

Where Are the People and Their Donkeys?

Many of you would remember a large mass of people with their donkeys flocking to large and small cities every Saturday, bringing with them a variety of rural produce for sale or barter in Gebyas (open markets). At the same time that people (farmer, traders, consumers and even wondering kids) and animals converged into narrow urban spaces, the higgling-haggling and other rituals of the Gebya would also heat up, not to mention the smell of spices and the not-so-terrible odour of the animal dung and urine that littered the ground. Gebyas had also a social function. Families and relatives who lived in different localities would meet, exchange news and comfort one another.

Recently, I was travelling in the countryside one early Saturday morning when I noticed that there weren't that many people and donkeys (the main means of transportation) heading towards Gondar. Given population growth and growing economy, I expected to see more, not less, people and donkeys on the road. So, I asked the young mini-bus driver, "where are the people and their donkeys?" He replied, "they (farmers) don't need to come to the city anymore. The traders go there". In fact, as you enter the hinterland, you will find unplanned small settlements by the sides of roads, where traders have set up shops and storage facilities to service the farming population. Farmers sell their produce and buy consumer goods (salt, sugar, etc.) there without travelling long distance to cities. I was told that prices for some crops like gesho and vegetables could be a little bit higher in large cities like Gondar, but overall farmers are satisfied with the prices offered by traders in the vicinities. They only come to cities if they are looking for things that are not available in the areas.

Why am I concerned about farmers and their animals, you may wonder? I look for phenomena that indicate progress in societal development. I try to think simple and look for simple explanations. In this respect, the declining human and animal traffic on roads during Gebya days can be an indicator of economic change. The market has entered the countryside, putting farmers in an advantageous position in terms of saving time and also price bargaining. This represents a shift in the function of Ethiopian markets, a shift that works towards the integration of rural and urban economies. As farmers realize the benefits of local and regional markets, they would become more and more motivated to embrace new marketing ideas and adopt new technologies that improve the productivity of their resources.

Furthermore, these days there are less and less people walking on countryside roads because farmers have money to pay for transportation. In some days of the week you may find more rural folks than urban dwellers using commercial transport. Rural people no longer trek long hours on foot to go to government offices and courts, see relatives, buy medicine, and so on. Modern transportation has helped them save time and improve the quality of their lives, as well as speed

up market activities and create structural linkages between rural sectors and the urban-based modern economy.

This picture (a mother carrying a baby and merchandize on her back) was circulated on social media to commemorate Mothers' Day. This mother represents the tens of millions of producers and market agents that are driving Ethiopia's economic growth. The policies of Ethiopian state must be grounded on the values, aspirations and needs of hard working masses like her.



Of course Gebya days also bring us terrifying memories of the Red Terror. Dergue executed prisoners on Friday nights and threw their dead bodies on streets, so that people coming to cities on Saturdays could see the punishment for opposing the military junta. Those were indeed the darkest times of our history. As EPRDF fighters encircled Gondar, Dergue officials looted banks and sneaked out of Gondar to flee to Sudan. They only travelled about 20kms before they were intercepted by local people, resulting in a shootout. The then notorious Dergue governor of Gondar Gezahagn Workie and other Degue officials and military personnel were killed. Tens of thousands of Ethiopian youth, mostly Tigrean children, died fighting to get rid of one of the most brutal regimes in the recent history of the world. Those young people made a heroic contribution to Ethiopian society. We should not forget this – regardless of our political differences.

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