevant to this conflict. Instead it was a matter of maintaining relationships.

In the case of the bar fight there was no expectation that one should share with a stranger simply because he has the ability to do so. While Getanet felt the fight could have been easily averted by sharing, he did not argue that there was necessarily an obligation to share. In Getanet's telling of this story there was no notion that the wealthier young man had a right to his money because it had been earned with his own labor. The money was assumed to be communal as long as a relationship existed. In the absence of a relationship, physical force had to be employed in order to enforce sharing that was not socially obligatory. One of the interesting aspects of this story is Getanet's argument that the wealthy young man should not have entered the bar if he did not want to share. In other words, by entering the spatial and cultural environment of a bar the wealthy youth was opening himself to potential sharing relationships. The issue here is not simply redistribution of wealth but the relationships that redistribution implies. One is not expected to share with everyone simply because of a difference in wealth, to share is to have a relationship and the two cannot be considered separately.

### **Towards a Theory of Status Based Stratification**

In previous chapters I have argued that the economic behavior of young men is guided by the logics of both material accumulation and a desire to reposition one's self

within social relationships. Having examined contrasting patterns of reciprocity among working and unemployed young men it is now possible to better conceptualize stratification in non-material terms. Although in the following chapter I will argue that in practice hierarchies of class and status are inextricable from each other, theoretically separating between the two has analytic utility. It reveals the particular nature of status and how it may function as a source of inequality.

Literature on gift exchange clarifies the relationship between reciprocity, status, and stratification. Strathern treats gift and commodity economies as metaphors that are useful for conceptualizing different dynamics of exchange. While strict distinctions between economies cannot be made, it is possible to argue that social and economic relations are more or less influenced by the logic of gifts or commodities. As noted in the introductory chapter, analyses of gift exchange reveal that economic activity is often directed towards the accumulation of social relationships (Gregory 1982:51). Strathern (1988) argues that in the Melanesian context, social relations are intrinsically desirable, not simply for their utility in accessing material goods. In Charles Piot's (1999) examination of reciprocity among the Kabre in Togo, he follows Strathern (1988) in arguing that it is misleading to conceptualize people as individuals who *have* social relations. Instead the person *is* social relations, and cannot be conceptualized outside of these relations (1999:18). It is for this reason that Strathern claims that, "In a gift economy, we might argue that those who dominate are those who determine the connections and disconnections created by the circulation of objects" (1988:167). The circulation of objects is inseparable from the construction of social relationships. Therefore to exchange goods is to construct both relationships and selves.

Although Strathern uses the term “dominate,” it is not immediately apparent what this means. She provides a convincing critique of the application of class-based notions of stratification within a Melanesian context, but Strathern does not clearly develop an alternative form of evaluation. David Graeber (2001:39-43) explains that for Strathern value is identical to meaning and can be thought of as “meaningful difference.” Graeber writes that Melanesians, “assume that we are, before we are anything else, what we are perceived to be by others” (2001:39). This implies that value is always relative and continually changing with social context. An exchange is an action that takes on meaning within a larger system of categories. While it is possible to discuss the meaning of different actions, Graeber claims that there are no grounds for evaluating one action as better or worse than another. Ultimately for Graeber the utility of Strathern’s analysis is limited because it is overly specific to the Melanesian context, and it provides no basis for understanding the hierarchical evaluations that humans constantly make in everyday life.

I believe that my discussion of Ethiopian young men provides a useful complement to Strathern and potentially solves both of the problems that Graeber identifies. The Ethiopian case first reveals that Strathern’s argument is applicable within a variety of cultural settings, and second it provides further insight into how non-materially based stratification can be evaluated.

In discussing the production of pigs and gardens among the Melpa, Strathern states, “Work cannot be measured separately from social relationships.” Although urban Ethiopia is a markedly different context where capitalist relations of production are common, the notion of work as inseparable from relationships is clearly applicable. As I

argued in chapter 5, work is generally evaluated in terms of the way it situates one in relation to others. Young men avoid jobs that require them to subordinate themselves without an accompanying personal relationship. In this sense there is great utility in examining non-material forms of inequality that exist in economies that involve high levels of commodity exchange.

The significance of the Ethiopian case for clarifying Strathern's notion of non-material forms of stratification comes partially from the simultaneous presence of multiple hierarchies of status. Among working and unemployed Ethiopian youth, reciprocity was a key process in which relationships were constructed, and it is possible to examine distinctive patterns of sharing in order to assess status-based inequality. The sharing behavior of working youth closely resembled the wealth in people/wealth in things model. Working youth invested in relationships that facilitated the accumulation of material wealth and that was then often reinvested in relationships. Despite the negative stigmas associated with their occupations, working youth were often able to develop desirable social relationships with other entrepreneurs.

The sharing behavior of unemployed youth did not directly support the accumulation of material wealth. Although unemployed young men received large amounts of gift income, this was immediately redistributed among their peers through shared consumption. Reciprocity among unemployed young men was idealized in a manner that resembled the model described in chapter 5 associated with government employment in that giving was thought to take place on the basis of relationships, not the intent to accumulate wealth. Where working youth often supported zemed in a manner that provided advantages to their business, unemployed youth consistently argued that

giving should take place only because a positive relationship exists. To the extent that unemployed young men consistently followed this model among their peers they generated status for themselves. The lack of stigma associated with the unemployed lifestyle was in part due to enacting the model of exchange on the basis of relationships. However, unemployed youth were isolated from relationships with older entrepreneurs and businessmen that working young men often utilized, and in this sense their ability to expand social relationships was limited.

Multiple hierarchies of status may exist simultaneously and their relevance depends on one's particular social context. Working and unemployed young men operated within distinct but overlapping hierarchies of status that were directly related to their differing patterns of reciprocity. The expansion and contraction of relationships depended on context. Working young men and entrepreneurs accessed status by engaging in a process of reciprocity in which investing in social relationships facilitated the accumulation of wealth. For unemployed young men status was generated through giving to others in a manner that did not have direct implications for material accumulation. If, as Strathern and Piot suggest, the self *is* relationships, then the construction of the self varies with context. For working and unemployed young men their sense of personhood varied dramatically depending on who they were interacting with. Individuals were subject to both positive and negative evaluations that interacted with their ability to construct relationships.

The notion of the person as social relations implies that a status based inequality is one in which a person is prevented from actualizing the self through relationships in a desired manner. The existence of multiple hierarchies of status in the Ethiopian case

demonstrates that stratification still exists even when it is relative to context. It is possible for a person to simultaneously experience a positive and negative social evaluation. In this sense multiple selves exist that are differently positioned within status hierarchies. These selves are not simply meaningfully different, but may be evaluated as better or worse depending on their coherence with a system of cultural values.

A final note of qualification is that to different degrees working and unemployed young men engaged in similar sharing relationships. In practice and intent many relationships for working youth did not facilitate the accumulation of profits. Particularly working youth like Getanet the barber who chewed chat and spent his leisure time in the busy city center maintained a number of sharing relationships with unemployed and working friends and zemed. Working young men like Kassahun the shop owner actively avoided these types of relationships in the interest of saving money. Kassahun for example, only received 27 birr in gift income (excluding room and board) during the month I monitored his income. At the same time unemployed youth sometimes engaged in relationships that resembled the wealth in people/wealth in things model that enabled the accumulation of profits. Especially unemployed youth who lived in high market neighborhoods often received gifts from local merchants. In addition to occasionally performing odd jobs, the loyalty of unemployed young men was an excellent source of security from theft. In this sense, unemployed and working youth did not have completely distinct modes of sharing, but in general working youth adopted a model of accumulating things through people while unemployed youth invested in relationships for their own sake.



## Conclusion

As noted at the outset of this chapter the purpose for comparing the types of relationships engaged in by unemployed and working youth is to fully explore the implications of status. I have argued that social relations for working youth are shaped by the nature of their employment. As I described in chapter 5, due to their subordinate position in relations of exchange that lacked a corresponding positive relationship working youth were often evaluated negatively. However, working youth also participated in a number of patron/client styled relationships, usually with other entrepreneurs. These relationships were mutually beneficial in terms of accumulating wealth in a manner that resembled the wealth in things/wealth in people model.

In aspiring to government employment, unemployed youth were implicitly rejecting the forms of exchange and hierarchical relations associated with low status occupations. Government employment was associated with a redistribution of goods in which things are given and received because of the existence of a relationship, not in order to accumulate profits. Sharing among unemployed youth fit with this dynamic in the sense that gift giving was based in relationships that did directly serve an accumulative function as gifts were always immediately disposed of through shared consumption. Unemployed young men did not conceive of the possibility of saving money from gifts in order to invest in a small business or other means of earning income.

I have turned to analyses of gift exchange in Melanesia in order to better understand how status may be conceptualized as a distinct form of inequality. Particularly in the work of Strathern and Piot it is apparent that the self is constructed through social relations. This perspective is highly relevant for the Ethiopian case. The

contrasting ways of working and sharing between unemployed and working youth reveal that there is a cyclical relationship between status and one's participation within social relationships. Evaluations of status condition the manner in which one is able to interact with others and in turn these interactions shape evaluations of status. An individual is often embedded in multiple hierarchies of status, meaning that they may have numerous relations open to them in one area but experience highly constrained relations in another. Working youth had low status among most of the urban population, but their status was generally high in relation to other workers. The implications of these distinct but intersecting hierarchies of status for class-based inequality is explored further in the following chapter.

At the beginning of this chapter I noted that my analysis reveals the limits of theories of neoliberalism. The notion that stratification exists as differential abilities to construct one's self through relationships would be missed if one attempted to analyze inequality only within a context of neoliberal capitalism. Inequality takes on multiple forms and within diverse economies a variety of analytical approaches are useful. In this case analyses of gift exchange that have emerged specifically out of anthropology highlight the importance of relationships for understanding inequality. Stratification may be conceived of not only in terms of differential access to material goods, but differences in one's ability to participate in positively evaluated social relationships.

## **Chapter 8: Class, Status, and Inequality**

In this chapter I seek to understand the interrelationship between class and status based forms of stratification, and the importance of temporal and spatial context for shaping that relationship. In chapter 2 I explained that the overlap between ethnicity, class, status, and occupation has been broken down by recent economic changes. In the context of these changes young men's choice between working and not working was intertwined with values concerning status and occupation that were based on norms concerning positive ways of interacting with others. Those who chose not to work did so in part because of a fear of contravening local norms surrounding relations of subordination. Those who did work were often detached from these norms either socially or spatially.

In the previous chapter I examined how occupational choice played out in terms of the actual social interactions that youth engaged in. While working youth generally experienced low status, they were also involved in a number of patron/client styled relationships that facilitated their economic goals. Unemployed youth were more likely to engage in sharing relationships that were structured by a desire to accumulate social connections rather than material wealth. I argued that status based stratification can be conceived of in terms of the ability to construct one's self through social relations. In order to make this argument I found it analytically useful to artificially separate class from status.

In this chapter I put class and status back together. Participation in the sharing relationships that were essential for the construction of status was highly conditioned by

class. In this sense class and status are inextricable. I begin this chapter by developing a working definition of class for contemporary urban Ethiopia that can be utilized for understanding differences in access to economic goods. I examine the roles of ethnicity, religion, and neighborhood of residence in mediating class and argue that neighborhood is the most important of these three factors. Based on this detailed exploration of class, I investigate the intersections between class and status, and in doing so engage with much of the data presented in previous chapters. This analysis supports insights into the processes by which stratification is reproduced and subverted.

### **Changing Class Structure in Jimma**

At the time of my research, class, meaning shared factors influencing one's chances of accessing economic goods, was constituted by a complex combination of occupation, income, gender, and zemed. As explained in chapter 2 one of the foundations of class in urban Ethiopia has historically been occupation. One's occupation is a key determinant of both income and status, which in turn contribute to the acquisition of other economic goods (housing, private education for children, etc.). However, where the relationship between occupational status and income was rigid in the past, in the previous chapter I described "low-status" workers engaging in valuable relationships that could potentially lead to the development of successful businesses. In contrast to Shack's (1973) description of Addis Ababa during the reign of Haile Selassie, money could sometimes allow one to participate in relationships that went beyond the status associated with one's occupation. In turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Jimma, a successful business owner was on roughly equal ground with a government administrator in terms of

ability to exert his will in economic, social, and political domains. In this sense, one's class position must be assessed both on the basis of traditional occupational hierarchies and in terms of one's access to income within the contemporary economy.

Unlike Addis Ababa, in Jimma an upper class that was marked by ownership of multiple businesses, personal vehicles, and the ability to travel internationally did not exist at the time of my research. In terms of occupation and income the lines of stratification were not so different from the pre-Derg period described by Bjerer (1985) for Shashamene. Although differentiation occurred within these groupings, in general government workers of all types and medium to large business owners (restaurants, small hotels, large shops, etc.) formed a "middle class". Private employees, small-scale entrepreneurs (like many of the working young men in my sample), and petty traders generally formed a "lower class".

Bjerer has argued that gender was not a relevant factor for long-term economic stratification in urban Ethiopia because single women married after a short period of time, usually along ethnic lines. This was not the case at the time of my research. Women were often long-term heads of households. Women had far less access to high status or high income employment and therefore gender was an important factor in relation to class. Another problem with Bjerer's analysis of gender is that she does not consider the importance of women in shaping the economic status of a family. Even for women who were not economically active (many married women engaged in some form of paid work) the labor they provided was an essential factor in the reproduction of the household.

These three factors – gender, occupation, and income – were often intertwined. With some exceptions, the occupations associated with high status were also those that brought relatively high incomes and were usually available only to men. *Zemed* (see chapter 7 for an explanation of *zemed*) also influenced class, but had less of an overlap with the other factors. Because *zemed* is based on biological and social relationships it might seem that it would be intertwined with occupation and income. If one family member has high status employment he or she may distribute jobs and other goods among his or her family, thus causing all individuals within a network of *zemed* to have access to wealth and status. This was often the case, but the value of one's *zemed* was also frequently related to international migration. *Zemed* living abroad could provide large gifts that were often used to start businesses or fund a private education that would eventually translate into significant economic opportunity. There was some relationship between one's ability to travel abroad and other factors influencing class. For example, working as a government administrator would enable one to provide the financial and social assistance necessary for family members to leave the country. This was particularly true for upper class families primarily residing in Addis Ababa who could take advantage of social networks and the ability to offer large sums of money in order to arrange temporary marriages. However, in Jimma having *zemed* abroad was often simply based on chance, meaning that an otherwise lower class family could potentially have valuable *zemed* living abroad.

