

The Impact of Locusts on Rural Production: The Case of Northern Shewa, 1928-1962

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Abstract

For a long time, one of the pressing problems of Ethiopia has been food shortage. Although food shortage was caused by several factors, locusts had in one way or another played their own part in depriving the Ethiopian peasants of their subsistence and reducing them to starvation. In the past, many parts of Ethiopia including Northern Shewa had frequently been visited by swarms of locusts which resulted in enormous crop damages. Leaving aside the devastation of pasture lands and forests, the amount of crops devoured by locusts is incalculable. In this study, I extensively consulted pertinent archives of the then Ministry of Interior. In addition, attempts have been made to gather qualitative data through interviews and consulting published and unpublished sources. It has been found out that between 1928 and 1962, Northern Shewa had suffered from disastrous locust plagues which brought about serious food shortage in the region. The study shows that in times of widespread locust plague, peasants were totally defenseless. The Ethiopian government was not able to help peasants in fighting locusts. Nor was it possible to distribute food grain to peasants who lost their crops by locusts. Peasants were therefore forced to employ traditional methods of combating locusts. Later on, the government managed to get technical assistance from Britain and the United States for its campaign against locusts.

Keywords: locusts, crop damage, peasants, food security, agriculture

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Introduction

Statement of the Problem

For centuries, Ethiopian peasants have been subjected to recurrent food shortage and famine. Although locust invasion is now quite rare, it had been one of the major causes of food shortage and famine in the past. One of the regions that had been frequently ravaged by locusts was northern Shewa. Between 1928 and 1962, peasants of northern Shewa faced serious food shortage as a result of crop damage by locusts. Although they repeatedly asked the local and the central government for assistance, they were told to use traditional methods to combat locusts. It was only after the 1950s that the government began to use modern methods of locust control. Despite the considerable impact of locusts on food security, no research has been conducted so far on the subject under discussion. The researcher thus believes that it is essential to investigate the impact of locusts on food security in the last century in northern Shewa and put peasant and government response to locust invasion in historical perspective.

Research Objectives

The general objective of the research is to find out the impact of locust invasion on agricultural production in Northern Shewa in the twentieth century. The study has also the following specific objectives:

- To evaluate the effectiveness of traditional methods employed by peasants to combat locust plagues;
- To critically examine the government response to locust plagues;
- To investigate the frequency of locust invasions in the region under study;
- To assess the kind of external assistance given to the Ethiopian government to combat locust plagues; and
- To look into the vulnerability of peasants to disasters like locust plagues.

At least to my knowledge, no independent research has been conducted so far exclusively on locust plagues in Ethiopia. There is, however, scanty literature dealing with locust invasion that occurred in various parts of the country throughout the centuries. European missionaries and travelers who visited Ethiopia between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, for instance, give us bits and pieces of information about locust invasion and the magnitude of disaster they had caused. The earliest European travelers' accounts include that of Alvares (1961), Lobo (1984) (translated by Lockhart) and Tellez (1970).

Francisco Alvares, a Portuguese priest who arrived in Ethiopia in 1520, had witnessed enormous crop damage by locusts in northern Ethiopia. According to him, the locusts were so numerous that they managed to "darken the light of the sun" (1961: 132). Concerning the extent of damage the locusts had caused, Alvares adds that they devoured all the crops and grass. His eye witness account also throws some light on the way people responded when invaded by locusts. In those days, the people had neither the will nor the ability to drive locusts out of their locality. It was with a sense of helplessness and defenselessness that they faced the invasion. When asked by Alvares why they did not attempt to kill locusts, they simply answered that they had no power to repulse the "plague God gave them for their sins" (*Ibid*, 136). Likewise, J. Lobo, a Jesuit missionary who came to Ethiopia around 1525, wrote that locust invasion was associated with some superstitious beliefs. That people had been leaving their homes in search of food due to locust invasion is stated in Lobo's account as well (1984: 191-194). B. Tellez, another Jesuit missionary, wrote in 1526 that Tigray had suffered complete devastation by a multitude of locusts. The damage on crops was so severe that the whole region was depopulated. As a result of famine that followed, records Tellez, about 5000 people came to the court of Susenyos at Dembia in search of food and shelter (1970: 234-235). Tellez had also witnessed another locust plague in 1934. That time, the whole region from Dembia in the south to Tigray in the north was laid waste by locusts that "devoured all the product of the earth." Because of that terrible locust plague, King Fasiledes, was reported to have temporarily moved his court to Libo (1970: 258).

