Women's Knowledge on the Move

How Maale women respond and adapt to contact with 'outsiders'

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Introduction

This paper examines the historical factors that have brought social change and affected the experience of Maale women in Beneta (highland country of Maale). The Maale of south-western Ethiopia have a history of contact with 'outsiders' – besides neighbouring ethnic groups – which started with the big game hunters of the late-nineteenth century. They were followed by Menelik's conquering troops and subsequent administrators and settlers, then the Italians with their bands of soldiers, successive administrators and policemen of t he changing regimes, traders, missionaries and, more recently, the personnel of governmental and non-governmental organizations, such as health officers, veterinarians, literacy campaigners and school teachers.

Throughout this history of contact, Maale households have practised, and continue to practise, a time-tested form of agriculture and animal husbandry as their main means of survival. At the same time, Maale men and women have adopted new ideas and practices, learnt through contact with the 'outsiders' and which they have adapted in innovative ways to their traditional way of life.

This paper is grounded in the literature provided by the invaluable work of Donham Donald and Sophia Thubauville on the Maale.[1] However, it also incorporates life history interviews with individual women who were and still are part of the long social process; a vital source of data, missing from the works of Donald and Thubauville. The focus of the paper revolves around the following questions: How have historical and current external factors affected internal social relations and caused social change in Maale? What are the experiences of individuals around social change? How did the dynamic sociocultural environment guide the role of individuals in Maale? In order to answer the questions I have raised, we need to examine aspects of contact and interaction between Maale and outsiders and forms of cultural exchange in a historical perspective.

By looking at a sample of eight women's life histories, I will explore the ways in which Maale women have responded to contact with 'outsiders' and have creatively adapted and incorporated new ideas and practices into their own way of life. I will also consider how these women have defined and redefined their identity in relation to the 'outsiders' and in response to the various requirements of successive administrations.

Most of the sampled women involved in the research were living in Beneta at the time the interviews were carried out. The educational background of these women varied: two of them had attended formal education at primary and junior level; the re-

1 The author would also like to take the opportunity to thank Sophia Thubauville and Jean Lydall for their constructive comments thorough the write up process.

maining six had never been to school. Five of the sampled women were followers of Protestantism, while three of them were followers of their ancestors' customary religion.

Most of the primary data for this paper was collected during field research carried out over nine months (February to October) in 2011. The purpose of the field research was to gather information for a PhD dissertation at the University of Messina, Italy, undertaken between 2011 and 2104. A combination of techniques, such as life history interviews, observation and the consultation of archival materials, were employed. The paper has also been supported by data collected during earlier field visits to Maale living between Beneta and Gongode. These earlier visits[1] to highland Maale, the frequent contact I had with my host family and the close relationships I built with them and other women informants gave me the 'freedom' of participation, allowing me to observe how Maale women deal with events that affect the everyday life of the community. The data provided by the narratives of women informants covers a long period of time, from 1935 to today.

The Maale People

The Maale have a heterogeneous myth of origin[2], as told by elderly informants:

> The two groups who lived in the Maale country before the Maale king and the present Maale people arrived were called Utili and Olasha. The Utili, who lived first, became extinct because of a big fight. Of the Olasha, who lived in the Maale country afterwards, nearly nobody survived an epidemic disease. As a result only two men, who survived from the Olasha, lived in the Maale country before the first Maale king arrived. These men were the Makana *godda* (chief of Makana) and a man called Are. They did not know how to make fire and just put their food into the sun to dry …

Traditionally, the socio-political organization of the Maale places the *kati* (king) as the highest authority, with thirteen *godda* (chiefs) below him. The thirteen *godda* (chiefs) had up to four *gatta* (sub-chiefs) each, depending on the size of the chiefdom, to assist them. Today, official reports[3] estimate that 84,657 Maale live in the north-east part of South Omo Zone. They share borders with the Aari, the Hammer-Banna group in the southwest, and with Gofa people in the north (Hanna 2001). Since 2007 the Maale have had their own district (*woreda*) that consists of twelve villages (*gurda*).

