

Within The Wall and Beyond - Ethnic Identity and Ethnic Persistence In Harar, Ethiopia

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Harar is the only case of a preindustrial "stone" city in this book (cf. Sjoberg "The Preindustrial City"; Arensberg "The Urban in Cross-cultural Perspective"). It has survived as a functioning walled city into the twentieth century, while many other cities of this type like Cairo have become absorbed into modern metropolitan areas (Abu-Lughod "Migrant Adjustment to City Life"). It is also the home of a unique ethnic group with its own language, culture, and identification with the city. The *ge usu'*, as the people of Harar call themselves, are an economic class, too. Sjoberg pointed out that the elite in preindustrial societies were residents of the cities. The *ge usu'* are both a mercantile and landowning elite who have dominated the peasantry in the surrounding countryside. Waldron thus demonstrates how class and ethnicity overlap. At the end of the article Waldron speculated about the future of the *ge usu'* as they become dispersed in other Ethiopian cities. He suggests that they may form ethnic associations like those found by Little ("The Role of Voluntary Associations in West African Urbanization"). Like many anthropologists, Waldron uses much of the terminology used by the people he has studied, since many words have no full equivalents in English.

Harar, Ethiopia, is a walled preindustrial city whose approximately 20,000 inhabitants (1) speak a unique Semitic language and have an urban culture which is distinct from that of the surrounding peoples. Oral traditions state that the city's wall was built by Emir Nur, who ruled from 1552 to 1566. Since that time, Harar has retained its identity as an ethnic enclave although it has functioned as a vital market area for the surrounding peoples and as an important regional center of Islam. Located about half-way between the Red Sea and Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia, Harar has long served as a trade link between inland Ethiopia and the outside world.

From the vantage point of Mount Hakim, the city of Harar resembles an island of houses in the midst of open country. In many ways, Harar is very much like an island, separated both physically and symbolically from its neighboring ethnic groups. The Harari call themselves *ge usu'*, "people of the city"; call their unique language *ge sinan*, (2) "the language of the city"; and call their way of life *ge 'ada*, "the customs of the city." Outside the city wall, they say, are *derga usu'*, "wild or uncultured people." The religion of the city, Islam, is its major cultural connection to many of the surrounding peoples.

For an anthropologist, such as myself, one of the most interesting phenomena of the city of Harar is the persistence of its ethnic group, the *ge usu'*, who have maintained their identity despite at least four centuries of frequent and intense contacts with four other ethnic groups. These are the agricultural Oromo, who number some 200,000 in the area of Harar; the pastoral Somali, who are the dominant population in the arid regions; the small group of Argobba villagers; and since the city's conquest and incorporation into Ethiopia in 1887 the highland Christian Amhara.

These outside groups are dealt with for economic, governmental, and many other vital reasons. This discussion will explore the means by which the Harari have maintained their distinct language and culture despite these contacts. Why have they not been absorbed by the surrounding Oromo, who outnumber them ten to one? Why haven't they become Somali, Argobba, or Amhara? Why, in fact, has Harar not become an ethnic melting pot?

Social Solidarity and Citizenship

The first insight into the integrity of the Harari comes from an appreciation of the internal solidarity of the city's society, the high value they place on their way of life, and some of the symbols they use to reinforce cultural self-awareness.

To the outsider, the city of Harar seems congested and maze-like in its complexity. To the *ge usu'*, it is both home and sanctuary. When I first moved into the old city in 1962, I was oppressed by the crowded conditions. Noticing the wide open spaces outside the city, I asked many *ge usu'*, "Why don't you move outside the wall?" The usual answer to this naive question was, "Because everything is inside."

The wall has ceased to be of defensive utility since the mid-nineteenth century. The gates did have an important economic function when Harar was an independent city-state. Each gate functioned as a customs station. Goods were taxed both as they entered and as they left the city (Paulitschke 1888:243). However, neither defense nor taxation explains the continuing importance of the boundaries which have preserved the Harari ethnic identity and which surround the Harari way of life.

Within the wall, the Harari ethnic group maintains its existence primarily by two means: (1) by defining and emphasizing the social duties of citizenship; and (2) by utilizing symbols of ethnic identity which enhance the consciousness of being Harari.

With few exceptions, the Harari ethnic group is endogamous. A *ge usu'* (Harari) is thus born of Harari parents. A Harari speaks *ge sinan*, the language of the city, as his mother tongue and uses only it within his own society, although he usually knows two or three other languages. Being born in the city and speaking its language would seem to be prerequisites enough for citizenship, but to fully qualify, he must participate in the city's three basic social institutions. These are *ahli*, the family network; *marinyet*, organized friendship; and *afocha*, community organization.