European travelers who visited Ethiopia in the nineteenth century had also witnessed devastation of crops by locusts. The important accounts they left include that of Pearce (1980), Gobat (1851), Blanc (1970), Rassam (1869), Wilkins (1870), Krapf (1968) and Harris (1844). N. Pearce, a British envoy who came to the court of *Ras* Wolde Sillase of Tigray in 1805 indicates that in 1811 the locusts had eaten up all the crops in the region. Pearce adds that a year later the whole region of Tigray was ravaged by locusts (1980: 92, 108). Samuel Gobat drew a much more vivid picture of locust plague of unparalleled magnitude which devastated Tigray in 1831. According to him, the swarm was so dense that people could not see the sky and the nearby mountains (1851: 393). Henry Blanc had also witnessed a similar plague in Tigray in 1865 (1970: 71). In the same year, Hormuzd Rassam, an envoy sent to the court of Emperor Tewodros II, had also encountered a huge swarm of locusts around Massawa

that devoured all the vegetation in that locality (1869: 121). Reporting a similar damage, C. Wilkins, a member of the reconnoitering party which preceded the British military expedition against Tewodros II in 1867, records that the Adigrat area was infested with locusts. Basing himself on the information given to him by the local people, he states that the locusts had been there for five years. Describing the multitudinous of the locusts he says that their horses "crushed numbers at each step" (1870: 290). Though not as frequently affected as Tigray, Shewa had also seen considerable crop damage by locusts. In his report of 1840, J. L. Krapf declares that he had seen a huge swarm of locusts in Shewa (1968: 196). W. C. Harris, another European traveler who visited Shewa, also records how King Sahle Sillase was very much worried about locust invasion. On one occasion, the king is said to have requested Harris if he had medicine to drive away locusts (1844: 209). In addition to travelers' accounts discussed above, we find reports of locust invasion in the earliest Ethiopian newspapers namely *A'emeru* (*Meskerem* 25, 1922 E.C) and *Birhan Enna Selam* (*Tekemt* 18, 1924 E.C).

The various sources reviewed so far do not show us the response of the Ethiopian government to locust invasion. According to existing literature, the Ethiopian government began to respond to peasants' request for help only after 1944. In this regard, Buxton (1949), Huffnagel (1961), Kurtz (1957) and Adefris (1970) give us some information about locust control activities of the Ethiopian government in collaboration with the British and American governments as well as the Desert Locust Control Organization for Eastern Africa. What makes the current research quite different from the works reviewed above is the extensive use of the archives of the then Ministry of Interior (MOI) and oral sources to substantiate the scanty literature on the subject.

Methodology

In February 1992, while looking for archival sources dealing with famine, I fortunately discovered some priceless documents labeled "Locust Invasion" among the dead files of the then Ministry of Interior. A close examination of these files revealed that locust plagues that broke out in Northern Shewa between 1928 and 1962 were sources of anxiety for peasants as well as lower and higher government officials alike. As a result, locust invasion became a subject of much correspondence among government officials at different levels. The letters exchanged between these officials are, therefore, selectively used

and carefully analysed. In order to enrich these invaluable archives, I have used a substantial amount of published and unpublished sources as well as relevant oral information. The information gathered from various sources has been systematically interpreted and cross-checked.

Background

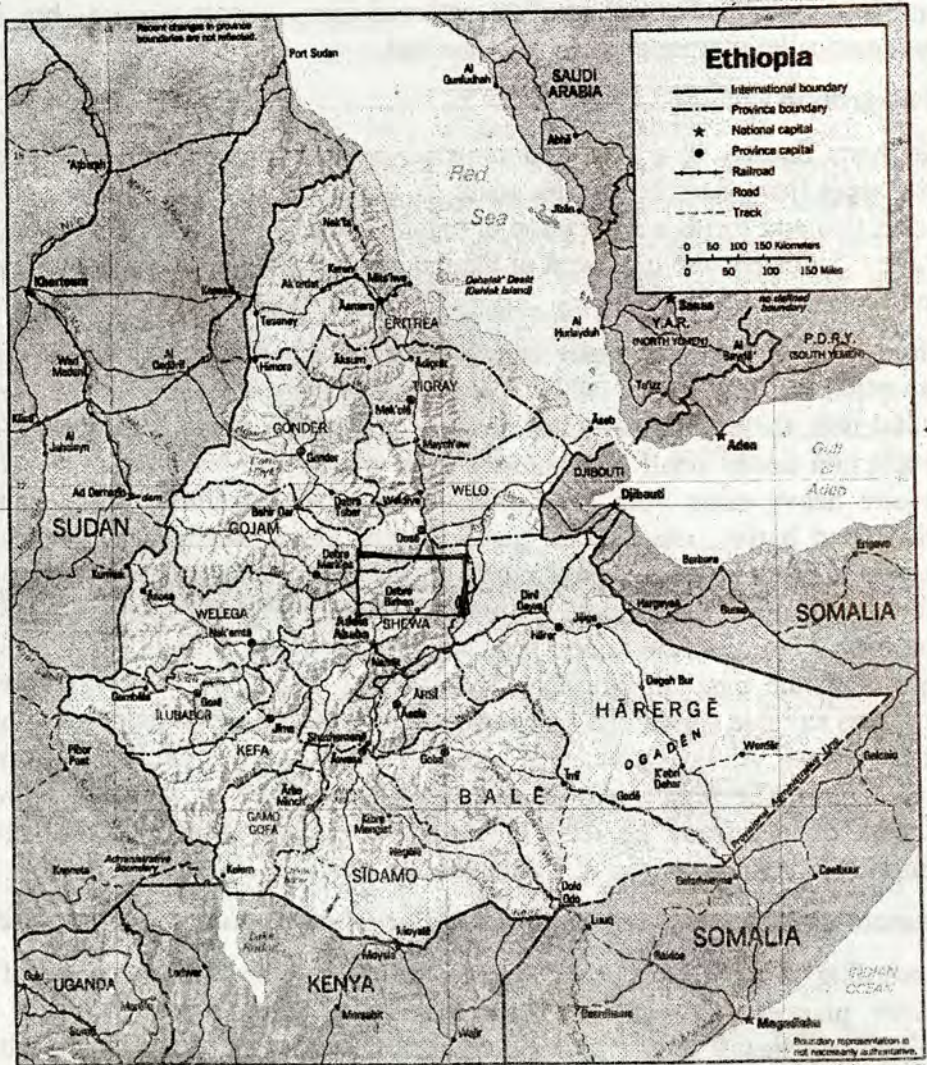
Northern Shewa is a region dominated by a north-south mountain ridge extending from Ankober in the south to Ansokiya in the north. East of this ridge, the land forms a succession of natural terraces falling rapidly to the Rift Valley. Similarly, the land west of the mountain falls to the valleys of Wonchit and Jema (Ege, 1978: 36).

