Résumé
D. M. Todd — Aspects de la chefferie dans le Dimam (Sud-Ouest éthiopien). Ethnographie des institutions politiques d'une population éthiopienne non amhara, traitant essentiellement de l'idéologie sous-jacente au système de chefferie. L'organisation coutumière n'était pas centralisée, chaque chefferie constituant une entité judiciaire et rituelle autonome. Le fondement de l'autorité du chef est une puissance spirituelle spéciale, balth'u, impliquant de sa part une constante pureté rituelle, symbolisée par des interdits nombreux et par des rites périodiques. Cette puissance est censée pouvoir s'altérer, en raison du comportement du chef, avec des conséquences néfastes pour la communauté, ce qui peut conduire à sa destitution.

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DAVE TODD

Aspects of Chiefship in Dimam, South-West Ethiopia

In this article I present a brief ethnography of chiefship in Dimam, South-West Ethiopia, constructed from observed events and Dime opinions recorded during my period of fieldwork between November 1972 and February 1974. I am here concerned mainly with the ideology of chiefship, rather than with its changing role in an ‘Ethiopianised’ society, which I have described elsewhere (Todd 1975). Certain features of Dime chiefship will bring to mind the close association between many East- and North-East African rulers and their divinities. It would perhaps be surprising if this were not the case, bearing in mind H. S. Lewis’s remark: ‘It is likely that every State in sub-Saharan Africa contained at least a few of the characteristics of the ideal African divine monarchy’ (Lewis 1965: 15). At this stage I eschew explicit comparisons with these kings, chiefs and nobles, in order to provide the reader with sufficient ethnography to form his own opinions.

I. — The Dime

The Dime number about 8,000 people and inhabit a series of mountain ranges and surrounding lowland territory, with a total area of approximately 1,500 square miles. This country, named Dimam, is situated in Gemu Gofa Province of South-West Ethiopia, and overlooks the lower reaches of the Omo river and its valley. The people practise slash and burn agriculture on extensive terraces, and produce several grain crops, such as sorghum, corn and teff (*Eragrostis teff*), as well as ensete (*Ensete edulis*; Smeds 1955), roots and tubers.

Their language, Dimaph (mouth of the Dime), has been analysed by Prof. H. Fleming, and classified as belonging to the Southern Omotic group (Fleming 1969, 1974, 1975, 1976).

The Dime divide themselves into a number of theoretically endogamous castes¹ (Todd 1977; Haberland 1959), within each of which are numerous exogamous patrilineages. Until the beginning of this century, they were a self-governing people, under a number of chiefs who had political, jurial, economic, and ritual functions. They were then invaded and defeated by an army of Amhara, who entered the country

¹. There are seven castes: chiefly caste; priestly caste; commoners; hunters; Kaisaf (ritual servants); smiths; tanners.

*Cahiers d'Études africaines, 71, XVIII-3, pp. 311-332.*
from the east, and colonised it. A large number of Dime (in the thousands) were sold to visiting traders, who removed them from the country and sold them as personal slaves to Amhara landowners, mainly in provinces to the north and west. The land was divided into a number of estates, belonging to both resident and absentee landlords, worked by the Dime, in return for the right to use smaller areas of land for their own purposes.

In the late 1930's an Italian force drove the Amhara from the area, and re-instated the Dime as free men, but at the same time removed a number of them to work on road-building projects. After the Italians were driven out, the Amhara returned, and began to reconstruct the old system. They were thwarted by the arrival in the sub-province of Ethiopian government officials and policemen, who began to put into effect the abolition of slavery, on the orders of Haile Selassie I.

Since this time, the Dime have increased in number, and begun to gain some rights vis-à-vis the ruling group of Amhara, many of whom are still resident in Dimam, and who own the larger part of the land. (This statement refers to the situation in early 1974. I have no information concerning changes which may have occurred since the revolution.)

The country is divided into seven territories, each of which is presided over by an official entitled zimu, which I translate as 'chief' (in accord with the terminology, Hauptling, used in Haberland 1959). Prior to the Amhara invasion there was no authority over the seven chiefs, and no institutionalized co-operation between them. Each chiefdom was then politically and jurally independent, although the rules of caste endogamy and clan exogamy ensured that they were linked by ties of affinity.

Even today, when the chiefs are subordinate to wider quasi-bureaucratic authorities, their independence of one another is emphasized by the rituals which each performs in his own territory. Although each has supporting officials, their titles and number differ by chiefdom. There is no 'typical' chiefdom, since each has been differently affected by the events of the last 75 years. The chiefdom in which I established my home, named Uth'a, is now probably the largest and most populous of the seven. It was in this area that most of the colonising Amhara settled, and in which a large township flourished at the height of their power. Yet this prolonged contact with, not to say domination by, the Amhara has not brought an end to chiefship in Uth'a. The account which follows applies most precisely then to Uth'a, but I believe that the same general ideology applies in the other six territories.

I must introduce one minor complication before proceeding. Within some of the chiefdoms are one or more 'village-chiefdoms'. The relationship of the latter to the former is not simply one of dependence. Indeed, owing to population movement, differential depopulation by slave traders, etc., at least one chiefdom, named Duch'a, now has less residents than some village-chiefdoms. The distinction between the two entities is not one purely of area and population, but has a historical foundation.
A village-chief has ritual power only over the area of dwellings and farmland of his own village. He performs rituals for this limited area, and may have officials under him. A chief performs rituals for a potentially much larger territory, including any village-chiefdoms within it, and his rituals determine its well-being: whether there is famine or plenty, drought or rain, and so on. The rituals of a village-chief affect such matters as slight differences of crop yields between villages of the chiefdom, the presence or absence of honey in one village as opposed to others. The chiefdom may have a bad year, but within it, some villages will be noticeably better than others. If such a village has a village-chief, the credit for the situation will go to him. Within Uth’a, Shinga is the only such village.

II. — THE CHIEFDOM OF UTH’A

There is a myth, which could conceivably have a historical basis, concerning the origin of the Uth’a chiefs, and I provide here a composite version of it. Myths in Dimam are not weapons in political debate, and no chief validates his position by a detailed exposition of the dramatic feats of far distant ancestors. Indeed, such tales can only be extracted with the greatest difficulty. For these reasons, I do not regard the slight variations between the versions I received as having deep significance, and do not here present them.