The family network links each person with dozens of other households spread throughout the city (Waldron 1978:15-16). Each has a specific role, which is defined for the individual by the kinship system. Unlike many other African societies, corporate kinship groups such as clans are not found in Harar, and unlike many other Muslim peoples, extended patrilineal systems of tracing relationships are not used here. Each person's family network overlaps other individual's networks until the interconnections of families within the city are as numerous and intricate as the crossing of strands in a spider web. Each *ge usu'* is ultimately tied to every other *ge usu'*, and closely related to a great many.

If kinship in the city establishes all-encompassing webs of relationships, each with its required form of behaviour, friendship provides the *ge usu'* with a small closed group of confidants. Each *ge usu'* belongs to one and only one group of friends, made up of about five or six persons of the same sex. These are formed of playmates from his neighborhood in early youth. Friends are seldom close relatives, and perhaps never are brothers. The explanation for this is that status inequalities are built into all kinship roles, even those between elder and younger siblings. Friends are, above all, equals and thus should not be confused with relatives.

Friendship in Harar is extremely important in adolescence. Young men roam the streets with their friends, and share many of the experiences of maturation in each other's company. Indeed a friendship group sometimes seems to produce a shared responsibility orientation among its members, who are likely to develop a similar way of viewing the world around them.

Friendship groups convene at least once a week in the important institution of the *bercha*. A *bercha* is a calm and deliberative conversational session where friends discuss anything of mutual concern. Much of their conversation centres around the topics of their city, its place names, their legends, and the proper way of telling these in the language of the city. Awareness of the city's culture is thus heightened. Conversation is stimulated by the chewing of the leaves of ch'at (*Catha edulis*), called *qat* in Arabic. Ch'at, chewed in moderation, produces a mild euphoria and mental intensification. The *bercha* epitomizes the nature of friendship in Harar, a tranquil respite from the status considerations involved in the rest of Harari society, and a place where stories are told and advice is sought within the security of lifelong bonds of trust.

The *afocha*, a kind of communal organization, is the focus of social solidarity among the *ge usu'*, however. In 1975, there were twenty-four men's *afochas* and fourteen women's *afochas* in Harar. *Afochas* are primarily concerned with weddings and funerals, but their inner workings are much more complex (Koehn and Waldron 1978). *Afochas* are made up of one's neighbors, for the most part, and are likely to include some of one's friends and some of one's relatives. Many friends and relatives will also belong to different *afocha* groups. The overlap of kinship, friendship, and *afocha* membership establishes a high degree of social solidarity in Harar.

This social solidarity, which could also be called "interconnectedness," affects the ways with which the *ge usu'* behave toward one another. No one within the Harari ethnic group is a stranger, and there are no public acts, which remain secrets from one's friends, relatives, or *afocha* mates. Thus a *ge usu'* is very careful how he behaves in public and how he treats other people of the city. Part of this consideration derives from his shared identity with them. But he also knows that if he should quarrel with another *ge usu'*, or otherwise behave against the ethics of the city, he would become the subject of gossip which would eventually reach everyone of concern to him.

Participation in the basic institutions of the city is the essence of Harari citizenship. The total amount of time spent in kinship, friendship and *afocha* functions is extensive. However, the individual who attends to the city's social obligations also knows exactly what is going on inside the walled city. He has accurate and up-to-date information concerning market prices and political conditions, which he obtains in informal conversation at social events. From an overall social perspective, the result of this high degree of participation is an extremely tight-knit ethnic group, effectively closed to those not born in the city, which, in turn, helps explain the persistence of the Harari ethnic group.

Symbols of Identity

Underlying this tight-knit society is a conscious awareness of what it means to be a *ge usu'*, a member of the city culture. Hundreds of local place names, coupled with their explanatory traditions, make the city a very meaningful place for the *ge usu'*. Although the city is bafflingly complex to the outsider, it is conceptually quite simple for the *ge usu'*. First of all, the city is divided into five quarters. Each of these quarters is further conceptually subdivided into neighborhoods. These neighborhoods are not merely spatial referents. Each has its tales and traditions, which enhance the meaning of living in the city.

Usually, neighborhoods are named after *awach*, a category which includes Muslim saints, war heroes and learned men, and which translates directly as 'fathers' in the sense of "fathers of the city." Perhaps fifty of the city's neighborhoods are named after *awach*. There are dozens more located throughout the city. (In fact, I recorded one hundred and fifty-six *awach* shrines in 1975.) Many of these *awach* are shrines of famous Muslim saints which are celebrated in all-night ceremonies by the *ge usu'*, wherein the life of Mohammed and praises to the saint are recited. Harar is thus a kind of holy city; to be a

Harari is to live in it, in the constant presence of the awach. For the purposes of this discussion, that statement should be reversed: to live in the presence of the awach enhances the feeling of being a Harari.