The region has three climatic zones: *dega*, *woina dega* and *qolla*. With the exception of Merhabete, which to a large extent is dependent on *meher* production, there are usually two seasons of production: *belg* and *meher*. *Belg* production needs small rains mostly from March to May. But *Meher* crops require heavy rains from June to September. Short-maturing crops, mainly wheat and barley, characterize the *belg* production. Such crops are usually harvested in June. *Meher* production, on the other hand, includes *teff*, maize, chickpeas, lentils, beans, peas and others (Daniel, 1990: 11-13). Both the *belg* and *meher* crops of the region had, however, suffered periodical damages by locusts in the past. In Northern Shewa, there had been some areas which provided suitable conditions for locust breeding. These areas include: the banks of the Awash, Abbay, Jema, and Wonchit rivers as well as the low lands in the Rift Valley. The region was also occasionally invaded by swarms of locusts coming mainly from the Afar lowlands, the railway zone and the Ogaden (Informants: Dinqe, Adera, & Tadesse).

Peasant and Government Response to Locust Invasion in Northern Shewa

According to existing sources, Northern Shewa witnessed several horrifying locust plagues between 1928 and 1962. The 1928 locust invasion was particularly heavy in the lowland areas like Derra and Midda (Merhabete), Insaro (Selale), Ankober (Tegletna Bulga), and Qawat (Yifatna Timuga). This had been so because these areas belonged to the locust breeding zones (Informants: Lisaneworq, Beshahwired & H. Mikael). In Ankober, for instance, the infestation was so dreadful that the local people went out through crop fields holding the *tabot* (altar) saying *Egzi'o Mahirene Kirstos* (Jesus Christ, Have Mercy upon Us) (Informants: Lisaneworq, Beshahwired & H. Mikael).

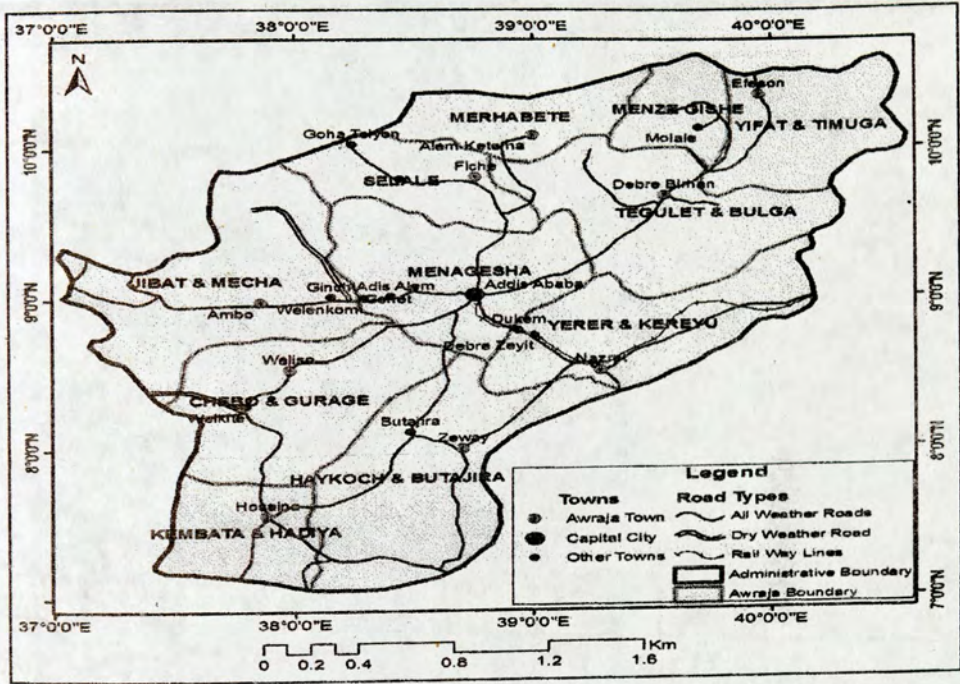
Figure 1. The Study Area



Note: Since the study covers the period between 1928 and 1962, the map used here is meant to depict the then Ethiopian administrative divisions.