The two chiefly clans of Uth’a, named Cobnits and Lassnits, came together from Ch’ara (Gimber in Dimaph), in Kaffa province, about two day’s walk to the north of Dimam, and on the other side of the Omo river. With them they had the Gedaf clan, whose head is now the bakob (‘priest’) of the chiefdom, and has an important role as the chief’s ritual helper, and as custodian of items of chiefly paraphernalia. The three clans settled in Uth’a, while a group of low-caste hunters who came with them lived semi-nomadically in the nearby bush. The hunters were unable to find sufficient game in the medium-highland of Uth’a, and moved to the lowland, where they were able to eat well, and acted as guards against the attacks of hostile pastoralist neighbours.

The ‘immigrants’ encountered the original inhabitants of the area, including commoner clans and Gayzaf clan (of Kaisaf caste), whose members later became servants of the chief. The aboriginals lived mainly on cows’ blood and milk, and were poor farmers, so that the newcomers soon farmed larger fields and produced better yields. They brought with them belief in mountain gods, and the practice of sacrificing

2. Like other Ethiopians the Dime divide their country into three regions, according to altitude. The height ranges are somewhat lower than those cited by Ullendorff (1960: 25). They are, very approximately, highland (6,000 feet and above), in-between-land (medium highland, 3,000 to 6,000 feet), lowland (below 3,000 feet).
to them, which gained the approval of the aboriginals. ‘Now, when Dime pray at the Holy Places, they start by calling the names of the earliest chiefs. All the words were given by the past chiefs.’ Because of the immigrants’ knowledge of farming and ritual the aboriginals invited their leader to become chief. He already had a priest under him in the religious hierarchy which came from Ch’ara, and selected Gayzaf clan as his servants.

The period between the mythical foundation of the chiefdom and the years immediately before the conquest is a blank, and there is no speculative interest in it. There are a few people still alive who remember the country prior to the arrival of the Amhara at the turn of the century, and others between forty and fifty years of age have a picture of the period, obtained from the accounts of their parents and grandparents. It is clear that each chief made his own legal judgements, no matter how serious the case was, since there was no centralized government of any kind. The zimu dealt with disputes in his own house, and the parties each brought him a gift of honey or a cow, since he might curse them if they did not. His servants (that is members of the Kaisaf caste) acted as his police force, and he might keep a man prisoner, or alternatively, send servants to seize the man’s cattle or those of his close kin as a fine. He tried cases, gave judgements, and passed sentences which he had the power to enforce.

In cases of murder involving members of two clans in the chiefdom, the chief had an important ritual function, which he should theoretically still fulfill, even though the killer is nowadays sent to prison. (Unfortunately, no one could cite an example of the ritual having occurred, only negative cases where a killer died from a gome—spiritually caused misfortune—because of its absence. Since the ceremony is still regarded as a possible occurrence, I refer to it in the present.)

After a murder, the groups involved may not eat or drink together until they have performed a special sacrifice under the chief’s supervision. The chief and his ritual servant, the shalem (a member of the despised Kaisaf caste), bring together the members of both clans involved. The chief kills a cow on the place where the victim died, and reads the intestines to ensure that the sacrifice is accepted by the localised spirit which caused the murder. He then cuts up the skin of the intestines, and gives a piece to each of the assembled people to eat. Then he takes some water, and makes everyone sip from it three times. Finally, he sips some of the water, and sprays everyone with it as a blessing, so that they may live in peace, and once more eat and drink together.

The zimu then orders the shalem to wash the relatives of both parties with the cow’s blood, and possibly also with honey: ‘To wash with honey is to let the friendship taste good like honey. Blood is a payment for the blood of the person killed.’ Finally, the chief takes blood (and honey if there is any) and pours it on the ground saying (according to one chief): ‘Here! Take this blood which we give you, and not a person’s
blood [. . .] Because you needed blood you took the blood of this person before, but now we are giving you blood and honey. . . .’ Commensality is, of course, a key symbol of social relations, but further, the main agricultural tasks are performed by work parties whose members are rewarded with a beer drink. If two groups are banned from eating and drinking together, social and economic co-operation is impossible, the health and wealth of the community is threatened, and members of all clans suffer. Only the chief has the authority to intervene in such a charged situation, and is able, by virtue of his spiritual power (balth’u, cf. infra, pp. 316 sq.) to heal the social rift. The sacrifice which he offers calms angry spirits and angry men. Responsibility for the killing is taken from the human parties, and placed on the spirit’s hunger for blood.

It is said that before the Amhara came, when the country was prosperous, people brought the chief frequent gifts of crops, cattle, honey and so forth in recognition that these came as a result of his balth’u. They had also to bring him specific portions of the first fruits of each harvest, which he offered to the gods and spirits at numerous holy places.

The chief gave feasts, and sat ‘above’ the people (that is, at the back of the house), while they ate. After the people had eaten enough, they left, and the chief’s servants stood at the door to prevent anyone seeing him eat, which was absolutely forbidden. As well as giving feasts, the chief directly maintained certain sections of the community who were by definition ‘poor’—notably smiths and tanners, who had few crops because of a ban on their owning farmland. The special relationship between a chief and any ‘polluting’ craftsmen under his patronage is still evident today in certain ‘reversals’ of status at the chief’s funeral.

The chief was also the political head of the chiefdom, in charge of defensive or offensive campaigns. There were occasional fights with other chiefdoms; but more regularly they fought the lowland pastoralists to the west of Dimam, since the men of Uth’a spent much time in this region with their large herds of cattle (which they have since lost to Amhara, disease and raiding), and grazing rights were frequently disputed. The chief initiated such actions and gave them ritual blessing.

