Matters of Muslim Menus, Meals and Manners: Foreign Foods and Formation and Alteration of Argobba Alimentation

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Abstract

Muslim Argobba alimentation and culinary customs are anchored by the social aspects of menus, meals and manners, and by the composition of ingredients and preparation and processing methods, and commensality and boundary relationships. They also reflect variation in food preferences and their formation and alteration due to contact with foreign foods coming both from within and outside Argobba escarpment habitats. Muslim Argobba cooking and cuisine thus requires no temporal guidance because grain and legume foods, for example, result from complicated and fragile fermentations, involve delicate preparations and must be made at specific times of the year if they are to succeed. However, the Muslim Argobba do not limit themselves to a formal calendar because they combine climatic and seasonal conditions, and all

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indigenous knowledge into an annual plan of agricultural tasks. Thus, food products that will keep for longer and shorter periods of time figure significantly and local meal patterns make time for indigenous culinary contexts and also respond to hegemonic pressures pilling from Argobba involvement in trade and wage labour in towns. This article examines the cultural assumptions and social practices through which these food identities are constructed and how in turn they inform the production, distribution, preparation and consumption of foods. It looks at household practices by comparing towns and rural settings because the structure of Argobba household time related to food habits depends above all on the length and combination of the undertakings. It explores how the scale and scope of the current condition of Argobba alimentation is in the process of erosion and alteration due to contact with neighbouring Amhara, Oroomo and Afar foodways, caused by the introduction of foreign foods and seemingly by the reorientation of trade trails and modern markets and marts related to changing commercial currents, and entrepreneurial and wage labour engagements in north-eastern Šäwa and south-eastern Wällo.

Keywords: Meals, Menus and Manners, Foreign Foods, Formation and Alteration of Alimentation, Argobba, Šäwa/Wällo, Ethiopia.

Introduction

This article is about ideas and practices pertaining to the production, distribution, preparation and consumption of food among the Muslim Argobba of Ethiopia and how they ascribe meaning to food habits and to the ways in which they find value in foods and foods give value to social relations. For the Muslim Argobba food expresses relations internal to Argobba alimentation, either in terms of meals, menus and manners, or with regards to gender relation within the household. This is expressed as in who serves what to whom, where and in what quantities, or still in informal food exchanges, as in establishing social links among and giving gifts to men and women relatives, neighbours, and friends. It also is an essential idiom, both for drawing hierarchy and for expressing relationships within and outside groups. These relations are typically expressed in terms of what foods are consumed by some wealthy Muslim Argobba trader families and poor Argobba peasant households, and by the Muslim Argobba and their non-Muslim Amhara, and Muslim Oromo and Afar neighbours. Such relationships prevail within the structure of Argobba household time that depends on the length and combination of tasks. For example, the growing of grain crops up to putting

bread on a 'table' as a finished product involves processes frequently taking place inside the household. What is then the place food occupies in the Argobba daily household schedule? How much time is devoted to the production, procurement and storage of foods, food preparation, and the taking of meals? Does food occupy more and more time in the daily Argobba schedule despite the presence of other equally important household and farm field activities? Is there variation in Argobba foods as a function of activities? What is the relationship between the traditional agrarian and religious food calendars, the calendar of workdays versus free or feast days, and the contrast between Argobba ordinary foods and holiday or holyday foods, which stress the passing of the year and the cycle of life? The answers to these questions speak volumes to reveal that time, in Argobba society, is not considered as a resource, and hence the 'rational' use of household time, as Appadurai (1984:17) and Sabban (1996:335) suggest, does not exist, but that the general concept of time treats only 'task time' (*yä səra*/*šəqqäla sä'at*).

The article draws on a wide range of theoretical approaches to the ecology, sociality, temporality, cosmology and political economy of food because they are critical to the definition of how the Argobba identify themselves in terms of ethnic ties, gender, age, social class, and religion.[2] These food usages are part of what the Argobba take for granted; they form the implicit rules that regulate the routine and ritual practices to which the Argobba, as Appadurai (1981:499) shows for rural India, unconsciously conform to the culinary norm of daily diet in Argobba society. The article therefore explores the extent to which meals construct ethnic identity and social boundary, and describes ritual meals during fasting and feasting moments in Argobba Muslim households and in places of pilgrimage. It discusses the ways in which Argobba cooking

[2] Robertson-Smith's (1889) systematic account of sacrifice places great emphasis on the commensality of the shared meal as symbolic of social bonds and ritual enactments. Fortes (1936) describes Tallensi food and domestic relations; Richards (1939) examines economic aspects of Bemba foods; Malinowski (1922) analyses Trobriand pigs and yams; Evans-Pritchard (1956) explains how Nuer sharing of foods defines social groups; Firth (1934) confirms that indigenous foods have sociological meanings; Mead (1970) looks at the changing significance of foods. Similarly, theoretical dimensions of food taboos speak volumes by way of Douglas (1967), Leach (1968), Lévi-Strauss (1965) and Tambiah (1969). For Turner (1967) foods are highly charged symbols, while for Goody ((1982) food is an indicator of social inequalities and competition that can mask authority, hierarchy, and power relations. 'Food for thought' (Caplan 1994) and, I would add, 'for feeling' (Appadurai 1991) and 'for fighting' (Young 1971) has also captured the imagination of modern ethnography on habits that are both culinary and dietary.

and cuisine are not standing still but are waving loyalty towards transformation caused by local, regional, national, and 'global market exchanges', to use the phrase of Appadurai (1996:56). It looks at the cultural and social practices through which these identities are expressed and how they in turn inform food production, distribution, preparation and consumption. In so doing, it elaborates the past and present culinary customs and circumstances of the Argobba, and shows how they are in a state of alteration resulting from the rerouting of trade networks and markets associated with changing socio-economic and political conditions, labour migration and the introduction of foreign foods in the region under consideration.