Source: <http://www.angelfire.com/ny/ethiocrown/maps.html>, 2010

Figure 2. Map of Former Shewa Province



Source: Department of Geography, Bahir Dar University, 2010

Figure 3. Map showing the former five *awrajas* of Northern Shewa



Source: Ethiopian Mapping Agency, ND

Figure 4. Satellite image of the study area



Source: Google Earth, 2005

The 1929 locust plague was much more devastating. Locusts that bred in the lowlands gradually invaded the highlands in the middle of 1929. In relation to this widespread locust infestation, Mersi'e Hazen W. Qirqos had this to remark: “በ 1922 ዓ.ም ዘመነ ማርቆስ ረቡዕ ባተ። በዚህ ወራት የአንበጣ መቅሰፍት በአገር ላይ ወርዶ የቆላውንም የደጋውንም ሰብል ያጠፋ ነበር...” (Mersi'e Hazen, 1938: 464). “In 1929, the year of Luke began on Wednesday. During that time, locust pestilence came upon the country and [locusts] destroyed all the crops in the lowlands as well as the highlands.” As the crop damage by locusts became severe, the government was forced to issue a proclamation on 5 October 1929. Part of it reads:

ይኸን የመጣውን የአንበጣውን መቅሰፍት እግዚአብሔር በቸርነቱ እንዲመልስልን ፈጣሪያችንን ከለመኑት ጨካኝ አይደለምና ቤተክርስቲያን የሚቀርብህ በየአጥቢያህ ቤተክርስቲያን የራቀህም በየደጅህ እግዚአታውን /ምህላውን/ አታስታጉል። (A'Emero, 25/1/1922 E.C: 262). Since the Lord is not cruel, he can repulse the current locust plague. Thus, those of you who are closer to churches, hold prayers in those churches. Those of you who are far from churches should not stop prayers in your houses. The government did not, however, reduce or suspend the payment of tribute. Peasants were instead told to pay tribute either in cash or in kind. In October 1931, the lowlands of Selale, Ankober, Minjar and Shenkora were hit hard by another devastating locust plague (*Birhaninna Selam*, 18/2/1924: E. C). Informants still vividly remember branches of trees cracked down due to the heavy weight of locusts. They had also observed locusts devouring vast fields of crops within a few hours (Informants: Taddesse, Eshete & Beshahwired). There are even reports of the interruption of railway traffic for enormous swarms of locusts had blocked the railway (*Birhaninna Selam, Ibid.*). When confronted by such locust infestation, peasants reacted in various ways. If a certain area is identified as a locust breeding zone, peasants would wait until young hoppers came out of eggs. Then, all the peasants from the nearby villages were called by the *chiqa shum* (village headman) or the *Mislene* (local governor). Early in the morning, peasants would go to the locust breeding area in several hundreds. Each peasant would be armed with broad bark of acacia tree for beating hoppers. With this bark, one could kill many hoppers at a time. As a result, peasants used to greatly reduce the number of hoppers. This method of combating young hoppers was widely practiced in Selale and Merhabete and it was found to be relatively effective (Informants: Adera, Birhanesillase & Beshahwired).

In areas like Ankober and Qawat, peasants did not use barks of trees. Instead, they used several branches of trees fastened together to attack young hoppers. The beating of hoppers lasted for several hours for some hoppers might not die with a first strike or because the hoppers might be too enormous to wipe out. The longer it took to destroy hoppers, declare some informants, the greater number of people who got sick. In the explanation they give as to what caused the sickness informants differ. Some attribute it to the revolting smell of damaged and decayed hoppers. In 9 contrast, others ascribe the sickness to some superstitious beliefs. According to the latter, exposure to the shadow of flying locusts might, for instance, cause abortion. Although informants report a few cases of death during anti-locust campaigns (Informants: Adera,

