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Echoes of Hunger: Unraveling the Story of Famine in Lasta awraḡḡa, 1960s–1980s

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Introduction

The main objective of this article is to study the history of famine in Lasta *awraḡḡa*¹ from the 1960s to the 1980s. While the Wällo famines of the 1970s and 1980s have been extensively researched by previous scholars,² little emphasis has been paid to the famines of Lasta. During these famine years, locals in Lasta devised their own resilience strategies in response to the crises. This study addresses the following questions: what were the causes of the famines in Lasta *awraḡḡa* under the period of study? How did the government respond to the magnitude of the crisis? What kind of local survival mechanisms were adopted by the victims of famine?

The geographical focus of this study is Wällo and, in particular, Lasta *awraḡḡa*. In the twentieth century, Lasta was one of the north-western districts of the Wällo province.³ The area was bordered by the *awraḡḡa* of Wag in the North, Wadla Dälanta in the South, Yäḡḡu and Rayya Qobbo in the East, and Bagemadr in the West. Wällo province comprised the sub-provinces of Wag, Lasta, Rayya Qobbo, Yäḡḡu, Wadla Dälanta, Ambassäl, Däse Zuriya, Wärrä Himano, Boräna, Wärrä Illu, Qallu, and Awsa.⁴

Ethiopia has suffered repeatedly from devastating famines. Due to the high frequency of famines in the country, the Oxford dictionary even used Ethiopia as an example for the meaning of famine.⁵ It is very important to discuss briefly the basic concept of famine to frame the issue. Famine can be defined as ‘an extreme scarcity of food’, ‘a great shortage’, and ‘starvation’.⁶ Famine refers to the highest

¹ Equivalent of ‘territory’, ‘sub-province’; it was the political administrative delineation of Emperor Ḥaylä Śəllase’s administration.

² See fn. 33 below.

³ Misganaw Tadesse Melaku 2019, 42; Dessalegn Rahmato 1991, 49.

⁴ Misganaw Tadesse Melaku 2019, 44; NALA, folder no. 17/1/12/01, file no. 17/1/12/1/1, about Wällo province, *wäräda* names.

⁵ Fantahun Ayele 1994, 1.

⁶ *Merriam Webster Dictionary*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/famine>, accessed on 5 August 2025.

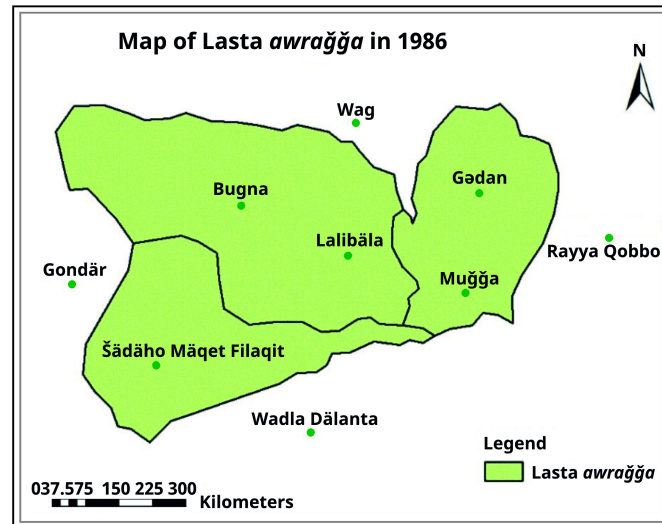


Fig. 1: Map of the study area in 1986.

(Source: NALA 1986, folder no. 631, file no. 476; digitized and translated into English.)

level of food scarcity leading to starvation. It is not solely food deficiency, but it is an absolute lack of food.⁷ As Mesfine Wolde Mariam explains,

For people under famine, the question of the quality of food simply does not arise. Famine victims have been known to eat wild roots, the bark of trees, and anything that appears to be edible, including some poisonous plants and seeds, and even old-cow hides that have been ground into for food. Indeed, people have sometimes resorted to bestial and barbaric practices. A husband has eaten his wife a mother has eaten her babies and babies have chewn off their mother's breasts and free men have turned themselves into slaves. General and widespread, prolonged and persistent, extraordinary and insufferable hunger lasting for several months and affecting the majority [...] population resulting in total social and economic disorganization and mass death by starvation.⁸

The above explanation outlines three main features of famine: inedible items may become edible for survival; the change of human behavior to cruelty; and the duration of time the famine lasts. In sum, famine is the overall hunger that

⁷ Mesfin Wolde Mariam 1984, 8–9.

⁸ Mesfin Wolde Mariam 1984.

seriously affects a large number of people due to the shortage of food for a long period of time.⁹

This description aligns famine analysis based on a theory called the food availability decline, which concentrates on the idea that prolonged and widespread hunger or famine occurs due to drought and war. The shortage of food supply finally leads to famine. Another framing, called entitlement theory, suggests that famine may occur due to the personal failure in purchasing capacity among members of the population. Accordingly, famine is starvation. Again, starvation indicates poverty. Thus, famine denotes poverty. Without the context of poverty, famine cannot be conceptualized.¹⁰ It has been suggested that famine and hunger are symptoms of poverty and lack of food. Poverty and famine are the same but different in the degree of absence of food.¹¹ Still further arguments hold that famine may occur due to the inappropriate response of government and international organizations. This suggestion mainly focuses on the political economy of famine. According to this view, famine has been instigated because of the internal and external political-economic developments, even taking the case of the 1980s Ethiopian famine as an example.¹² Defining, measuring, and monitoring poverty, famine, and hunger in a brief word is too difficult due to the broad concept of these terms. Although there is scholarly debate on what these conceptual frameworks precisely mean, in this study these concepts are used according to the above definitions, explanations, and theoretical frameworks.

With regard to the history of famine in Ethiopia, both natural and human-made factors exposed the people to famine from early times in Ethiopia. These consisted of drought, over population, land tenure systems, soil degradation, and ecological disturbances, as well as socioeconomic and political factors.¹³ Although natural factors could be managed by appropriate responses by governments, available archival documents, eyewitness accounts, and official government reports show that several Ethiopian famines occurred due to the weak responses of governments for natural factors. The available historical documents show that the first recorded Ethiopian famine occurred in 831–850 CE.¹⁴ Recurring famines happened from the beginning of the thirteenth century through the twentieth due to the lack of rain and locust invasions. These famines brought epidemics that devastated both humans and animals alike.¹⁵

⁹ Mesfin Wolde Mariam 1984, 9.

¹⁰ Sen 1981a, 434; Sen 1981b, 39; Vadala 2008, 1.

¹¹ Mellor and Gavian 1987, 1.

¹² Snowdon 1985, 48–52.

¹³ Aschale Dagnachew Siyoum et al. 2012, 1; Dagm Alemayehu Tegegn 2023, 11–12.

¹⁴ Derseh Endale 1992, 6; Cutler 1988, 6.

¹⁵ Pankhurst 1972, 37–38; Pankhurst 1966, 96–97; Pankhurst 1961, 91–92.

