



# Labour in Abyssinia

by

Marcel GRIAULE

*The author of this article, who has a special knowledge of Abyssinian questions, was recently sent to Abyssinia by the French Ministry of Education and Fine Arts to conduct an ethnographical and linguistic enquiry in that country. As an outcome of the journey, which took place during 1928-1929, Mr. Griaule has aimed at giving in this article, as he himself explains, a "strictly objective" account of the institutions he has been able to observe in their own setting, and of slave labour in particular. At a moment when public attention is especially directed to slavery, readers of the Review will certainly be keenly interested in this account of the factors that tend to perpetuate the ancient forms of servitude in Abyssinia, and of the efforts of the Emperor—the "King of the Kings"—to bring about their ultimate abolition.*

THE "organisation of labour" in Abyssinia cannot be described on the lines usually followed in dealing with European countries, or indeed any countries commonly accounted civilised. In these, established systems may be so differentiated as to be more or less divisible into watertight compartments, and consequently there can be no serious objection to handling them separately. But while — in countries such as France and England — it may be legitimate to consider specifically the organisation of justice, the legislature or the navy, there would be a risk of grave misconceptions if in the subject under review only one part of the question were studied and regarded as complete in itself to the exclusion of other aspects of the life of the country.

For instance, how approach the question of food consumption, either technically or from the standpoint of its effect on the general economic situation, unless its close connection with religious practices is kept in view? For here we have a community in which nearly a hundred and eighty fast days are strictly observed every year and where particular families are forbidden by custom to eat the flesh or portions of the flesh of certain animals. Again, how enter on judicial questions without at least

taking into account the national conception of the personality of the political chief of the country, a conception in which magic plays a part? And how can the customs governing labour be studied to any purpose if no account is taken of the fact that the king is overlord of the whole territory, or that the holidays compulsorily observed as a religious duty are actually more numerous than the working days? For all these reasons a short statement on the general situation of the Abyssinian State seems to be called for as a preface to the present study; and it also seems desirable to link the account of labour conditions closely with some remarks that may perhaps seem to the uninitiated to be purely a matter of ethnography — a science often considered as wholly devoid of practical interest.

## GENERAL ACCOUNT OF THE ABYSSINIAN STATE

### *Geographical and Ethnical Conditions*

Roughly speaking, Abyssinia or Ethiopia<sup>1</sup> lies between the 4th and 15th degrees of north latitude and the 31st and 45th degrees of east longitude. The two elongated plateaux of which the country consists meet towards the south as do the two strokes of a V, one lying from north to south, the other from south-west to north-east; these two ridges are divided by a depression holding a chain of lakes, the southernmost of which is Lake Rodolphe. Towards the Red Sea the triangular Danakil desert ends this depression. On the east of the Empire is the Somali desert.

In the north part of the northern plateau live the Abyssinians properly so called; they are Kamites and Monophysite Christians. Its southern part and the southern plateau are inhabited by Gallas and the desert by Danakils and Somalis; these three races are Kamites or Moslems. In the south and south-west of the Empire the population is negro or of negroid type; these races are heathen.

It is impossible to give an approximate figure to represent the population of the Empire. Some travellers or savants have put it at five million, others at fifteen. The more prudent strike

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<sup>1</sup> The Abyssinians use "Ityopia" as the official name of their country. In Greek, "Ethiopian" covered various parts of Africa; the ancients applied the term to all Africa south of Egypt.

an average and taken ten million as being nearer the truth. In point of fact to draw lots for the figures would give an equally reliable result.<sup>1</sup>

### *Social Conditions*

The Abyssinians are the official masters of the whole country. Christian since the fourth century, strongly organised and inspired from quite early times by a savage nationalism, they have constantly desired to dominate the heathen or Moslem population by which they were surrounded and have sought means of conquering disunited or less warlike peoples. All through the centuries they have come down from the high plateaux where they lived to invade the deserts to the east and the country to the south. They began with raids which were not followed up, for they were meant to intimidate turbulent neighbours who were no longer troubled when the Abyssinian fighting men had returned home. As time went on and the central power was more firmly established, permanent garrisons were left in the invaded countries; these were strong enough to maintain order, to secure the payment of tribute, and even in some degree to introduce the Abyssinian civilisation.<sup>2</sup>

### *The Political Situation*

In bygone days Abyssinia was a confederacy of States governed by princes recognising the theoretic supremacy of one of their number: the "King of the Kings". Abyssinia to-day presents the same characteristics except that the central Govern-

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<sup>1</sup> The census is unknown even among such a strongly organised people as the Abyssinians proper. According to beliefs which may also be found elsewhere, it is of ill omen and harmful to the peace of the community to take a census. I have myself observed that it is considered extremely uncivil to ask the head of a family how many children he has. If an Abyssinian Chief is asked the number of his warriors he invariably replies "many", a reply which is often suggested less by pride than by ignorance; the only number he knows is that of his rifles.