Birhanesillase & Beshahwired), it is not corroborated by the government. Referring to this problem, the government on one occasion complained: "... ሕዝቡንም በያለበት እየተሰበሰቡ አንበጣ ደብድብ ብለው ቢሰጡት አንበጣውን የደበደበ ይሞታል እያለ የሀሰት ወራ እያስወራ በመስነፋ ምክንያት አንበጣው እየወለደ እጅግ በዛ።" (*Birhaninna Selam, Ibid*). "... Although the people were ordered to beat locusts, the circulated false rumours saying those who attack locusts would die. As a result of this laziness, locusts tremendously increased through breeding." In the case of flying locusts, peasants' response was quite different. The two common ways of preventing adult locusts from settling down were sending dense smoke into the air and making disturbing sound by waving *jiraf* (long whip). The two methods were widely practiced throughout the whole region. Throwing up sand into a swarm of locusts and waving white cloth were other methods of chasing away invading locusts. This was a common practice in Yifat. Peasants in Tegulet are said to have been using metal and tin articles to produce disturbing sound against flying locusts (Informants: Adera, Birhanesillase & Beshahwired). If locusts settled in an area despite all these measures, peasants had two options. They would either try to drive out locusts with mass prayer or appeal to the government for any possible help. Never the less, the government took no practical measures against locusts. When asked for help, the only thing the government did was to recommend prayers and mass beating of locusts at the hopper stage. The former recommendation is explicitly stated in the 1929 proclamation (*A'emero, Ibid*). With respect to the second recommendation, the government urged: ... አሁን የተወለደው አንበጣ ቁጥሩ የማይታወቅ የማይገመት ነው። ከመሬት እንደምንጭ ይፈልቃል። ... አሁን የተፈለፈለውን አንበጣ የተወለደበትን ስፍራ እየሄድን መግደል ይሻላል እንደ በክንፋ ወደ አየር ከበረረ በኋላ ምንም ለማድረግ አይቻልም። እንደ ሰማነው ወራ እንደ አውሮፓ ሰቶ በመድሃኒት በአየር እየሰጠረን ለመግደል ኪሳራውም ይበዛል። ሰዶ ማሳደድም የሚሉት ተረት ይሆንባናል። አሁን በፍጥነት ከመሬት ሳይነሳ መቃወም ይሻላል። (*Birhaninna Selam, 6/1/1924 E. C*).

...The locusts that are hatched now are not known and cannot be estimated. It would be better to go to breeding sites and destroy hoppers. Once locusts are able to fly, 10 nothing can be done. It would be very costly to spray insecticides from the air like Europeans. As the popular saying goes it would be like chasing something once it is allowed to go away.

The government made it clear that it could not afford using modern techniques in combating locusts. On 29 October 1931, some pieces of advice to peasants appeared in the *Birhaninna Salam* newspaper underlining the traditional

methods of dealing with locusts. Part of it reads: በጥቅምት ቀን አንበጣው መጥቶ ... አደረ። በነጋውም ... ግርማዊ ንጉሠ ነገሥትና ብፁአን ጳጳሳት፣ ልዑላን መሣፍንትና መካንንት ሊቃውንትና ሠራዊት በአንድነት ቆመው እየተቀበሉ እግዚአ መሀረን ክርስቶስ ሊሉ ብዙ ሰዓት ቆይተው ... በነጋው ... አንበጣው መጥቶ በሙሉ አዲስ አበባን አከናነበው። እግዚአ ብሉን መከራ አመጣን ይሆን እያልን ስናዝን በሰዓት ከተማውን ለቆ ሄደ። የጉባኤ ጸሎት እንደሚጠቅም በዚህ ተረዳነው። ጸሎት ይጠቅማል ስላልንም መደብደብን አለመተው ነው። አሀያዬንም አሥራሊሁ አላህንም አምናሊሁ እንዳለ አንዱ የእስላም ሊቅ ሥራ መሥራት ሃይማኖትን አያጎድልምና። (Emphasis added)(*Ibid.*).

On October 15 [1931] locusts came and stayed throughout the night. On the next day, the Emperor, bishops, nobles, dignitaries and soldiers stood together and held prayers saying "Oh Christ, have mercy upon us!" On the next morning, locusts invaded Addis Ababa. As we felt sad due to the futility of our prayers, locusts suddenly left the capital at 1:00 O'clock in the afternoon. *Even if we believe in the importance of prayers, we should not abandon beating locusts. As a Muslim scholar put it: 'I would keep my donkey in a safe place and believe in Allah at the same time.' Doing things right would not affect religion.*

The presence of the Emperor in such mass prayers proves that the locust plague had been a national concern though the measures taken by the government were ineffective. For the period between 1932 and 1942, locust invasion seemed to be nonexistent. As a result, the local government received no reports of crop damage by locusts. But that was not the end of the problem. One of the worst locust plagues in the post-liberation period broke out in 1943/44. The first area to be invaded on 9 March 1943 was Tegulet. The swarm which spent that night in Tegulet left for Menz without much damage (Ministry of Interior (MOI) Archives: File No. 100-29/78, 30/6/1935 E. C).