So until the conquest chiefship had several interwoven facets: ‘political’, ‘jural’, ‘economic’ and ‘religious’. The chief had political as well as spiritual power. Today he has only the latter, but the respect which this brings a man is still such as to make the office highly prized by potential incumbants. This special spiritual power, known as balth’u, to which I have previously alluded, is central to the ideology of chiefship. Although I cannot discuss the parallels at this time, it certainly brings to mind such forces as mahano amongst the Nyoro (Beatte 1959, 1960a, 1960b, 1968), swem amongst the Tiv (Bohannan 1953), and ker amongst the Alur (Southall 1956).
III. — ‘Balth’u’

The word *balth’u* means literally ‘forehead’, and there is no single word which renders it in English. The nearest translation I can provide is ‘spiritual power’. The Dime themselves cannot concisely explain its meaning, and do so mainly by discussing the results of good or bad *balth’u*. My friend Argenu told me:

‘If we install a new chief, and then plant crops, and they grow more than usual, we say “These crops are better than before because the new chief’s *balth’u* helped to make them many. His *balth’u* is good and makes things grow properly.” But if a chief is made, and then the crops are bad and we have a poor harvest, we say “We must get rid of him; the thoughts he has for the country don’t work.”

If a chief’s *balth’u* is bad, the spirits and lyaf [God] won’t accept what he offers; something unusual will happen; things will be bad. It means he has a *gome* [spiritually caused misfortune] on himself, which makes everything go wrong—if the cows give no calves; starvation begins; the children are always hungry; they put hives in the trees and the honey is eaten by animals, or there is none; they plant crops and they are raided by wild animals. Old men look at all of this, come together to discuss it, and decide that his *balth’u* isn’t good any more, so they must get rid of him.’

*Balth’u* is not a facet of the chief’s personal nature, but of his relationship with the gods and spirits. He cannot have good *balth’u* unless he is in a state of ritual purity. He should work as little as possible and keep himself apart from the rest of the people. He builds a special house, known as the *mish eh* (‘prayer house’) into which no one but himself, his ritual servants or children may enter. Women may on no account enter it, neither may any man other than a servant, in case he has recently slept with a woman or eaten a prohibited food. The chief should live mostly in the *mish eh*, wearing the traditional garb of black cow skin, and should rarely sleep with his wives. Women have negative ritual status. They are strictly excluded from many rituals and take no active part in those which they are allowed to attend. Their polluting nature is most characteristically linked by the Dime to menstruation and childbirth. A chief may not allow a menstruating woman into the house he is occupying, or eat any food she has prepared. This causes no practical problem, since he either has more than one wife, in which case he moves to the house of a ‘clean’ one; or he has relatives nearby with whom the wife can stay, and who prepare him food from his crops. If neither of these is possible on a particular occasion, he retreats to the *mish eh* and has a young girl bring him food there.

When the chief travels, he does not pass in front of the door of those people who eat chicken, goat or sheep; nor near any hut where a baby is to be born (a special temporary construction); nor near a house in which there is a woman with a child whose teeth have not begun to grow. Added together, these prohibitions exclude almost everyone, and so he
usually skirts around villages, either on a back path, or through the surrounding bush. If he wishes to visit someone he avoids the rest of the houses, and emerges from the bush just behind the house, and approaches the door without using any main village paths. Since he need not avoid people on the road, it seems that the ‘polluting’ qualities of people are most potent in and around their homes.

The chief has special dietary prohibitions, which exclude chicken, eggs, fish, sheep, and goats, and he should not enter a house where there are such items. If he comes near such food, or breaks any of the other ‘taboos’, it is said that he will contract scabies and become very thin. Scabies can be regarded as external evidence of internal pollution: as well as affecting a chief polluted by any forbidden contact, it can be contracted by any Dime who fails to avoid smiths and tanners. The remedy for such pollution is a ritual one, usually requiring the sacrifice of an animal.

The belief that the chief will become thin is more specifically tied into the realm of chiefship symbols. If he is thin it is not merely an external sign of internal pollution; it is the exact reverse of the correct chiefly constitution. When a chief receives his food, he does not eat it all, but leaves some of it in the house. He is replete before he has finished all the food which has been brought to him: ‘People will get enough crops when it happens like this. They will have enough to eat, and even some to throw away.’ If he is ‘thin’ it means that his food does not satisfy him: he cannot eat enough, and it will be the same for all his subjects. If he ignores the ritual prohibitions which enable him to maintain a good balth’u, all his subjects suffer. The offerings which he makes are not accepted, as is shown by ‘bad’ intestines, and the anger of the gods and spirits brings disaster.

Before performing any sacrifice for the chiefdom, the chief must retire into his mish eh for three days, and be fed by young children. He has no contact with his wives during this period, and must emphatically not have intercourse with them. As well as protecting the chief from pollution, this seclusion ensures that he will not be attacked by the quite distinct force of ‘evil eye’, which will make him sick, and possibly too ill to carry out the sacrifice.

When he has been in the mish eh for three days, clear of pollution of any kind, he is ready to go to the sacrifice place. He sends messengers out to clear the path before he leaves the house, and travels to the place without meeting anyone. He meets his ritual assistants at the shrine, carries out his role in the sacrifice, and returns to his prayer house again without seeing anyone. The avoidance of people during the period surrounding a sacrifice is couched in terms quite different from ‘pollution’. At this time, it is not only that others will harm the purity of the chief, but that the very sight of him would kill them! ‘Purity’ and ‘danger’ are here complementary aspects of the same condition. The chief isolates himself to ensure that no one pollutes him. After three
days, he is pure enough to sacrifice to the gods. Such purity is the
pinnacle of man’s ritual possibilities, the opposite of everyday man, and
highly dangerous to him. Only the essential officials are allowed at a
sacrifice, and if a person happens to come to the shrine, even when it is
not in use, the gods may kill him. For this reason, people avoid these
places, which is simple enough since their approximate location is well-
known, and they are never on a path.

Dime cosmology embraces several hierarchies. There are men, women
and children. Men are the highest, and may deal with suprahuman
forces; women are lowest, and hinder contacts with these forces; children
are neutral, and neither aid nor hinder such contacts. Within humanity,
there are those with a positive ritual status (chiefs and priests), those with
negative ritual status (smiths, tanners, Kaisaf), and those with no religious
status (commoners). Among animals, cows are the highest, pigs are the
most polluting, and others may be roughly ranked in between.

The chief is the most dedicated follower of the rules of hierarchy, which
forbid ritual contact between categories. On the most obvious level, the
village of a chief displays the rules in spatial terms; the chief’s mish eh is
the highest house in the village (remembering that most villages are built
on terraces). Below it are his other houses, and then the houses of other
villagers. At the lowest level come the houses of smiths and tanners,
if there are any. When the chief attends a public gathering such as a
wedding, he sits on a terrace above everyone, whilst smiths should disport
themselves below (although in the case of funerals certain symbolic
reversals occur). The chief receives his own pot of beer and supply of
food, which he shares with no one.