Among several famines of the nineteenth century, the 1888–1892 famine was the most disastrous, being known as the Great Famine or *Kəfu Qän*, literally meaning ‘Evil Day’.¹⁶ In the twentieth century, the country saw the 1958 famine in Təgray and the 1966 famine of Lasta and Wag, which was devastating and caused the death of a large segment of people. But these were hidden from most of the Ethiopian public.¹⁷ Unlike these famines, the 1973 Wollo famine was much more documented and known by the Ethiopian public as well as by international communities. However, during this century, the most shocking and comparable to the Great Famine of the nineteenth century was the famine of 1982–1985.¹⁸

When it comes to the famine of the 1960s–1980s, both the imperial and military governments’ policies exacerbated the severity of the famine as their respective policies did not consider preventive and remedial solutions.¹⁹ Both governments were much more responsive to addressing food shortages in this period. In particular, the military regime attempted to invoke structural reforms to address the problem. However, these attempts were not successful in solving the long-term issue, and reliance on food aid became the main source of survival after the 1960s.²⁰

In addition to government responses, whenever famine became severe, local communities used their own methods for survival since emergency aid was not always easily accessible.²¹ During famine, the rural communities of Wällo devised their own survival strategies through their own accumulated knowledge, resources, and experience, while the world turned a deaf ear to emergency aid to counter their starvation. These local resilience techniques may be grouped in four categories: adapting to austerity and reducing consumption; experiencing temporary migration to towns and commercial farms; searching for markets; and mass migration.²² The present research shows similar local responses among the people of Lasta.

Before coming to the main topic of the article, it is important to discuss further the conceptual framework. After that, the bulk of the article consists of an investigation of the famine years with attention to the factors of vulnerability, consequences, coping mechanisms, and government responses. A conclusion discusses

¹⁶ Cutler 1988, 116–118; Pankhurst 1966, 95–115.

¹⁷ Mesfin Wolde Mariam 1984, 35–40; Webb and Braun 1990, 12; Cutler 1988, 118; Ghaji Ismaila Bello 1990, 18.

¹⁸ Kumar 1987, 25–26; Fantahun Ayele 1994, 7–8, 29–30; Crummey 2018, 35–50.

¹⁹ Dagm Alemayehu Tegegn, 11–12.

²⁰ Aschale Dagnachew Siyoum et al. 2012, 2.

²¹ Dessalegn Rahmato 1991, 117–118.

²² Dessalegn Rahmato 1991, 165; Kloos and Lindtjorn 1994, 123; Adhana Haile Adhana 1991, 186–187.

the natural and human-made factors that contribute to famine, coping mechanisms, and government responses in the area of Lasta. Interspersed throughout the paper are local expressions of what people went through in the form of short poems.

Methodology and Source Materials

Methodologically, this research has been conducted using a qualitative approach to historical study. The article utilizes both primary and secondary data. Among the primary data, notable sources include archival records, letters, eyewitness accounts, government reports, and other valuable documents directly related to the issue in both time and place. Archival records were accessed at the National Archives Library Agency (hereafter NALA) of Ethiopia and the repositories of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (hereafter IES) at Addis Ababa University. In particular, six archival folders with many files about the Wällo province have been consulted from NALA along with further letters, mimeographs, and other important sources. In addition, firsthand accounts from interviewees who were victims of famine, beneficiaries of relief aid, and local employees of government and relief organizations provided invaluable information for the study. Most of these interviews consist of memories of the famine period. These oral sources were collected in 2022 from different areas of the current Lasta *wäräda* (Lalibäla, Gännätä Maryam, and Muğğa). Thirteen informants were selected, and their interviews were crosschecked with one another. Moreover, the oral data were corroborated by archival records and published documents to identify the authenticity of evidence.

As for ethical principles, the present research takes into consideration the issues of informed consent, willingness of the participants, and confidentiality of sensitive information. First, all the available sources are acknowledged. Second, all informants and participants were informed that collected data are to be used only for the research purpose. Third, the principle of confidentiality was adopted for the information provided by informants. Finally, it should be noted that the research does not present any risk to any person involved in the research.

Factors behind Lasta *awrağga*'s Vulnerability to Famine

In almost all the famines of Ethiopia, drought was a key factor for the death of people because of the absence of proper management of the natural risk.²³ Lasta *awrağga* has faced recurrent droughts since the beginning of the twentieth century, as deforestation and overgrazing became serious problems for the

²³ Mellor and Gavian 1987, 540; Dawit Wolde Giorgis 1989, 265.

environment. Thus, ecological, geographical, and historical factors, together with over cultivation and overgrazing, exposed Lasta to recurrent chronic drought and famine.²⁴

It was particularly in 1965/1966 that Lasta faced a drought that resulted in severe famine. Just before the famine, *Däggazmač* Mammo Šəyyum, *əndärase*²⁵ of Wällo province, made a tour of Lasta. He observed the barren hilly lands. Then, he made an eloquent speech for the elected elders, saying that government officials who are appointed to serve the public should realize their responsibility in keeping environmental conservation, and if they do not, it will be considered a crime by future generations. He mentioned that land degradation and deforestation was a critical problem of Lasta. Thus, he aimed to help afforestation and promote conservation works of the barren areas. As it turns out, he was predicting the future.²⁶

Among the administrative *wäräda* of Lasta, Bugna *məkəttəl wäräda*²⁷ was the first that reported the existence of drought in the area leading to famine: ህዝቡ እህል በማጣት የሚቀምሰው እያጣ ወሸሽ የሚባል የእንጨት ሥር እየቆፈረ እስከ መመገብ ድርሷል። ‘Having nothing to eat, people have been forced to dig out and feed on the root of wood locally called *wäšäš*’.²⁸ In this way, the administrator of this *məkəttəl wäräda* announced the case to the larger *wäräda* administration. Accordingly, his notice stated that no less than 400,000 people had been exposed to famine and that though relief cereals were stored in warehouses, all cereals had expired just before their distribution to people.²⁹ In 1966, the population of Lasta *awraḡḡa* was numbered at 292,400 (153,600 male and 138,800 female).³⁰ The number of people exposed to famine might be exaggerated, though the famine was still severe.

In addition to correspondences and data from primary sources, we have the views of informants about the 1965–1966 famine in Lasta. People expressed that the famine was principally caused by drought, as illustrated in this poem:

ሰኔም ጥሃይ ፈራ ሐምሌም ጥሃይ ፈራ
ልጁ እንጅራ ቢለው በጅብ አስፈራራ
በሰንዴ እንጅራ ሆዱን ካልጎጠሩት
ልጅ ዝም አይልም አባው መጣ ቢሉት

²⁴ Dessalegn Rahmato 1991, 99–100; Dessalegn 2001, 47–48; McCann 1984, 34–35.

²⁵ The head of a province.

²⁶ Dessalegn 1998, 69–70.

²⁷ An administrative unit below the level of *wäräda*.

²⁸ Inquiry Commission 1975, 3–4, Zämmänä Kase 1969/1970, 21–22.

²⁹ Zämmänä Kase 1969/1970, 21–22.

³⁰ Zämmänä Kase 1969/1970, 118.

ልጁም አለቀሰ እርር ደብን ብሎ
ከራብ የበለጠ ምን ጅብ አለ ብሎ³¹

June and July, both afraid of the sun.
When the child asks him for bread, he threatens (him) with a hyena.
If you don't fill the stomach of the child with wheat bread,
A child will not be silent if the hyena comes.
The child cried terribly, woefully,
Asking what other hyena is there worse than hunger?

In the 1970s, among the areas of Lasta *awraḡḡa*, ጅንጎፋፋፍ and Gədan *məkəttəl wārada* lost most of their crops due to crop pests, frost, hail, rust disease, and a lack of rain.³² The *māhar* and the *bālg* crop production of 1972 entirely failed in the lowland areas of the *awraḡḡa*. All the *awraḡḡa* of Wällo faced rain shortages due to the delay of the onset of *māhar* rain season as early as 1973/1974.³³

The 1972–1974 famine became known as the Wällo famine and has been studied by several scholars,³⁴ but most of the studies have no coverage of Lasta *awraḡḡa*. This is despite the fact that historical records report that the first petition of famine and drought came from Lasta *awraḡḡa*'s Gədan *wārada*. Then, the areas of Gədan, Qobbo, Mäqdäla, and Abät were facing famine within Lasta. The *awraḡḡa* administrator, *Fitawrari* Abbäbä Šəyyum, asked his superiors to be entirely free from *‘asrat* (tithes) and taxes for the year. The request of the administrator was implemented on the basis of a crop failure study that was sent on 9 January 1973 to Wällo *täqlay gəzat*.³⁵ The famine was severe in the Mäqdäla *məkəttəl wārada*. In this particular area, there was no rain from 1971 until 1973, and people had nothing to harvest, forcing them to migrate to Humära and Asayta.³⁶

Without fully recovering from the famines of the pre-revolutionary age, Lasta faced drought which led to another famine. This brought serious problems on the life of the animals, since there was no grass on which to feed.³⁷ These were the early signs of another catastrophic famine that Lasta would face in 1984.