On 25 March 1943, another invasion was reported by *Qannazmach* Tasamma Ali, the *Mislane* of Gidda to *Tsehafe Tizaz* Hayle W. Rufe, Governor of Debre Birhan (*Ibid.*, 16/7/1935 E.C). Another report sent four days later to *Dejach* Mengesha Wosene, Governor of Debre Sina and Menz stated that yellow and red locusts had completely devoured wheat, barley, maize, pepper and onion seedlings in all the areas between Argaga and Tilem Ber (*Ibid.*, 20/7/35 E. C). On 3 May 1943, *Tsehafe Tizaz* Wolde Mesqel, Governor of Shewa, received a report from Debre Sina which warned that large scale hatching was taking place at a site called Awadi Mukka (*Ibid.*, 28/8/35 E. C). Although district governors

had repeatedly sent alarming reports of crop damage, nothing came up from concerned officials. In July 1943, locust infestation was heavy in all the areas between Ayaber and Qawat. The local headmen of these areas reported to their superiors that locusts had eaten up sorghum and pepper plants. The latter in turn reported the problem to *Dejazmach* Mengesha Wosene (*Ibid.*, 30/10/35 E. C). The *Woreda* office immediately sent the report to the Governor of Shewa with a request for any possible action (*Ibid.*, 2/11/35 E. C). Before receiving a response from his superiors, Hayle W. Rufe was informed about the discovery of vast egg fields in Ankober. It was with a sense of urgency that the *Mislene* of Ankober reported the case. The report warned that unless insecticides were applied immediately, the whole region would be in great jeopardy (*Ibid.*, 15/12/35 E. C). This report was sent to the *woreda* office on 21 August 1943. But the *Woreda* Governor ordered the *Mislene* of Ankober to encourage peasants to continue attacking locusts in mass. Consequently, on 2 September 1943, the *Mislene* reported that the traditional methods were no longer effective: ... የአንበጣውም ብዛት ለሰውም ለከብትም ለመንግሥትም ትልቅ ጉዳት የሚያመጣ ... ነውና መርዝ መጥቶ ካልጠፋ ካሁን ቀደም በደብዳቤ አጥፋት ተብሎ በተጻፈልን አይነት የሚቻል አይደለምና ይኸው ነገር ታስቦበት እንዲጠፋልን ስል ለክቡርነት አመለክታለሁ::(Emphasis added, *Ibid.*, 27/12/35 E. C). I appeal to your Excellency that since locusts would bring about damage to humans, cattle and to the government, *they should be destroyed by using poison bait; otherwise it would be impossible to get rid of them by beating in accordance with the written instruction given to us.* At the mean time, the *Woreda* Governor of Debre Birhan sent a similar report to the Governor of Shewa. The letter was termed “Very Urgent.” It warned that the whole region would face a tragic devastation unless the government tried its best to use modern techniques of destroying locusts (*Ibid.*, 25/12/35 E. C).

A few days later, the Governor of Shewa simultaneously wrote letters to both the Ministries of Agriculture and Interior asking for insecticides (*Ibid.*, 1/13/35 E. C). Even then, the government was not able to purchase insecticides and the necessary equipment. Instead, the government limited itself to give orders to peasants. Accordingly peasants were instructed to: (i) identify egg sites, dig up and dry them in the sun to prevent hatching; (ii) attack fledgling hoppers with barks of trees; (iii) dig up ditches as traps and push young hoppers forward (when hoppers fell into the ditches, peasants would then fill the ditches with soil; (iv) burn hoppers that settled on bushes by spreading straw under and over them (Informants: Taddesse, Adera & Eshete). In order to destroy hoppers at

their fledgling stage, the central government intended to gather information about locust breeding areas. To that end, it promised peasants to give awards for those who could inform the government the whereabouts of egg and hopper sites. As a result, on 22 September 1943, it sent a circular to all administrative regions announcing the award to peasants: “አንበጣ እንቁላል የጣለበትን ቦታ አግኝቶ ከሰው ሁሉ አስቀድሞ ለሚያሳይ 20 ብር የተፈለፈለው ሲያከበኩብም አግኝቶ ለሚያሳይ 15 ብር የርሻ ሚኒስቴር ካሰራቱ ገቢ እንዲሰጥ ታዟል።” (MOI File No. 100-29/78, 11/1/36 E. C). “The Ministry of Agriculture has been ordered to pay from its tithe revenue 20 Birr for any person who showed [locust] egg laying sites and 15 Birr to a person who showed the location of hoppers.” Since egg and hopper fields were everywhere, the local people perceived the circular as something that could not go beyond a joke. In response to the circular, Hayle Giorgis W. Tinsa’e, the *Mislene* of Ankober sent a very strongly worded letter to his superior on 6 December 1943: የአንበጣ አደጋ የበዛ ሆኖ ሊያጠፋን ነው ብለን ካሁን ቀደም ማመልከቻችን ላይ ቁታ እና አቤቱታ እየጨመርን የፃፍነው ደብረ ብርሃን ... ይገኛል። ስለዚህ በቅርፊት በጭራር ደብድቡት፣ ቆፍራችሁ በፀሐይ አስጡት የሚል የማንገፋውን ሥራ ብንታዘዝ የመንግሥታችንን ትዕዛዝ እንገደጽማለን በማለት እንደሚመዘገቡ ቃል ብንሰራ በዚህ ምክንያት ህዝቡም ከጤነኛው ህመምተኛው የበዛ ሆኗል። ባንክበር ወረዳ ከፋፍ በታች እንደነበረ ወደፊት የሚፈለፈለው ይቅርና ክንፍ አውጥቶ ከሳር ከቅጠሉ ከመሬት ከአሸዋው የበለጠ ሆኖ በሀገሩ ላይ መኖሩን ለክቡርነትዎ አመለክታለሁ። (Ibid., 26/3/36 E. C).