The physical evidence of ethnic awareness is manifold in Harar. Even household architecture plays its role, since every feature of the traditional home has a pattern, which is explained in terms of the past of the city. A good example is the explanation of the hard-packed red earth floor of traditional Harari homes. The red color of this specially prepared surface is said to represent the Harari blood spilled at the Battle of Ch'elenqo, where the city lost its independence forever to the forces of the Ethiopian Empire in 1887. Children are thus raised with the distinctiveness between *ge usu'* and other ethnic groups firmly entrenched as part of their surroundings.

Since its conquest, Harar has come into more and more intensive contact with outside groups, especially the Amhara, who comprised the dominant ethnic group of the Ethiopian Empire. The Harari seem to have made adjustments in the ethnic markers used to define themselves vis-a-vis the Amharas, who are Christians, as this contact increased. I can cite only a few examples here.

Richard Burton, who, in 1854, was the first European to visit Harar, reported the Harari to be virtual drunkards, in contradiction to the rules of Islam, which prohibit alcoholic beverages. "High and low," he said, "indulge freely in intoxicating drinks, beer, and mead" (Burton 1966:188). Gohoy, a kind of beer, used to be sold in the streets. However, a century later, the Harari do not tolerate the drinking of alcohol: Christians (Amhara) drink; Muslims (*ge usu'*) do not. The *ge usu'* chew *ch'at* extensively; the Amhara eschew it. The *ge usu'* grow the world's most delicious coffee beans, in my opinion, but they seldom drink coffee - it is for Christians. They prefer imported tea, or drinks made from coffee leaves or husks.

One may react to these intensifications of the symbols, which define group identity, whether one is Harari or Amhara, with distaste, seeing them as deplorable examples of bigotry and intolerance. Here, however, I am suggesting another perspective, that of a threatened ethnic group, trying against all odds to hold on to its identity, its culture, and its way of life.

Boundary Maintenance and Restrictions of Exchanges

Harari in-group solidarity, combined with the symbols of ethnic identity, which define the people of the city as separate from all other peoples in the world, provides a strong basis for the maintenance of their ethnic identity. However, probably the most important social mechanisms with which the *ge usu'* have preserved their tiny culture while engaging in daily and important transactions with the surrounding and more numerous ethnic outsiders are those which are used in defining boundaries.

The perspective I have taken in analyzing Harari social boundary maintenance was developed independently of that of the great Norwegian anthropologist, Frederik Barth, but resulted in a remarkably similar conclusion. As Barth says,

“Stable interethnic relations presuppose... A structuring of interaction: a set of prescriptions governing situations of contact, and allowing for articulation in some sectors or domains of activity, and a set of proscriptions in other sectors, and thus insulating parts of the culture from confrontation and modification“ (Barth 1969:16).

The way the people of Harar have held on to their identity is exactly by defining limits for the types of interactions permitted with the members of other ethnic groups. One may trade with an Oromo or an

Amhara, but one may not marry a member of the outside group. One may engage in religious celebrations with other Muslims (and the Oromo, Somali, and Argobba are Muslim), but unless the fellow Muslims participate in the three basic social institutions of the city (kinship, friendship, and *afocha*), they are not Harari - they are still outsiders.

In categorizing the types of exchanges which are regulated by the *ge usu'*, I have followed the suggestion of Claude Levi-Strauss (1953:536). He suggests that the crucial exchanges in any society, which my focus restricts to inter-ethnic exchanges, are of three types: (1) exchanges of goods and services, or economic exchange; (2) exchange of personnel, (especially marriage, but also including adoption, and assimilation; and (3) exchange of information. One could probably consider biological exchange between groups, or gene flow, but data are lacking.

Sometimes anthropologists speak of social boundaries as if they were single clear-cut lines, as a circle on a map of ethnographic distributions. The approach I have used, however, produces three types of boundaries - each of which is measured as a frequency of inter-ethnic transaction. However, as Barth has made clear, ethnic survival in contact situations is facilitated by forbidding some types of exchanges while permitting others.

The ethnographic details of Harari exchanges with each of the contingent ethnic groups are too complex to be presented here (see Waldron 1974: 260-327). However, in the abstract, a pattern of boundary management by the *ge usu'* emerges, which has permitted the survival of their culture. Most important, here, is their restriction of the exchange of personnel across ethnic boundaries. Harari are permitted to marry only other Harari, (3) thus avoiding gradual dilution of their culture. Should a Harari marry a Christian, that person would be shunned and referred to as if he or she were dead.