About the shortage of rain and the government's resettlement plans, informants recalled what was said then:

³¹ Informants: Mogäs Abatä and Gännanaw Wände, February 2022, Lalibäla.

³² RRC 1978a, 231.

³³ RRC 1985, 14–16; RRC 1982, 9.

³⁴ Adhana Haile Adhana 1996, 446.

³⁵ An administrative unit consisting of several *awraḡḡa*.

³⁶ Inquiry Commission 1975, 21–22.

³⁷ Informants: Gänzäb Akkälä and Dästa Ḥayle.

ቀና ብዬ ባየው ሰማዩ ቀለለኝ
አንተንም ሰፈራ ወሰዱህ መሰለኝ³⁸

When I looked up, the sky felt lighter—
I think perhaps they resettled you too.

Socio-economic and political factors made the natural disaster worse by orders of magnitude. Institutional factors were the primary factors that aggravated the disaster and exposed the people to famine. These consisted of war and political insecurity, the exploitation of the peasantry by the landed rulers, and the negligence of the administration to take measures to prevent and reduce the causality caused by nature.³⁹ Among my informants, Gännanaw Wände recalls that in 1974/1975 the conflict between the former political elites of Ḥaylä Śəllase and Mängiṣtu Ḥaylä Maryam (the leader of post-revolution Ethiopia) aggravated Lasta's impoverishment. Months after Emperor Ḥaylä Śəllase had been removed from the throne, the parliamentary representative of Lasta *awraḡḡa*, *Däḡḡazmač* Bərhanä Mäsqäl Dästa, and his supporters opened an attack on the Lalibäla airport on 14 March 1975.⁴⁰ Mängiṣtu's soldiers then burnt homes, harvests, and peasant properties, particularly of those suspected of being supporters of *Däḡḡazmač* Bərhanä Mäsqäl, who had himself escaped via Ayna Bugna to Gondär. The soldiers further destroyed the administrative offices of the *awraḡḡa* and looted the peasants' cattle.⁴¹

The lack of proper use of harvests in good years and extravagant festivities can be mentioned as other socio-economic factors that made Lasta vulnerable to famine.⁴² The land tenure system of Lasta was a form of communal kinship property.⁴³ During the imperial period, fertile and productive land found near the Täkkäze river, specifically at Warka Mäššagäriya, was owned by a parliamentary representative of the *awraḡḡa*, *Däḡḡazmač* Bərhanä Mäsqäl. Other fertile lands found in the present areas of Ašätän, Ṭälfäṭit, and Nä'akutolä'ab were owned by the *ba-labbat* (hereditary owners).⁴⁴ Such socio-economic issues exposed the peasants to famine.

³⁸ Informant: Mogäs Abatä.

³⁹ RRC 1975, 20–23; Girma Kebede 1988, 126–127.

⁴⁰ Informants: Gännanaw Wände, Mogäs Abatä, and Abbay Biräsaw.

⁴¹ Informants: Gännanaw Wände, Mogäs Abatä, and Abbay Biräsaw.

⁴² Informants: Bərhanä Ayyaläw and Mogäs Abatä.

⁴³ Girma Kebede 1988, 128; Mesfin Wolde Mariam 1984, 76; Kumar 1987, 7.

⁴⁴ Informants: Bərhanä Ayyaläw and Mogäs Abatä.

The absence of proper response from government administrations was seen both during the imperial regime and the succeeding military rule. Both government administrations concealed the existence of famine instead of providing preventive and remedial measures for the natural disaster.⁴⁵

Other factors that made Lasta vulnerable to famine were animal and human diseases, as well as crop-destroying pests. Among the diseases, malaria greatly affected the life of the people and their agricultural production. Further, epidemic diseases like cholera, influenza, smallpox, water-borne diarrhea, and meningitis visited the area in cycles. Cattle diseases also affected the region. Further agricultural pests like locusts and army worms (*däyri*) were also among the most common factors for famine.⁴⁶ In the famine years of 1965/1966, the population of Lasta suffered from malaria, diarrhea, typhus, and other diseases. The lowland areas of the *awraḡḡa* were especially vulnerable to malaria, and the administrator of the *awraḡḡa* requested to set up a malaria prevention and avoidance center in the area.⁴⁷

During the famine years of 1970–1984, Lasta was similarly affected by diseases such as ergotism,⁴⁸ meningitis, diarrhea, and the like.⁴⁹ These famine-borne diseases mainly attacked legs, hands, waists, ears, and eyes. Diarrhea, twitching, and nausea were their symptoms. The germinated crops were also eaten by insects of army worms.⁵⁰ As field surveys in Muḡḡa, Kulmäsk, Āstayəš, and Lalibäla also indicated, the crops in the lowland areas of Lasta were affected by locust, *dägäza*, and *qoraç* insects.⁵¹

Poor technology and the absence of infrastructural development for agricultural practice exacerbated the vulnerability of Lasta to famine. According to local evidence, soil infertility, locust invasion, and insects aggravated famine because of the absence of technological advances like pesticides, fertilizers, and enhanced seeds.⁵² The absence of health centers and road transport also contributed to making famines more catastrophic. In 1965 in a speech by the *ändärase* of Wällo,

⁴⁵ Dersseh Endale 1992, 17–18; Girma Kebede 1988, 129.

⁴⁶ McCann 1984, 36–37.

⁴⁷ NALA, folder no. 17/1/12/22, file no. 17/1/12/22/8, a letter from Lasta *awraḡḡa* administrator to the Ministry of Pen, reference no. 2394/23/56, 6 Ḥamle 1956 EC = 13 July 1964 CE.

⁴⁸ Mesfin Wolde Mariam 1984, 64.

⁴⁹ NALA, folder no. 17/1/12/31, file no. 17/1/12/31/4, a letter from Wällo province to Wällo Province Health Center, reference no. 1008/5367, 3 Gənbət 1970 EC = 3 May 1978 CE.

⁵⁰ Informants: Kasaw Məssəge, Ṭasāw Aḡaḡu, and Bərhane Ayyalāw, March 2022, Lalibäla.

⁵¹ Inquiry Commission 1978; Natural Disaster Relief Temporary Coordinator Central Committee 1978.

⁵² Informants: Abärra Āndawwäqä, Bərhane Ayyalāw, and Mogäs Abatä.