The Maale are a patrilineal society with a patrilocal residential pattern. Polygamous marriages with extended family members are still common in the area, even though more than 50 per cent of the population has already converted to Protestantism, which only tolerates monogamous marriages (Hanna 2001; Hanna and Thubauville 2004). Although Christianity has spread widely since the 1960s, some Maale still adhere to their traditional beliefs, which are characterized by ancestor worship (Donham 1987).

1 Even though the formal data collection for my PhD dissertation was carried out over nine months in 2011, I had had the opportunity to a make a number of field visits to Maale since joining the South Omo Research Center in 2001/02.

2 Taken from a longer version of Maale oral history collected by the author and Thubauville (2004 and 2010) through intensive interviews made with elders.

3 This number was published in the last country-wide census, conducted in 2008 (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia 2010).

The economy of Maale combines both agriculture and animal husbandry. While agriculture plays a more important part for the inhabitants of the mountainous areas, where coffee, papaya, mango and banana plants are common, the economy in the lowlands is defined by pastoralism and the production of maize, sorghum, finger-millet and teff. They also keep livestock, mainly goats, sheep and cattle.

A significant aspect of Maale social life is the way they work together. The work that individual households can perform is limited, so workgroups between households are formed to accomplish certain tasks much more efficiently. Working together is also one of the most important ways for Maale households to establish their identities. Who you work with says who you are and where you belong (Donham 1999).

As to linguistic classification, Azeb (2000) notes that *maalò mùcci* – *mallò* is the plural of the self-name of the people, *mùcci* means language – belongs to the Omotic language cluster found in the vicinity of the Great Omo River.

The Maale in Historical Context

The late-nineteenth-century campaign of conquest launched by the forces of Menelik of 'Shoa' was responsible for the creation of the modern Ethiopian state. It was during that time that the Maale and the remaining ethnic groups of today's South Omo Zone were brought under the Ethiopian state administration (Donham 1994; Tsega-ab 2005; Strecker 1976). The most important developments of the period were the establishment of Gofa-Bako as the provincial town in the South Omo highlands, and the subsequent foundation of the small garrison at Godda-Maale at the turn of the twentieth century. The selection of Bako, in the Aari highlands, by the forces of 'Ras' Wolde Giyorgis – who had been leading the campaign – was driven by socio-economic and ecological factors. As Tsega-ab (2005) puts it:

> Gofa-Bako's provincial rule over its subject peoples had marked variation along socio-economic, ecological and also to some extent ethnic lines. A glaring indication was the disparity evident in the highland areas of Gofa, Aari and Maale on one hand and the dominantly pastoralist areas of Banna, Mursi, Dime, Hamar, Bashada, Kara and Dassanetch on the other. As it can be seen in name of the province, Gofa-Bako had firm control over highland areas of Gofa and Bako (which refers to Aari). Gofa, Ari and Maale are ecologically suitable to accommodate settlers of northern Ethiopia background.

Whatever the motives were, incorporation paved the way for another development in the area – the imposition of the *gabar* system.[4] The *gabar*[5] system was an administrative

4 The *gabar* system had been introduced in the South Omo region following Menelik's campaign of conquest at the turn of the twentieth century. In its true sense, however, the *gabar* system had been functional in the northern parts of the country well before the twentieth century. During this period, *rist* and *gult* were the mechanisms by which land could be inherited and tribute levied. While inheritance under the *rist* system depended on household and descent, in the *gult* system, loyalty and terms of service to rulers were what were expected of individuals. Following the decision of Emperor Menelik to offer *gult* grants to his officials, from 1910, highlanders who relied on cultivation for their livelihood were reduced to tributaries on their land. This is what happened to both Maale and Aari: both groups were turned into *gabars* who had to bear the responsibility of paying different dues.