Together these four factors – occupation, income, gender, and *zemed* – combined to form something like a class situation in urban Ethiopia. Although they often overlapped in some cases a single factor was powerful enough to influence one's access

to economic goods. In the following sections I describe the implications of class for the sharing relationships that unemployed youth engaged in. It is the interaction between these relationships, class, and occupational choice that appears to have shaped the reproduction or subversion of economic stratification.

Rather than simply describe the dynamics of exchange as I have done in the previous chapter, my interest here is to analyze quantitative data concerning young men's gift income. Although I have argued that among unemployed youth gift income does not represent capital that can be invested in the accumulation of further wealth, gift income is still a useful indicator of desirable sharing relationships. To be involved in sharing relationships is to experience high status, and therefore gift income is a reflection of status among urban young men. In the analysis that follows I explicate the differences in access to gift income that existed among youth. Both class and neighborhood were major determinants of one's access to gift income and therefore also structured one's ability to participate in sharing relationships.

### **Class Background and Gift Income**

In the previous chapter I explained that unemployed young men's gift income is invested in social relationships, not the accumulation of things. However, this should not imply that these relationships are divorced from class. In many ways the flows of things between people are shaped by class, meaning that status and sharing relationships are inseparable from class as well. By demonstrating that a relationship exists between gift income and class, I will argue that the relationships formed and maintained by unemployed youth through gift exchange do have long-term implications for

stratification. In order to assess parental wealth and the value of one's zemed in relation to gift income I assigned youth ratings based on the following criteria.

#### Evaluating Parental Wealth

0 – No parents

1 – Only one parent present and extremely low support (for example, incoming from baking injera or domestic work)

2 – At least one parent present with low to medium ability to provide support (for example, private sector work, government guard, or retired with a pension,)

3 – One parent with good work (government administrator, teacher, successful business owner); or two parents with ability to provide low support

4 – Both parents present, one has good work and the other may provide low support

5 – Both parents have good work

#### Evaluating Zemed

- Siblings or Grandparents living in Jimma with quality work = 1 point for each
- Siblings or Grandparents living in Jimma with medium to low quality work = 1/2 point each
- Extended Family Relative (aunt, uncle, cousin, etc.) living in Jimma with high quality employment = 1 point if the relationship with the relative is felt to be close; 1/2 point if not
- Extended Family Relative living in Jimma with medium to low quality work = 1/2 point if relationship is felt to be close; 0 points if it is not



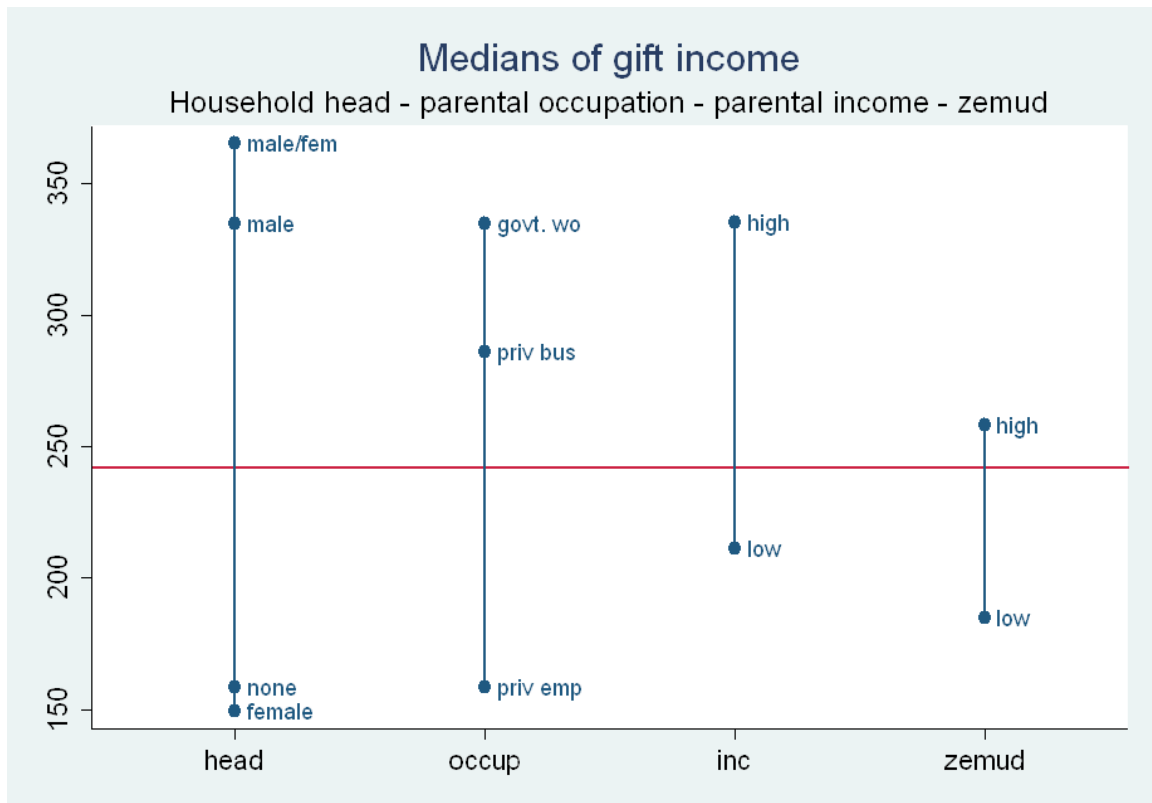
- Friends living in Jimma who can provide significant aid = 1 point
- Sibling living outside of Jimma with high quality work = 1 point if relationship is felt to be close; 0 points if not
- Extended Family Relative outside of Jimma with high quality work = 1/2 point if the relationship is felt to be close; 0 points if not
- Sibling living abroad = 2 points
- Relative living abroad = 1 point if the relationships is felt to be close; 1/2 point if not

In assessing occupation, I divided the parents of my twenty primary informants into three categories: government employees, private business owners (small shop owners, merchants, etc.), and private employees (in my sample these were day laborers and domestic servants). In terms of parental gender I divided youth based on the gender of their household head. I considered the household to be “male-headed” if the bulk of household income came from the father, and “female-headed” if the mother was the primary breadwinner. Households where both parents contributed equal amounts of income were considered “dual income.” In my sample, all female-headed families were led by single women, while only one male-headed family was led by a single man. The presence of a domestic partner is most likely related to the higher economic standing of male-headed families when compared to female-headed families.

There was a high degree of overlap in terms of wealthy parents, government employment, and male-headed or dual income households. Among youth with parental wealth ratings of three or higher, six of seven had parents who were government workers,

and six of seven were from male-headed or dual income households. All of these factors corresponded with high gift incomes for unemployed young men. Youth with low parental wealth ratings (n = 13) had less than 80 percent of the average monthly gift income of youth with high parental wealth ratings (n = 7). Youth whose parents were private employees (n = 6) and private business owners (n = 5) received 57 percent and 80 percent respectively of the average monthly gift income of youth whose parents were government employees (n = 9). In the most striking contrast youth from female-headed households (n = 7) receive just over 50 percent of the average monthly gift income of youth from male or jointly headed households (n = 12). A high zemed rating also corresponded with high levels of gift income. However, zemed ratings did not have a clear relationship with the other factors. The relationship of household head, parental occupation, parental income, and zemed to young men's gift income is summarized in the chart below.

**Table 1**



The manner in which different aspects of parental background were intertwined, but often distinct from zemed, in the production of economic stratification is best understood through individual case studies.

#### Habtamu – High gift income through zemud

Habtamu lived in Qottebe Sefer. His father was a retired police officer and his mother was deceased, giving him a parental wealth rating of two. Although Habtamu was of Kaffa ethnicity and nominally Protestant, these were not important aspects of his identity as he did not speak Kaffa or have any contact with his family living in that region, and he was not a practicing Protestant. From an economic standpoint the dominant feature in Habtamu's life was the presence of three siblings living in the United

States<sup>1</sup>. One had won the Diversity Visa Lottery and was gradually able to help the others move as well. Due to his extended family Habtamu had a zemed rating of 9 and the highest amount of gift income of any youth in my study.

During the month that I tracked his income Habtamu received 653 birr in gifts, 406 of which was cash, primarily from his family in the United States. Habtamu's access to cash allowed him to frequently invite his friends for chat, meals, and drinks. Many of his friends were from wealthier families or had well paying jobs of their own and they were able to return Habtamu's invitations.

After completing 12<sup>th</sup> grade Habtamu worked for over a year as a construction foreman before quitting because he disliked his co-workers. At the time of my research he had been unemployed for two years and did not appear to be actively looking for work. Although one of his sisters had used money from their family in the US to start a hair salon, Habtamu was not interested in starting a business of his own as he did not think it would be possible to generate enough income to significantly change his life.

Habtamu is a good illustration of the importance of having family living abroad, particularly for youth who lacked wealthy parents. Although family background may provide a slight advantage, for the most part winning the Diversity Visa Lottery was random. Having a family member in the states almost guaranteed economic mobility. In the past one's extended family tended to live locally, and the well being of one's extended and immediate family were inseparable. In other words, one would not have expected that a member of his extended family would have the opportunity for class

---

<sup>1</sup> I had the opportunity to spend a few hours with Habtamu's older brother in Atlanta. He lived with his sister and worked as a cashier at a gas station/convenience store. He explained to me that his "heart and mind" are in Ethiopia. He did not experience the constant need to support his family as a burden, but he did explain that he preferred to help them establish business opportunities so that they may sustain themselves economically.

mobility if his own family were not also wealthy. Habtamu represented an extreme with so many close family members living in the US (widely considered to be the most desirable location), but even youth with an aunt working in the Middle East stood to benefit economically. Of the eight youth with the highest zemed ratings, six had family members living abroad who contributed significantly to their gift incomes. In this manner zemed has become disassociated from parental background while still remaining a key factor in shaping class relations.

Kebede – Household head gender, occupation, and high gift income

Kebede lived in Mahel Ketema with both of his parents. His father was employed by the government at the city bus station and his mother occasionally earned money by baking injera for other families. His father earned the bulk of income for the family and therefore Kebede was classified as having a male-headed household with a parental wealth rating of two. Kebede was a practicing Orthodox Christian. His mother was Oromo and his father was Kaffa, and he had a reasonably sized extended family in the area that provided him with a zemed rating of four (roughly in the middle of my sample).

His father's job was to assist passengers with finding their bus, load cargo, and generally insure that the station was running smoothly. It was certainly not a well-paid or powerful position and it required that Kebede's father perform significant amounts of manual labor. Despite these drawbacks the job facilitated Kebede's father's ability to form social relationships with others. At the time of my research he had been working at the bus station for nearly thirty years. Busses were the primary means of transportation between cities and this meant that anyone economically or politically privileged enough

to travel regularly frequently passed through the bus station. Kebede's father's position afforded him ample time to meet travelers and gradually form friendships through repeated encounters. He was also able to bestow small favors on travelers. For example, he could reserve the best seats on a bus or advise travelers about which bus was scheduled to be leaving first. Kebede had five siblings and aside from meals and a place to sleep he received very little from his parents in the way of material support. While he received only 39 birr in cash social income he received 205 birr in in-kind social income (excluding room and board). A large amount of in-kind income was from friends of his fathers and reflects the economic value of a social network based in adult men. For example at one point during the month that I monitored Kebede's income, a friend of his father's visited and purchased multiple meals for Kebede, each valued at five to eight birr.

When my research finished Kebede had been unemployed for three years and his long-term chances of finding desirable employment were unclear. However, at least for the present, the gender and occupation of the primary wage earner in his household appeared to enable him to engage in desirable sharing relationships.

Berhanu – Household head gender, occupation, and low gift income

Berhanu, an unemployed young man from a female-headed household provides a useful contrast to Kebede. Berhanu lived in Qottebe Sefer. His father was deceased and his mother supported him and his siblings by baking and selling injera. Berhanu's parental wealth rating was one. Berhanu was an Orthodox Christian whose family traced

its descent to the Amhara region. He had many brothers living in Jimma, mostly employed at local garages, and his zemed rating was 4.

Berhanu's mother's occupation of baking injera was considered to be one of the worst forms of work, but it was one of the few means that older single women had to support themselves. Injera is baked over an open fire meaning that the work is hot and requires the inhalation of large amounts of smoke. Baking injera brought no regular contact with the community, outside of the women or children who would come to the house to make purchases. Gender roles reinforced the social isolation associated with Berhanu's mother's work. During my walks through the city I would frequently encounter Kebede's father, running errands or chatting with friends over coffee. It would not have been appropriate for Berhanu's mother to move this freely through public space. While she could have female friends over to her house for coffee, these women were of a similar economic standing, and this would not allow her to develop a social network with individuals wealthier or more politically powerful than herself. Furthermore, her friends were other older women and it was not possible for these women to have the sort of relationship with Berhanu that Kebede had with his father's friends. For an older woman to invite a young man for a meal would have been culturally inappropriate. Berhanu's cash gift income was almost the same as Kebede's. Over the course of a month he received 35 birr. However, while Kebede received 205 birr in in-kind gift income, Berhanu received only 9 (excluding room and board). This disparity was typical of young men with their respective differences in head of household gender and parental occupation status.

Like Kebede, at the time that my research finished Berhanu had been unemployed for three years and his prospects for the future were not clear. Berhanu occasionally did semi-skilled work for neighborhood contractors and he earned 39 birr during the month that I monitored his income. However, the type of work that Berhanu desired was not regularly available and it did not appear that these occasional jobs would expand into full time employment.

#### Ahmed – Economic success through unemployment

I have already described Ahmed in detail in chapter 2. His case demonstrates the manner in which unemployment could be a successful strategy for some middle class young men. His father was from the Wolo region and his mother's family was from the area surrounding Jimma meaning that Ahmed had extensive family support, which translated into a zemed rating of 6.5 (the second highest in the sample). Both parents were government workers and his family is classified as a dual income family with a parental wealth rating of five. As noted in chapter 2, Ahmed was well paid for the occasional work he performed for neighbors and friends, and also received a high amount of gifts income. During the month that I tracked his income Ahmed received 93 birr from work and the equivalent of 450 birr in gift income, including room and board. The 264 birr that Ahmed received in cash gifts indicates the importance of wealthy parents with a regular government salary.