The result of the pursuit of purity is successful intercourse
with the suprahuman beings which control the chiefdom. This leads to
a period of plenty, and public recognition of his good balth’u. To be a
chief who is acknowledged in this way by his subjects is the greatest
honour of traditional Dime society. To be a chief without public
acceptance is precarious, since the probability of deposition increases
with each misfortune the chiefdom suffers. In other words, a chief
loses his ‘prize’ if he does not carry out the actions, and attain the quality,
which merit it. The essential actions are, firstly, the avoidance of
impurity by such measures as skirting round villages when travelling,
eating only food prepared in his own home, and retreating to the mish eh
before rituals. Secondly, initiating the rituals which necessitate such
purity. I have covered the first of these, and now turn to the second.

IV. — The Chief’s Rituals

Details of the rituals performed by the chief with the help of his
subordinate officers proved very difficult to obtain. I have mentioned
above that even other chiefly Dime (with occasional exceptions) avoid
being on the roads near a shrine on a sacrifice day. Since I ate several of
the forbidden foods, and had contact with blacksmiths, I was classified
as ‘like an Amhara’ as far as pollution was concerned; that is, as someone
outside the system, with no legitimate place in its cosmology. I was
therefore categorically excluded from chiefly rituals, since the reaction
of the gods and spirits to such outsiders at their shrines is not thought
to be favorable.

Most Dime had, of course, themselves never been to such a ritual,
and their accounts of them were a mixture of received information, and
extrapolation from the more familiar proceedings of lineage and territorial
rituals. My discussions with past and present chiefs and with the
bakob suggested that chiefly rituals are not radically different from any
others. They are of three basic types: ‘calendrical’, ‘affliction’, and ‘life
 crisis’.

I. Calendrical Rituals

There are two major calendrical rituals performed by the chief of
Uth’a annually (at least normatively). One of these takes place at a
shrine at Wollo, which is the place where the first Uth’a chiefs settled,
and where new chiefs are enthroned. Formerly, the Uth’a chief lived in
a village here throughout his reign, but it is now deserted. A bull and
the ‘first fruits’ of the major crops should be offered here soon after the
teff harvest in November. The intended recipients are the chiefly
ancestors, spirits of the earth, and God (Iyaf).

The other important calendrical offering, which is to Iyaf, takes place
on Jimsha (Mount Donaldson Smith), which at over 8,000 feet is the
highest point of the country. Just as Iyaf is the pinnacle of the pantheon,
Jimsha is the pinnacle of Dime height symbolism, and is the only Uth’a
shrine which lies outside the chiefdom. A former chief told me:

‘The animal killed at Jimsha is a young, black, bull calf. The chief
prays at a distance from where the god is. The intsuk [a ritual assistant
of the chief at certain shrines] kills the bull, and the zimu takes the heart,
liver, meat and blood to the shrine. The zimu and the bakob don’t eat
any of the meat.’

All those attending wear black cow skin on their hips and as a hat. 3

3. They used to wear leopard skins at this ritual, but do so no longer, since the
government banned the killing of these animals, and trading in their skins. The
current chief of Uth’a told me that in the past a chief always wore leopard skin as
part of his attire. Even though this is no longer possible, he maintains a special
relationship with these animals. As well as leaving some of his food to rot, the
chief throws some outside of his prayer house for leopards to eat. He told me,
‘I don’t trap leopards because I regard them as my dogs. They always come in
front of the mish eh and wait for scraps of my food. One day, wild pigs ate my
teff. I cried and said, “Why don’t my dogs eat these pigs?” The same night
leopards ate two pigs in my teff field [. . . ] Leopards always hear what chiefs
say . . . ’
The chief and the intsuk pray, both using the same words. They call Iyaf and say, 'We give you this bull to give us enough crops. Send out sickness and make the country overflow. Give us more honey and milk...' The remains of the animal are taken home and eaten by the intsuk, and the shrine is referred to as 'the ugly place' to avoid calling its name during the period surrounding the sacrifice. These are clear indications of the danger which is inherent in close contact with God.

Although there are several other shrines at which calendrical rituals are said to take place, sacrifices no longer occur at them with any regularity, and they have effectively become the sites of 'rites of affliction' only.

2. Rites of Affliction

The chief performs rites of affliction when his territory is going through a period of misfortune in terms of poor crops, disease of humans and animals, lack of honey, warfare and so forth. He is requested to hold such a ritual by certain 'adults' (a literal translation of the term deXub, which includes any married man with his own house) who have high status by virtue of their large households, special wisdom, or great age. They may either approach the chief directly, or through a recognized intermediary, such as the bakob, or the leader of the hunter caste, who is thought to have an especially close relationship with the chief, and has the office of 'foot holder' at the installation of a new chief. The chief is told of the distress among his people, and that he should take suitable measures to discover which force is bringing the misfortune, and what must be done to placate it.

He then sends representatives to a shaman or diviner to discover what he should do. When he has the necessary information, he must produce the animal to be offered, call together his assistants, ritually prepare himself, and perform the sacrifice at the appropriate shrine. Since there are several steps between the subjects' feeling of discontent, and the sacrifice necessary to restore their well-being, it is rare for the process to be completed. Continued failure by the chief to perform such offerings on behalf of his people may be a contributory factor in attempts to depose him. But at the moment, I must move on to the final type of ritual, which concerns the 'life crises' of chiefs.

3. Life Crisis Rituals

If we temporarily ignore the possibility of deposition, a chief goes through two life crisis rituals: he is enthroned and buried. Since one man's enthronement is often another's burial, we may examine the two together.
Death and Succession

When I asked various Dime to give an account of what happens when a chief dies, the accounts they produced varied greatly, and tended to dwell on the allegedly magnificent funerals of the past. The following account is therefore based on the witnessed funeral of the village-chief of Shinga (there being little difference in principle between this and the funeral of a chief apart from its smaller scale); reports from participants in the funeral of the chief of Ishema (which I was unable to attend owing to illness) and a large number of interviews of the subject. It presents a 'composite' event, to which any actual funeral will only approximate. I must omit most of the intricate details of the funeral rites, since I wish mainly to discuss the process of death and succession, and to convince the reader that chiefship is still very much a central institution of Dime society, even though its politico-jural powers have been removed.