5 *Gabar* means 'tribute-giver'. They were peasants who owned *rist* lands but were forced to pay tribute to gult holder (Donham 1987).

mechanism that lasted until the mid-1940s and brought drastic changes to the lives of the inhabitants of South Omo, especially Aari and Maale.

As is indicated in the quotation above, the selection of a provincial town on the basis of socio-economic and ecological concerns was repeated in sub-provinces like Maale and Aari. The provincial towns provided a steppingstone for the commencement of contact affecting the lives of the Maale who resided in highland areas, particularly in the north-west and west of the country. In 1910, all the western chiefdoms of Maale – Bio, Lemo, and Gento – were given as *gult*[6] grants to three of Menelik's officials, along with ten to twenty soldiers under them. In 1911, the governor of Bako established a second settlement of soldiers at Bunka, the heart of Maale. These events not only affected the ritual role of the Maale traditional king (*kati*), who later became a *balabat* under the tutelage of the Ethiopian administration, but also unsettled Maale families, who were supposed to render services to the insatiable settler soldiers.

Moreover, different sources indicate that inhabitants of South Omo's two highland countries, Aari and Maale, were enormously affected by the slave hunting that started soon after the campaign of the conquest. In this regard, oral history evidence from both areas reveals the extent to which Aari and Maale were affected differently by slave hunting, due to differences in the reactions of their traditional political leaders in that period (Tsega-ab 2005).

In early 1937, the invading Italian army seized important posts in South Omo. This was followed by the establishment of an Italian commissariat administration centred at Bako; the coming of Italian soldiers locally termed Somali or *banda* stationed at Bako (Aari); and the construction of roads connecting Gofa with Bako and Hamer-Koke (Strecker 1976; Tsega-ab 2005).

From 1941 to 1943, the south-western province of the country faced a period of anarchy, following the evacuation of the Italian troops. The cause of the conflict is attributed to ex-resistance fighters seeking revenge on so-called collaborators (*banda*). In particular, revenge attacks and internal fighting were severe and rampant among the Maale, Aari and Amhara of Bako until late 1942. Among the groups of south-western Ethiopia, the Maale, Aari (highland parts), Dassanatch, Nyangatom and Mursi (pastoralists) in Lower Omo were labelled as collaborators and subjected to revenge attacks by other groups supported by ex-resistance fighters.

Van Aswegen (2008) summarizes the most important events that affected the political and economic life of the Maale between 1941 and 1991. First, he mentions the abolition of the *gabar* system and the introduction of taxation in cash, based on a new system of land measurement called *qalad*.[7] The new system served as an administrative mechanism from the period of the restoration to the Ethiopian revolution (1941–1974). Further regulations were introduced whereby salaries were paid to administrative officials from Addis Ababa; the title of policeman was given to the former Menelik settler-soldiers; and government-owned land was sold to northern settlers. However, Bako continued to be a

6 A *gult* grant was permission to rule and dominate. This meant the right to collect money and services from peasants who lived on the land. This also included the right to production and *rist* (Donham 1986).

7 In this system of taxation, former *gabars*, such as Maale and Aari highlanders who depended on agricultural for their livelihoods, were required to measure their lands in *qalads* and divide it into three categories based on the degree of fertility – *Lam*, *Tef* and *Lem-taf*.

provincial town and centre for education and medical services, as well as a major trading centre for the southwest.

On January 1954, Scandinavian and North American evangelists from the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM) – founder of the Kale Hiwot church – opened a mission station in Bako. During the 1960s, Christianity was spread in Maale by evangelists from the Wolaita – a neighbouring ethnic group – who had been working closely with SIM missionaries. The SIM missionaries stationed in Bako offered modern medicines and education in the Amharic language. The young men who attended Christian schools during the 1960s helped bring about the events of the revolution of 1974. This was because the education offered by the Kale Hiwot church at that time was underpinned by criticism of traditional values as 'backward' and support for the ideology of social change that helped the *Derg* to power. Under the socialist *Derg* regime, all rural land was nationalized and redistributed by peasant associations. Schools and clinics were expanded and university students from Addis Ababa were sent into the countryside as part of a major literacy campaign; they reached the Maale in 1975. All these events significantly affected their traditional lifestyle.