<sup>2</sup> I was actually able to witness the application of this method in the province of Godjam in 1929. Ras Haile Jassu II, the Governor, who has established his capital in the south of this region, personally commands an army composed of some 2,000 soldiers and craftsmen. The camp is established for several months at the principal points of the route followed, and becomes a centre of intense activity, a kind of temporary capital with an influence radiating in all directions to a distance of several days' march. According to Abyssinian tradition, which may be observed at Addis-Ababa itself, the political chief is also a labour chief, and the governor personally directs any important work he may have decided to undertake. Thus at Addiet du Metela, a district where I lived for several months with the expeditionary corps, I saw the building of a palace and of granaries intended to house the proceeds of the taxes, and the complete restoration of some ten churches, as well as the clearance of land.

ment, strongly organised by the Emperor Menelek II at the end of last century, is daily increasing its strength, and therefore the possibility that sooner or later it will be in a position to bring about the effective unity of the Kingdom.

Menelek's reign saw the downfall of the reigning families of the provinces, and the governors who replaced them were nominated by the Emperor ; a certain number of them were chosen from among the descendants of the conquered. Abyssinia is governed by the "King of the Kings", Haile Selassie. The Emperor's power is absolute only in the particular provinces he himself governs. In other regions his power is tempered by certain privileges of the governors, whose fairly frequent inordinate acts really have but little importance in the general direction of the State.

Authority rests on one established principle ; the king (or the governor) is absolute master of his subjects ; theoretically he may dispose of their persons and their goods. This leads to two results of extreme importance for the matter under consideration :

(1) Every subject is in a certain sense in the service of the State ; he is compelled to do certain work or to render specified dues in labour or in kind.

(2) In principle, all land belongs to the central authority. In fact this overlordship assumes two very different forms : *rest* and *goult*. *Rest* is hereditary land and the central authority only interferes with enjoyment of it in quite exceptional circumstances (lack of any heir or rebellion of the owner, who is then deprived of the property for the benefit of his family). This is customary especially in the central provinces. *Goult* really belongs to the central authority. It is granted on a temporary basis to servants of the State. Thus the soldiers, who are not paid, serve for a "pension" constituted by a piece of *goult* land and the peasants living upon it. This practice is found above all in the conquered countries but also in the central provinces.

The tenure of any sort of property always involves a variety of obligations : taxes, services, or dues in kind.

### *The Religious Situation*

Monophysite Christianity is the State religion. The strong organisation of the clergy and their worldly wealth really put

the Church in the position of a State within the State. The moral and material advantages which the ecclesiastics of every rank exclusively enjoy cause a large number of people to decide that they have a vocation for the priesthood. It is no exaggeration to say that a tenth of the population which is genuinely Abyssinian is wholly occupied in the service of the State religion. Labour is required to supply the needs of the whole of this class, and practically another tenth of the population is thus absorbed ; the effect upon the economic condition of the country need hardly be stressed.

The confusion between religious and political authority, together with the religiosity of the people, gives the force of law to rules decreed or approved by the Church. Thus it comes about that the normal year contains no less than 220 holidays ; for instance, in a month's employment of the time of an agricultural labourer in the central provinces (taking the period from 9 March to 7 April 1929) there are 21 days' rest for compulsory religious or domestic festivals, one day of *corvée* (or compulsory labour) and only 8 days of normal labour. Above all in the country districts, for any breach of the weekly rest penalties are incurred, of fine or imprisonment, even in a case of work which might be considered indispensable. A case in point is that the women must lay in a large quantity of water (called "the Friday water") on Friday, since they are forbidden to go to the springs on Saturday or Sunday.

The civil authority inflicts fines and may put the offender in chains. If the delinquent was only acting under his master's orders, the master is responsible.

But these punishments, although applied with more or less regularity, are not the most efficacious way of securing respect for the days of rest which are imposed as a religious duty. The suffering which public opinion can inflict is much harder to bear and is, moreover, much less avoidable. There is not only the sanction which has moral force—censure or contempt ; in the case of a repeated offence the village may exact a penalty in the form of a costly banquet.

It is a fact that in the mind of these peoples the observance of religious rules is connected with the peace of the community. Should there be a breach of such a sacred custom as the weekly rest the most serious calamities may fall on them at any moment. It is the belief in some districts that to do any work on the day

of the Patron Saint of Thunder will bring about terrible storms which will be detrimental to the whole area.

This is an example of the many complications that cannot be ignored in the social life of Abyssinia, while it shows that in a sphere generally considered purely technical a rôle of great importance is played by an institution which the so-called higher civilisations are apt to leave in the background.

### *The Economic Situation*

The Abyssinian State is peculiar and probably unique in one respect : it has no internal or external debt.

The annual imports and exports amount to some tens of millions of tons, so far as it is possible to judge by the statistics of the Franco-Ethiopian railway, which carries a considerable part of the national traffic. It is true that some business is transacted on other frontiers, but there are no reliable data to show what its importance may be.