Däḡḡazmač Mammo Śəyyum bemoaned the absence of road transport in Lasta *awraḡḡa*. Thus, famine victims received food aid only after more than four days of travelling on foot. Although air transport started in Lalibäla in 1966, it was seasonal.⁵³ The road to Lalibäla and its environs was completely closed due to heavy rain. As a result, several people requiring aid suffered seriously from lack of food in the shelter in Lalibäla.⁵⁴

Consequences of Famine

In the twentieth century, Lasta and its surroundings faced a terrible drought, diseases, and destitution that resulted in a disastrous famine.⁵⁵ The 1965–1966 famine was catastrophic in the areas of Lasta and Wag, but it was hidden from the Ethiopian public and international communities by the imperial government. This famine is regarded as the precursor to the Wällo famine of 1972–1974. The first information about the occurrence of the famine reached the Ministry of Interior, the ministry dealing with internal affairs of the country, through the police in 1966.⁵⁶

An archival document stated that ‘since June of this year several people have died due to famine and epidemic. Many corpses were visible on roads’.⁵⁷ This document says 18 people died within two days. Another letter clearly explained the seriousness and severity of the famine and epidemic. The number of deaths grew out of control, and the region was urgently in need of health professionals.⁵⁸ A parliamentary representative of Lasta *awraḡḡa* named Allänä Aligaz went to Lasta for vacation in August 1966 and wrote that the time was terrible because of the famine and epidemic. According to his eyewitness account, in every church of Śädäho Mäqet *wäräda*, at least 15 people were dying daily. Many of the dead

⁵³ Zämmänä Kase 1969/1970, 86–89.

⁵⁴ NALA, folder no. 17/1/12/31, file no. 17/1/12/31/4, a letter from Wällo Province to the RRC and the Ethiopian Road Transport Construction Authority, reference no. 70/02, 17 Gənbot 1977 EC = 25 May 1985 CE.

⁵⁵ McCann 1984, 42.

⁵⁶ Mesfin Wolde Mariam 1984, 37; Fantahun Ayele, 1994, 6.

⁵⁷ NALA, folder no. 17/1/12/22, file no. 17/1/12/22/9, a letter from Lalibäla Police Office to Wällo Province Police Office, especial no. 29/58, 18 Ḥamle 1958 EC = 25 July 1966 CE.

⁵⁸ NALA, folder no. 17/1/12/22, file no. 17/1/12/22/9, a letter from Śädäho Mäqet *wäräda* to Lasta *awraḡḡa* territory, reference no. 1939/58, 21 Ḥamle 1958 EC = 28 July 1966 CE; reference no. 1987/58, 27 Ḥamle 1958 EC = 3 August 1966 CE, a letter from Ministry of Public Health to Ministry of Interior, reference no. 3/ፀ1/44/59, 10 Mäskäräm 1959 EC = 20 September 1966 CE.

bodies remained unburied for five days due to the absence of people who could carry out this task. Following this shocking situation, he wrote an appeal to the Wällo province on 5 August 1966. In this appeal, Allänä Aligaz stated that 124 churches were closed because of the death of priests and that cattle and other properties of people had become unmanageable. He asked the government to provide medicine and food aid for those who would survive the famine.⁵⁹

The area of Lasta has always been exposed to impoverishment, but the famine of 1966 was unmanageable: the extent of the scarcity of food and pestilence was too widespread. The spread of diarrhea, typhus, epidemics, and malaria exacerbated the situation. People’s refusal to take malaria tablets, local bandits, and insufficient health professionals, transport, and medicine were a great challenge in treating the patients. With these challenges, a total of 5,401 people received treatment, 3,378 people acquired prevention, and 1,216 houses received anti-malaria DDT sprays. The outbreak of epidemic diseases in Lasta *awraḡḡa*, especially in Šädäho Mäqet *wäräda*, was a critical problem. As a result, 10,000 people were dying per month, and 120 churches were left without priests. However, it is stated that food aid was a crucial issue over getting treated.⁶⁰

People from the famine-affected areas of Lasta migrated to Wälidiya and Alamaṭa. According to my informants, most of the people who migrated to Wälidiya and Alamaṭa came from Bugna and the border areas of Lasta and Wag. Following the famine, the people of Lasta had expressed their feeling and emotion in the following verse:

ራሴን ወገቤን ብሎ ሳይናገር
ሳስታ ተራብ አሉ ያነ ትልቁ አገር
የታደለው ውሻ ስጋ ሲቀርብለት
ሞቷል ስንት ወገኔ እፍኝ ጥሬ አልቆበት⁶¹

Without calling out ‘my head, my waist’,
Lasta, that great country, they said is starving.
When the lucky dog is offered meat,
How many people died from a lack of a handful of cereals?

As a result of the absence of relief activities and government officials’ ignorance of what was going on in the *awraḡḡa*, people criticized the administration:

⁵⁹ NALA, folder no. 17/1/12/22, file no. 17/1/12/22/9, an appeal from Alänä Aligaz to Wällo Province, reference no. 30/58, 5 Nāḥase 1958 = 11 August 1966 CE.

⁶⁰ NALA, folder no. 17/1/12/22, file no. 17/1/12/22/9, a letter from the police force to the Ministry of Interior, reference no. 12404/20/43, 2 Paḡʷəumen 1958 = 7 September 1966 CE.

⁶¹ Informants: Mogäs Abatä and Gännanaw Wände, February 2022, Lalibäla.

ለምስለኔው ጥቦት ለጭቃው ወጠጤ
እንዲህ ብዬ ነው ወይ ካገር መቀመጤ
ወረቀተ ብዙ እንደ ወልዶ ገደል
ያን ገጣባ ግዛት ገፍቶ መግደል⁶²

Big goat for the *māslāne* and small goat for the *čəqa*,⁶³
Is it this way that I stay in my homeland?
With lots of papers like those who kill after birthing,
Would be best if we could push and kill these ignorant rulers.

In general, the famine in Lasta was severe particularly from June 1965 to September 1966. Unfortunately, there are no available historical records with precise figures for the total number of deaths of humans and animals during this time.

On 6 April 1973, the Ministry of Interior identified the number of people who needed immediate and free food aid in 1973 in Lasta *awraḡḡa*: from the total population of 300,000, roughly thirty percent of the residents, numbering approximately 90,000 people, settled in lowland areas. Of these lowland settlers, twenty percent of them (18,000 people) were in need of food aid.⁶⁴ An eyewitness account from April 1973 revealed that most of the refugees in Kombolča came from drought-affected areas of the Wällo province, including Lasta,⁶⁵ in which, from its 292,000 total population, 182 household members were in different relief camps.⁶⁶

The famine of 1972–1974 in Lasta *awraḡḡa* was less severe compared with the 1965/1966 famine because it occurred in narrower geographical space. Beyond Lasta though, the 1972–1974 famine brought about the death of a hundred thousand people and left great political repercussions: it led to the downfall of Emperor Ḥaylā Śällase I and the rise of the Därg, the military government, in September 1974.⁶⁷ Even though governments changed, however, famine was not eradicated from Ethiopia.

At the beginning of 1978, a government report further stated that many died due to a disease called ergotism, which was caused by a poisoned crop like barley locally known as *gänč*. Locally, this disease was known as *labb aqəlt* (heart melter).

⁶² Informants: Mogäs Abatä and Gännanaw Wände, February 2022, Lalibäla.

⁶³ See the glossary at the end of this article for explanations of *māslāne* and *čəqa*.

⁶⁴ Inquiry Commission 1975, 68.

⁶⁵ Getachew Haile et al. 1974, 69.

⁶⁶ Sen 1981a, 99; Shewandagn Belete et al. 1977, 17–18.

⁶⁷ Dawit Wolde Giorgis 1989, 257; Crummey 2018, 39–40.