When a chief feels that he is dying, he calls for the bakob and the shalem, and possibly also his sister’s son (sister’s son being a ritually subordinate position at all levels of Dime society), and tells them whom he wishes to succeed him. This should be his eldest son, if he has one. If he has none, it will be the closest agnate who is old enough for the responsibility (in the case of Shinga the deceased’s father’s brother’s son became village chief). When the chief dies, it is not immediately announced, but the relatives begin to prepare beer and food for the funeral guests. The body is placed in the mish eh, and visitors who come to enquire as to the chief’s health are not allowed to see him, but are told that he is asleep and very ill. They understand the meaning of this, and spread the news rapidly, although they do not explicitly state that he is dead. Indeed this should never be said; the appropriate euphemism being, ‘He is lost’ or symbolically, ‘The mountain has fallen’.

Before the funeral of the deceased, the bakob, the shalem and the sister’s son (gis) inform his chosen successor of the death and anoint him. They kill a black cow from the herd of the old chief, and put its warm skin around the successor’s shoulders, and its peritoneum around his neck. The shalem paints the chief’s right hand with cow dung and ash, and a line of ash from the hand to the shoulder. (I cannot examine this symbolism in depth here. Briefly, cow dung and ash are distinguishing marks of a kinsman of a deceased person. The line from the hand to the shoulder alludes to a method of reading an intestine by measuring the width of a certain feature on it with one hand, and counting out this distance along the other arm. A measurement from the hand to the shoulder symbolizes death.) The bakob coats the cow skin with milk and honey, and anoints the new chief’s head with the same. (It seems appropriate that the shalem, a ‘polluter’, symbolically announces death, and is followed by the bakob, a ‘pure’ person who brings new life.) The
*bakob* and the *shalem* then sing the appropriate chief's songs and go out to the village to dispatch the news. The candidate is now in the process of becoming a chief, but is not so yet.

On the night of the new chief's anointing, more cows are killed from the herds of both the old and new chiefs, and their horns and jaw bones are placed on the roof of the house where the body lays. The intestines are read to determine whether the sacrifices are satisfactory to the ancestors. Messengers are sent out to call the mourners, and before it is fully light the relatives begin the first day of mourning. A bullet is fired in honour of the deceased to officially open the funeral. Then horns are blown to call visitors from villages within earshot.

The visitors arrive in village units, and perform elaborate rites which I shall not detail here. I must however mention that each village enters as a unit, and that its men do not use the footpaths. Instead they stalk around the bush, behind their village 'big man', with spears poised ready to 'raid' the village. Suddenly, they run in through the tall grass, yelling, wailing and threatening to stab the chief's kinsmen. Their entry appears to suggest the disorder and hostility of a chiefdom without a chief.

After complex symbolic exchanges, the new chief stands up from behind the kinsmen of the deceased, wearing the black cow skin, an ostrich feather in his hair, and a necklace of leopard's claws. The visiting men dance around him in a warlike manner, and sing chiefly songs. In the funeral I saw at Shinga, the men of large villages danced the new chief in a broad circle around the old chief's house, clearing the bush before him with their feet and spears. Finally they went through a taro field of the former chief which they flattened completely, and then back into the village clearing.

By these actions, they give their public assent to the choice made by the old chief, and enacted by the *bakob* and the *shalem*. It is thus the public assent of all the villages in the chiefdom which finalizes the appointment of a new chief, and not the words and deeds of the old chief and his assistants.

Towards evening, sister's sons and sons-in-law of the deceased carry out the body, which is wrapped in a black cow skin, sewn tight at the neck. It is placed inside an inverted house-roof, and the same relatives carry it out of the village to the burial place, which is usually some distance away. Women are not allowed at this spot, but many men accompany the body.

The new chief accompanies the body of the old, and the people dance and sing in honour of both. The body goes before the people and the new chief goes behind. In the case of the chief of Uth'a, they first go to Wollo, 'along the same road on which the chiefs walked in the past'. The new chief sits on seven large stones which are situated at intervals by the side of the road. When they reach Wollo, where the first chiefs settled, the new one sits on a large stone and is formally enthroned (or
perhaps ‘enstoned’). People raise the corpse of the old chief, and put
the forehead (balth’u) of the old and new chiefs together.

The ceremony now follows two directions. The new chief continues
with certain rituals designed to ensure that his balth’u is good, and that
the country will prosper. He remains seated on the stone, and holds
in each hand an ensete leaf. The officials kill a cow, and the bakob gives
the chief the bottom half of each leg to hold in the leaves. He sits on
the stone for twelve days holding the meat until it is rotten, and ‘the
maggots run down his elbows’. (During this period the chief may not
feed himself, but is fed by the shalem.) Then the bakob and the shalem
take the rotten meat, and place it on the chief’s bed in his mish eh at
Wollo. It is left there to rot.

At the end of the twelve days, further cattle are killed. Blood from
a black bull is collected and the chief’s body washed in it. This is
followed by applications of honey, chyme, millet porridge, and beer.
Then the shalem takes a special vine called zu:mu which stings the skin,
and ties it around the forehead, hips and wrists of the naked chief. After
one night the three officials go to a special river nearby, where the chief
is washed. He is now free to eat using his hands, and to take part in
life again. More cows are killed, and the bakob collects a mixture of raw
and cooked portions of meat in a leaf. The shalem takes this to the chief,
who throws meat on the ground in offering at four holy places. Then
the chief is free to return to his former home, or to set up a new one
in Wollo, according to the custom. He makes a sacrifice to the chiefs’
ancestors at their official burial place to make the country bountiful,
and throws grass towards the neighbouring lands of Siddo, Ch’ara and
Bodi to make disease go away to those places.