In 1991, the *Derg* regime fell and the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Front (EPRDF) took power. The two immediate post-*Derg* events observed in Maale were the revival of Evangelical churches and the resurgence of earlier customs. The Maale, for example, were able to reinstall their traditional king (Donham 1999). Furthermore, an official report issued on 16 June 2008 by the Statistics and Population Office in Lemogento – a newly established *Woreda* town – provides both statistics and details on the types of community development interventions that were being undertaken by both government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in every part of Maale. Among these interventions, health, education, economic activities, agriculture and social services received wide attention.

Recent interviews conducted with church leaders in Koybe (west Maale) have revealed that the numbers of Protestant church buildings and followers are increasing across Maale. The churches built in different areas of Maale are also important for the government's current aims for formal education, as they run literacy programmes so that followers will be able to read the Bible in their local language. These literacy centres opened by Protestant churches have created an environment conducive to both government and other NGOs' education initiatives in Maale. Here it is important to note that formal education began in the 1970s in Maale, with the establishment of the first school by Protestant missionaries. Yet the Amharic script had been in use before the opening of schools in Maale. In this respect, missionaries played an important role as they initiated the translation of the bible into local language and spread informal education in Maale by using the Amharic script. (Thubauville 2012, 2013).

Life History Interviews

The following material from life history interviews provides an overview of the lived experiences of women informants and their childhood memories of the lives of their parents. The first part presents memories of people whom informants knew personally or about whom they were told by their families. The second part focuses on the direct life experiences of women informants from early childhood, girlhood to womanhood.

Reconstructed life experiences

Most of the informants interviewed were not alive during the brief period of Italian administration in Maale. Yet, they recalled what they were told by their families about that time. What looms large in their stories is the maltreatment they endured at the hands of the Italian soldiers. According to informants, Italian soldiers treated the men working at the road-building sites joining Maale to Aari and Goffa countries badly. Also, married and unmarried women were sexually abused by soldiers who visited the villages looking for more manpower and food supplies. The families visited by soldiers handed over what they had produced but were also expected to carry the goods to the road-building sites. The collected grains, honey and raw meat had to be transported by young or married men who were selected by the Italian soldiers. Men were assigned to transport food supplies and other materials from one road-building site to another; and women were required to serve the Italian soldiers by grinding grain. According to women interviewees, demands for labour and tribute during the Italian administration were similar to those of the *gabar* system.

The following stories from two women – Zelekech and Dikise – exemplify the shared experiences of the women. Zelekech recalls the experiences of her father at a young age as follows:

> I remember when my father was calling the name 'Atse' Menelik, I couldn't recall any of the stories he told about this period. But when I was little, our father used to tell us the story of the Italian period when all family members were sitting by the fire. He usually said 'Tsalian (Italians) brought us iron. We never used iron made tools before'. During his young age my father was taken by *banda* (Ethiopian soldiers who followed the Italians) to transport sacks filled with maize. My father walked the road from his village Koybe (west Maale) to Bako (Aari country). He carried grains at the road construction site in Bako and walked until Key-Afer (town located south west of the Maale). One day while he was travelling from Bako to Key-Afer he got very sick. His throat was sore that he couldn't swallow food and became very tired. He was left on top of the hill by the *banda* who continued their way ahead to Key-Afer. He recognized that the road was dug by many people, such as the Aari and the Gofa, who were not taken from Maale. He saw that the *banda* seriously controlled the work, and men who were exhausted due to the demanding labour were pushed down the hill at Bako. He observed women grinding and cooking. Our father told us that he spent a long time until he joined his family, who moved away from their *bao* (ancestral grave yard) again. Our father told us soon after he was taken by the soldiers, his mother took other family members and moved to Beneta. My grandmother didn't like the Italians; she used to call it the period which 'separates children from family'.