Wällo province wrote a letter to all *awraḡḡa* administrators to stop selling and feeding the poisoned crop in their administrative areas.⁶⁸

My informants further relayed that Lasta *awraḡḡa* was entirely under famine from the end of June 1984 up to October 1984. Food aid began being distributed widely only in October of the same year. Death, however, could not be stopped. Those who received food aid also died. There is no accurate record of the number of deaths in official documents, but eyewitness informants estimated the number to be quite large. At least fifty and sixty people died daily, particularly from August 1984 until February 1985.⁶⁹

My informants again recount sorrowful tales of a child suckling at the breast of his or her dying mother or of a mother holding her dying child on her back to get food aid. In general, mothers, children, and those of old age were the main victims. Seeing corpses was a common situation everywhere in and around Lalibäla.⁷⁰ Those who survived the famine remember the time of constant difficulties in the following couplets:

ባለቅሰው ባለቅሰው ጨርቄ በሰበሰበ
ካምናው ክራሞቱ የዘንድሮው ባሰ
የዘንድሮንግ አልፎ ዋለሁኝ እንደምንም ብዬ
ድንጋይ የተጫነው ጨፈቃ መስዩ⁷¹

I cried and cried, my cloth is soaked.
More than last year's existence, this year's is worse.
But I've somehow gotten through this year,
Even if I seem like a piece of wood loaded with stone.

The famine of 1984 in Lasta came to an end after the *māhar* season of 1986. This was a productive year for almost all the peasants of Lasta, as agricultural products were harvested in considerable amounts.

Coping Mechanisms for Famine

Among the first coping mechanisms for famine adopted by the local population of Lasta was appealing to God and announcing the issue to local government officials. Drought was said to be caused by the evil deeds of people, and that God

⁶⁸ Natural Disaster Relief Temporary Coordinator Central Committee 1978, a letter from Wällo province to all *awraḡḡa* administrators, reference no. 11/08/78/43, 24 Säne 1970 EC = 1 July 1978 CE; Kloos and Lindtjorn 1994, 136.

⁶⁹ Informants: Ṭasäw Agaḗu and Kasaw Mässäge.

⁷⁰ Informants: Ṭasäw Agaḗu and Kasaw Mässäge.

⁷¹ Informants: Gänzäb Akkälä and Dästa Ḥayle.

brought it about to punish people for their unlawful actions. Thus, people repented and requested his forgiveness and mercy. Additionally, people presented a kind of petition to the government to give appropriate solutions for the natural disasters: the victims gathered together and carried pieces of wood, probably barkless logs or branches. To their tops, they tied animal skins with ropes. The people held this up and repeated, ‘we are dying due to famine; we are starving; look at us, God revealed it to you’. They repeated this petition in front of the government administrative offices.⁷²

Selling property was a second mechanism for surviving until matters improved. People sold their cows and oxen, which were the basis of their agricultural activities. A peasant seriously under famine would not, however, sell their land, as it was considered the permanent property of their life and of their children.⁷³

Borrowing and working with rich peasants was another local response during famine in the Lasta area. The items that were borrowed mostly consisted of cereals like barley, wheat, *tef*, and sorghum. Famine victims also reduced the amount of their food consumption. They ate either lunch or dinner each day. People also changed what they ate, namely, they went from eating *ənḡära* to *qolo* (roasted cereal).⁷⁴

When the severity of famine drastically increased and exceeded the capacities of the peasants, they were forced to consume unusual foods. Although this might reduce hunger temporarily, it also created adverse effects on their health. Since people had little knowledge of the negative and positive effects of the wild plants they consumed, including leaves, seeds, fruits, and roots, many died after eating poisonous plants.⁷⁵

In Lasta, starving people consumed various wild roots, fruits, and seeds. In the lowland areas of Lasta people ate wild plants locally named *lolit*, *yägidär wätät*, *gommän*, roots of numerous wild plants, and *ənṭaṭit*. *Ənṭaṭit* was consumed extensively and was extracted through digging through the soil by hand, after which it was roasted for consumption.⁷⁶ In April of 1984, at least 3,000 peasants were observed in the areas of Lasta, particularly at Gədan, digging for *ənṭaṭit*. In the highland areas of Lasta, famine victims consumed wild plants and roots locally named *gätən*, *aluma*, *wäfe*, *samant*, *yätət färe*, and *dənba*.⁷⁷ *Aluma* was the most

⁷² Informants: Ṭasäw Ağažu and Kasaw Məssəge.

⁷³ Informants: Abärra Əndawwäqä and Bərhanə Ayyaläw, February, 2022, Lalibäla; Mesfin Wolde Mariam 1984, 62.

⁷⁴ Informants: Mogäs Abatä and Täga Fəkade

⁷⁵ Mesfin Wolde Mariam 1984, 64; Adhana Haile Adhana 1988, 187.

⁷⁶ Informants: Mogäs Abatä and Täga Fəkade. See the glossary at the end of this article for explanations of the names of the plants.

⁷⁷ Adhana Haile Adhana 1988, 16.

edible kind of plant, and its leaves and seeds served as famine food. Simply boiling it in water makes it ready for consumption. The leaves and seeds of this plant also served in the preparation of bread, but it should be consumed with care as other plants resembling *aluma* are poisonous.⁷⁸

About the sorts of meals people had to adopt, informants relayed the following couplet:

የዘንድሮይቱን ቀን ወጣናት በመላ
ከኩርማን እንጀራ ቅጠል ተቆልላ⁷⁹

We passed this year through wise strategy.
Leaves stacked on a small *əngära*.

People recall that everything that was thought edible was eaten by famine victims during the 1984/1985 famine. As a result, the people referred to this year as the cruel day of Lasta. In fact, many informants preferred not to talk about this famine and said that ‘it is better to leave the memory of this famine behind’.⁸⁰ Some said the following:

መገን ሰባ ሰባት ያልተበላ የለም ያልተርመመመ
እሬት እና ቅንጭብ ሁለቱ አመለጠ⁸¹

Oh! Seventy-seven nothing was left uneaten, nothing left unboiled.
Aloe Vera and *Qənčəb*, only those two escaped.

When famine spiraled out of control, the last option left to the population was mass migration to towns and streets. Death, depression, beggary, and mass dislocation became the final fate of famine victims.⁸² Most famine-stricken peoples of Lasta migrated to Alamaṭa, Qobbo, Wäldiya,⁸³ Kombolča,⁸⁴ and Gondär⁸⁵ in search of food and work.

Other informants remembered that many went to Wäldiya, Sanqa, and Bäqelo Manäqiyā to receive aid. The victims went to the relief centers on foot. Those who arrived and received aid were lucky as most died on their way. The killer epidemic was locally known as *əlqätu* or *wəzəfəš*, literally referring to an epidemic

⁷⁸ Dessalegn Rahmato 1991, 171.

⁷⁹ Informants: Mogäs Abatä and Täga Fəqade.

⁸⁰ Informants: Afäwärq Gärrämāw and Bälaynäw Agäññähu, March, 2022, Muḡḡa.

⁸¹ Informants: Afäwärq Gärrämāw and Bälaynäw Agäññähu, March, 2022, Muḡḡa.

⁸² Adhana Haile Adhana 1988, 19.

⁸³ Informants: Abbay Biräsaw and Bälaynäw Agäññähu; Inquiry Commission sub-committee, 1974, 3–4.

⁸⁴ Getatchew Haile et al. 1974, 67.

⁸⁵ NALA, folder no. 17/1/12/16, file no. 17/1/12/16/17, a letter from Gondär to Ministry of Interior, reference no. አውጎ/14/2, 14 ፕጅር 1976 EC = 23 January 1984 CE.

that kills many people. It was for this reason that the year 1965/1966 became a reference point for calculating people’s ages. Presently at the border of Lasta and Wag, there is a place called Dohälqa just thirty kilometers from Lalibäla. According to the local people, the name of the place refers to the death of poor people: Dohälqa as *Däha-älläqä*, the death of the poor.⁸⁶ While many were dying on their way, the families of the deceased expressed their sorrow as:

እንጀራ ፍለጋ እያሉ ሂደዋል
ያገኙቱ መጡ ያጡቱ ቀርተዋል
እንጀራ ነበረ የሰው ቁምነገሩ
አልቀበር አለ ሰው ሁሉ ባገሩ
ተጉዞ ተጉዞ ሰው እንደ ደመና
መመለሻው ጠፋ ያገሩ ጎዳና⁸⁷

They went in search of *əṅḡära*.
Those who gained came and those who didn’t remained.
ጅጅራ was the essence of man.
People refuse to be buried in their homeland,
Travelling and travelling, just like a cloud.
The way back home is lost.