Just a few months before I completed my research, approximately four years after completing secondary school Ahmed found a job at a photo processing shop. He found the work through zemed. Although it is unlikely that he earned much more than he was



already receiving in gifts, the job was in a clean environment, and working with modern technology provided a certain level of prestige. Given his education level this was a “good” job for Ahmed, and it is unlikely that he would have been able to obtain this position through his zemed relationships if he had accepted low status work during his extended period of unemployment.

Clearly class, as I have defined it, impacted unemployed youth access to gift income, and the ability to participate in desirable sharing relationships. In order to further understand the organization of sharing and relationships it is necessary to look more closely at different factors structuring friendship.

### **Ethnicity**

Particularly given the role that ethnicity has had historically in structuring stratification in Ethiopia that I described in chapter 2, one would assume that it would be relevant for young men in Jimma as well. Political and academic discourse concerning the 1991 transformation to a political system of ethnic federalism, has also contributed to the construction of ethnicity as the primary aspect of identity in Ethiopia. Ethnicity is clearly an important issue, particularly in regards to political power struggles, but its implications for social and economic relationships among young men in Jimma were ambiguous. Despite the occasional eruption of ethnic stereotypes in everyday conversation, ethnicity did not appear to influence gift income or one’s circle of friends.

Because of the ethnic diversity of Jimma and the small size of my sample it is not possible to analyze gift income among youth along strict ethnic lines. In fact, the majority of youth in my sample came from mixed ethnic backgrounds. However, if one

separates youth who at least partially traced their lineage to the historically dominated ethnic groups from the area surrounding Jimma (Dawro and Kaffa for my sample) and youth who were from the more economically and/or politically dominant ethnicities of Amhara, Gurage, Oromo, and Tigre the sample is divided evenly in half. Total gift incomes received by these two groups were almost the same.

This would appear to support the point that I made in chapter 2 that long standing ethnic hierarchies were being broken down during the post-1991 period. As explained previously, there are a number of reasons for this. One is a changing economy in which ethnicity is no longer a guarantee of opportunity. For example Habtamu, whose mother was Kaffa had a very high level of gift income due to the essentially random fact that his siblings had won Diversity Visa Lotteries and migrated to the United States. Other youth of Amhara ethnicity, like Berhanu, were the children of relatively recent migrants from the north lacking any significant ties to people of power in Jimma. Furthermore the recently implemented policy requiring fluency in the local language (Oromo in the case of Jimma) in order to obtain government employment meant that youth from Amhara or Tigrean backgrounds were less likely to have family employed by the government, thus breaking down one of their traditional sources of economic dominance. Also, as noted in chapter 2, an overall absence of desirable employment means that there are currently very few economic goods to be competed for.

Another factor in decreasing the importance of ethnicity for gift income was that it appeared to have almost no impact on friendship, which was a particularly important source of in-kind gifts. This is not to say that ethnic stereotypes and racism did not influence friendships. In Jimma, the Dawro and Yem were the objects of particularly

negative ethnic stereotypes. The terms Kulo and Janjero both have negative connotations and were used to refer to the Dawro and Yem respectively<sup>2</sup>. On one occasion I was drinking coffee at a café and interviewing a working young man. Two clothing vendors of Dawro descent walked into the café in search of customers. The young man who I was interviewing quickly identified them as “Kulo,” and loudly told me that they are a “bad race” (“*metfo zer*”) and come from the countryside into the city in order to steal. The clothing vendors laughed nervously and left. I was surprised by my informant’s behavior and asked how he felt about Dawro who had spent their entire lives in Jimma and spoke only Amharic. This question seemed to confuse him but he stuck to his point that all “Kulo” who come from countryside are thieves.

While these types of ethnic stereotypes did exist, in practice friendships were rarely formed along ethnic lines. Young men would most likely know the ethnic background of their neighbors, but it is unlikely that they would be able to determine the ethnicity of another young person without knowing his family. The majority of youth in Jimma were born in the city and with the exception of many Oromo, spoke only Amharic. Most, but not all, Oromo did speak their parents’ language, but the language they used with their peers was nearly always Amharic. Although many Ethiopians would argue otherwise, for the most part the different highland ethnic groups are not distinguishable from each other on the basis of physical features. While religion is an ethnic marker in some situations, in Jimma many individuals from historically subordinate ethnic groups belong to the historically dominant religion, Orthodox

---

<sup>2</sup> Kulo and Janjero were also used by many youth to refer to themselves and therefore were not necessarily considered to be insults. This may be contrasted with the use of the word Galla for Oromo, which would never be used in regards to one’s self and would only be uttered in front of an Oromo if the speaker’s intent was to start a fight.

Christianity. In many cases it would have been very difficult for youth to determine the ethnicity of their peers and even in cases where this was known it was generally not a common topic of discussion.

This situation may be contrasted with past generations. Groups of older men that I often spent time with tended to be ethnically homogenous. Among those who socialized with ethnically mixed friends, ethnic difference was a frequent topic of joking and discussion. For example a group composed of two Amhara and two Oromo men in their late-thirties who were sitting together drinking, might occasionally joke with each other by employing ethnic stereotypes, or on the part of the Amhara using the occasional Oromo word. While it would be surprising to have an encounter like this among older men that was unmarked by some sort of ethnic based banter, I did not observe similar discussions among younger men. It was common to find a mix of Amhara, Tigre, and Dawro youth sitting together chewing chat, but if they were conscious of their ethnic difference it was rarely expressed. In this sense, ethnic difference among youth was not a significant issue in relation to discourse or practice.

## **Religion**

In terms of identity and friendship among youth, religious difference played a larger role than ethnicity. Based on the national census, Jimma's population is divided roughly evenly between Orthodox Christians and Muslims, with Protestants making up a much smaller minority. However, in my research I consistently encountered more Orthodox Christians than Muslims. I frequently questioned youth and adults about this issue wondering if perhaps Muslims were less likely to be unemployed. While some

individuals argued that the census was incorrect others claimed that Muslims were more likely to be found in certain outlying neighborhoods where I was not conducting research. In the end my sample was predominantly Orthodox Christian and for this reason a breakdown of gift income on the basis of religion does not make sense. However, it is possible to analyze youth discourses and practices surrounding religious difference, and religion's role in shaping social networks.

Among the Muslim young men that I worked closely with religion was not a major source of identity. With the exception of Siraj, the watch vendor, Muslim youth spent most of their time with Orthodox Christians. For the youth I worked with, Muslim identity was always heightened during the Ramadan fast, but during the rest of the year it would have been very difficult to determine their religion without asking directly. The same was true for around half of the Orthodox Christian informants that I worked closely with. However, for many of the Orthodox young men and all of the Orthodox young women<sup>3</sup> who were involved in my research, religion was one of the defining characteristics in their lives. I only worked closely with one Protestant and for him religion was the primary aspect of his identity.

I have argued above that ethnic identity is less salient in the current generation. The same may be said about religion. A useful illustration comes from a funeral I attended for a young Muslim man in Qottebe Sefer, the neighborhood where I was residing. His family was not a member of the neighborhood iddir and therefore attendance at the funeral was not compulsory. At Muslim funerals the men and women mourn in separate areas but the general process of reclining on mattresses and socializing under a tent for a given number of days is shared with Orthodox Christians. When I

---

<sup>3</sup> I did not work closely with any Muslim young women.

arrived shortly after lunch the men in the tent had begun chewing chat and were separated into two groups based on age. It was very clear based on their dyed orange beards and round hats that the older men were all Muslim. I knew most of the younger men and they generally reflected the religious composition of the neighborhood – approximately two-thirds Christian and one-third Muslim. While the older men conversed in Oromo, the younger men spoke in Amharic. The young men commented that for them religion and ethnicity were not important. They could be together and chew chat because they were friends but this was not the case with the older generation. With perfect timing an older Orthodox Christian man from the neighborhood entered the mourning area and illustrated their point. He did not join the other older men on the mattress and instead sat on a bench near the funeral tent. Although he was greeted no attempt was made to include him in the conversation among the older men and he was not offered chat (it is unlikely that an older Orthodox man would chew). In this case it was clear that religious and ethnic boundaries were being broken down and young men were socializing on the basis of common interests and neighborhood.

However, for some youth religion was an essential aspect of identity. In the case of Christians, both Orthodox and Protestant, chat was forbidden and pious individuals would have been careful to visit the funeral tent in the morning before chat chewing became the dominant activity. Both men and women were open in explaining that they preferred to be friends with those of the same religion. For some a common religion was necessary for spiritual reasons while others argued that it was necessary to share holidays and other experiences together in order to build a strong bond of friendship. Their common avoidance of chat and worship of Jesus Christ should not imply that pious

Orthodox and Protestant Christians identified with each other. One young Orthodox woman explained to me that she would rather be around Muslims because Protestants are always trying change one's religion. This attitude was typical of both Orthodox and Protestant Christians and they did not see themselves as sharing a common religion.

I have argued elsewhere (Mains 2004) that in Ethiopia ethnicity, religion, and nationalism have been inextricably intertwined. Particularly among youth in an ethnically diverse city like Jimma these issues are very complex. In terms of creating social groups among youth, nationalism was not a primary factor and I will not discuss it here. Ethnicity and religion were related but it is very difficult to pull them apart. Muslims were primarily local Oromo. Orthodox Christians included Oromo from other regions, Dawro, Kaffa, Yem, Amhara, Gurage, and Tigreans. Among Orthodox Christians I did not observe any relationship between religious piety and ethnicity. It was just as likely that a pious Christian would be Dawro as it was that he would be Amhara.

Religious piety exerted a strong influence on the flows of gifts among unemployed young men. Unemployed youth were primarily receivers rather than givers of gifts and therefore economically it was better for them to create as many friendships as possible. The one Protestant young man in my study, Petros, is a good example of the manner in which piety constricted friendships. As discussed in chapter 2, Protestants in Ethiopia have been socially marginalized by both Muslims and Orthodox Christians. Most of Petros' time was spent at the Protestant Church and with other Protestant youth. I am not arguing that these contacts were more or less valuable than others but a small percentage of the population of Jimma was Protestant meaning that Petros' potential contacts were very few. During the month that I monitored his income, Petros received

only 27 birr in cash and 18.3 birr in in-kind gift income (excluding room and board). The fact that Petros was a Protestant perhaps exacerbated the impacts that religious piety would have had if he had been a Muslim or an Orthodox Christian, but this does not mean that particularly pious followers of other religions did not face similar constrictions of their social relations. Petros' case may be contrasted with Endale. Like Petros, Endale received very little support from his parents or kin. They also both lived in Mahel Ketema. However, Endale had a high level of gift income. Endale was an Orthodox Christian and did occasionally attend church, but this did not prevent him from chewing chat daily and spending time with anyone who shared his interests, regardless of religion. Endale's more inclusive attitude brought the benefit of receiving a large amount of gift income. During the month that I monitored his income he received 251 birr of cash and 150 birr of in-kind gift income (excluding room and board). Young men who were not pious were able to drink, chew chat, and engage in other leisure activities that opened up flows of income. In this sense flexibility in behavior and morals was a key quality that allowed unemployed young men to increase their gift income, and participate in sharing relationships.

As I described in the previous chapter, religious piety sometimes benefited working youth, but it did not appear to bring the same important economic contacts for unemployed youth. This may have been partially a problem of numbers. With so many unemployed young men, even religious piety may not have distinguished a person from the masses to the extent that he could make contact with a sponsor or patron. Also it was far easier to help someone who had already started working and was simply seeking to reach the next level. To help an unemployed youth would have required a much greater



investment in time and resources and most successful adults avoided this type of commitment.

### **Neighborhood**

Neighborhood of residence was an additional and possibly the most important factor in influencing flows of wealth between unemployed young men. The unemployed informants for my study came from five different neighborhoods. These neighborhoods represent three general types: low income with low market activity, mixed income with high market activity, and mixed income with low market activity. I have already provided detailed descriptions of each of these neighborhood types in chapter 2. Sa'ar Sefer is an example of a low income and low market activity neighborhood, Kulo Berr is an example of a mixed income and high market activity neighborhood, and Qottebe Sefer is an example of a mixed income and low market activity neighborhood.

Neighborhood affected both the quantity and quality of flows of money among youth. In a neighborhood like Sa'ar Sefer, the lack of trade meant that even the small amount of capital that was present did not tend to change hands often. Although nearly everyone in Kulo Berr was poor, money was constantly circulating in the form of cash or invitations. Many of the unemployed young men were able to occasionally earn money from work or knew others who had regular incomes that they were willing to share. In an environment of high trade volumes, profits were quickly earned and lost. Sharing provided a form of security in the sense that one could not be guaranteed of having money tomorrow, so by sharing with his friends he could insure that he would at least be able to access small amounts of pocket money. In Qottebe Sefer, many youth had parents

who were middle class government employees and provided them with frequent cash handouts. Unlike the Kulo Berr youth they were not dependent on trade and parental salaries provided a dependable source of income. Consequentially, wealthy young men in Qottebe Sefer had nothing to gain by sharing with youth who were of a lower economic level. If sharing of wealth did take place it was within class groups – poor sharing with the poor and rich sharing with the rich – and in this sense it did not function as a means of redistribution.

Like religion, neighborhood acted as a mediating factor that shaped the impact of class on sharing relationships. Low income/low market neighborhoods like Sa'ar Sefer were often homes to single mothers who were employed as domestic workers, injera bakers, or brewers of local beer. Rent was low in these neighborhoods and therefore they attracted women with few means of supporting themselves. As discussed above these women were at a disadvantage in terms of the ability to create zemed relationships that would be beneficial for their children both because of their gender and occupation. Living in Sa'ar Sefer spatially and economically isolated these women further, making it even more difficult to create valuable relationships. Particularly in Sa'ar Sefer, the high degree of religious piety also constrained the ability of young men to form relationships with their peers. Most youth were Orthodox Christian and they avoided chewing chat, one of the key activities that brought young men together to exchange both ideas and material wealth.