This situation is the result of Abyssinian domestic organisation. The family is self-sufficing and needs scarcely any products coming from outside. With the exception of a few iron utensils, a little pottery, some service from specialists such as the weaver and the blacksmith, the Abyssinian family produces everything it needs (food, clothes, dwelling), and usually with no surplus. Indeed, besides the lack of inclination for work of this people there is no appreciable advantage in producing more than can be consumed. On one hand, the general situation is precarious ; on the other, the civil authorities arbitrarily fix the tax to be paid and if a man has a plentiful crop he will be taxed the more heavily. So in most cases the head of the house is content to cultivate only as much land as is necessary to provide his family with food and to enable him to pay the tax.

In addition to these causes of minimum production religion or the climate may enforce idleness. Thus the rainy season (June to September) stops all agricultural work and almost all business, either because the ground is water-logged or because the swollen streams make all communications impossible. Gondjam, for instance, is entirely cut off from the rest of Abyssinia for a good part of the year by the Blue Nile, whose depth and swiftness forbid any attempt to cross.

It is well to remember also that the property rights of the political chief are not likely to encourage the nominal owner to improve his land, even supposing that agriculture is sufficiently advanced technically for this to be within his power.

### DIVISION OF WORK

The division of work is founded on strong traditional or religious prejudices in respect of age, sex and the origin of the person concerned.

#### *Division by Age*

From about his seventh year the child begins to make himself useful. Unless he is meant to be a student<sup>1</sup> (and this is fairly frequent in well-to-do families), he helps his elders so far as his strength allows. Girls are trained to work in the house, boys to life in the fields. Boys usually look after the cattle or the crops, according to the season.

The adult male works at the principal occupation by which the family lives. The head of the family, besides taking his share of this employment—but often only the most intricate part of it—exercises authority and general supervision over the family community.

The old man, who is always held in great respect, does no hard work. In some provinces, such as Wollo, he watches over the country from the hillocks which are numerous on the high plateaux. He reprimands negligent shepherds or boys in charge of crops, and warns the village of anything serious which takes place in the neighbourhood, fire, plundering, etc.

#### *Division by Sex*

With very few exceptions the man has a different activity from the woman. It is not within the sphere of this article to seek for the reasons of customs by which a woman may not milk a cow or kill an animal without becoming an object of contempt and derision to the village. In any case this sanction

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<sup>1</sup> Abyssinian studies are chiefly religious, and are founded upon the knowledge of the sacred books, written in a primitive language, *Geez*, which is no longer spoken. The student has to make a definite effort, all the more that he often has to go into a distant region to find a famous teacher. He builds a hut close to his teacher's house or lives with its inmate, who must in either case feed him.

is strong enough to prevent any infraction of the rules of the division of labour by sex, if any individual should ever even dream of transgressing.

Work is divided between the sexes as follows. Men follow occupations such as civil, military, and religious employment, agricultural work and cattle breeding, portorage, hunting, weaving, washing, building, the working of metal, leather, and horn, the arts, and employment as eunuchs. Women look after the kitchen (except killing the animals), grind the grain, carry water, do the less important field work, spin, carry wood, and are employed in the lower class of work for the service of religion ; some are prostitutes. Certain work, such as making pots, selling in the market, household work and begging, is done by men and women alike. In short, the woman is generally employed in the lower sort of work, especially for field labour.

At twelve years old girls are considered grown up and fit for marriage or work alike. In the middle-class families the woman's position is very hard. She is looked upon as a servant and there is hardly any difference between her duties and those of a slave. The heaviest work she has to do is grinding grain and carrying water. The grinding is done with a large flat stone with a sloping surface upon which a smaller stone — weighing eight or ten pounds—is rubbed to crush the grain. With this rudimentary method it takes a very long time to get enough flour to feed a whole family. To provide water, in a great number of cases long distances must be covered, up to some miles, with a return load of four or five gallons weighing over forty pounds.<sup>1</sup>

To speak generally, women are not greatly held in honour, and they are harshly treated, as is attested by many proverbs.

### *Division according to the Worker's Origin*

The free Abyssinian does not indifferently follow any trade. Some are considered degrading and are left to men of inferior races, who live apart from the rest of the population.

Among the occupations considered degrading are the iron and pottery trades, and that of the silversmith. Special contempt is reserved for the blacksmith ; not so long ago any man

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<sup>1</sup> Probably because it is only a matter of women's work Abyssinians do not seem to trouble themselves about a water supply when establishing a village. And because the dwellings are usually built upon mounds, streams and springs are as a rule some distance off.



in the trade who was called upon to work for a private individual would come with his feet in chains, and the employer who needed his services would take all manner of precautions in the domain of magic in order to ward off imaginary dangers. This is connected with superstitions which are widely spread throughout the world, crediting men who handle iron and fire with magic and malignant powers.