According to other informants, those famine victims who could come back with food consumed as much as they needed on their way back, which was itself an issue.⁸⁸ The following couplet illustrates the issue:

እንጀራ የሚሏት አንዲት ቆንጆ ጠፍታ
እሷን በመፈለግ ሕዝቡ ተንገላታ
አይቸሽ የለም ወይ በክፉ ቀኒቱ
ልጆቻችን ትተሽ ስትበይ እናቲቱ⁸⁹

A beautiful girl called *əṅḡära* went missing,
And people suffered looking for her.
Did I not see you during that evil day,
When you were eating without offering any to your children?

According to informants in Lasta, though the famine was not as severe as the previous one, there were famine victims who came from Rayya Qobbo and Gədan *wäräda* to Lalibäla as of 1971. These famine victims expressed their feelings in the following manner:

⁸⁶ Informants: Gänzäb Akkälä and Dästa Hjäyle, February 2022, Gännätä Maryam.

⁸⁷ Informants: Gänzäb Akkälä and Dästa Hjäyle, February 2022, Gännätä Maryam.

⁸⁸ Informants: Abbay Biräsaw and Mogäs Abatä, March 2022, Lalibäla.

⁸⁹ Informants: Abbay Biräsaw and Mogäs Abatä, March 2022, Lalibäla.

ስናርድ የነበረ ሙከት ከወጠጢ
እንባል ጀመረ ሙጡ የኔ ቢጢ⁹⁰

We were slaughtering both big and small goats.
Now they say ‘the pauper comes’ when they see us.

Informants further stated that famine victims criticized government officials. This happened particularly in places where many people gathered, like weddings, markets, and holy days, and these spaces served as discussion forums to criticize the administration. The famine-stricken people opposed the heads of the local administration units as there was no harvest in their homes, and famine and migration became the challenges of the peasant’s life. My informants recalled that in 1973 the local government officials requested that the peasants pay ‘*asrat*’ (tithes) and taxes forcefully, even though crop production had failed both in the *bālg* and *māhar* seasons.⁹¹ People refused by saying:

ዘንድሮ ጎጆዬን አቃጥላታለሁ
ሲጨሱ እየጨሰኝ የበላ እመስላለሁ
ኧረ የኛ ጎጆ የተጀነነኝው የተቆነነኝው
ከቤት ውስጥ ሲገቡ ባዶ የሆነኝው⁹²

This year I will burn my house.
Because of the smoke, I will appear as though I were fed.
Oh, our house is the one that looks wealthy.
When you enter, it is empty.

Nonetheless, since the end of 1960s, repeated drought, diseases, insects, and conflict deteriorated the life of the people of Lasta to the point that they had no other option but to migrate.

Government Responses to Famine

As an official document stated just before the occurrence of the famine in 1966, the *awraḡḡa* administrator, *Fitawrari* Abbäbä Šəyyum, wrote a mimeograph to the Ministry of Pen of the imperial government of Ḥaylä Šəllase. This mimeograph, written in July 1964, stated the infrastructural and administrative challenges fac-

⁹⁰ Informants: Gänzäb Akkälä and Muluye Akkälä.

⁹¹ Informants: Mogäs Abatä and Gännanaw Wände.

⁹² Informants: Mogäs Abatä and Gännanaw Wände.

ing the *awraḡḡa*. He also mentioned the establishment of additional health institutions to alleviate the death of humans due to malaria.⁹³ This could be considered the first warning system of the *awraḡḡa* government officials for the coming famine and related diseases.

Before the outbreak of famine in Lasta, the *əndärase* of Wällo province, *Däḡḡazmač* Mammo Śəyyum, made field observations in Lasta *awraḡḡa*. In these field observations, he understood that the existence of deforestation, soil degradation, the loss of fertile soil, and the rocky landscapes of Lasta might be the cause of the ecological disturbance, which could in turn result in famine. He recommended that the government officials of this *awraḡḡa* rehabilitate the environment, or it would be regarded as a crime for and by future generations.⁹⁴ This could be taken as another harbinger.

After the outbreak of the famine, the government officials in the Wällo province sent cereals and clothes for the people of Lasta, though the amount of aid supplied is not specified.⁹⁵ *Awraḡḡa* government officials announced the occurrence of serious famine in Lasta while also requesting food aid that was stored in Wällo for the starving people of Lasta. But, because of the absence of the *awraḡḡa* administrator, the aid cereals spoiled in the store houses before their distribution to the needy.⁹⁶ The amount of aid cereals is not known, nor why the *awraḡḡa* administrator was absent.

Däḡḡazmač Mammo Śəyyum then came up with the idea to collect cereals from the famine-free *awraḡḡa* of Wällo (Däse Zuriya, Ambassäl, Yäḡḡu, Qallu, and Wärrä Illu). Accordingly, a total of 26,529 *quna* (local measurement unit that may contain four to six kilograms) cereals were donated to the famine-stricken areas. The government then made provisions of clothing and cereals for the people of Lasta.⁹⁷

Furthermore, a charity organization called *Yädəkuman mārḡa dərəḡḡət* ('Organization to help the destitute') was set up in 1965. The principal objective of this organization was to provide help for elders who had nobody to care for them, orphans, and those who suffered the most in famine.⁹⁸ Treatment of patients started in December 1965. According to the report of the Lalibäla health center,

⁹³ NALA, folder no. 17/1/12/22, file no. 17/1/12/22/8, a letter from Lasta *awraḡḡa* administrator to the Ministry of Pen, reference no. 2394/23/56, 6 Ḥamle 1956 EC = 13 July 1964 CE.

⁹⁴ Dessalegn Rahmato 1998, 69–70.

⁹⁵ Inquiry Commission 1973/1974, 3–4.

⁹⁶ Inquiry Commission 1975, 4.

⁹⁷ Zämmänä Kase 1969/1970, 21–22.

⁹⁸ Zämmänä Kase 1969/1970, 116.

from 30 December 1965 up to 24 September 1966, more than 30,000 people received treatment and preventative care for malaria, diarrhea, typhus, and other transmittable diseases and epidemics in Lasta. The report shows that a total of 10,154 in Bugna, 8,771 in Mäqet, 871 in Gədan, 635 in Gännätä Maryam Däbr, and 221 people in Lalibäla received medical treatment.⁹⁹ These figures indicate that there were more victims of famine and epidemics in these two *wärädas* of Lasta: Bugna and Mäqet. Though the severity of epidemic eventually came under control,¹⁰⁰ famine was the main cause of death as people's natural resistances were weakened by the lack of food.