While these events have been occurring, the mourners take the body
to the official burying ground of Uth’a chiefs at Umfain, half an hour’s
walk from Wollo. There are now two other sites at which Uth’a chiefs
may be laid to rest, and the burial is in a deep grave, with the head
protruding above the ground. The physical fate of the body is watched
with great interest. If the grave fills up with maggots, it proves that the
chief did well when he was alive, and that the chiefdom is in a satisfactory
state. But if no maggots come, he was bad, and the chiefdom will be
‘destroyed’. In present times, once the body has decomposed to the
satisfaction of the onlookers, they cover it with earth, put a house roof
over it, and leave it. (In the past, yet another minor ritual official
entitled wuncheer planted red teff around the grave. When it was ready,
he harvested it and took it home to eat. Periodically, he removed parts
of the thatch of the house roof, poured in blood and honey, and threw in
meat. This no longer occurs.)

This marks the end of the rites to dispose of the dead chief, although
on rare occasions the incumbent may perform a sacrifice here for the
spirits of past chiefs. The shrine may also be the venue of rites of
affliction, if a diviner or shaman suggests that the spirits which linger there
are the cause of a problem in the chiefdom. But in general, the site is now left alone.

Back in the dead chief’s village, on the seventh day after the funeral, at the end of the most intense period of mourning, the close relatives cook some meat, kept from the black bull killed to mark the chief’s death. Each relative eats a piece of this, and should any of them be in any way responsible for his death, by putting evil eye on him for example, he will die from eating this. Then they take a piece of the black skin, which has been especially kept, and each relative ties a small piece of it onto a thread, and wears it around the forehead or neck. It is worn for one year, to show that the wearer is mourning the chief’s death. Individuals may also daub the forehead, face and arms with mud for this period, or a part of it, and perhaps shave off all hair.

There are clearly at least three stages involved in the safe departure of a chief—the funeral day, the seventh-day ceremony, and the termination of mourning after approximately one year. It did not prove possible to gain any interpretation as to what happened to the deceased at these times, apart from the physical event of the burial. On the funeral day, the relatives honour the deceased by their mourning, and the sacrifices they have performed. The more ostentatious the mourning, the greater is the honour of the deceased, and the greater the prestige acquired by the living. On the seventh day, the relatives are exonerated from the death, by their public eating of the meat from the sacrificial cow, which may be likened to a ‘poison oracle’.

From this day, the relatives need no longer wail for the deceased, but merely wear a sign of their continuing sorrow. At the one year ceremony, now usually called tazkar (a borrowing from Amharic), they are released from mourning. My informants were unable to say whether this corresponded with the final acceptance of the spirit into the world of the ancestors, or any such event. Questions of such a hypothetical nature received blank stares, or a dismissive ‘How do I know? I’ve never been there.’

Interregnum

There is an institutionalized interregnum period, which occurs even if there is no such event chronologically. It lasts from the first day of the funeral until the seventh-day ceremony, and is marked by a situation of anarchy in the chiefdom.

This becomes explicit as the funeral progresses, and numbers of visitors can be seen stealing the deceased’s crops, especially his ensete, teff, tubers, taro and honey. They are not limited to his personal crops, but may steal from anyone and anywhere in the chiefdom. There is no fear of reprisal, since such activities are usually encouraged by the new chief and identified as the express command of his predecessor. The
wealth which has been built up by the balth’u of the deceased is redistributed amongst those who come to honour him. The ‘raiding’ is a display of confidence in the chiefship, and in the new chief’s balth’u. One chief made the crops grow, the cattle fruitful, and the bees come, and the next, being duly chosen and approved, will do the same. Not to steal the crops provided by the old chief would be a vote of no-confidence in the new one.

This custom has been restricted considerably by the arrival in Dimam of a police force of outsiders, who do not find it acceptable under Ethiopian law. In about 1965, on the death of Futdub Kolomash, who is remembered as one of the great chiefs of Uth’a, large numbers of people descended on Garo village on market day and destroyed crops and property, including some belonging to Amhara. Nine cows were taken from the market, and all the clothes for sale were stolen. Crops were taken from granaries, honey from hives, and corn from the fields. The looting lasted for three days, and the police ran off into the bush because they were afraid of being beaten. When things calmed down, they returned and took some people to Basketo and had them put in prison there.

Before the police came, it is said that people threw stones and spears at each other during this period, and perhaps half a dozen would be killed. It was not a crime to kill at this time, and no compensation could be claimed, as would normally have been the case.

In the interregnum ‘insiders’ act as ‘outsiders’, by raiding, stealing, wounding and even killing members of their own tribe without paying compensation, or being brought to justice. They enact the situation which would arise if there were no chiefs, and recall that it was they who established the interwoven moral, political, ritual and legal order, which would collapse without them. Other events in the funeral rites emphasize the breakdown, or reversal of normal practices and hierarchies, but I cannot detail them here.

An important factor in the success or otherwise of the chief is the response which his rituals draw from the forces to which they are addressed. Calendrical rituals seek to persuade these forces to provide a time of plenty for the people of the chiefdom. If this arrives, it is evident that the chief’s life-style has ensured his purity, that he has offered sacrifice to the approval of the gods and spirits, and that they have blessed him with good balth’u. If life is poor, then the chief has erred in some way and his balth’u is bad. He must rapidly attempt to redress this situation by living according to the rules of his office, and offering a rite of affliction on behalf of his people to the force which is identified as the cause of the problem. If this fails, he may find himself removed from office, which is a distinctly dishonourable fate for himself, and an affront to the pride of his clansmen.

Life crisis rituals are somewhat different, since the chief is passive in them, although they concern his well-being. If he dies, such a ritual
ensures that he is disposed of correctly, and joins his ancestors, and that his successor is duly presented to the people for acceptance. If he is to replace a deposed chief, another ritual presents him to the people, the spirits, and God, and assures him that his subjects are convinced of his capacity to bring them abundance.

Thus the chief's rituals serve to install him, to maintain his favour with gods and men, and to properly dispose of him. According to Dime values, if all is well with the chief, all is well with the chiefdom. If there is no chief, chaos ensues, as shown by the events of periods of interregnum. If there is a chief, but he has bad balth'u caused by failure to observe the rules of chiefly purity, or if he does not sacrifice to the gods and spirits, the chiefdom as a whole will suffer. The Dime do not take this identification of chief and chiefdom to the extreme of insisting that a chief be physically healthy, or else be removed (Beattie 1960: 26). But on the other hand, Dime chiefship is in a sense ‘democratic’ since the people have the right, which is used, to depose a chief and replace him. Deposition occurs both in chiefdoms such as Uth'a, where there are two chiefly clans, and in those such as Dinge, where there is only one. To conclude this preliminary account of Dime chiefship, I should like to describe briefly two depositions, one of which occurred during my fieldwork period. These events show how the various ideological aspects of chiefship which I have presented are used by Dime to justify or oppose deposition attempts.