In some ways the poor in a neighborhood like Qottebe Sefer were similarly isolated. Although the presence of numerous wealthier families did create some economic opportunity, most government workers had the living space and resources to

offer relatives from the countryside support in exchange for performing the hours of food preparation that were necessary for the reproduction of an Ethiopian household. In other words the presence of wealthy families did not necessarily mean increased employment opportunities for their poorer neighbors. While youth from various class backgrounds would share time talking together on Qottebe Corner they would usually separate in order to engage in their respective consumer activities. Separate compounds and the presence of private space enabled middle class youth to avoid lower class youth when chewing chat. The wealthy had little incentive to “invite” the poor and therefore youth were isolated from the high levels of exchange brought by a spatial proximity to a market. In these neighborhoods middle class youth were surrounded by other youth with similar family backgrounds. Among middle class youth both parents were usually present and at least one was a government employee. Exchanges of wealth between middle class young men were generally equitable and the presence of wealthy parents meant that neither party was overly reliant on these exchanges. The low market activity also meant that constant exchange was not the norm and there was less of an obligation for wealthy youth to support their poorer neighbors.

Young men were not unaware of the manner that class often structured sharing relationships. They explained that sharing was the norm but problems sometimes occurred when one felt that others were simply using his friendship for personal gain. As long as it was felt that the friendship was based on a personal bond or genuine affection then people were happy to give. For this reason, youth sometimes claimed that friendships worked better between youth of the same economic background. A young man who was always being invited by his friends without the ability to return their

generosity would “feel something.” Youth sometimes argued that the poor did not want to be friends with the rich because they would be unable to invite them in the manner to which they were accustomed. In this sense, class barriers that prevented sharing were justified based on the emotional state of the lower class. It was better for lower and middle class individuals not to form relationships because they could not reciprocate gifts.

Mixed income/high market neighborhoods like Kulo Berr contained a diverse range of families in terms of occupation, wealth, and household head gender. The diversity of backgrounds meant that poor and rich were not isolated from each other and the neighborhood’s spatial dynamics enforced intense economic and social relationships. Not only were there people who had something to share, the presence of a high volume of trade encouraged sharing. For many lower class youth, living in a high market neighborhood allowed them to access large quantities of gift income and partially compensated for their class background.

Money moved through people and therefore it was by repositioning one’s self in relation to others that one was able to access money. While the social obligation to redistribute wealth was powerful, this obligation was based on the existence of a relationship, not simply different levels of need and wealth. In this sense, ideals of reciprocity did not always level class differences. For example, among unemployed young men with wealthy parents, living in a neighborhood with low market activity reduced the obligation to share with peers. On the other hand, for lower class youth who depended on these economic flows between friends, isolation from market activity was detrimental to their gift income. For urban young men, the qualitative dynamics of space

and religious practice constrained or facilitated the redistribution of wealth in a manner that shaped relationships between individuals.

### **Class, Status, and the Reproduction of Inequality Over Time**

In this section I seek to develop a means of simultaneously analyzing class and status as sources of stratification. In the previous chapter I explained that sharing relations among unemployed youth facilitated the development of relationships rather than the accumulation of material goods. It has been argued that within gift economies, ideologies of reciprocity mask productive inequalities (Josephides 1985). From this perspective status is subsumed within class in the sense that it plays a role in the production of material inequalities, but does not constitute a source of stratification in itself. The evidence I have offered above concerning the unequal distribution of gift income among unemployed youth on the basis of class and neighborhood could be interpreted as supporting Josephides' argument. Among unemployed youth particular groups have greater access to the total social product, and therefore a productive inequality is constituted. Spatial dynamics often caused patterns of reciprocity to be influenced by class, thus reproducing class based stratification. This inequality is both produced and legitimated by the positive valuation of status and social relationships. However, this perspective is problematic for two primary reasons that I have addressed in previous chapters. First, among unemployed youth, labor or one's occupation was not necessarily conceived of as "creative activity." One's occupation was a means of establishing an identity that influenced the manner in which one related to others. The productive result of labor was not as important as the manner in which the act of working

situated one within relations of subordination. Second, although unemployed youth sometimes received large amounts of gift income it does not make sense to analyze this in terms of an appropriation of the surplus labor of others. The problem with this perspective is the assumptions that it makes regarding the relationship between individuals and property. “As long as things are ‘owned’ or the ‘use value’ of labor is enjoyed, the one-to-one relationship between proprietor and product is assumed” (Strathern 1988:158). As Strathern (1988) explains, materialist based notions of inequality rest on the assumption that one has a right to the product of his or her labor. In the case of unemployed youth, gifts were conceived of as the product of social relationships and not individual labor, and these gifts were immediately directed towards communal consumption. Therefore, in giving and receiving youth were not necessarily alienating others or themselves from the product of their labor. Although material wealth was redistributed in a manner that supported economic stratification, it was not in itself conceived of as a source of inequality.

While a materialist or purely class-based perspective is not adequate for an analysis of the case at hand, even among unemployed youth status based stratification cannot be divorced from relations of production. For unemployed youth, access to gift income represented qualitative differences in one’s ability to form social relationships, and sharing was conceived of as producing relationships, not things. However, as I have argued above, based on class background and neighborhood of residence one could be left out of or included in sharing relationships. While these sharing relationships did not necessarily enable an accumulation of income in the manner of working youth, they did reflect a positive bond between groups and individuals. In the long-term it was possible

for these relationships to yield benefits that were important for solidifying or shifting the class position of unemployed young men. Ahmed was not the only young man in my sample to access desirable work through zemed. During the course of my research another middle-class primary informant found work as a kindergarten teacher and it is likely that others would eventually access similar opportunities through social relationships. In this sense class influenced the ability of youth to involve themselves in desirable sharing relationships, which in turn had implications for the reproduction of their class position.

In order to understand stratification in this situation it is necessary to avoid rigid boundaries between gifts and commodities, or status and class. Weber's notion of power as, "the chances which a man or a group of men have to realize their will in a communal activity (1978:43)," is useful because it relativizes power to particular sets of aspirations, and does not exclude forms of stratification that are not materially based. When inequality is assessed in terms of aspirations it is relative to time and space. As noted in the previous chapter, multiple hierarchies of status may exist simultaneously, meaning that stratification is even relative within a relatively narrow context.

In chapter 4 I argued that the aspirations of young men were based in social relationships. Progress was conceptualized in terms of changing one's position in relation to his family and community. In concrete terms these changes involved marriage, children, and supporting one's zemed. In other words young men sought to change their position within sharing relationships. Youth aspired to shift from being the receiver to the giver. While working and unemployed youth often had divergent values in terms of occupational status, their aspirations were generally similar. For both the

“good life” meant “having a good relationship with my family,” “helping my family,” “being comfortable with my family.” Achieving this goal required a shift in one’s position within sharing relationships, which in turn was interrelated with class. In this manner the aspirations of young men encapsulate both class and status. An examination of the ability of young men to reposition themselves within sharing relationships enables an assessment of inequality at a given point in time, and therefore provides insights into the changing dynamics of local stratification in relation to global economic shifts.

Working and not working represented divergent strategies for achieving one’s aspirations and repositioning one’s self in terms of class and sharing relationships. As I explained in chapter 6, the choice between these occupational strategies was based in values concerning status and social relationships. Lower class youth who did not accept low status employment were essentially refusing to take on the class position of their parents. This refusal was at least partially based in their experience with education and the expectation that a secondary education entitled them to government employment. It is interesting to compare this dynamic to Bourdieu’s statement that, “In some cases the qualification-holder finds he has no other way to defend the value of his qualification than to refuse to sell his labor power at the price offered; the decision to remain unemployed is then the equivalent to a one man strike” (1984:143). For young men in Jimma the issue was not so much the “price offered” for one’s labor but the status implications of working in particular occupations. To perform low status work was perceived as preventing the development of positive relationships with others, and young men were refusing to place themselves in this stigmatized position. The irony of Bourdieu’s notion of a “one man strike,” in Ethiopia and possibly in late-twentieth



century France as well, is that it is not clear who is being “struck” against. There is no Ethiopian employer who is impacted by the refusal of urban young men to work. Perhaps the decrease in the labor supply may have a marginal impact on wages but for the most part daily laborers from the countryside may always be hired. Work is not refused with the conscious intention of gaining a better opportunity in the future. Urban young men are concerned with their status in the present and it is by avoiding certain occupations that they may preserve that status. However, unless a lower class young man happened to live in a high market neighborhood, it was unlikely that he would be able to engage in valued sharing relationships. In this sense, for many lower class youth to choose unemployment was to preserve relationships that did not exist or were of little value.

Bourdieu explains that aspirations often conform to one’s objective chances in life. One of the exceptions to this pattern is, “given by historical conjunctures of a revolutionary nature in which changes in objective structures are so swift that agents whose mental structures have been molded by these prior structures become obsolete and act inopportunistly” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:130). This appears to be the case for lower-class unemployed youth. The particular form of patron/client relationships associated with government employment provided the model for how one accessed social mobility. Mobility occurred through people, but not in the same manner associated with the wealth in people/wealth in things model practiced by working youth. Relations among government workers were based in complete dependence. An individual’s position was dependent on the person above him. Maintenance of that position depended on a qualitatively positive relationship. Power always moved from the top, never the bottom, and in this sense the ability of subservient individuals to offer benefits to their

superiors was not essential. The government worker received or gave on the basis of a close relationship that extended beyond the workplace into all areas of life. In contrast workers usually gave their service only in exchange for something predetermined and specific that was confined to the moment of exchange.

In avoiding occupations associated with negatively evaluated forms of exchange, unemployed youth were conforming to methods of accessing power specifically associated with government employment. These were methods that had been effective for achieving aspirations within their parents' generation. Many parents migrated from the countryside surrounding Jimma at a young age and were eventually able to secure employment utilizing social connections. For example, the father of an unemployed young woman in my study, moved to Jimma in the 1950's from the Dawro region. He explained that he was a "lower person" during the reign of Haile Sellasie. His parents were tenant farmers and there was no school near their home. He claimed that even if there had been a school only the Amhara landowners would have attended. He came to Jimma in search of wage labor. After holding a number of temporary jobs he found work as a guard at the Jimma Agricultural College. When he arrived in Jimma he had very little knowledge of Amharic and he was reliant on the help of a few extended family members. He was involved in the Orthodox Christian Church and the community iddir and these relationships were adequate for securing desirable employment. At the time of my research a young man with a grade 12 education and numerous family connections would have had great difficulty finding similar employment as a university guard. Economic changes associated with structural adjustment meant that government work was scarce and government employees had a reduced ability to distribute goods within

their community. In many cases, the model of behavior pursued by unemployed youth was no longer viable for developing sharing relationships, accessing class mobility, or achieving one's aspirations.

Clearly this shift was not complete. For middle class youth unemployment allowed them to participate in desirable social relations and reproduce their parents' class position. Their class background enabled the (re)production of relationships through sharing which in turn created opportunities for accessing their aspirations in the future. While the long term implications of living in a high market neighborhood are unclear, in the short term it enabled lower class youth to engage in a high number of sharing relationships, and perhaps provided a degree of class mobility.

All of the working youth in my sample came from lower-class backgrounds, and by engaging in low status occupations it might appear that they were reproducing their parents' class position. However the decline of the public sector also meant a relative rise in the importance of private sector employment. Many of the working young men were entrepreneurs and engaged in mutually beneficial relationships with more established business owners. The same qualities that constricted working youth social relations in some circles – subordinating one's self in exchange for money, working in public, and performing “dirty” work – were often valued by business owners and therefore facilitated the formation of economic relationships. To some extent, for working youth “low status” contributed to the development of the types of relationships that would allow them to achieve their aspirations. Some of the working youth in my study like the small shop owners, Tadesse and Kassahun, appeared to already be posed to achieve the “good life,” in the sense that they were taking on a different position

within sharing relationships. Others like Getty were unlikely to experience a change in their relative position. However, in terms of the power to achieve aspirations, as a group working youth appeared to be better positioned than their lower-class unemployed peers.

In the past, barriers such as ethnicity and more rigid notions of occupational status would have prevented low-status workers from changing their class position. In the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century economic environment the type of social relationships that were effective for class mobility had changed, placing working youth in a position to benefit. Class hierarchies have not been completely disrupted, and the social networks of middle class unemployed young men generally allow them to find work after extended periods of unemployment. However, the strategy of unemployment that was effective for the middle class was not useful for the achievement of aspirations among lower-class young men. Assessing the relative chances for achieving aspirations among different class and occupational groups provides a sketch of stratification that acknowledges both class and status. It would appear that depending on class background, employing the strategy of accepting low status work may increase one's chance of achieving aspirations. In the final chapter I examine the implications of this conclusion for analyzing inequality in the current economic context.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have developed a working definition of class that is intended to encompass the bundle of factors that influence one's access to economic goods in contemporary urban Ethiopia. Class, neighborhood of residence, and to a lesser degree religious piety all shaped the involvement of young men in sharing relationships.

Involvement in sharing relationships both reflected and reproduced one's status position. While the material wealth received through sharing was redistributed and did not have a significant impact on one's long term class position, to engage in sharing relationships was to have high status and a close personal bond with others. In the previous chapter I described these dynamics in more detail and gave attention to their implications for the construction of the self. Sharing relationships could often be the source of long-term opportunities, like desirable employment, that improved the position of young men within both hierarchies of class and status. In this sense class and status were closely linked in urban Ethiopia. At the same time working young men had differing notions of status that supported their engagement in relationships that were often based on the mutual accumulation of material wealth.

I argue that it is necessary to develop a conception of stratification that enables an assessment of multiple hierarchies of status and their interrelationship with class. Weber's seemingly simple notion of power as the ability to achieve one's will is helpful in that it is relative to the multiple goals possessed by actors within a given society. In the case at hand, regardless of employment status urban young men aspired to place themselves in relationships in which others are dependent on them for support. Unemployment was a viable strategy for middle-class youth to achieve this goal, in that it allowed them to preserve valuable social relationships that would eventually serve to reproduce their class position, and allow them to support their dependents. In the current economic context, for lower class youth preserving status by avoiding low status occupations did not appear to enable them to achieve their aspirations because they had few valuable relationships to preserve. Working youth were all from lower class

backgrounds and in their case working appeared to allow them to improve their position within the specific status hierarchies associated with work in urban Ethiopia. Some of these young men were already supporting dependents and it appeared that involvement in relationships specifically associated with their work was essential for their ability to achieve aspirations.