Although these beliefs have less hold on the people than in the past the castes carrying on these industries do not mingle with the population, have no rights and cannot enter the army or aspire to the priesthood. They live in a kind of servitude and are harassed in a number of ways, though they are allowed to keep what they gain by their work. They have to pay an annual tax fixed by the regional chiefs and paid either in cash, in articles they have made or in work.

The peasants (*gabars*) of the conquered countries constitute another very important class of workers. The land of these regions is generally granted to the soldiers as a reward for their services. The original agriculturist is deprived of his land, but he remains attached to the soil and farms the land under the man to whom the ownership has passed; the latter has to pay a special tax to the Government.

In other cases the inhabitants of countries either conquered or raided are carried off into slavery pure and simple; this question is discussed later.

In principle, the free Abyssinian may follow any trade he chooses, but in fact he is bound by a series of obligations or customs so that the course of his life is determined without his being aware of it. A succinct study of land administration in the central provinces of Abyssinia will give an idea of these customs.

It has been stated above that all land is the property of the central authority; anyone to whom it is granted is bound by a variety of obligations: payment of taxes, rendering of dues in kind or in service. A few types of these obligations may be mentioned here by way of example and to give an idea of their diversity. To begin with, the use of certain lands is associated with dues in kind such as supplying grain, incense, or coal to the Church for purposes of worship. Sometimes there are temporary personal obligations to the Government, such as driving the baggage animals during military expeditions, or making and

looking after the baggage, or to the Church, such as putting up accessories of worship and removing them, repairing the carpets or metal-work of the sanctuaries, etc. Finally, there are cases where the use of land entails carrying out some duty or exercising a special profession all through life or a part of it. For example, a member of the family may be under the obligation to fill a post such as that of sacristan or singer in the service of the Church, or of soldier, watchman, silversmith, labourer, etc., in the service of the Government. In these cases it is clear that a heavy charge falls on the owner of the land for the time being. He must either support the official selected by the notabilities or by the Government or he must, as happens most frequently, supply an official. In the latter case he will take the post himself or put a member of his family into it. If this is an impossible solution he must find a substitute, whom he has to support according to a tariff fixed by custom. Supposing he has to find a deacon, he goes to the choirmaster of his Church, who then makes enquiries in the district and tells him what to do. The deacon is paid eighteen baskets of the best grain or thirty-six baskets of ordinary grain a year. This quantity is doubled in the case of a priest.

Inversely, of course, there is no office without land attached to it. Whether it is the Government bestowing military or civil rank or the Ecclesiastical authority nominating a dignitary, *ipso facto* the recipient receives lands "to eat", as the Abyssinians say. But there is reason to stress the other aspect of this system, for up to now sufficient attention has not been focussed upon it.

This close network of customs does, however, allow for free labour requiring only an agreement between workers and employers. The principal free occupations are domestic, agricultural, and military service, and portorage.<sup>1</sup>

*Agricultural Service.*<sup>2</sup> The worker is hired by the employer in April. The engagement is for a year and is made in the presence of two witnesses, and of a surety provided by the worker, who is responsible for his good behaviour. The wages are paid when the contract terminates; the yearly payment amounts to some ten *talari*.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Employment in Government administrations or in the foreign legations at Addis-Ababa is not taken into account in this article.

<sup>2</sup> This information applies to the province of Wollo and to a Moslem worker.

<sup>3</sup> The *talari*, or Maria Theresa dollar, is worth about 1s. 2d.

The servant is lodged and boarded but he has to find his own clothes. He is employed only in the fields, either with his master, or alone if he has enough experience. The working day is about ten hours ; there are five working days and two regular rest days in the week (Friday and Sunday). The regional chief fixes the festivals during which no work may be done. In addition the servant may obtain leave to attend to his own affairs.

The master cannot punish his servant except by dismissal. He may not strike him nor bully him in any way, under penalty of a fine payable both to the injured person and to the authorities.

Disputes between masters and servants are submitted in the first instance to the territorial chief. The usual course of justice is followed in the case of an appeal.

In the province of Choa the worker is engaged by the day, the week or the month. He is paid in kind or in cash, as the parties may prefer. For instance, if a peasant has no oxen to plough his land he sells his labour to a more fortunate neighbour who has fields to be tilled, and is paid by the loan of a pair of oxen for his own ploughing.

*Household Service.* In centres such as Addis-Ababa household servants are usually engaged by the month. The contract is concluded before witnesses and the servant must furnish a surety who is responsible for his good behaviour. If, for instance, the servant robs his master, the surety must repay double the value of the theft. Wages are paid monthly and may be as much as fifteen talari in European households. Board and lodging are generally provided ; if they are not an extra payment is made to the servant. His clothing is also provided by his master, but this only becomes his own property after he has served for six months. His work is fixed beforehand and he can refuse to do work for which he was not engaged.

In the interior of the country and in the native households the wages are much lower. For example, in the Wollo province a woman servant is paid four to five talari a year and has to do any work that her employers demand of her.