V. — DEPOSITION

1. The Chiefship of Uth'a, 1966-1974

In 1966 the chief of Uth'a was Mangada Elan of Cobnits clan. He was deposed, and Mamo Badji of the rival Lassnits clan took over the office. I was fortunate in being able to question both chiefs, as well as many of their subjects.

I begin with a relatively ‘independent’ account given by my friend Argenu, of Gayzaf clan.

“When Mangada was chief, Sagod ["The Rainmaker", see Todd 1975, ch. 11] co-operated with him to bring rain. One day he [Sagod] was put in jail in Garo by the police. He was there for a long time, and Mangada did not go down to visit him. Sagod has the same food prohibitions as the chief, and was in jail with people who eat anything. He thought to himself: “Since the chief and I co-operate—he gives to the holy places and I bring the rain... how is it that he doesn’t visit me? Does he think he can get the sun and rain for the people?”

When he got home from jail he said, “Iyaf, don’t bring rain.”
The country became hot and dry, and the Bach’as [hunters] did not kill animals. They shot at many, but did not kill them. There was some kind of gome [spiritually caused misfortune] because Sagod and the chief were at odds. There was still no rain, and people wanted to know what was wrong. They heard why Sagod was angry, and went to beg him. He refused to bring rain unless the chief was changed. Mangada bought a big overcoat for Sagod, and took him $ Eth. 75. He said, “Forgive me.” Sagod said, “I have money. I wanted you to visit me. When I was in jail with people who eat anything, you never visited me.”

Mamo Badji wanted to be chief, but had not had a chance until then. He heard what was happening, and went to Sagod’s house to talk to him. He brought Sagod back to his house, and gave him much gubzi [beer]. Other people came, including many Bach’as. They all got drunk, and Mamo said he wanted to be chief. Sagod said, “As far as I am concerned, I choose you.”

Next day, Mamo Badji chewed some ginger, and spat on the Bach’as’ hands to give them good hunting. They went to the bush, dug out a hole as a buffalo trap, and went home. Next day, they found a lion cub in the hole. They thought, “He is strong like a lion!” They took the lion to his house, and they all had much beer again. They stayed three days at Mamo Badji’s house, and then went down to Garo, which was then warada [district government headquarters]. There were many police and government people there.

They told the governor the story, and he thought Mamo Badji should be chief. The Bach’as gave the lion to the governor, and he took it to Fellege Neway [sub-province headquarters], and it went to Addis. People heard about this, and went to Wolde (bakob) and asked him if they could make Mamo Badji chief. They soon fetched him and took him to Wollo.’

Mangada’s version was very different:

‘One year after I became chief, the Bach’as caught a lion cub, and took it down to Waka’s house [Waka Jamani, the leading Amhara in Dimam, who owns extensive land here and elsewhere] because he was the wana balabat [principal chief in the Ethiopian system]. By chance, I was there. I saw the Bach’as carrying it in a bee hive, and asked what they were carrying, and they told me.

I said, “Well, as long as I am chief you are supposed to bring it to my house first, and then to Waka. But you brought it here because you don’t think I am chief.” The Bach’as did not pay any attention to me but listened to Waka, and took the lion to Ato Asefer, the governor of Garo. He told me to order three people from my chiefdom to carry the lion to Fellege Neway.

The next day, I took three people, but the governor had written Waka’s name in his book, saying the lion came to him with Waka’s help not mine. So I said to Waka, “If the governor gives you more respect than me, I won’t order the people to carry the lion.” So Waka and I argued. I told him and the governor that my
balt'h'u helped the Bach'as catch the lion. Waka became angry with me, and told people to throw me out, and put in Mamo Badji instead.'

Mamo Badji's summary of the affair was as follows:

'Mangada's reign had starvation, sickness, cattle disease, and drought. So the people came together, and talked about it, then came to my house and sat down. I didn't know what was happening, and asked why they came. They said, 'It's for a good reason.' Someone from Marnits [the "hand-holder", an official essential for the enthronement ceremony] grabbed me by the wrist, and the others picked me up, and began to carry me to Wollo. They stayed two nights on the way . . .] and the third day we reached Wollo.'

The encounter between Mangada and Mamo Badji shows the way in which differing accounts of one incident manage to credit opposing parties with adherence to appropriate 'norms'.

Mangada emphasized the quality of his balt'h'u, which his subjects did not duly honour. Instead they brought into the affair an Amhara, who preferred a rival candidate, whose balt'h'u was not so powerful, and did not therefore represent any possible loss of allegiance to the land-owner. The Amhara ordered his tenants to rebel against their chief, and Mamo Badji co-operated in this episode, clearly breaking with the ideology of chiefship, which excludes Amhara.

Mamo Badji emphasized that Mangada's balt'h'u was poor, and that he therefore did not have the essential quality of a chief. According to the rules, the people of the chiefdom came together and chose a new chief by consensus.

The independent account stressed the incorrect behaviour of Mangada, who ignored his fellow ritual expert, and therefore failed to consider the interests of his subjects. A period of misfortune followed, which indicated to the people that their leader's balt'h'u was not working. At the same time, Mamo Badji gave two clear indications of his fitness to rule: he exhibited the generosity of the old-time chiefs by holding a beer-drink, and the power of his balt'h'u by spitting ginger on the hunters' hands (to make their hunting 'hot') which brought immediate results. It was clear that the suprahuman forces were blessing Mamo Badji, and that the people ought therefore to enthrone him, which they did.

The bakob, Wolde Buth'i, was placed in a difficult situation by the deposition, since he was, and still is, a supporter of Mangada. When he heard that the latter had been deposed, he refused to take part in any rituals with the new chief, because he 'couldn't see anything wrong with Mangada'. For one year, Mamo Badji tried to sacrifice with just the shalem's help, but the people decided that this was not working, and persuaded Wolde to begin attending sacrifices again.