A letter written on 4 November 1966 contested the speech of Allänä Aligaz via the Ethiopian broadcast about the people of Lasta *awrağğa*. Allänä Aligaz was a parliamentary representative of Lasta who had made a speech on 29 October 1966 about the famine and epidemic situation there. According to this letter, the writer stated that Allänä Aligaz had spoken without evidence. Allänä Aligaz mentioned that the name of the epidemic was not known but was commonly called as *yänəfas bäššəta* ('wind disease'). He further stated that the health professionals had not yet identified it and that the message was aimed at building a personality cult.¹⁰¹

This letter has some historical significance. First, it mentions the type of epidemic based on a laboratory blood test. According to the results, the epidemic was not a wind disease but typhus, diarrhea, malaria, fever, and other transmitted diseases. Out of 779 people's blood tests, 449 were victims of malaria at the time. Second, it mentions the number of people who received treatment and prevention from 1 September 1966 until 28 October 1966: 59,072 people acquired treatment and preventive care for the stated diseases in all areas of the *awrağğa*. Third, it mentions the people involved in treating victims. The participants were three people from the Mäqäle Malaria Prevention organization, five professionals from the Transmitted Diseases Prevention, and others from the Ministry of Health. Finally, this letter identifies the helicopter as the means of transportation for the distribution of medicine and food aid in remote and inaccessible areas of Lasta.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ NALA, folder no. 17/1/12/22, file no. 17/1/12/22/9, a report from Lalibäla Health Center to Lasta *awrağğa*, reference no. 25/59, 18 Mäskäräm 1959 EC = 28 September 1966 CE.

¹⁰⁰ NALA, folder no. 17/1/12/22, file no. 17/1/12/22/9, a telegram message from Lalibäla health center to Wällo health center, reference no. 116/59, 21 Təqəmt 1959 EC = 31 October 1966 CE.

¹⁰¹ NALA, folder no. 17/1/12/22, file no. 17/1/12/22/9, a letter from Šawandañ Bällätä to the Ministry of Communication, reference no. 127/59, 25 Təqəmt 1959 EC = 4 November 1966 CE.

¹⁰² See fn. 101.

By January 1967, Wällo Province decided to set up a clinic in the populous district of Lasta *awraḡḡa* based on the recommendation of *Däḡḡazmač* Mammo Śəyyum, *andärase* of Wällo province.¹⁰³ This permanently reduced the problem of uncontrollable epidemics. Similarly, informants suggested that in 1967 the situation radically changed both in terms of agricultural produce and health care. The following verse became common at wedding ceremonies:

ያልሞተበት የለም ያልጎተተ እራሳ
ጨዋታ አይደለም ወይ ያገገ የሚያስረሳ¹⁰⁴

Everybody has lost someone, everybody has dragged a dead body.
It is only *čäwata*¹⁰⁵ that helps us to forget that.

For the 1972–1974 famine in Lasta, the role of the government was limited. By 1973, the *awraḡḡa* administrator, Abbäbä Śəyyum, notified the province's officials that the people of Lasta had not received aid from the government in 1972. The *awraḡḡa* administrator also requested to be exempted from paying taxes for the famine years. But the officials at the province did not accept the request since the study of famine in the area was incomplete.¹⁰⁶

In April 1974, a government organization concerned with famine affected areas and its measures was realized by the transitional government of Prime Minister Endalkachew Makonnen. This government organization was known as the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (hereafter RRC) under the direction of Šə-mälləs Adduñña.¹⁰⁷ The outbreak of war by former government officials was a great challenge for the work of RRC as Lalibäla airport, schools, health centers, and relief centers were the targets of attacks.¹⁰⁸

The provisional government decided to set up a committee that provided relief, shelter, health care, and sustainable solutions with the coordination of other governmental and non-governmental organizations.¹⁰⁹ On February 1978, the Wällo

¹⁰³ NALA, folder no. 17/1/12/22, file no. 17/1/12/22/9, a letter from Wällo *täqalay gəzat* to *Däḡḡazmač* Kəfle ፓገጎ, reference no. 8879/16/514/59, 4 ፕግ 1959 EC = 12 January 1967 CE.

¹⁰⁴ Informants: Gänzäb Akkälä and Muluye Akkälä.

¹⁰⁵ Hewan Semon Marye 2024, 46–52. See Hewan's work on *čäwata* as humor and playfulness that has various manifestations and meanings in different social and political situations. I thank Hewan for letting me read an advanced copy of this chapter from her then forthcoming book.

¹⁰⁶ Inquiry Commission 1975, 19–20.

¹⁰⁷ Crummey 2018, 42; Borton 1994, 40.

¹⁰⁸ RRC 1978/1979.

¹⁰⁹ Inquiry Commission 1978.

province administrator, Ḥaylā Giyorgis Ṭasāw, held a meeting with different members, including the Lasta *awraḡḡa* administrator named ‘Alāmu Ṭiyyu. The proceedings of the meeting show that the RRC provided aid to more than 126,000 people in Lasta.¹¹⁰ The Wällo province noted that more than 85,000 people in Lasta at Gədan *wärāda* were exposed to famine. Thus, urgent food aid was requested by the province. The province also requested clothes for 8,000 people.¹¹¹ Accordingly, the RRC office of the province mentioned that an aid distribution center with human personnel and mobile clinics would be set up in Lasta to provide aid and medical treatment for people facing famine.¹¹² From May until August 1978, different kinds of aid were provided for western Wällo, including Lasta. Among the food aids were various proteins, salt, seeds, and clothes. This document, however, does not mention the amount of each aid.¹¹³ Food aids, trucks for transport, medicines, and other materials were also distributed by the Red Cross, RRC, and Ministry of Public Health. Moreover, six Douglas Commercial (DC-3) airplanes were assigned for the *awraḡḡa* of Lasta, Wadla Dälanta, and Wärrä Himāno.¹¹⁴

The Provisional Military Government of Socialist Ethiopia designed a resettlement program as a solution for the famine-stricken areas. In June 1978, Wällo Province mentioned that 809 first-round and 890 second-round cadres were recruited from Lasta *awraḡḡa* to teach, mobilize, and organize re-settlers.¹¹⁵ Although historical records are not available for the figures of the resettled people, settlers were taken to Wälläga, Mätäkäl, and other areas in Lasta. According to informants, some settlers were willing, whereas others were forced by the recruited cadres. Other famine victims went to the areas of Šašämäne, Ğamma, Bale, Harär, Arsi, and Šäwa.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁰ NALA, folder no. 17/1/12/02, file no. 17/1/12/2/1, minutes of a meeting in Yäkatit 1970 EC = February/March 1978 CE; a letter from the Ministry of Interior to Wällo province, Mäggabit 1970 EC = March/April 1978 CE.

¹¹¹ NALA, folder no. 17/1/12/31, file no. 17/1/12/31/4, a letter from Wällo province to its RRC office, reference no. 10063/68/98, Gənbət 1970 EC = May/June 1978 CE.

¹¹² NALA, folder no. 17/1/12/31, file no. 17/1/12/31/4, a letter from RRC to Lasta *awraḡḡa*, reference no. 64/1/2803, 8 Gənbət 1970 EC = 16 May 1978 CE; a letter from Wällo province to its health office, reference no. 5367, Gənbət 1970 EC = May/June 1978 CE.

¹¹³ RRC 1978b.

¹¹⁴ See fn. 113.

¹¹⁵ NALA, folder no. 17/1/12/16, File No. 17/1/12/16/17, a letter from Wällo province to the Natural Disaster Prevention Central Committee, reference no. ፬፻፺፻፺፻፺፻/34/70, 28 Säne 1970 EC = 5 July 1978 CE.

¹¹⁶ Informants: Mogäs Abatä, Kasaw Məssəge, and Bərhane Ayyaläw.

Among my informants, Ṭäga Fəqade was a settler in Wälläga, but she returned to Lasta fifteen years ago. She expressed her distress that she lost her daughter, mother, brother, and three sisters there in Wälläga. Her challenge was narrated in the following couplet:

እንጀራ አለ ብሎ አይነግሩም ለድሃ
ተሻግሮ ይሄዳል አርባ አራቱን ውሃ
እንጀራ አለ ቢሉኝ የወረድኩበቱ
ከሾተል ይበልጣል የድጋይ ስለቱ¹¹⁷

Do not say that there is bread for the poor;
He will cross the forty-four waters.
If they told me there was bread, I went down.
The sharpness of the stones was sharper than a sword's.