*Military Service.* A soldier may enlist in the service of a chief, who boards, lodges and clothes his men but does not generally give them any pay. He employs them as he sees fit but does not ever put them on heavy work such as agricultural labour. When moving about the soldiers are quartered upon

the inhabitants. At the end of a certain period of service the soldier obtains from his master a piece of land (*goult*), which is worked by the peasants who live upon it and who pay heavy dues to the temporary owner.

*Porterage.* At Addis-Ababa the *Gouraghis* are carriers and do navvying work. They are hired in gangs for a fixed price estimated for each job.

*Transport.* Caravans engage mule-drivers, who are quite often recruited among the youths of well-to-do families. The terms are much the same as in the case of household servants.

It should be noted that it is the master himself who settles disputes arising between his servants or his soldiers. The regular course is followed if there is an appeal.

In addition to the obligation connected with their land, their offices or their caste, Abyssinians, whatever their status, are subject to the *corvée*, i.e., compulsory labour which is called for by the authorities in case of need and is work for the public weal. If there is a bridge, a Church or a palace to be built, the region concerned is notified that there is work to be done at such a place on a certain date. Everyone presents himself with the necessary tools and material and the governor, or it may be the King himself, directs the work, carrying in his own hands the bundle of thatch, the stone or the tree-trunk which is to be used in construction. It certainly may be said that in Abyssinia the King or governor is a labour chief.

To these *corvées* imposed in the public interest there must be added another kind of *corvée*, which consists in helping some private individual to carry out work which is beyond the strength of a single family. If a peasant wants to build himself a house or has not enough hands to get in the harvest, he will ask for the assistance of the other villagers, merely giving them quarters while the work is going on.

Penalties in the form of fines are attached to the *corvées* imposed by the public authorities; the private *corvées* cannot be neglected without incurring moral sanction, which may go so far as the exaction of a sort of fine paid to the village in the form of a costly banquet, or may even cause the offender to be ostracised, to the serious prejudice of his interests.

There is one more institution which has often brought oppro-

brium upon Abyssinia and has given rise to numberless controversies : slavery.

Although this study is strictly objective it may be well, in order to avoid possible misunderstanding, to vouch for the determination of the Emperor Haile Selassie to put an end to slavery. To carry out such a task in the present state of Abyssinian civilisation might well absorb all the energies of a strong Government. But the present Emperor has to begin at the bottom in introducing reforms into the country and those who are working with him are but a handful. Besides, there are hidden forces working against him and he has to overcome these at every new reform. His most powerful opponents — of which he is not likely to be rid yet awhile — are the Abyssinian customs which are clung to by certain governors of provinces.

In the provinces under his direct rule the Emperor has done away with slavery ; this is proof that if he had complete control of his whole country he would speedily put an end to a state of things for which he is sometimes, but quite unjustly, considered responsible.

#### CONDITIONS OF SLAVES

The slave, purchased as any commodity might be, is the chattel of his master, who disposes of his slave's person just as he pleases. There is however one exception to this rule. Theoretically the slave becomes non-transferable if he is converted to Christianity. Practically there are numerous infractions of this law ; it meets the case to call the transference a "gift" when it is nevertheless a real sale.

The slave has no recognised identity ; his owner has therefore to pay for any damage the slave may cause. In the case of a crime it is just the same : the master must either pay blood-money or submit to the penalty of retaliation in kind as the claimants may prefer. In the latter case the master may be released from the responsibility if he hands over his slave to the injured party, who will carry out the sentence. The master may also hand over his slave as a guarantee of repayment of a debt, of the payment of interest, or in compensation for damage. In past times there were cases where exemption from State demands could be obtained by giving up a slave or a child. For instance, the Chankallas of the West used to give their children to the Abyssinian tax collectors, either because a high price could be

obtained for this human merchandise or because they had their hands forced by their conquerors.

The slave is utilised at the will of his master in any and every department of ordinary life, including reproduction in the case of a woman. In fact, just as live stock is placed in favourable conditions for breeding, so a male may be assigned to a female slave in order that their offspring may add to their owner's property. It is however more usual to let these people form ties as they will, so long as it does not interfere with their work ; moreover they can be separated at any time just as may suit their owners. A woman slave may not take advantage of her pregnancy to stop her work for a time. She continues her work until the actual day of her delivery and resumes it almost immediately afterwards. Only the desire of the master not to depreciate his goods by demanding exertions which might injure the mother's health and lessen the value of the child ever softens the rigours of this custom.

The child belongs to the owner of the mother at the day of birth, even if the father is a free man ; a free father has the right to buy his child's freedom. If the child is the issue of a slave and her master it belongs to him on the same footing as his legitimate children and has the same rights ; in this case the child is free, and does not suffer any deprivation of rights on account of the low estate of his mother.

If a free woman bears a child to a slave father the child is a slave and belongs to the person who has rights over the woman : to the parents of a single woman, to the husband if adultery has been committed.