We appealed earlier that locusts were going to destroy us. Our appeals and cries for help are found in Debre Birhan. We were instructed to beat locusts with barks and branches of trees, to dig them out and expose them to sunlight. We were doing all those difficult tasks for the sake of obeying government orders. But in doing so, people fell sick. We, thus, appeal to your Excellency the existence of multitude of 13 hoppers in the lower parts of Ankober. They are more numerous than grasses, leaves and sand. On 1 January 1944, the Ministry of Interior asked the Ministry of Agriculture to think over the locust problem seriously and take urgent measures against it (Ibid., 22/4/36 E. C). Locust plague had now become a nation wide phenomenon that forced the Ethiopian Government to take the matter to the British. Since 1942, the British Government had already sent two entomologists to Ethiopia to study the locust problem. The British locust experts proposed that the Ministry of Agriculture should employ, on the basis of a small monthly pay, scouts for each *woreda* to

gather information about locusts (*Ibid.*, 23/10/43). When asked for material assistance, the British experts told the Ethiopian Government that the poison bait they possessed was enough only for the hard-hit parts of the Reserved Area. Some years were to elapse before poison bait and other insecticides could be available for other areas (*Ibid.*). Meanwhile, reports of locust breeding and movement were streaming to the Ministry of Interior from all over the country. Likewise, fresh reports were coming from Northern Shewa informing that terrifying locust breeding was taking place. The Shewa *Awraja* Office also kept on warning the concerned authorities that locusts posed a serious threat to the region. It continued to press both the Ministries of Interior and Agriculture to do what should be done (*Ibid.*, 29/10/36 E. C). The response sent back seems to have dashed the peasants' hope of getting technical assistance from the government. Declaring that it was impossible to get technical aid whatsoever, the Ministry of Agriculture ordered peasants to combat locusts in accordance with the Emperor's earlier instructions: በደብረ ሲና ወረዳ በገርባ ቀበሌ ስለተፈለፈለው አንበጣ ... የፃፉልን ደርሶናል። ይህንኑ ... አንበጣ በቴክኒክ ረገድ ለመቃወም ለጊዜውም የሚሳካ ሆኖ ስላላገኘነው ካሁን ቀደም በግርማዊነታቸው ትዕዛዝ ... እንደተላለፈው ቃል ህዝቡ በነቂስ እየወጣ እንዲደበድበው ትዕዛዝ ቢተላለፍለት ከሁሉ ይልቅ የሚሻል መሆኑን ... እናስታውቃለን። (*Ibid.*, 14/10/36 E. C). We received what you have written about the hatched locusts in the Gerba locality of Debre Sina district. Since it has been found difficult to use modern techniques for the time being, it would be better to order the people to set out in mass and beat locusts as per the directives of the Emperor.

On 18 July 1944, it was reported that a swarm of locusts had ravaged all the crops around Debre Sina (*Ibid.*, 11/11/37 E. C). Again in November 1944, another round of locust breeding took place in the Ankober area. This was reported to the Ministry of Interior with a request for better techniques of controlling locusts (*Ibid.*, 7/3/38 E. C). Because of the scarcity of insecticides, no practical measures were taken until September 1945. Nor was it possible to destroy locusts through mass beating. It was only after 1945 that insecticides became available and it was then decided to teach peasants how to use insecticides against locusts. Eventually, an Ethiopian expert in locust control, Ato Engidaworq G. Maryam, was assigned to go to various districts of Northern Shewa and demonstrate to the local people the application of insecticides and poison bait (*Ibid.*, 15/1/38 E. C). In March 1945, there was heavy locust infestation in Selale particularly along the banks of the Abbay

River. For the first time, the government dutifully sent insecticides on time to the region and the control operation is reported to have met with some marked success (*Ibid.*, 25/7/38 E. C). At the same time, the British intensified their locust control operations until the middle of 1950s. They had, for instance, played a great role in combating the 1955 locust plague in Northern Shewa. Between 1 July and 31 October 1955, the British Anti-Locust Units are reported to have destroyed 71 swarms around Debre Sina alone. Of the swarms destroyed, 36 were of small size, 16 medium and the remaining 19 of large size (Huffnagel, 1961: 172). As it is believed that an average swarm contains about 1 million locusts (Chapman, 1976: 8), one can easily appreciate the contribution of the British in checking the plague in the region. The Americans, too, gave some technical and material assistance to the Ethiopian government for its locust control operations in the 1950s (U.S Operation Mission, 1953: 19). In 1956, the National Locust Control Unit was formally established. Despite this development, northern Shewa could not escape occasional crop damages by locusts. In 1958, a devastating locust plague, perhaps the worst since 1943/44, occurred. Like the one in 1943/44, it was a nationwide invasion. In 1958 alone, the country lost about 100,000 tons of grain due the locust plague, an amount sufficient to feed 1 million people for a year (Uvarov, 1960: 22).