## **Chapter 9: Conclusion**

In the introductory chapter of this dissertation I described ethnography as a process of investigating pockets and pouches. I have spent much of this dissertation rummaging around in those spaces within spaces, pulling off the chair cushions, sticking my hand into the crevices, and seeing what there is to be found. It is now time to emerge from these pockets and search for the sunset. In this final chapter I hope to move to a more abstract perspective, like the one I found on the balcony of a hotel in Jimma. From this perspective I will sketch out the sometimes hazy themes that I have dealt with in the preceding chapters. While these ideas do not always have meaning when taken on their own, when seen together I hope that like a sunset they form an image that can be understood and appreciated.

I believe that this dissertation has made two primary contributions. The first has been to offer a detailed ethnography of the lives of young men in urban Ethiopia during a time period marked by economic scarcity. Particularly in chapters 3 and 4 I describe everyday activities of young men such as watching videos and chewing chat, their desires for marriage and having children, and their conversations concerning issues of progress and migration. I summarize these findings below and highlight their significance for understanding the position of youth in relation to global flows of finance and culture.

My second contribution has been to utilize occupational status as a point of entry into a variety of analytical issues. In examining occupational status I have sought to deconstruct dichotomies between class and status, production and consumption, and commodities and gifts. I argue that work is not important only as a means of generating

income, but in terms of the qualitative nature of the relationships with which it is associated. In many ways this is a classic argument in anthropology that dates back to the work of Malinowski and Mauss. It has long been argued that humans are not inherently economic rationalizers, and therefore it is perhaps not surprising that Ethiopian youth often choose unemployment over work in the interest of maintaining status.

My study takes this analysis in a new direction in that I seek to understand how inequality is produced, not just in terms of material accumulation, but in relation to status. In order to carry out this project, at times I have found it analytically useful to artificially separate between class and status. This has allowed me to better understand the nature of status and how it may function as a source of inequality in itself.

In this concluding chapter I review the importance of local values surrounding occupation for understanding the intersection between class and status. I argue that examining work in terms of social relationships supports a rethinking of the experience of time, particularly as it has been conceived of in relation to capitalism. The relationship between class and status is also important for understanding the reproduction of stratification, and I explicate these in relation to the Ethiopian case. The discussion from chapter 7 is then reviewed in order to clarify the peculiar nature of status-based stratification.

A second way in which my study is distinct from classic anthropological critiques of the maximizing human is that it clearly takes place in a context that has been shaped by global capitalism. At various points in this dissertation I have critiqued the use of neoliberal capitalism as an explanatory mechanism for cultural and economic processes in Africa. However, I also do not argue that Ethiopian young men somehow exist outside



of capitalism. I return to this argument here and suggest that concepts that have been developed within anthropology, such as gift exchange, are useful for understanding diverse economic practices. Developing a means of speaking about changes in relations of power over time is valuable, and the relative importance of class and status for inequality provides a means of conceptualizing difference across time and space. In the end this analysis supports a rethinking of the concept of unemployment and the condition of urban African youth.

### **An Ethnography of Youth, Progress, and Day-to-Day Life**

Although this dissertation has focused on the lives of young men, at no point have I offered a rigid definition for what it means to be a “youth.” Rather, I have argued that youth is a socially constructed category that changes in meaning with context. That said there is something peculiarly temporal about youth as a category. Youth is presumed to be a process of becoming – the transformation from child to adult. In this sense youth is a temporary stage that is defined partially on the basis of one’s relation to his or her future. However, in a context when becoming an adult is increasingly difficult, the period in which one exists as a youth expands. Jennifer Cole (2005) has even argued that youth may become indefinite. Those who are positioned within this category of youth are constantly grappling with their future. When the process of becoming an adult is impeded by unemployment then youth often search for alternative ways of becoming. Much of my ethnography of urban young men may be conceived of as an investigation of progress – how it is defined and how young men seek to experience it.

In chapter 4 I explained that young men conceptualize progress in terms of relationships. They seek to experience linear improvements in the qualitative nature of their relations with others. Concretely this involves the transition from being dependent on one's parents, to becoming a husband, father, and eventually providing support to one's community. Progress is also thought to occur between generations as young men consistently expressed the desire for their children to have better lives than their own. I argue that an ideology of progress is partially acculturated through education. Education has historically provided access to the valued government employment that has enabled the achievement of goals related to family. Education is also an intrinsically progressive process in that it is structured on the basis of graduated linear improvement. Partially due to economic changes associated with neoliberal capitalism the link between education and employment has been ruptured, and many young men find themselves unable to experience progress in the manner they desire.

On a day-to-day basis young men must negotiate the problem of progress and they often do so through imaginative engagement with global culture. Both the consumption of international film and the locally grown narcotic chat were methods that young men utilized in order to imagine different futures. I have argued that young men do not simply absorb the messages that they encounter in films. Rather, films are interpreted through a lens that is based on their own needs and desires. Arjun Appadurai has described changes in the imagination of possible futures in relation to "flows" of electronic media. In the Ethiopian case cultural norms mean that activities like film and chat are isolated to specific spaces within the city that may be accessed only by young

men. The confinement of global culture implies that the imagination is also stratified in terms of gender and age.

Conversations while chewing chat were often focused on possibilities for the future, especially international migration. Chat facilitated the construction of elaborate plans for living abroad. In these narratives spatial movement took the place of temporal processes like education. The notion that space is prioritized over time fits with the dynamics of neoliberal capitalism described by James Ferguson (2006) and David Harvey (1990). However, based on local values concerning occupational status, I argue that both spatial and temporal dynamics must be reconsidered in terms of social relationships. Young men often sought to leave Ethiopia specifically because of social pressures that prevented them from performing available forms of work. In this sense spatial difference was conceived of in terms of qualitative shifts in one's social relationships.

### **Rethinking Class, Status, and Time**

The power of *yiluñña* combined with values concerning particular types of work means that concerns with status often take precedence over available wages in youth decisions regarding employment. Occupation becomes a site that is inextricable both from the construction of identity and relations of production. In this sense my study of occupation is not far removed from the vast anthropological literature on consumption. At an abstract level, work is similar to consumption in that both involve economic exchange and the construction of identity. The upper class American who purchases contemporary art for her home signals her values to others at the same time as she enters

into relationships surrounding the production of art. For Alemu, one of the young men in my study, unemployment enables him to avoid negative stigmas associated with work, while also leading him to depend on his mother and older siblings for daily access to cash. Both processes contribute to the construction of identity and influence one's access to economic goods.

Carla Freeman (2000, 2001) has developed a similar critique of the consumption/production dichotomy in her examination of Caribbean women and the "informatics" industry. Freeman explains that women's involvement in the production process shapes their consumer behavior, which in turn influences the manner in which they work. Freeman extends her critique to dichotomies between global and local, and feminine and masculine. Like Freeman's study, in the Ethiopian case one's actual working and consuming behavior are inseparable. When an unemployed young man like Alemu receives money from his mother he immediately spends it on chat that he shares with friends. Shared consumption enables Alemu to maintain relationships. Friendships create social pressure that inhibits Alemu from working and prolongs his unemployment. Relationships maintained through shared consumption also may eventually provide contacts that will allow Alemu to find respectable work and thus end his unemployment. In this sense consumption and production are empirically intertwined in practice, not just in their abstract connections to class and status.

One of the key benefits of deconstructing dichotomies that separate the material from the cultural is that it generates insights into day-to-day activities and perceptions of time. An analysis of occupational status provides an entry point for understanding time in terms of relationships instead of production. The concept of surplus labor presumes

that labor may be quantified in terms of time and categorized as necessary or surplus. In the Ethiopian case, work is not always conceived of in this manner. Working positions are within relations of power and exchange in a manner that produces identity. This work may last two hours or eight and the implications for identity are the same. One *is* a shoeshine or one *is* a teacher. In Ethiopia the government worker is the paragon of this dynamic. The government worker receives a salary that is not dependent on the number of days or hours worked, but on his position. He is not thought to produce, but to mediate between individuals. Technical students complained that a government worker's time is spent on drinking coffee and attending funerals but this is exactly the source of his prestige. The model of the government worker, on which the aspirations and values of youth are largely based, produces no surplus value. He gives and receives as a result of his position in relation to others.

It is not my intent to argue that Ethiopian youth exist outside of capitalism. Relations in which the owner of capital appropriates the surplus value generated by workers are common in urban Ethiopia. Furthermore global processes of accumulation associated with neoliberal capitalism certainly impact the lives of most if not all Ethiopians. As I will elaborate further below, I do not believe it is useful to categorize urban Ethiopia as capitalist or non-capitalist. In avoiding this categorization, analytical space is created for rethinking the experience of time. If an occupation takes on meaning through the manner that it positions one in relation to others, then notions of time must be adjusted accordingly. Marxian critiques of market economies argue that production and labor are rationalized on the basis of time. In chapter 4 I argued that an abstract notion of

time does exist among urban young men, but that time is used to evaluate relationships rather than production.

Among urban young men in Ethiopia time is not money. Perhaps it is better to say that “time is relationships.” In chapter 4 I have detailed temporal problems faced by young men that are caused by the stress associated with unstructured time and the inability to experience progress in social relationships. Day-to-day activities are evaluated in terms of time, and this evaluation is relative to progressive changes in one’s relationships. Like work, the relationship between time and activity functions in two ways. First, engagement in the activity itself contributes to the construction of identity in the present. To chew chat immediately causes one to *be* a chat chewer, which has implications for friendships and other relationships. Second, the activity positions one in relation to his future. Conversations while chewing chat allow young men to imagine how they will *become* husbands and fathers in the future. The activity is evaluated on the basis of time but it is primarily a social time rather than a productive time.

### **Producing Identities and Stratification**

By placing my examination of occupational status within the context of detailed data on youth incomes from gifts and work, my study also offers further insights into the relationship between identity and stratification. This is a relationship that has been productively explored in the anthropological literature on consumption. In general this literature has advanced arguments similar to Bourdieu’s (1984) that the performance of a high status identity through consumption is related to the reproduction of class. As noted above, the working behavior of young men is also a means of performing identity. In this

section I argue that an analysis of identities produced through work generates insights into issues of stratification and consumption. I also seek summarize my findings on the reproduction of class hierarchies within the specific context of urban Ethiopia.

Both lower and middle class youth were able to perform high status identities, but for lower class youth this did not impact their class position. Lower class youth who refused to take on menial occupations may be understood in a similar manner to those who seek to overcome their class situation by adopting the consumer behavior of the wealthy. By avoiding low status employment young men opened the possibility of experiencing a shift in their class position through the maintenance of positive relationships with others. Middle class youth were essentially engaging in a similar practice of maintaining status through the avoidance of low status employment.

An interesting peculiarity of the case at hand is that there was no sense that by not working lower class youth were somehow acting in a way that was not fitting with their class position. Unlike the pretender who faces ridicule for adopting the stylistic practices of the upper class (Bourdieu 1984), the aspirations of lower class youth to attain government employment were generally seen as legitimate. Seemingly the option to perform a high status lifestyle through the avoidance of menial labor was open to all young men, regardless of class. I have argued that in urban Ethiopia the spread of education has been combined with a breakdown in the relationship between ethnicity and class in a manner that democratizes one's chances of achieving aspirations. It is this shift that has legitimated the aspirations of lower class youth for upward mobility.

Conceiving of unemployment as a performance of identity that may impact one's class and status position is useful for understanding consumption. In order for the

performance of an upper class identity to shift one's position within class relationships a number of barriers must be overcome. Even if, like unemployed Ethiopian youth, the performance of that identity is seen as legitimate, there must be a possibility for it to shift one's relationships with others. Without a qualitative change in relationships then status is meaningless. The similar status generating behavior of lower and middle class youth had very different outcomes in terms of their class position. For both lower and middle class youth, unemployment allowed the maintenance of relationships. However, the relationships of lower class youth were not of the quantity or quality to shift their class position. The information I have presented on gift incomes in chapter 8 indicates that unemployment as a performance of status did not enable lower class young men to engage in sharing relationships similar to middle class youth. This was partially due to neighborhood. Regardless of employment status neighborhood placed certain spatial constraints on one's ability to interact with others. Adopting a stylistic practice associated with high status is only significant if it changes one's relationships with others. In this sense the performance of status is largely dependent on audience.

The case of working youth provides insights into the subversion of class hierarchies through the construction of identity. By engaging in low status employment, working youth were transgressing values concerning status, and they were doing so in a manner that had immediate implications for class relations. The rapid accumulation of wealth, occasionally made possible by working in the informal economy, had the potential to disrupt the long-standing association between class and a particular style of involvement in relationships of exchange and dependency. In the same manner that a style of dress is often synonymous with class, in Ethiopia so is how one works. To



experience a shift in class position through engagement in low status labor was to call into question the relationship between class and occupational status.

The situation of working young men is comparable to the stylistic practices of lower class youth subcultures described within British Cultural studies (Hebdige 1979, Hall et al 1976) or la sape in an African context (Gondola 1999, Friedman 1994, MacGaffey and Bazenguissa 2000). In these analyses of the performance of style through consumption, lower class youth adopt spectacular identities that deconstruct relationships between class and identity. These practices range from the extreme exaggeration of upper class style and consumer behavior among sapeurs to the valorization of working class fashion among punks in the U.K. or U.S. Through conscious appropriation and manipulation, the arbitrary nature of the association between class and style is revealed. Subcultures also form alternate regimes of value in which youth may access status within the social group formed by their peers.

In the Ethiopian case working youth did not share consumer behavior that distinguished them from unemployed young men. However, as I explained in chapter 7, working youth were united in their distinct practices surrounding sharing and exchange. For working youth, investing in relationships facilitated an accumulation of economic goods that was absent in sharing among the unemployed. Working youth were able to attain a positive status position among other entrepreneurs, but it was unclear if this would impact their status among others. However, regardless of their status working youth were clearly more successful in accessing economic goods and attaining their aspirations, relative to their unemployed lower class peers.