The owner has theoretically the right to dispose of the child from the moment of its birth ; he can take the baby from the breast and sell it. As a matter of fact, it is clear that the owner's interests demand that the new-born child should live under the best possible conditions, so that he may be a fine specimen if sold young or that he may develop normally and become a vigorous worker. These two reasons usually prevail to prevent the child being taken from his mother until he is weaned.

At the death of the head of the family, and unless he has left directions to the contrary which involve their liberation, the slaves are reckoned as part of the property and are divided among the heirs. No account is taken of the family relations among them and they are disposed of as the heirs may wish

or by drawing lots. If it is not possible for the full value of a slave to be allotted to one share, two or more of the claimants have the use of him between them, and he then goes to work for the different masters during times proportional to their shares and at dates which have been agreed. During these periods the temporary master is responsible for misdemeanours or crimes which the worker may commit while in his service.

The produce of the slave's work belongs wholly to his owner, who must in return house, feed and clothe him. No slave can therefore make savings which he could use to gain his freedom by repaying his purchase price to his master. If he ever has any money it will only be by stratagem that he will be able to keep it.

There are however some exceptions to this rule. In Godjam, the province situated in the bend of the Blue Nile after it has left Lake Tana, a slave may become the owner of movable goods — flocks, merchandise, crops, etc. — and may trade in them. The original source of his income is from his share of the grain he harvests on his master's lands. This is usually fixed at a third. The situation is comparable to the serfdom of the middle ages in France, with this difference that the Abyssinian serf is attached to his master and not to the land.

The slave has no redress in respect of the punishments his master may inflict ; the commonest is corporal punishment, which may be the bastinado. Slaves are frequently put in chains or deprived of food. In former days the owners had even greater rights ; they could torture their slaves and put them to death without any interference from the religious or civil authorities.

This state of things is now somewhat improved. Theoretically, summary execution is forbidden and the offender is prosecuted by the civil authority. Practically, the civil authority is helpless, for custom does not consider the crime a public affair. The procedure, in fact, can only be set in motion by those who have a right to claim blood-money, i.e. the parent in the case of a free man, the master when it is a slave, since the slave is in some sense part of the family he serves. The owner who murders his slave is therefore at once the plaintiff and the defendant, which makes any action impossible.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> It seems that until Abyssinian customs undergo far-reaching reforms the civil authority will be confronted with an insoluble problem. This is one of the most important questions that can present itself to be dealt with by the courageous activities of the Emperor.

It might well be thought, in face of all these facts, that the life of an Abyssinian slave is nothing but a series of sufferings and that his mind is solely set on escape. But in most cases this is not at all so, and it is only just to say that the actual position is not identical with the legal position. This is the result—in the first place—of his being a chattel, and a valuable one at that. Among ordinary commodities, the slave has far the highest value, for in some provinces this may exceed a hundred talari (about £6).<sup>1</sup> The slave is usually worth more than the whole harvest of his master's land, and the owner must therefore have a keen interest in preserving and developing a capital asset of such value.

Secondly, the simplicity of Abyssinian life is a levelling factor. Mingling with the family and dependent, like them, on good or bad harvests, eating the same food, sleeping under the same roof, the slave soon becomes a part of the household that he has not chosen, even when he has not belonged to it since his birth. His life in captivity is not very unlike what it would be in his own country if he were free.

It is true that Amharic<sup>2</sup> proverbial literature is full of sayings which indicate hostility to slaves<sup>3</sup>, and it must be conceded that they are harshly treated; but in this respect their condition does not differ from that of the married woman. It is a question of manners and customs in general rather than one concerning a special class.

Taken into the family the slave ends by being considered as a real relation, and if he is with a master desirous of performing a pious act<sup>4</sup>, it is quite possible that he will be liberated after having worked for some years. Generally he has to await his owner's death to gain his freedom, supposing his master has been careful to mention the matter in his will. Wills are almost always verbal but are made before a priest and honourable witnesses.

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<sup>1</sup> In Godjam, for instance, a pair of oxen in working condition are worth 30 talari, and an ordinary house (20 to 25 feet in diameter) costs from 30 to 50 talari.

<sup>2</sup> Name of the official language of Abyssinia. It is taken from Amhara, one of the most important provinces.

<sup>3</sup> The names given them are a characteristic sign of the state of mind of the free man. The slave often has a sort of nickname in two parts. The first is used by the master to call him, the second is the slave's reply when he hears himself called, as if to say "I am here".

<sup>4</sup> The Abyssinian Church recommends, though in rather feeble terms, that the good slave should be liberated.



After a life of loyal service, if there are no direct heirs, it may come about that he is named as legatee of his master's property. But in such a case it is always possible for heirs who may subsequently present themselves to gain possession of the property after the death of the former slave, who is only considered to have a life interest in it.