In Northern Shewa, locust breeding began in July 1958 along the valleys of Abbay, Jema, Walaqa and Shenkora. The worst devastation took place in Darra and Merhabete (*Addis Zemen*, 27/3/51 E. C). Between 1959 and 1961, sporadic locust invasions were reported in almost all the lowlands of Northern Shewa and the government tried to carry out effective control measures (*Ibid.*, 7/1/52 E. C, *MOI Ibid.*, 16/5/52, 7/9/53 E. C). In 1962, an event of great importance took place. This was the establishment of the Desert Locust Control Organization for Eastern Africa. It was composed of seven member states: Ethiopia, French Somaliland (later Djibouti), Kenya, Somalia, Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda (DLCOE, 1963: 3, Huffnagel, 1961: 173). Member states agreed to combine their resources to combat their common enemy - the desert locust - which knows no boundaries. Initially, the regional organization had its headquarters at Dire Dawa (Begashaw, 1963: 80) but was later transferred to Asmara and eventually to Addis Ababa (Adefris, 1970: 9). It was after 1962 that extensive aerial spraying and ground control operations both against hoppers and adult locusts were conducted in breeding and invasion areas. Meanwhile, the National Locust Control Unit resumed its activities on a large scale and opened provincial stations in Asmara, Meqele, Desse, Gondar and Dire

Dawa. The stations were equipped with trained personnel, motor vehicles, insecticides and wireless communication (Huffnagel, 173).

Conclusions

In the last century, locusts had been dreadful enemies of peasants. In the years before the Italian invasion and in the immediate post-liberation period, peasants tried in vain to combat locust plague through traditional methods. Out of desperation, they asked for government support. Unfortunately however, they were told to stick to traditional ways of driving locusts from their farms. In most cases, the swarms of locusts were so huge that peasants were unable to wipe them out. As a result, locusts brought about immeasurable damage on crops and vegetation. That again resulted in critical food shortage and sometimes famine affecting a considerable number of peasant households.

Later in the 1950s, the government secured support from the British and Americans and began to apply modern techniques of locust control activities. In 1962, Ethiopia joined six other eastern African countries and established the Desert Locust Control Organization for Eastern Africa. Since then, the organization took over the task of conducting ground and aerial locust control operations.

Although locust plague has become less frequent in our time than before, it still posed a dreadful threat to peasants. Since there are still conducive conditions which enable locusts to breed, mature and fly long distances, the magnitude of disaster they could bring about should not be undermined. Needless to say, subsistence agriculture is still prevalent in Ethiopia. It should therefore be underlined that any disaster, be it man-made or natural is most likely to cause a serious problem of food insecurity among peasants. Even in our time, peasants are not free from the threat of crop damage by locusts. Quite recently swarms of locusts have been observed in different parts of the world. Global warming is believed to have created some conducive conditions for locust breeding. As a result, locust invasion could occur at any time and it is advisable to be prepared to combat the problem.

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C. List of Informants

Name	Age	Date of Interview	Remarks
Adera Habte	84	04/01/92	Born in Ensaro, Selale and now residing in Debre Birhan. He has a sharp memory of most locust plagues.
Beshahwired Demisse	61	13/12/91	He had witnessed locust invasion in Merhabete and participated in locust beating in 1929 and 1931.
Birhanesillase Abera	76	11/12/91	He is a native of Merhabete. He vividly remembers locust invasions and the control measures taken in the area. Now he lives in Addis Ababa.
Dinqe Antenyismu	68	05/01/92	He was born in Tegulet and had seen crop damages in 1928, 1929 and 1931.
Eshete Abebe	74	19/12/91	He was born in Menz. He had witnessed locust invasions in many areas in the 1930s and 1940s.
Hailemikael T. Yohannis	71	15/12/91	He is a good oral historian. He was born in Bulga. He is now serving in the church of Yeka Mikael.
Lisaneworq Tasfaye	65	10/12/91	Born in Ankober, he had seen locust breeding sites in that locality.
Tadesse Yigletu	78	13/12/91	He is from Sala Dingay. He claims that he had taken part in the combat against locusts.
W. Maryam Belayneh	81	14/12/91	Born in Haramba and had seen hoppers coming out of eggs in Ankober area.