The other woman, Dikisi, shared with me what she had observed and how the situation after the Italians left had affected her life. As she put it:

> I grew up when the 'bow bow' sound from the airplane filled up the sky. Soon after, rumours like 'the *arbegnoche* (patriots or ex-resistance fighters) returned back from the bush' and 'the Somali have left Bako' were circulated widely among villagers. Then the Amhara who controlled Bako opened a war against the Maale.

> Many men went to fight the Amhara and we (the Maale) were able to chase them until Arba Minch. During this time my mother took all of us to a village near Boka (small river found in Beneta), our former village was on top of the hill and near to the war. We also fought with the Banni (common name for neighbouring pastoralists). The war with the Banni claimed many lives, including my mother's. After we had chased away the Amhara from our land we have been leading a peaceful life, there was no war and no sickness. Many new houses were built, the relative peace gave the families time to know their surroundings, including the forest, and farming plots were chosen. At this time, I remember I was a young girl and started to work with my age mates on the farming field.

From the above memories, we learn that different and gender-specific survival mechanisms were used during the Italian occupation, as well as during the three years after the Italian soldiers left the South Omo region. Tribute was paid in kind, and male family members worked as daily labourers. The payments they received were not sufficient to live, so the Maale fled their homes during Italian occupation. In particular, the flight from the western Maale lands was triggered by those living near to the road construction site. And the change in the place of residence was made by female family members, who shouldered responsibility for the survival of other family members. This shows that women had a significant role in creating a secure life between1937 and 1943.

So far we have heard about the survival strategies adopted by the Maale from the experiences related by just two women from our sample. However, the life histories narrated by Zelekech and Dikise were shared by the other women included in the study. In what follows, I will describe the shared life histories of these women from childhood – beginning just after Italian period – up to the present day, when interviews were conducted.

Lived Experiences of Women

Wodero (girlhood)

During the interviews on life before marriage, the women shared with me the kind of clothing they wore, the tasks they and their families used to carry out, and their memories of contacts with outsiders, including Amhara merchants and surrounding groups such as Aari and Banna. The traditional skirts and aprons worn by the women were of three kinds: the *shiro*, the *pido* and the *buddo*. The *shiro* – a skirt made from cotton strings – was worn by small girls around their waist and usually covered the front part. This kind of traditionally made cloth is still used by those who settled in the lowland area of Maale. The *pido* – made out of a small goat skin – provided additional cover at the back of the body, because the girls wearing it were old enough to do the grinding and it was taboo to show the rear of their bodies. The *buddo* – a leather skirt made out of five or six goat skins – was worn by young girls. In 2006/2007 *buddo* were being worn by girls in *Gongode* (lowland country of Maale), but I did not see any of the lowland girls wearing traditionally made *buddo* during my last field work visit, in 2013.

Understanding change through traditional costume

In what follows I will provide a description of traditional costume as recalled by my female informants.

The *shiro*

Small girls started to wear a shiro when they began to participate in simple daily tasks, such as taking care of younger siblings and following a flock of goats to nearby forests. Informants recall observing family members busy with preparation of clothing. This was one of the important tasks performed by family. A lack of the weaving tools needed to change the cotton into cloth meant that all family members had to lend a hand in the process of preparing cotton to be used either as blankets or clothing for small girls. Married women shared daily household chores, such as grinding, cooking, fetching water and collecting firewood. Both old women and male family members carried out other duties, namely the caring for and educating small children, receiving visiting guests, and cleaning compounds. Moreover, the old men, if they were the *toidi* (eldest son), were responsible for making *kashi* (ceremonial rituals) for their families, and for their married younger brothers. The shared activities mentioned above all contributed to survival, and more tasks were observed by women informants relating to food production. Married men and young boys played a key role in food production by collecting special woods and sticks to be used to prepare bee hives, for digging and for the cattle kraal. Young girls played a role by weeding and working with their age mates to collect and carry harvests – mainly maize and sorghum into the granaries.