In practice, few slaves are freed, and this is due as much to the slaves themselves as to the owners who are anxious not to reduce their property. The slave suddenly left without a protector, shelter, or food is utterly unable to do without the one or procure the others. Having been unable to save during his captivity (except in the special cases referred to in the province of Godjam), he has not even the means of purchasing provisions for his return journey to his country of origin. And besides, even if his return were made easy, what would his life there be? Separated from those of his own race for a very long time, having forgotten his customs and perhaps his mother tongue, he would be considered a stranger by his own people, above all if he has been born in captivity of slave parents and only knows his country by hearsay.

There is another point. He may be free personally but he does not possess the full rights reserved to the free Abyssinians. For instance, he cannot be put on his oath, and will therefore be at a disadvantage if he comes into conflict with the law, and the first comer can contest his position as a free man. How can he prove that is free? Almost always it depends on a verbal declaration of the master, which has very little force when the freedom was given in a will made *in extremis*. In fact, the principal actor will have died soon after. And since it is customary that testamentary declarations should be made before men of weight, i.e. old men, these witnesses too will be likely to die at no distant date and so nothing will remain of the act of liberation.

When the freed slave finds himself in this lamentable position, in contrast with the relative tranquillity he enjoyed when in captivity, he desires nothing more than to return to his former status. He accepts the protection of another master, who frequently takes advantage of the situation described above and treats him exactly as if he were a purchased slave.

The most important decision that the Abyssinian Government has taken in regard to the suppression of slavery is the

Edict of 1923. This was followed by precise regulations concerning its application. The text of the Edict and a summary of the regulations are given as an appendix to this article. Together they have had the following effects.

On the Emperor's own lands the provisions of the law are observed. In the other parts of the Empire the sale of slaves takes place, but as the capital is approached the traffic goes underground. It is however possible, even in Addis-Ababa, to procure slaves old enough to suggest that they were purchased before the Edict but still too young to know what their rights are. For this reason, which is a complete reversal of what was formerly the case, a slave is the more valuable in proportion to his youth. The price of a healthy child in Godjam may be as much as 150 talari (about £8 10s.), a woman of thirty is worth 80 talari.<sup>1</sup>

The capture of slaves is as easy as ever; determined people can always organise raids, particularly in Wallaga, Wallamo, Gamou, Djimma, Konta and Gofa. But it is more and more difficult for the slave traders to get their convoys through the central provinces. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that numbers of slaves coming from the south-west of Abyssinia are shipped on the Somali coast to be sold in Arabia.

It is not possible here to deal with this fact. But it may be pointed out that if, with the fleets they have at their command, European nations encounter serious difficulties in keeping an eye on dhows—all under thirty tons—it is only fair to give due weight to the difficulties of a King who seems to have done all in his power to put an end to an institution that has existed for several thousand years, and is still accepted as legally and morally sound by all his subjects save those few who have been in contact with western civilisation.

A number of factors contribute to explain the survival in the sphere of labour of systems that have long been repudiated by western ideas. Among these are the geographical situation, which cuts Abyssinia off from the stream of western civilisation; an economic system which is still based on the family group; the almost total absence of external commerce; a social organisation tied down to old traditional and religious ideas; the

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<sup>1</sup> There is reason to suppose that these figures were exaggerated, either boastfully, or in the hope of driving a good bargain with a foreigner.

still incomplete control of the central authority over the whole extent of the territory. All this may cause a fear that the old systems will not be discarded so soon as may be desirable. But it seems that the personal action of the Emperor Haile Selassie may be counted on to speed up the necessary reforms, in conjunction with the increasing contacts with western civilisation which will be the result of Abyssinia's entry into the League of Nations.

## APPENDIX

### EDICT CONCERNING THE SLAVE TRADE

"The Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, Empress Zauditu of Ethiopia, daughter of the Emperor Menelek II, the Chosen of God, and the Heir to the Throne, Ras Taffari.

"The Emperor Menelek II had published an Edict forbidding the people to purchase or sell slaves. This Edict has several times been repeated. We now once more confirm the said prohibition by the present Edict. For if in former times captures of slaves were carried out among certain peoples, this was solely for the purpose of levying an indemnity to cover the expenses of the military operations caused by their rebellion and in order that they might become civilised and live under Christianity. To-day, however, you unlawfully carry out raids for slaves and sell them when you have succeeded, and you kill those who do not submit with docility to your oppression.

"Any person henceforth found committing such an offence will be condemned to death.

"Governors of provinces who shall in future allow persons placed under their jurisdiction to be removed from their own district to be reduced to slavery, shall be liable to a fine of 1,000 talari per individual. The fine shall be 500 talari for the chief of any village and the notables who fail to observe the present Edict.

"Any person henceforth found outside his district of origin on account of slavery must be furnished with a certificate of liberation which will allow him to return to his home.

"You slaves who, after the publication of the present Edict, are residing outside your district of origin on account of slavery shall, on returning to your home, pay the tribute which the Governor of your province shall fix.