But even six years later, Wolde continued to support Mangada.
Three items of official paraphernalia should pass from one chief to the next in Uth’a: beads, a bracelet, and a spear. In the event of a deposition, it often proves difficult for the new chief to acquire these items, which are necessary if his sacrifices are to be accepted by the receiving forces. The bakob must act as an intermediary between the chiefs, and ensure that the items are passed on. In this case Mamo Badji had received the bracelets and beads from the shalem, who had them at the time of succession. But the spear had been with Wolde, who disclaimed all knowledge of it.

Mamo Badji maintained that the poor state of his chiefdom, compared with others, especially regarding honey, was ultimately due to the fact that he lacked the chief’s spear. He eventually refused to sacrifice, on the grounds that the spirits would not accept his offerings if he did not have the necessary regalia. Because he did not sacrifice the bees did not produce honey in Uth’a, whereas in Shinga, a village-chiefdom within it, they did. By retaining the spear, Mangada was claiming that he should still be chief, and the bakob was supporting him in this.

The dispute had even been brought to the chikashum (headman of the Dime in the Ethiopian system), but since he is in the same clan as the bakob, the latter mysteriously had time to disappear before the accuser, witnesses, and ‘adults’ necessary for the hearing arrived at his house. For the time being, the spear remained under Mangada’s control.

Wolde was not carrying out the bakob’s role according to the rules. He is defined as an intermediary between the people and their chief, and one chief and another, but he acted as a follower of one party. This alliance between the bakob’s clansmen and Mangada’s clan was a strong feature in Uth’a chiefship politics. The two clans live close to each other, often in the same village, while members of the smaller clan of Mamo Badji live mainly in a village which is several hours’ walk away. The alliance made it virtually impossible for Mamo Badji to obtain the ritual objects he required in order to sacrifice successfully. The resulting situation was amenable to varying interpretations. While Lassnits people emphasized the illegitimate nature of the alliance, which was harming the chiefdom, Gedaf and Cobnits complained of the chief’s poor balth’u, and the resultant poor state of the territory. They were seeking to set in motion a popular movement for another deposition, and the return of the chiefship to Cobnits.

2. The Chiefship of Dinge, 1973-74

Dinge chiefdom lies to the north of Uth’a, and was for many years controlled by a chief named Costabab Fundo (Haberland 1959: 240-244). In 1973 he was suddenly deposed. As I was not resident in that chiefdom, I had not been aware of any general discontent with him. The accounts which I was given probably omitted many of the relevant details, but
those that I did hear fit in well with what I have shown thus far. (My account again comes from Argenu.)

‘A brother’s son of Costabab got drunk, and argued with the chief one day, then took some fire and set light to one of the chief’s houses in Gach’a [a village within Dinge which had its own village chief], and to the granary beside it. There was only Costabab’s wife in the house, and she ran out and shouted, and people came and took some of the things from the house. The granary burnt down with crops inside.

Costabab asked people to build him a new house and granary, and to bring him teff to replace that which he had lost. People said, “Well it was your brother’s son who got drunk, and burnt down your house and granary, so it’s not our job to replace it all” [. . .] Costabab said, “I am the chief, and if I am hungry and can’t sacrifice, you won’t get enough crops in future. . .”

In the past, when Costabab’s father, Fundo, was chief of Dinge and died, Costabab wanted to be chief, but the people didn’t want him. He took two cows to Sagod and said, “Unless the people choose me as chief, don’t bring rain.” It became dry for some time. People asked Sagod why it was dry, and he said it was because Costabab should be chief. So they chose him, and he became chief.

So when he asked people to rebuild his house and so on they refused. He went to Sagod again and said, “Let there be no rain.” That’s why it was so dry that year [. . .] People were angry at Sagod and Costabab and made a new chief, Costabab’s brother’s son (not the arsonist). They talked only to the bakob. People came together and discussed whom they should choose. At Dinge they have a place like Wollo, where they install a new chief. The new chief didn’t know what was going on; they decided everything before coming to him. All the people of Gach’a and Dinge came together on market day. They told people, “There should be rain by now, but Sagod and the chief don’t make it. Everything is going wrong, so we must choose a new chief.” Tilahun [village-chief of Gach’a] said, “His balth’u is no longer good. We don’t want him.”

The next day they gathered together at the place where they make the chief. Costabab came there, and they took off his leopard’s claws [. . .] and his red beads [. . .] and cow-skin hat. Then they threw stones at him, beat him, and chased him away. They put these things on the new chief, killed a cow, and put its fresh skin on him. Costabab heard that they were going to get rid of him—that’s why he went there—to try to talk them out of it. But they wouldn’t listen and threw him out.’

When I saw Costabab some time later, he claimed that the Amhara in Dinge had united and persuaded their tenants to depose him. He intended to do all he could to make the people restore him to his rightful
position, but in the meantime he lived with one of his wives in a village outside of Dinge chiefdom.

Costabab’s stated reason for requiring his subjects to donate food to replace that which he had lost was in terms of the symbolism of chiefship—a hungry chief means a hungry people.

Sagod was a supporter of Costabab, as he had been of his father, and the people believed he had stopped the rain in order to force them to choose his ally. But there was a rival faction, which seems to have been led by Tilahun, the village chief of Gach’a, which is within the chiefdom. A decision was reached by consensus, on market day, the only regular occasion when the people gather in large numbers. The next day, Costabab greatly miscalculated his influence, and had the symbols of chiefship forcibly removed. He himself explained his removal in terms of the illegitimate manoeuvring of the powerful local Amhara landowners.

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Until the Amhara invasion of about eighty years ago, chiefship in Dimam was an all-embracing ‘institution’ including complexly interwoven strands which an observer might label ‘political’, ‘jural’, ‘economic’, and ‘religious’. Although the politico-jural sphere has now been removed, and economic interdependence between chief and subjects has declined, chiefship remains important to the Dime. The reason for its enduring nature is without doubt the central role in society played by the spiritual power known as balth’u, which is embodied in chiefs through their continuing contact with the gods. My examination of Dime chiefship has shown how balth’u is obtained and transmitted, and how it can be lost, with disastrous consequences for the chiefdom, and later for its chief.

Although many, perhaps most, of the individual symbols of Dime chiefship seem familiar and provide valuable comparative data, they have been juxtaposed in a complex and highly-satisfying manner which is unique to the Dime.

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