The *pido*

When the women first began wearing the *pido*, they were young girls who had begun to help their mothers with daily tasks, taking the opportunity to learn the skills embedded in daily duties, such as grinding, preparing carrying rope to tie on the calabashes used for fetching water, and other simple chores. They also began working on the farmland, watching over the crops to protect them from birds and other animals. Although most of the activities and division of tasks among family members were summarized similarly by my informants, they also recalled seeing male family members preparing the equipment used for ploughing with oxen at that time.

Moreover, according to most of my female informants, the *pido* phase was characterized by contact with 'outsiders', which left vivid memories. Shared stories of contact throughout the period when they wore the *pido* reveal three different forms of interaction with 'outsiders'. The first was with men wearing police uniform who came from the north-west, and who seized fire arms, snatched traditional weapons from the young boys herding cattle, and roughly punished male family members who were suspected of hiding firearms. The second was with outsiders who collected grain and/or honey. The third was with the *negade* (merchants) who came with their donkeys and were noticed in/around their villages.

Locally all these 'outsiders' were called *gali* – a person who smells, wears fabricated cloths, has a light-coloured face and carries firearms. And family members were able to use their wisdom and knowledge of local geography as protection mechanism. Hence, while the men gave in to the demands of the outsiders, the women ran and hid with their small children in the nearby forest.

The *buddo*

During this stage, young girls were expected to carry out activities they had learned and practised with their mothers in earlier stages: *shiro* and *pido*. It was at this stage that they

learned newly introduced cooking recipes from their mothers. These were *wote* (a stew made out of beans and peas) and *injera* (a very light circular bread usually made out of *teff*). Most of them also learned the skills involved in the lengthy process of polishing the *mitade* (a plate made out of clay used for backing) bought from market. In addition, at this stage women learned how to prepare *samo* (a local dish made out of sorghum/maize flour), bake *laddo* (bread made out ground sorghum/maize) and brew *alla* (a local beer made out of sorghum). Moreover, they used to weeding the fields and harvesting the grain and transporting it to the granaries. All the activities listed as being carried out by unmarried girls were generally referred to as 'working for fathers'. These traditionally assigned roles prepared young unmarried girls for the next steps in their life, without changing their identity. Soon they would be engaged in the process of *gocho* – mate selection by a pulling girl's hand in the evening – which eventually changed their identity from *wodero* (girl) to *lali* (woman).

Traditionally, the start of the period in which women wore *buddo* signified that they had already been engaged in farming activities. But for the women I interviewed, the phase during which they learnt the traditional tasks expected of a woman was interrupted when they were sent to elementary schools, which had been opened by the SIM (Sudan Interior Mission). The women went first to the schools opened in their villages to attend literacy classes (reading and writing alphabets in Amharic language) before moving to the elementary school found in Bako (Aari country).

However, even if they joined the elementary school they couldn't continue after grade five because they had no relatives with whom they could stay in the place where further schooling was available. By then too, they were old enough for marriage since all their started schooling at a late age. Traditionally, unmarried girls were required to serve in farming activities, which were very important to their selection as a wife, before they went to their husband's house. But, by the time my female informants had reached marriageable age, the arrival of education in the area had changed forms of mate selection: young boys had started to prepare handwritten letters to communicate with the girl of their choice. The women in turn arranged their marriages either in the traditional way, where feasting and payment of bride wealth was minimal, or with a big feast and dressed in 'modern' clothes bought from the market.