"For the execution of the present Edict officials have been sent to hold enquiries in the provinces. Any person accusing another of a contravention and proving his accusation shall receive by way of reward one-third of the fine imposed.

"Done on the 4th day of Maskaram 1916 (15 September 1923)."

## REGULATIONS CONCERNING THE LIBERATION OF SLAVES AND THEIR CONDITIONS OF LIFE

These regulations were published on 22 Magabit 1916 (31 March 1924). They comprise 45 sections, divided into four groups.

### I. *General Conditions relating to Liberation* (Sections 1-20).

As the wholesale liberation of slaves might lead to grave disorders, it has been decided to proceed to this operation in the following cases only :

Cruelty by masters (beating, deprivation of food or clothing, excessive work);

Conversion to Christianity ;

Sufficient education to become a priest, deacon or officer ;

Union with the master or a child of the master, whether followed by a birth or not ;

Failure by the masters within a period of eight days to demand the restoration of a fugitive slave arrested at the frontier posts or at internal customs posts ;

Death of the master who had effected the purchase, even though liberation is not provided for in his will (the slave will, however, remain in the house of the master for seven years, during which he will carry out the customary commemorative ceremonies. Only after the conclusion of the funeral rites will the slave be entitled to live as he pleases);

Death of the master who captured his slave in the course of a regular expedition (liberation in this case is immediate);

Assignment, whether for valuable consideration or not, to a third person or to a relative ;

Participation in a military expedition and in a combat in the quality of a soldier (when such quality was acquired with the authorisation of the master and the Government);

Saving the life of the master when in danger during a combat or in any other circumstance.

Children born of a woman slave and a freeman must also be liberated immediately.

Children born of slave parents on and after the promulgation of the Edicts shall remain with their parents in the house of their masters. They shall be free from their birth, but shall be clothed, fed, cared for and educated by the masters up to the age of fifteen, after which period they may go where they think fit.

In case of divorce of the masters, the slaves may follow whichever of the spouses they prefer.

## II. *Provisions relating to Liberated Slaves* (Sections 21-30).

Judges appointed by the Governor shall proceed to carry out liberations in the following manner. They shall make the necessary enquiries with a view to ascertaining the slaves entitled to be liberated. They shall question these individuals and draw up a certificate of liberation setting out the name and origin of the person concerned, the name and condition of the master, and the reason for the liberation, which shall be entered in a register kept by the judges. They shall deliver the liberated slave to the Governor of the province in which the operation takes place.

The Governor, after giving a discharge to the judges, shall repatriate the man or restore him to his parents or his tribe.

On returning to his district the liberated slave shall be exempt from taxes for a period of seven years in order that he may become accustomed to his new life and learn to support himself.

If he does not desire to return to his district of origin, he may live in any province he pleases. The certificate of liberation shall protect him from all interference.

Slaves over seven years and under twenty years of age are authorised to enter the special school founded by the Government for this purpose. Their maintenance shall be at the charge of the Government until the completion of their studies in reading and writing. Those who are considered capable shall then be sent to the school of handicrafts, the military school, the school of foreign languages, or the seminary, according to the abilities of which they have given proof.

Subsequently, if the individual shows intelligence and assiduity, he may obtain Government employment and receive a rank.

A liberated slave who is guilty of theft or brigandage shall be subject to the same laws as free men guilty of the same crimes. He shall in no case return to his former condition.

## III. *Penalties applicable to Slave Traders* (Sections 31-37).

Any person habitually carrying on the slave trade shall be sentenced to a fine of 500 talari and to imprisonment for ten years. If the offence is repeated he shall be sentenced to perpetual imprisonment. Any individual who deceives a liberated slave by promises of any kind with a view to reducing him again to slavery shall be liable to the same penalties.

A fine of 50 talari shall be imposed on any person who applies the name of slave to a liberated man.

The Governor of a province, the chief of a tribe or the chief of a village in which cases of slave trading take place shall be sentenced to fines varying from 100 to 300 talari for the first offence. These fines shall be progressive and may be converted into removal from office and confiscation of property.

The amount of the fines imposed shall be brought to the knowledge of the Minister of the Interior, whose duty it shall be to collect them and pay them over to the Minister of Finance. The sums so raised shall be employed for the maintenance of liberated slaves and the cost of the schools founded for them.

IV. *Provisions relating to Judges appointed for securing the Liberation of Slaves* (Sections 38-45).

Two special judges shall be appointed in each province by the Governor, in agreement with the central Government. A building and guards shall be placed at their disposal for the custody of the slaves whose liberation is pending.

Any differences arising between masters and slaves shall be brought before these judges and not before the ordinary tribunals. In case of appeal the question shall be decided by a commission appointed by the Governor and not by the provincial courts.

The Minister of the Interior shall appoint every six months a supervisor whose duty it shall be to enquire into the action of the special judges. The latter shall every month furnish the Minister with a report specifying the number of slaves liberated and the grounds of their liberation.