The practices of working youth are particularly potent in relation to class because they relate directly to production. However, the relative success of working youth in shifting their class position does not necessarily have implications for status. A change in one's access to economic goods does not always imply a shift in one's relationships with others, and the converse is also true. For example, in the United States working class culture has been embraced at various points during the last forty years, but this has had few implications for changing class relations. Shifts in class and status based stratification are certainly interrelated, but they may occur independently.

The case of unemployed young men highlights the importance of audience for the potential impact that the performance of identity may have on class. Whether an identity is constructed through consumption, work, or another means, it cannot shift one's class position unless the performer is situated so that others may recognize and react to that identity. Working young men were able to change their access to material wealth by generating status within a specific context. The existence of multiple status hierarchies means that accessing status among a particular population or subculture can have implications for class, if the relevant subculture can offer assistance that is useful for material accumulation.

### **Status as an Independent Source of Stratification**

I have argued that in practice class and status are inextricable, but there is still analytical value in separating between the two. Too often analyses of class and status have addressed their interrelationship but ultimately subordinated status to class as a source of inequality. For example, Bourdieu uses the concept of symbolic capital to

explain how status functions to shift one's class position. The possibility that status may independently constitute an inequality is not acknowledged. An important contribution of this dissertation has been a more detailed examination of the production of status-based stratification. Rather than evaluate hierarchies of status in terms of their implications for class, I have sought to understand the manner in which differences in status may form a distinct inequality. To discuss status is essentially to address variability in evaluations of identity. As indicated throughout the dissertation, I treat identity as a performance that is produced through the interaction of actors and their communities. My interest is in how status evaluations produce identities that are dominant or subordinate.

Primarily in chapter 7, I develop a means of evaluating differences in status that does not necessarily make reference to class. I focus on relations of exchange associated with work and sharing. Status is produced through participating in positively evaluated relationships. Working young men subordinate themselves within relations of power that lack close personal bonds. In doing so they are evaluated negatively, thus producing a "low status." In turn this status evaluation places limits on the manner in which they may interact with others. Low status acts as a barrier that sometimes prevents working young men from attending weddings or engaging in particular types of interactions. If the self is relationships, then the ability to construct one's self is limited. In this sense status may be understood as a complicated intersection between relationships and evaluation. Cultural values intersect with the manner one relates to others in order to produce and reproduce status. Regardless of their implications for class, inequalities in one's ability to construct relationships with others are significant in themselves. The Ethiopian case

indicates that analyses of stratification in terms of social relationships are useful for a broad range of economies, including those that involve capitalist production and commodity exchange.

The contrast between working and unemployed youth demonstrates that multiple hierarchies of value may simultaneously exist. In working as a street-side salesman, Kassahun was placed in a subordinate status position at the same time that he experienced positive relations and high status among entrepreneurs in the business community. Within particular social environments Kassahun had far more control over his relationships with others. In this sense the construction of selves through relationships simultaneously takes place in relation to multiple hierarchies of status. Status is always relative to context, but it may be concretely evaluated in terms of the coherence of one's behavior with a particular system of values.

### **Neoliberal Capitalism and Understanding Local Inequality**

Particularly in chapter 4 I have critiqued the use of neoliberal capitalism as a theoretical framework for understanding cultural processes in urban Ethiopia and elsewhere in Africa. I have argued that concepts such as time/space compression cannot be easily applied to a context where time appears to expand and exists as an overabundant quantity. In examining *yiluñña* and occupational status I have offered evidence for the importance of local values and practices for conditioning the experience of time.

Analyses based in theories of capitalism are also problematic for understanding inequality at a local level. Discussions of Africa in a context of neoliberalism have

examined capitalism in terms of its absence or isolated presence in order to understand economic decline. In the Ethiopian case it is clear that policies of structural adjustment associated with neoliberalism have contributed to high rates of unemployment. While this analysis is helpful for understanding global inequality, it tells us little about the economic processes and inequalities that actually exist within Ethiopia. To understand Africa in terms of an absence is to close off opportunities for further investigation.

As noted above, Carla Freeman's (2001) primary purpose in critiquing production/consumption dichotomies is to query the relationships between local and global, and feminine and masculine. Freeman argues that local economic processes and global capitalism are mutually constitutive and gendered. In Freeman's case, the relationship between neoliberal capitalism and the informal trade carried out by workers in a factory owned by a transnational corporation is quite clear. The female entrepreneur both elevates her class position and supports the extraction of surplus value by the transnational company. While informal work provides the employee with an additional source of income it also means that her ingenuity and hard work enable the company to pay a less than adequate living wage. I have argued that structural adjustment has shaped employment opportunities for urban young men, but it is not clear how unemployed and working youth in Ethiopia constitute global capitalism.

Gibson-Graham's (1996, 2006) suggestion that diverse economic processes be examined without necessarily making reference to theories of capitalism is valuable. My intent is not to separate the local from the global. Throughout this dissertation I have drawn attention to the importance of western models of education, consumption of international films, and neoliberal economic policies for the lives of urban young men.

However, when Afwerk, a bicycle repairman who stores his tools at a friend's shop and operates a makeshift garage on the street with the permission of local merchants, receives three birr for repairing a bicycle and then uses this money to purchase honey wine for friends I do not believe it is accurate to describe this process in terms of global capitalism. The two are not completely disconnected, but there are other more analytically useful methods to examine Afwerk's economic relationships. As noted above, I am not arguing that Ethiopia exists outside of capitalism or advocating an investigation of a locally distinct "Ethiopian capitalism<sup>1</sup>." Rather, I am suggesting that inequality should be understood on the basis of a perspective that is grounded in local dynamics.

The value of explicating the nature of status as I have done above is that it demonstrates a method for investigating stratification. The role of social relationships in structuring both class and status based inequalities indicates that analyses of exchange that have emerged out of anthropology are particularly useful. Analyses of gift exchange highlight the importance of relationships for stratification. This is useful for understanding a situation in which decisions regarding employment are often made based on relationships rather than income. Drawing primarily on the work of Strathern I have argued that the working and sharing behavior of young men is important for the production of the self through relationships. In the Ethiopian case it is often relationships, rather than control over surplus labor, that constitute a source of inequality. The case of working youth reveals the value of the wealth in things/wealth in people model. Working young men invest in relationships that in turn allow them to accumulate

---

<sup>1</sup> See Yanagisako (2002) for a critique of "capitalist cultures" and "cultures of capitalism."

things. The contrast between these modes of sharing and working clarifies the production of stratification in terms of both class and status.

It is through critical engagement with gift exchange and multiple ways of investing in relationships that actual diverse practices can be explored. To label Africa as “neoliberal” is to forego the possibility of developing new understandings of inequality. From this perspective, economic practices are caused by neoliberalism and therefore further investigation is not necessary. Not only does this constrain our understanding of Africa, it prevents that development of an economic anthropology that is capable of thinking reflexively about capitalism. A dialogue among scholars concerning such diverse practices as gift giving, unemployment, and informal self-employment must exist before capitalism can be interrogated and understood.

### **Assessing Change Over Time**

I have argued that the interrelationship between class and status provide one means of assessing economic changes across time and space. Although class and status are inextricable, one may be prioritized over the other. In the introductory chapter I drew from the Comaroff's (2000) essay on millennial capitalism, noting that their discussion is both useful and problematic in its assessment of contemporary Africa. It is now possible to expand on and rework the claims of the Comaroffs on the basis of the analysis I have presented in the preceding chapters. In chapter 1, I quoted from the following sentence, “In short as neoliberal structures render ever more obscure the rooting of inequality in structures of production, as work gives way to the mechanical solidarities of ‘identity’ in

constructing selfhood and social being, class comes to be understood, in both popular and scholarly discourse as yet another personality trait or lifestyle choice” (2000:306).

My extensive discussion of occupational status has shown that inequality remains rooted in “structures of production,” which have been historically intertwined with identity. As I have noted above, the Comaroffs’ use of “neoliberal structures” to explain economic change potentially obscures more relevant dynamics for local processes and inequalities. Despite these qualifications, the Comaroffs’ push to analyze changes in the relationship between class and identity over time is valuable. It is possible to keep in mind the inextricable nature of production and identity (class and status) and explore their respective relevance within a given time and place.

The argument for the prioritization of lifestyle and identity over relations of production appears to be related to the notion that a proliferation of styles and identities stimulates consumption and solves problems of over accumulation in a late capitalist context (Baudrillard 1982, Harvey 1989). While I have drawn attention to situations in which style and identity have been prioritized among young men, the reasons for this have little direct relation with the processes associated with late capitalism. In chapter 4 I discussed the Diversity Visa Lottery and migration as means of constructing an identity associated with “modern” places that allows young men to overcome barriers to achieving progress through linear processes such as education and employment. Elsewhere in Africa, studies have described the use of fashion and style among young men in order to transform their identity and achieve aspirations (Gondola 1999, MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000, Newell 2005).



In these cases it does appear that identity is taking precedence over relations of production, but again, I would argue that this represents continuity with the past. Identity has historically been linked with class and if anything is new it is the attempts of young men to manipulate class hierarchies through linear narratives of progress. As I explained in chapter 4, education represents a linear narrative of progress and during the mid-twentieth century it emerged as the primary means by which one could achieve class mobility in an urban context. In this sense the pursuit of aspirations through linear processes is a relatively new dynamic within Ethiopian social life. As the possibility of experiencing progress through education has begun to appear less likely in recent years, youth have sought to access their aspirations by constructing identities that reference modern places. It is the rise and subsequent fall of education as a linear means of accessing progress that has led youth to once again prioritize investing in the social relations that have historically been key for shaping stratification in Ethiopia.

The relative importance of class and status for inequality depends on where one's attention is focused. I have argued that particularly following the 1991 shift to a more liberalized economy, in urban Ethiopia the importance of status for achieving one's aspirations was declining. Being positively evaluated by one's community was no longer a guarantee of achieving one's aspirations. The decline of status is directly related to shifts that have increasingly prevented economic goods from being accessed through social relationships. In an urban setting government employment has been the key link between status and class. It is both a means of placing one's self within valued social relations and accessing economic goods. As I explained in chapter 8, the decreased availability of government employment means that for many young men investing in

social relations is no longer a viable means of advancing their class position. While status appears to enhance the ability of middle-class young men to access desirable employment, it is not an effective strategy for young men from lower class backgrounds. In a context of neoliberal policies that have reduced the size of the public sector, there is a lack of economic goods that may be accessed through status, thus shifting the manner in which status interacts with economic inequality. Viewed from this perspective, the importance of identity for local inequalities actually decreases in a context of neoliberalism. The relative importance of status versus class in relation to inequality is not simply a result of neoliberal capitalism, but the particular cultural processes that are at work within a given space. In Ethiopia it is values surrounding *yiluñña* and occupational status that lead youth to seek out government employment. In other words, the cultural dynamics of work in Ethiopia exacerbate the effects of structural adjustment for young men.

The other side to this argument is that middle class young men were able to reproduce their class position by remaining unemployed for long periods of time. For this relatively small population, it was precisely their investment in social relations and status that allowed them to maintain their dominant class position. If middle class young men had worked in stigmatized occupations it is likely that many of their social relationships would have been eroded and they would no longer have the ability to access opportunities through friends and family. Particularly in a context where qualifications (education) are democratized, status becomes increasingly important for the preservation of power. Local values concerning *yiluñña* and occupation meant that status could potentially be preserved through unemployment. However, for the most part only middle

class young men had the social connections to make status valuable in relation to economic goods. It was not that status ceased to be important for economic inequality, but that it could only be successfully manipulated by individuals who came from a middle class background.

While the preservation of the middle class through unemployment and stylistic attempts at transforming identity were important, in general working youth had a greater likelihood of achieving their aspirations to reposition themselves in relations of dependence with others. The situation of working youth indicates that the current period is not necessarily one in which status is losing its importance but one in which status is being redefined. Despite the negative status evaluations that were often attached to their occupations, working young men could potentially expand their businesses in order to provide support to dependents in a manner that was positively valued. Choosing work rather than unemployment was certainly not a guarantee of success and for middle class young men unemployment appeared to be a more viable strategy for achieving their aspirations in the long-term. However, in an environment where valued government work was extremely rare, working in stigmatized occupations represented a realistic possibility for young men to reposition themselves within social relations.

The continued subjugation of working youth within the dominant hierarchy of status indicates a disjuncture between status and one's likelihood of accessing economic goods. However, as I have argued in chapter 7, working young men were able to engage in a number of positive relationships with other entrepreneurs. These relationships were structured differently than those valued by unemployed youth in that they enabled the accumulation of things through investment in people rather than investing in relationships

for their own sake. In this sense it appeared that a new hierarchy of status was emerging in Jimma that cohered with changing economic realities. Working young men, who were a minority relative to the unemployed, valued relationships that enabled accumulation. Excelling in these relationships and achieving status among working young men appeared to have positive implications for one's success within the contemporary urban Ethiopian economy.

The current moment may be conceptualized in terms of its place in a continuum based on the relative importance of status for economic inequality. One of the complexities of this continuum is that the endpoints are frequently redefined. Thus the nature of status changes with context. Despite these complexities it is still possible to assess the relative importance of investing in social relationships for accessing economic goods in a manner that provides insights into both local and global economic conditions.

The method that I have employed in reaching these conclusions is to examine concrete representations of status and class in the lives of youth. In measuring youth incomes from work and gifts and placing these within the context of a discourse concerning work and sharing I have developed an analysis based on the lived experiences of young men. This is a distinctly different process from theorizing the dynamics of a capitalist system and then analyzing social life on the basis of this theoretical framework. Both methods seek to place relations of power and inequality within a temporal and spatial context, but the former provides much more room for change and variation. Rather than simply assume that lifestyle and identity are of heightened importance in a late capitalist context I have been able to show that one's

involvement, or lack there of, in both the symbolic and material aspects of production is key for relations of inequality

### **Rethinking Unemployment**

Unemployment among urban young men is thought to be a major source of violence and potential unrest, not just in Africa, but throughout the world. It is generally believed that when youth lack jobs and have little hope of obtaining employment they become susceptible to radical political messages. These young people are desperate for an income and may be easily hired as soldiers or mercenaries. Their general sense of hopelessness for the future, combined with a lack of spouse or children, means that youth have little fear of death and they may have fewer compulsions against inflicting violence on others. This argument is combined with the common assumption that young men are naturally unstable and prone to sudden outbursts of emotion<sup>2</sup>. In Ethiopia young men are often referred to as “*fendata*,” which literally means explosive. A *fendata* drinks heavily, has casual sex, fights, and perhaps most important, boasts openly about all of these activities. Unemployed young men in Addis Ababa played a key role in the political protests that developed into riots in 2001 and again following the 2005 election. Conservative estimates place the number of people killed by police during the 2005 protests at well over one hundred. After the 2005 violence, thousands of unemployed young men were removed from the streets of Addis Ababa and detained for months

---

<sup>2</sup> This assumption regarding the “nature of youth” is one of the major flaws in this argument. Beginning with Margaret Mead, anthropologists have critiqued the notion that adolescence is an inherently emotional and unstable period. Although I do not address this issue in my dissertation, the young men in my study were often in their late-twenties, well past the biological age associated with adolescence. This would seem to indicate youth and their problems are largely socially constructed rather than innate.

without charge in camps outside the city. The “explosive” nature of young men was used to justify their massive imprisonment and government officials argued that the removal of unemployed youth was in the interests of public safety.