If endogamy preserves the integrity of the population and its culture, its wealth and energy are derived from profitable economic exchanges with the surrounding groups. Of these, the Oromo have been historically the most important to Harar. Richard Burton described the Harar of one hundred years ago, saying, "Harar is essentially a commercial town: its citizens live . . . by systematically defrauding the Galla Bedouin (Oromo)" (Burton 1966:192). Although much has changed recently in the old system, the *ge usu'* traditionally profited in two ways from the surrounding Oromo peasants. First of all, they owned most of the farmland for miles around the city. This was cultivated by Oromo tenant farmers, who might be expected to yield as much as seventy percent of their crops to the Harari owner. Also, the Harari merchants profitably controlled the city's market, the sole source of regional specialties and imported goods for a vast area of this part of Africa. In a way, then, the Harari exploited the Oromo while forbidding marriage with them, and in this lay the secret of their duration and wealth.

The Harari also controlled the flow of information in and around the city, for they were and are multilingual. Most Harari are fluent in the Oromo language, for instance, although virtually no Oromo can speak the language of the city. The Harari merchants thus could manipulate prices on the spot, using *ge sinan*, the city language, as a kind of secret vehicle for price setting. Many Harari also speak Amharic, Somali, Arabic; many can speak some English. Within the city the knowledge of markets and farms, of political and economic events is pooled within the population of *ge usu'*. It is shared in visits, in meetings of friends, relatives, and *afocha*. In a way, the system of information thus established is like a brokerage of strategic knowledge, and to become a member one must be a *ge usu'*.

Beyond the Wall: The Future of The Harari

The delicate balance of ethnic groups, which has been discussed here, has been altered irreparably by the events of the twentieth century. As I have indicated, the old farming economy of Harar was based

on ethnic stratification: the Harari owned the land, and the much more numerous Oromo paid for the right to work it, often exorbitantly. Such exploitative forms of land tenure were widespread in Ethiopia before the revolution of 1974. Not surprisingly land reforms were one of the first and most necessary changes made by the new government. However, with these reforms, the traditional Harari economy was shattered, and the wealth of the city, which had permitted the *ge usu*' to spend long hours fulfilling social obligations, was gone forever.

In response to this and earlier economic changes, many Harari merchants had moved to the capital of Ethiopia by 1975. In 1977, when I last worked in Ethiopia, this population movement from the old city had become a virtual Diaspora: there were more Harari living in Addis Ababa than in their old home city.

I know, from preliminary research in Addis Ababa, that they are adjusting their patterns of friendship and the structure of *afocha* organizations, and that kinship has taken altered roles. The Harari will not have a wall around them in their new city, nor will they be reminded of the term *ge- usu*' will refer less and less to the people who live in their old sanctuary, the city of Harar. However, there will be for all the foreseeable future, *ge usu*' living in the cities of Ethiopia and contributing their specialties to its culture: they are the "people of the city."⁽⁴⁾

Notes:

1. In this paper, I have used the term "Harari" interchangeably with the term of self-reference, *ge usu*' ("city person"). This use of Harari is somewhat misleading: (a) at present the old city, which is discussed here, contains some 20,000 persons. Of these, perhaps two-thirds were *ge usu*' in 1975, and the rest were Amhara and Somali. (b) Outside the old city is a proliferating new urban center at least equal in size to the old city. Ethnically, it is dominantly Amhara, with lesser numbers of Oromo, Gurage and other Ethiopians. The term "Harari," which I have used in a restricted sense, could be used for any resident of the city of Harar, Ethiopia, population 45,000.
2. Until recent years the Harari language, *ge sinan*, was restricted to the city walls. That is to say, one could walk through the Harari speech community in twenty minutes by walking through the city. It is a distinct Ethiopian Semitic language, akin to the national language of Ethiopia, Amharic, but not mutually intelligible with it.
3. Important exceptions to this firm general rule are documented in the complete ethnographic description (Waldron 1974:270). For instance, sometimes a *ge usu*' man might marry an Oromo woman as a second wife. This would be seen as an economic and political stratagem by the *ge usu*', since, by doing this, he would be gaining a link with her village. He would never, however, bring this wife or any children back to Harar. They would be raised as Oromo.
4. My research in Harar has been generously supported over the years. A Ford Foundation Foreign Area Research Fellowship sponsored the original work 1962-64. In 1975 and 1977, research was supported by The Social Science Research Council, The State University of New York Research Foundation, and a Summer Stipend from the National Endowment for the Humanities.