Wällo Province was once again under devastating famine in 1984. Relief could have been provided at the center of camps, but the Ethiopian government delayed relief activities. Though some argue the military government concealed the famine,¹¹⁸ it is known that by 1978 the international community had ignored the Ethiopian government's request of 400,000 tons of grain for the famine affected areas of Wällo.¹¹⁹

In 1984, the RRC provided protein-rich foods like milk, biscuits, and others for the famine victims. It opened its permanent office in Lalibäla at a place called *təbabbər* ('cooperation'), which changed its name to 'Commission' and which is how it is known until now. The RRC also assigned human personnel and provided burial materials like hoes, shovels, wrapping clothes, scissors, and ropes.¹²⁰

Conclusion

As part of the Wällo province, the area of Lasta is here identified as one of the most famine-stricken areas from the second half of the twentieth century up to the 1980s. Although Lasta is bestowed with a rich natural and cultural heritage, historical records reveal that the area suffered from recurrent famine in the twentieth century. During the period under study, Lasta was one of the twelve *awraḡḡa* of the Wällo province. It was divided into three *wäräda*: Gədan, Bugna, and Mäqet. Based on archival records, published and unpublished sources, and interviews, this research has attempted to better understand the situation of famine, vulnerability factors, as well as the responses of governments and local people

¹¹⁷ Informant: Ṭäga Fəqade, March, 2022, Gännätä Maryam.

¹¹⁸ Crumme 2018, 47; Gizachew Andargie 2014, 184; Aychegrew Hadera Hailu 2016, 214.

¹¹⁹ Fantahun Ayele 1994, 28.

¹²⁰ Informants: Ṭasäw Ağažu and Kasaw Məssəge.

alike to famine. This research shows how the people of Lasta suffered from chronic famines during the imperial regime (1960s–1974) and the Därg (1974–1980s) and suggests that difficult famines occurred in 1965/1966, 1972–1974, and 1983/1984. In all these famine years, the vulnerability factors were drought, socio-economic and related political problems, human and animal diseases, as well as poor technological and infrastructural development of the area. In addition, this article shows how during famine people devised their own local strategies for survival. These local responses include praying to God and petitioning the government, selling personal property, borrowing grains, working with richer peasants, adapting to eating emergency foods, and in the end migration. Finally, this research hopes to serve as an outline for further studies in Lasta. Particularly, topics like the land tenure system, the resettlement program from and in Lasta, and the socio-economic history of Lasta could be studied in future research.

Glossary of Terms

aluma – the most edible kind of plant in which its leaves and seeds served as famine food.

‘ásrat – a kind of tithe paid to the government and/or one tenth of a product paid to the church.

awraǧǧa – an administrative division next to provinces.

balabbat – hereditary owners of large *rəst* land, prestige, and political power.

bālg – the autumn season of Ethiopia.

čəqa šum – a lower government official that links the community to the government.

čäwata – humor and playfulness that has various manifestations and meanings in different social and political situations.

däbr – an administrative unit that consisted local districts of a church.

däǧǧazmač – a politico-military title below *ras* but above *balambaras*.

dägäza and *qorač* – an insect like locusts that eats germinated crops.

däyri – local name given to insects of army worms that eat germinated crops.

dənba – a fruit of wild plants used as food during famine.

əlqātu (local expression derived from *əlqitu*) – an epidemic that kills many people.

andärase – the head of a province.

anǧära – the staple food of Ethiopia which resembles flat bread, made from the indigenous *tef* grain.

anṭaṭit – the seed of wild grass and extracted through digging the subsoil by hand.

fitawrari – a military title to mean commander of the army or leader of a center.

gänč – a poisonous crop that grows with barley.

gätən – a kind of plant-like cabbage.

gommän – cabbage.

labb aqəlṭ – local name given for the disease that attacks the heart.

lolit – a wild plant that serve as famine food.

māhar – the summer season of Ethiopia.

məkəttəl wärāda – an administrative unit below the level of *wärāda*.

məslāne – a representative of government at *wärāda* level.

qənčəb – a tree that is not edible.

qolo – roasted grains, usually a mix of wheat, chickpeas, and barley.

qunna – a local measurement unit cereal that would be equal with 4–6 kg.

rəst – hereditary land use.

samant – a kind of plant whose leaves serve as food during famine.

ṭäqlay gəzat – an administrative unit consisting of several *awraḡḡa*.

wäfe – a kind of plant whose fruits serve as food during famine.

wärāda – an administrative unit below the level of *awraḡḡa*.

wäššäš – another kind of food eaten during famine that is extracted from the root of a tree.

wəzəfəš – an epidemic that kills many people.

yägidär wätät (lit. ‘milk of a heifer’) – a kind of wild plant.

yänəfas bäsšəta (lit. ‘wind disease’) – a local name for a famine-born disease.

yätəṭ fəre – the produce of cotton.

List of Informants

Abbay Biräsaw, a government employee and relative of *Däḡḡazmač* Bərhanä Mäsqäl, March 2022, Lalibäla.

Abärra Əndawwäqä, served as a language translator and assistant at the administration for foreign relief aid agencies, February 2022, Lalibäla.

Afäwärq Gärrämaw, an employee at the church administration and government office, March 2022, Muḡḡa.

- Bälaynaw Agāññāhu, worked at the *qābāle* peasant association in Kulmäsk, March 2022, Muğğa.
- Bərhanē Ayyalāw, a government representative at Lalibāla from 1971 to 1973, February 2022, Lalibāla.
- Dästa Ḥayle, her father was governor of the Gännätä Maryam Däbr from 1965 to 1969, February 2022, Gännätä Maryam.
- Gännanaw Wānde, grew up in Bugna and served as government representative of Bugna *wärāda* from 1960 to 1967, February 2022, Lalibāla.
- Gānzāb Akkälä, one of the victims and beneficiaries of the relief aid at Lalibāla, February 2022, Gännätä Maryam.
- Kasaw Məssəge, supervisor of the RRC workers at Lalibāla from 1984 to 1989, March 2022, Lalibāla.
- Mogäs Abatä, a police officer at Lasta *awraqğa* from 1965 to 1972, narrated well about the famine situation of 1965–1966, February 2022, Lalibāla.
- Muluyē Akkälä, one of the victims and beneficiaries of the relief aid at Lalibāla, February 2022, Gännätä Maryam.
- Ṭāga Fəqade, a victim of the famine of 1984 and a settler in Wällāga, March 2022, Gännätä Maryam.
- Ṭasāw Agažu, a coordinator of the daily workers employed by the RRC at Lalibāla during the 1984 famine, March 2022, Lalibāla.

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Summary

The area of Lasta *awraḡḡa* has suffered from recurrent droughts which exacerbate the poverty of the people there. The main objective of this article is to reconstruct the history of famine in the Lasta *awraḡḡa* from the 1960s to the 1980s. Data have been collected from the archival records of the National Archive and Library Agency (NALA) of Ethiopia and repositories from the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (IES) at Addis Ababa University, published and unpublished sources, and interviews of eyewitnesses. These eyewitness accounts include people who were themselves victims of famine, the beneficiaries of relief aid, and local employees of relief organizations. This study shows how the people of Lasta faced recurrent famine in the second half of the twentieth century and explores the ways governments attempted to respond to these crises. The study identifies natural and human-made factors which make the area vulnerable to famine. It also explains how the people of Lasta devised their own indigenous coping mechanisms, including praying to God and appealing to the government, selling personal property, borrowing, adapting to unusual foods, and migrating.