A more humanitarian solution to the “problem of youth<sup>3</sup>”, regardless of context, is generally thought to be jobs. My analysis of occupational status draws attention to problems in the assumption that jobs alone are the answer. For young men in Jimma employment was not simply a means of accessing wages, but of constructing meaningful lives through relations with others. Before leaving to Gambella in search of work, Solomon (discussed in Chapter 4) explained to me that a life in Jimma lacked meaning. He would prefer to die in search of work, rather than continue living a meaningless life. At least this way a good story would be told about him. The problem was not only that he lacked money. In fact based on my documentation of his income, Solomon was receiving a relatively large amount of cash and in-kind gifts. Solomon’s problem was that he could not place his life within a narrative of progress, in which he was able to experience linear changes in his relationships with others.

De Boeck and Howanda (2005) have called African youth “makers and breakers” in the sense that they have the potential to both shape and tear apart societies. It would seem that in Ethiopia youth face a problem of making themselves. What young men need are not simply jobs, but meaningful jobs that alleviate issues of status in both the present and the future. Employment must allow young men to become active participants in the construction of a desirable life. I have repeatedly made the point that access to economic

---

<sup>3</sup> In Chapter 3, I explained that in the constructing of youth as a problem, the category of youth takes on very specific meanings. In terms of political violence, “youth” refers to urban young men. Discourses concerning other problems, such as the spread of HIV/AIDS, may define youth differently.

goods was essential for the realization of the social aspirations of youth – particularly marriage and raising children. Ideally, occupations would be made available that allow one to immediately take on a positive identity and *be* someone desirable, while also providing the economic means to experience progress in one's social relationships and *become* someone better in the future.

Young men sometimes suggested that the solution to the problem of unemployment was to construct more libraries and gymnasiums so that youth could spend their free time in a positive manner. As explained in the previous section, youth often expressed their difficulties in temporal terms, and employment was just one option for occupying time. In chapter 3 I argued that activities like the consumption of chat and videos provide a solution to the problem of unemployment in the sense that they use time and allow young men to reposition themselves in relation to the future. In other words, the issue of unemployment is not only about jobs. The realization of young men's aspirations does depend on accessing a regular income, but the construction of meaning in their lives extends beyond issues of work. I have demonstrated that status is produced through social relationships. Youth may experience change in their social relationships and subsequent status position regardless of their ability to find work. The multiple directions this process may take are briefly taken up below.

### **Considering the Future**

On September 11, 2007 in the Gregorian calendar Ethiopians will celebrate the beginning of a new millennium and the year 2000. It is a time when thoughts are increasingly directed towards the future. Unfortunately, it is difficult to be hopeful about

the condition of young men in Ethiopia or elsewhere in urban Africa. Employment that would enable young men to construct desirable selves by reconstructing their relationships with others is not available and there is no reason to believe that this will change in the near future. The success of some of the working young men in my study should not imply that entrepreneurialism and involvement in the informal economy is a potential solution. Even if issues of status did not present a barrier, the market for this type of work would soon be saturated. Economic opportunity may gradually increase, but for the cohort of youth that I have studied it is likely that any positive change will come too late.

This leaves young men struggling with the question of how to marry, how to be a father, and how to become an adult. It has been nearly two years since I left Jimma. For many of my informants that is two years of sitting and waiting in hope of change. How much longer can they wait and what will they do if change does not come? I have argued that the problem of unemployment is a problem of constructing a meaningful life through relations with others. If employment fails to materialize as a solution to this problem then it would seem that young men must look elsewhere in order to construct meaning in their lives. As I have described in chapter 4, migration abroad is constructed as the primary means of solving the problems faced by young men. This spatial narrative has begun to replace or reconfigure the linear temporal processes of using education in order to progress through time. However, in practice the narrative of migration remains just that, a narrative. It is extremely rare for youth, especially young men, to travel abroad. While dreaming of migration is very important for their day-to-day life, travel abroad will not be a reality for most young men.



If young men seek to solve the temporal problems associated with unemployment then they must seek those solutions at home. Of the various solutions employed by young men – chat, videos, conversation, sport, and religion – it would appear that religion has the greatest potential for a long-term solution. One unemployed young man approaching the age of thirty, spoke of how prayer and regular attendance at an Orthodox Christian Church brought him peace of mind and helped him to stop chewing chat. Religion provided a similar escape from the problem of time that I describe in relation to chat and videos in chapter 3. The difference is that at least among adults, religion was a far more socially acceptable means of passing one's time.

In December 2006, with the support of US military advisors, Ethiopia invaded Somalia in order to drive out a group called the Islamic Courts. Prior to this invasion the Islamic Courts had declared a “jihad” against Ethiopia, and mainstream media portrayed this conflict as a battle between Muslims and Christians. I am suspicious of the simple logic that unemployed young men may easily be swept up into political violence, but a religious war would certainly provide a sense of meaning in many of their lives. It is difficult for me to imagine the religiously mixed groups of young men who I observed day after day talking and chewing chat together suddenly turning to violence at the call of a government that few of them support. Based on communications with friends in Ethiopia it appears that there is little popular support for the invasion of Somalia. That said, years of sitting and waiting may eventually produce a desperation that I did not observe during my research. Diverse urban centers like Jimma are not common in Ethiopia and it is difficult to predict the reactions of young men in the countryside or more homogenous cities.

Furthermore, particularly in south and western Ethiopia where Jimma is located, evangelical Protestant religions are growing in popularity. As Donald Donham (1999b) has described, in an Ethiopian context Protestantism is associated with a particular notion of modernity. Evangelical Protestantism often forces an explicit rejection of tradition and the past that can be useful for young people contemplating an undesirable future. Protestantism was not a major source of identity among my informants, but this may change and I suspect that very different dynamics are at play in the countryside.

While religion may prove to be an increasingly important factor in shaping young men's movement towards adulthood, in the narratives of youth desires for the future were consistently placed in the context of family. Raising a family is perhaps the primary struggle that young men will face as they age and the pressure to marry and have children increases. If status is generated through relationships, then marriage and parenthood are the most important factors in shifting one's relationships and subsequent status position. It is very difficult for me to speculate about how young men might solve this problem. Fathering children outside of marriage and providing them with little or no financial support would seem to provide the most obvious solution to the basic need to biologically reproduce. While some men certainly did take this route, at the time of my research it did not appear to be common. Birthrates in urban Ethiopia have decreased dramatically in recent years (Kinfu 2001) and single mothers were not abundant in Jimma. Perhaps this is another indication of the power of social pressure in Jimma. To father children that one could not support was considered extremely shameful and young men may have been reacting to this pressure.

This is an issue that I am eager to explore further in the future as it is a site where young men are feeling pressured to both start families and to do so in a culturally appropriate manner. Marriage and fatherhood are also key components of local notions of masculinity. Given the importance of family and the lack of a simple solution I anticipate that young men and women will adopt innovative and imaginative relationships. As family relationships are an important site for the generation of status, a further investigation of fatherhood would also enable a better understanding of how status is developed through relationships.

### **Concluding the Conclusion**

In general, predicting the future can be a frustrating exercise. Two years ago I would have never predicted an Ethiopian invasion of Somalia and now it has become one of the primary factors in shaping Ethiopian politics. While knowing the future is impossible I hope that I have been able to abstract beyond detailed ethnography in order to clarify processes that extend beyond contemporary urban Ethiopia. I have demonstrated the importance of social relationships for work and the experience of time. I have clarified the interrelationship between class and status, and the manner in which status may act as a source of stratification in itself. Finally, I have critiqued theories that reduce cultural and economic processes to products of neoliberal capitalism and suggested that inequality may be better understood through analyses of gift exchange, reciprocity, and other diverse practices. All of these arguments are encompassed within an ethnography of urban young men who are living through a time period that is marked by economic decline and a rapid increase in the influx of international culture. It is

through the lives of young men like Afwerk, Siraj, and Solomon that the peculiar dynamics of life during the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century may be better understood.

## Glossary

The Amharic and Oromo words included here are either technical terms or are used repeatedly throughout the text, frequently without an accompanying translation.

### Amharic Terms

<i>ato</i>	an honorific term corresponding to mister
<i>chat</i>	a green leaf that acts as a mild stimulant when chewed
<i>chewata</i>	literally play, also used to refer to conversation
<i>demibeña</i>	may refer to either the customer or the vendor when a close relationship exists between them
<i>derg</i>	literally committee, refers to the Marxist military regime that ruled Ethiopia from 1974 to 1991
<i>duriye</i>	see chapter 3; generally refers to a socially deviant young man
<i>ferenj</i>	foreigner; generally used to refer to someone of non-African descent
<i>finter</i>	an informal term for a gift that is given to others after one has had good fortune
<i>gibza</i>	an invitation; may include presents, telling stories, playing music, and other offerings
<i>gwadeñña</i>	friend
<i>gwilt</i>	land held as a fief
<i>iddir</i>	a burial association, usually organized by neighborhood
<i>injera</i>	the staple food in Ethiopia; a flat bread that resembles a large pancake
<i>merkana</i>	a state of mental bliss achieved through the consumption of chat
<i>qeñazmach</i>	a highly honorific military term

<i>ras</i>	a highly honorific military term
<i>sefer</i>	neighborhood
<i>shifita</i>	bandit
<i>shuro</i>	a spicy chickpea paste, commonly eaten by poor families
<i>sitota</i>	gift
<i>tej</i>	honey wine
<i>tella</i>	home brewed beer
<i>watat</i>	youth
<i>wereda</i>	an administrative district, similar to a county in the United States
<i>yiluñña</i>	the experience of an intense shame based on what others are thinking and saying about one's self and family
<i>zemed</i>	social category that generally encompasses biological kin and close friends

### **Oromo Terms**

<i>abba</i>	honorific term preceding a man's name
<i>afkala</i>	Oromo merchants in the Gibe Valley Region
<i>chafe</i>	meetings held within gada political system where major decisions are made
<i>gada</i>	a political system practiced by the Oromo that is based on age grades
<i>jabarti</i>	Muslim merchants operating in Ethiopia; Levine (1974) claims that jabarti were of Amhara descent while Hassan (1990) argues that they were Arab; the term is not used to describe contemporary merchants

*moggaasa* process of assimilating other ethnic groups through adoption

*moti* king

## Bibliography

Abu-Lughod, Lila 2005. *Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of Television in Egypt*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Amsalu Aklilu 1986. *Amharic – English Dictionary*. Addis Ababa: Kuraz Publishing Agency.

Arrighi, Giovanni 2002. *The African Crisis: World Systemic and Regional Analysis*. *The New Left Review*. 15:5-36.

Asmarom Legesse 1973. *Gada: Three Approaches to the Study of an African Society*. New York: Free Press.

Appadurai, Arjun 1996. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

----- 1988. Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value. *In The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bahru Zewde 2002a. *Pioneers of Change in Ethiopia: The Reformist Intellectuals of the Early Twentieth Century*. Oxford: James Curry.

----- 2002b. *A History of Modern Ethiopia, 1855 – 1991*. Oxford: James Curry.



- Barnes, Sandra. 1986. *Patrons and Power: Creating a Political Community in Metropolitan Lagos*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Baudrillard, Jean 1982. *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. St. Louis: Telos Press.
- Bedru Kedir Hassen and Girma Alemayehu 2003. *Content Outline for Civic and Ethical Education*. Addis Ababa: Ministry of Education.
- Biaya, Tshikala 2005. *Youth & Street Culture in Urban Africa: Addis Ababa, Dakar, & Kinshasa*. In *Makers & Breakers: Children & Youth in Postcolonial Africa*. Alcinda Howanda and Filip De Boeck, eds. Oxford: James Curry.
- Bjeren, Gunilla 1985. *Migration to Shashamene: Ethnicity, Gender, and Occupation in Urban Ethiopia*. Uppsala: Scandanavian Institute for African Studies.
- Bledsoe, Caroline and Susana Lerner, and Jane Guyer eds. 2000. *Fertility and the Male Life-cycle in the Era of Fertility Decline*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- 1979 [1963]. *Algeria 1960: The Disenchantment of the World*. Richard Nice, translator. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

----- 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre and Loic J.D. Wacquant 1992. *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Bourgois, Philippe 1995. *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in Spanish Harlem*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Bozzoli, Belinda 1991. *Women of Phokeng: Consciousness, Life Strategy, and Migration in South Africa, 1900 – 1983*. Portsmouth: Heinemann.

Buck-Morss, Susan 1991. *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Cole, Jennifer 2005. The Jaombilo of Tamatve (Madagascar), 1992 –2004: Reflections on Youth and Globalization. *Journal of Social History*. 38(4): 891 – 914.

----- 2004. Fresh Contact in Tamatave, Madagascar: Sex, Money, and Intergenerational Transformation. *American Ethnologist*. 31(4): 573-588.

Comaroff, Jean and John Comaroff 2004. Notes on Afrimodernity and the Neo World Order: An Afterword. In *Producing African Futures: Ritual and Reproduction in a Neoliberal Age*. Brad Weiss, ed. Leiden: Brill.

----- 2000. Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming. *Public Culture*.  
12(2): 291-343.