During this period, family members were becoming more engaged in activities, such as the production of *teff*, butter, honey and coffee, that enabled them to trade for cash. Women were also preparing *injera* and wote to be carried by young girls and sold in the market. Thus the period witnessed ever-increasing forms of interaction with 'outsiders'. The initial and somewhat smaller from of exchange started in terms of spices such as salt has attracted women to take part in trading activity. During frequent visits from merchants buying *teff*, honey, butter and small domesticated animals – usually chickens – the female family members exchanged goods for coin. This form of interaction helped families to identify what crops and products were in high demand in the wider system of exchange. Honey and goats were also important in building *bella* – a bond friendship made through the exchange of goods – in this period. The traditional concept of *bella* was also applied by the Maale with the Amhara – the owners of their land – and the *negade*, which not only helped the latter, who could then leave heavy goods or spend the night

with the family, but also enabled family members who moved more than previous time in the provincial town they could observe life, markets, attend legal matters in the court.

Experience of life during lali (womanhood)

The skills the women learned and observed from their families when they were younger played a significant role in sustaining their lives as adults and their families under the demands of succeeding periods.

During their early womanhood, most of the women worked in the peasant associations (PA) established in their villages. Some informants who had attended the SIM School in Bako had knowledge of writing and reading in Amharic language. Therefore, they were well-positioned to administer the women's associations organized under the peasant association. Besides participating in the peasant associations, the women sold *injera* and *teji* to the *zemachoche* – (college students who came from outside). The cash they received from these activities not only covered their membership fees for the peasant association, which were 0.25 cents per women, but also enabled them to buy clothes and spices.

The women who had been taking goods to sell at far away markets, later on resolved the problem by developing new strategies. The community opened a market in their own village, Beneta, in the early 1980s. This market provided a good ground for exchanges with other villages and neighbouring groups, and even with 'outsiders' coming from the zonal town of Jinka.

My own observations of these women's daily lives revealed countless other activities they carried out.

Among those daily tasks are: attending programmes of prayer and Bible study organized in the Protestant churches in their villages; preparing meals and drinks, grains and vegetables that are sold at the Thursday market; interacting with other outsiders who live in the village by learning cooking recipes, hairdos, talking in Amharic language, sharing coffee, and making friends. In addition, women are recruited to teach their community at meetings organized by governmental and non-governmental organizations in their villages and at zonal/regional level. Most of the meetings focus on raising awareness of social issues, such as health (HIV/AIDS, malaria, family planning) and formal education, especially girls' education and gender issues. They are also involved in livelihood projects financed by NGOs that focus on farming, apiculture and credit services, from which women have emerged as immediate beneficiaries. Though some of them have been rewarded for their effort by getting the support of their children who have held important positions at the Woreda or Zonal offices, most of the women informants are still investing in the schooling of their children. The women who send their daughters to school or college have to carry out the daily tasks alone and have to support their children in higher education by sending them the money they make selling meals, drinks and other things at the Thursday market.

Concluding Remarks

The life history interviews with women informants epitomize the survival mechanisms employed by individual families. The first part of the paper emphasized the role of women in dealing with change brought about by external forces in the past. By reconstructing life histories, an attempt was made to pinpoint how historical events – external

factors and contact with 'outsiders' between 1937 and 1943 – affected the survival strategies of individual families and the coping strategies adopted by women. The second part examined the shared life histories of informants from their childhoods – right after the Italian period – to the present day. It was presented into two parts: the lived life of the women during their younger years, before they married, and their life experiences during their womanhood.

Above all, this paper had attempted to show that the life histories of women in Beneta (highland country of Maale) provide ample evidence of how external factors – land reforms, the opening of schools in Bako (Aari) and later in Maale villages, the establishment of associations, the arrival of *zemachoche* (students) in Maale, the introduction of policies on primary education, health, gender issues, the opening of offices at zonal and *woreda* levels, the emergence of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) operating in livelihood improvement projects – and all forms of contact over a long period of time affected survival mechanisms in the past and continue to play a significant role in shaping the lives of the people in general, and women in particular.

The history of the eight individual women emphasizes the prevalence of social interaction between families who moved, seeking exile as a coping strategy, both from the Aari highlands (Bako and Shengama) and the central part of Maale (Boshkor, Asheker and Koybe) as far back as the 1930s. In this regard, exile or movement from one place to another looms large and appears to have been a crucial force behind today's mixed identity in Maale.

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