De Boeck, Filip 1999. Domesticating Diamonds and Dollars: Identity, Expenditure and Sharing in Southwestern Zaire (1984-1997). *In Globalization and Identity: Dialectics of Flow and Closure*. B. Meyer and P. Geschiere eds. Oxford: Blackwell.

De Boeck, Filip 2005. Introduction: Children and Youth in Africa: Agency, Identity, and Place. *In Makers and Breakers: Children and Youth in Postcolonial Africa*. Alcinda Howanda and Filip De Boeck, eds. Trenton: Africa World Press.

Deresse Negatu 2004. Chewing Over Khat Closures. *Fortune* August 1: 1-3, 21.

Donham, Donald 1999. *History, Power, Ideology: Central Issues in Marxism and Anthropology*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

----- 1999b. *Marxist Modern: An Ethnographic History of the Ethiopian Revolution*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

-----1986. "Old Abyssinia and the New Ethiopian Empire: Themes in Social History." *In The Southern Marches of Imperial Ethiopia: Essays in History and Social Anthropology*. Donald Donham and Wendy James, eds. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Dore, R. 1976. *The Diploma Disease: Education, Qualification, and Development*. London: George Allen and Unwin.

Durham, Deborah 2004. Disappearing Youth: Youth as a social shifter in Botswana.

*American Ethnologist*. 31(4): 589 – 605

Ellison, James 2006. “Everyone can do as he wants”: Economic liberalization and

emergent forms of antipathy in southern Ethiopia. *American Ethnologist*. 33(4): 665 –

686.

Escobar, Arturo 1995. *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the*

*Third World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Fallers, Lloyd 1966. Social Stratification and Economic Processes in Africa. *In* *Class,*

*Status, Power: Social Stratification in Comparative Perspective*. R. Bendix and S.M.

Lipset, eds. New York: Free Press.

Ferguson, James 2006. *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order*. Durham:

Duke University Press.

----- 1999. *Expectations of Modernity*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Freeman, Carla 2001. Is Local: Global as Feminine: Masculine? Rethinking the Gender

of Globalization. *Signs*. 26(4): 1007 – 1037.

----- 2000. *High Tech and High Heels in the Global Economy: Women, Work, and Pink-*

*Collar Identities in the Caribbean*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Friedman, Jonathan. 1994 *Cultural Identity and Global Processes*. London: Sage Publications.

Gebissa, Ezekiel 2004. *Leaf of Allah: Khat and the Transformation of Agriculture in Harerege, Ethiopia, 1875 –1991*. Oxford.

Gebeyehu Abelti, Marco Brazzoduro, Behailu Gebremedhin 2001. *Housing Conditions and Demand For Housing in Urban Ethiopia*. Addis Ababa: Central Statistical Authority.

Genene Bizuneh, Teshome Adino, Giuseppe Gesano, Antonella Guarneri, and Frank Heins 2001. *Work Status and Unemployment in Urban Ethiopia*. Addis Ababa: Central Statistical Authority.

Gibson-Graham, J.K. 2006. *A Postcapitalist Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

----- 1996. *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

Gondola, Didier 1999. *Dream and Drama: The search for elegance among Congolese youth*. *African Studies Review* 42, 1.

Goodstein, Elizabeth 2005. *Experience Without Qualities: Boredom and Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Goody, Jack 1976. *Production and Reproduction: A Comparative Study of the Domestic Domain*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

----- 1971. *Technology, Tradition and the State in Africa*. London: Oxford University Press.

Gould, W.T.S. 1993. *People and Education in the Third World*. Longman House: Longman Scientific & Technical.

Graeber, David 2002. *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of Our Own Dreams*. New York: Palgrave.

Guluma Gameda 1987. *An Outline of the Early History of Jimma Town*. Paper Presented at the Fourth Annual Seminar of the Department of History, Addis Ababa University. Awassa, Ethiopia: July 9-11.

----- 1984. *The Process of State Formation in the Gibe Region: The Case of Gomma and Jimma*. In *Proceedings of the Second Annual Seminar of the Department of History*. Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University.

Guyer, Jane 1993. *Wealth in People and Self Realization in Equatorial Africa*. *Man*. 28:243-265.

Hall, Stuart and J. Clark, T. Jefferson, B. Roberts, eds. 1976. *Resistance Through Rituals*. London: Hutchinson.

Hansen, Karen Tranberg 2005. *Getting Stuck in the Compound: Some Odds Against Social Adulthood in Lusaka*. *Africa Today*. 51(4):2-17.

----- 2000. *Gender and Difference: Youth, Bodies, and Clothing in Zambia*. In *Gender, Agency, and Change: An Anthropological Perspective*. Victoria Goddard, ed. London: Routledge.

Hart, Keith 1988. *Kinship, Contract and Trust: The Economic Organization of Migrants in an African City Slum*. In *Trust: Making and Breaking Co-operative Relations*. Oxford: Blackwell.

----- 1975. *Swindler or Public Benefactor? The Entrepreneur in His Community*. In *Changing Social Structure in Ghana*. J. Goody, ed. London: International African Institute.

----- 1973. *Informal Income Opportunities and Urban Employment in Ghana*. *Journal of Modern African Studies*, September 1973

Harvey, David 2005. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

----- 2003. *The New Imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

----- 1990. *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Cambridge: Blackwell.

Hassen, Mohammed 1990. *The Oromo of Ethiopia: A History 1570:1860*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hebdige, Dick 1979. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. London: Routledge.

Hoben, Allan 1970. *Social Stratification in Traditional Amhara Society*. In *Social Stratification in Africa*. Arthur Tuden and Leonard Plotnicov eds. New York: The Free Press.

Howanda, Alcinda and Filip De Boeck eds. 2005. *Makers & Breakers: Children & Youth in Postcolonial Africa*. Oxford: James Currey.

Hutchinson, Sharon 1996. *Nuer Dilemmas: coping with money, war, and the state*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Jua, Natang 2003. *Differential Responses to Disappearing Transitional Pathways: Redefining Possibility among Cameroonian Youths*. *African Studies Review*. 46(2):13-37.

Karp, Ivan 2002. *Development and Personhood: Tracing the Contours of a Moral Discourse*. In *Critically Modern: Alternatives, Alterities, Anthropologies*. Bruce Knauff, ed. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.



Kelly, Raymond 1993. *Constructing Inequality: The Fabrication of a Hierarchy of Virtue among the Etoro*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Kinfu Y. 2000. Below Replacement Fertility in Tropical Africa? Some Evidence from Addis Ababa. *Journal of Population Research*. 17(1):63-82.

Kondo, Dorinne 1990. *Crafting Selves: Power, Gender, and Discourses of Identity in a Japanese Workplace*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Koselleck, Reinhart 1985 [1979]. *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*. Keith Tribe, trans. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

Knauff, Bruce 2002. *Critically Modern: Alternatives, Alterities, Anthropologies*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Krishnan, Pramila 1998. *The Urban Labour Market During Structural Adjustment: Ethiopia 1990-1997*. Oxford: Center for the Study of African Economies.

Larkin, Brian 1997. Indian Films and Nigerian Lovers: media and the creation of parallel modernities. *Africa* 67(3) 406-440.

Levine, Donald 1965. *Wax and Gold: Tradition and Innovation in Ethiopian Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

----- 1974. *Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of a Multiethnic Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lewis, Herbert 1964. A Reconsideration of the Socio-Political System of the Western Galla. *Journal of Semitic Studies* 9(1).

----- 1996. The Development of Oromo Political Consciousness from 1958-1994. *In* *Being and Becoming Oromo: Historical and Anthropological Enquiries*. P. Baxter, J. Hultin, and A. Triulzi, eds. Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet.

----- 2001. *Jimma Abba Jifar: An Oromo Monarchy, Ethiopia 1830-1932*. Lawrenceville: The Red Sea Press

Liechty, Mark 2003. *Suitably Modern: Making Middle-Class Culture in a New Consumer Society*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

MacGaffey, Janet and Remy Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000. *Congo-Paris: Transnational Traders on the Margins of the Law*. Oxford: James Currey.

Mains, Daniel 2004. Drinking, Rumor and Ethnicity in Jimma, Ethiopia. *Africa*. 73(4).

----- 2004b. "Working, Dreaming, and Chewing: Chat Use and Employment Among Young Men in Jimma, Ethiopia." Workshop on Khat and the Ethiopian Reality: Production, Marketing, and Consumption, April 16, 2004. Addis Ababa University.

Markakis, John 1974. *Ethiopia: Anatomy of a Traditional Polity*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Masquelier, Adeline 2005. The Scorpion's Sting: Youth, Marriage and the Struggle for Social Maturity in Niger. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*. 11:59-83.

Mitchell, J. Clyde, and A.L. Epstein 1959. Occupational Prestige and Social Status among Urban Africans in Northern Rhodesia. *Africa* 29:22-39.

Mustafa, Huda 2006. La Mode Dakaroise: Elegance, Transnationalism and an African Fashion Capital. *In Fashions World Cities*. Chris Breward and David Gilbert, eds. Oxford: Berg Press.

National Urban Planning Institute 1997. Report on the Development Plan of Jimma Town. Addis Ababa: National Urban Planning Institute.

Newell, Sasha 2005. Migratory Modernity and the Cosmology of Consumption in Cote d'Ivoire . *In, Migration and Economy: Global and Local Dynamics*. Trager, Lillian, ed. 2005. Altamira Press: Walnut Creek.

Ortner, Sherry and Harriet Whitehead 1981. Introduction: Accounting for Sexual Meanings. *In Sexual Meanings: The Cultural Construction of Gender and Sexuality*. Sherry Ortner and Harriet Whitehead, eds. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Pankurst, Alula 2001. Dimensions and Conceptions of Marginalisation. *In Living on the Edge: Marginalised Minorities of Craftworkers and Hunters in Southern Ethiopia*. Dena Freeman and Alula Pankhurst, eds. Department of Sociology and Social Administration: Addis Ababa University.

Pankhurst, Alula and Dena Freeman 2001. Change and Development: Lessons from the Twentieth Century. *In Living on the Edge: Marginalised Minorities of Craftworkers and Hunters in Southern Ethiopia*. Dena Freeman and Alula Pankhurst, eds. Department of Sociology and Social Administration: Addis Ababa University.

Pankhurst, Richard 1968. *Economic History of Ethiopia, 1800-1935*. Addis Ababa: Haile Selassie I University Press.

----- 1985. *History of Ethiopian Towns From the Mid-Nineteenth Century to 1935*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden GMBH.

Parkin, D. 1972. *Palms, Wine and Witnesses: Public Spirit and Private Gain in an African Farming Community*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Parry, Jonathan 1989. On the Moral Perils of Exchange. *In Money and Morality of Exchange*. J. Parry and M. Bloch, eds. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Paules, Greta 1991. *Dishing It Out: Power and Resistance among Waitresses in a New Jersey Restaurant*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Piot, Charles 2005. *Border Practices: Playing the US Diversity Visa Lottery*. African Studies Association Annual Meeting, Nov. 17-20, 2005. Washington, D.C.

----- 1999. *Remotely Global: Village Modernity in West Africa*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Poluha, Eva 2004. *The Power of Continuity: Ethiopia Through the Eyes of its Children*. Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet.

Postone, Moishe 1993. *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Resnick, Stephen and Richard Wolff 1987. *Knowledge and Class: A Marxian Critique of Political Economy*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Richards, Audrey 1940. *The Political System of the Bemba Tribe - Northern Rhodesia*. M. Fortes and E.E. Evans-Pritchard, eds. London: Oxford University Press

Richards, Paul 1996. *Fighting for the Rain Forest: War, Youth, and Resources in Sierra Leone*. Portsmouth: Heinemann.

Rofel, Lisa 1999. *Other Modernities: Gendered Yearnings in China After Socialism*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Serneels, Pieter 2004. *The Nature of Unemployment in Ethiopia*. Oxford: Center for the Study of African Economies.

Shack, W.A. 1973. *Urban Ethnicity and the Cultural Process of Urbanization in Ethiopia*. In *Urban Anthropology: Cross-Cultural Studies of Urbanization*. A. Southall ed. New York: Oxford University Press.

Silberschmidt, Margrethe 2004. *Masculinities, Sexuality, and Socio-Economic Change in Rural and Urban East Africa*. In *Rethinking Sexualities in Africa*. Signe Arnfred, ed. Nordiska Afrikainstitutet.

Strathern, Marilyn 1988. *The Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Tekalign Woldemariam 1986. *Land, Trade, and Political Power among the Oromo of the Gibe Region: A Hypothesis*. In *Proceedings of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Seminar of the Department of History*. Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University.

Tekeste Negash 1996. *Rethinking Education in Ethiopia*. Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet.

Thompson, E.P. 1967. Time, Work Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism. Past and Present. 38:56-97.

Tsing, Anna 2002. Conclusion: The Global Situation. *In The Anthropology of Globalization, A Reader*. J. Inda and R. Rosaldo, eds. Malden: Blackwell.

Weber, Max 1982. Max Weber: Selection from Economy and Society, vols. 1 and 2, and General Economic History. *In Classes, Power, and Conflict: Classical and Contemporary Debates*. Anthony Giddens and David Held, eds. Berkeley: University of California Press.

----- 1978. Class, Status, Party. *In Max Weber: Selections in Translation*. W.G. Runcimou, ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Weiss, Brad 2005. The Barber in Pain: Consciousness, Affliction, and Alterity in Urban East Africa. *In Makers & Breakers: Children & Youth in Postcolonial Africa*. Alcinda Howanda and Filip De Boeck, eds. Oxford: James Curry.

----- 2004a. Contentious Futures: Past and Present. *In Producing African Futures: Ritual and Reproduction in a Neoliberal Age*. Brad Weiss, ed. Leiden: Brill.

----- 2004b. Street Dreams: Inhabiting Masculine Fantasy in Neoliberal Tanzania. *In Producing African Futures: Ritual and Reproduction in a Neoliberal Age*. Brad Weiss, ed. Leiden: Brill.

----- 2002. Thug Realism: Inhabiting Fantasy in Urban Tanzania. *Cultural Anthropology* 17(1): 93-124.

White, Louise 1990. *The Comforts of Home: Prostitution in Colonial Kenya*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Willis, Paul 1977. *Learning To Labour: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*. Farnborough, England: Saxon House.

Yanagisako, Sylvia Junko 2002. *Producing Culture and Capital: Family Firms in Italy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.