In the process, the article spells out how the Argobba have become accustomed to such alien foods and new modes of preparation and distribution and how such alterations have changed the ways in which food has expressed social relations in terms of ethnic, class and gender identity, food familiarity and novelty, food abundance and scarcity, hunger and satiety, and finally change and continuity. It highlights the relative importance of the social and symbolic function of Muslim meals, menus and manners and explains food politics and aesthetics and the gendered meanings behind the organisational formation and reorientation of Muslim foodways in changing commercial, entrepreneurial, and employment environments. By extension it shows how children are socialised within gendered relations embedded in foodways; interrogates meals not only for how they emphasise and hierarchise gender differences, but also for how the organisation of dinner 'tables' and 'table' manners and 'palates' or 'plates' reflects social differentiation that is loaded with gendered meanings. In so doing, it and provides answers to questions related to the material life of cooking and cuisine at a time when fewer and fewer Argobba are producing the foods they consume, and many are drawn away from their rural homelands either as merchants or as wage labourers where they are in touch with foreign food menus and manners in an Argobba inhabited Amhara *kəlləl* administration undergoing rapid social, economic and political transformation in an Ethiopian region.

Plates and palates of 'little known societies', to use Foucault's (1969:11) phrase, such as the Argobba have always received disproportionate attention in the general Ethiopian system of alimentation. For example, many are at present far more aware and informed on the culinary customs of the Amhara than on the far more numerous food habits of other Ethiopian societies (Perret 2005:257). Even within the Amhara, people know more about the food

preferences of the elite and *haute cuisine*, to use the phrase of Revel (2013:146), than they do about the ordinary foodways of commoners, peasants, lower classes, and of their markets or mini markets, and street shops and vendor stands (*gullət gäbäya*). And when people manage to discover these popular or exotic edibles, they are not presented in their proper cultural context but are rather referred to *via* references to the dominant Amhara or Oroomo foodways. For example, *qənççe*, *çäççäbsa and çəkko* are at present prominent Amhara and Argobba aliments although in origin they are part of Oroomo food habits.[3] These movements of labour and food products within the Argobba homeland settlements and among families and kinsmen are eroding, modern market exchanges are increasing, and symbols and ideologies are struggling to encompass transformations in structures of cuisine, discourses about food and foodways, and practices of cooking and serving that together form complex food habits central and pivotal to the culinary culture of Argobba societal character.

History and Ethnography of Food Ecology

The Muslim Argobba of Ethiopia of north-eastern Šäwa and south-eastern Wällo inhabit a long chain of settlements, some connected with each other, others scattered among Christian Amhara and Muslim Oroomo peoples but all flanked by the Muslim Afar—whom the Argobba usually and popularly refer to as Adal—on the eastern fringes of their homelands located along the escarpment slopes of the eastern margins of the Rift Valley system that define the edge of the Ethiopian plateau from Mənğar in the south to Qallu in the north. While those who live among the Christian Amhara use Muslim food prescriptions and inherent Islamic dietary laws to distinguish themselves as Argobba, the Qallu Wällo Argobba of the Argobba *wäräda* of Šonke/Sänqälle or Ǝssoyyä Həğğərota and Ǝssoyyä Wata in particular project language as a distinct marker of their ethnicity to separate themselves from Muslim Oroomo identity.

The existence of a continuous Argobba Muslim population stretching from north-eastern Šäwa to south-eastern Wällo in what is today Argobba *wäräda* in *kəlləl* Amhara of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia suggests that Argobba settlements of the past were more widespread than their present

[3] *Qənçe* is butter-based barley, while *çäççäbsa* and *çəkko* commensurate with barley bread mashed in butter and barley flour mashed in butter respectively. The historical and ethnographic account of food ecology is largely drawn from my book published in 2006.

locations and intermediate points. As a result of the socio-economic and political connection that existed between the Argobba peasants and their feudal Wälasma dynasty rulers, and the fortunes of the Muslim sultanates which developed in north-eastern Šäwa and south-eastern Wällo between 1270 and 1415, there is evidence suggesting that the present Argobba of *sämen* Šäwa and *däbub* Wällo are a remnant population of the Sultanate of Yəfat (Abbebe Kifleyesus 2006:39-88). The fact that Argobba villages are today situated on hilltops partly suggests that such settlement sites were chosen for defense purposes against the sixteenth-century Ahmad Grañ invasion and the subsequent Oroomo population migration which swept throughout the highlands of the Amhara and the escarpment slopes of the Argobba and disturbed the demographic map of this region in particular and that of Ethiopia in general (Abbebe Kifleyesus 2006:39-88). This is perhaps why the Argobba are at present found interspersed among their Amhara and Oroomo neighbours and live contiguous to Afar lands, loosing language and copying or adopting Amhara and Oroomo mode of living as well as cooking and cuisine.

The rise of the Kingdom of Šäwa during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries became a prelude to the Amhara settler penetration into the Argobba escarpment slopes. With Nəgus Sahlä Səllase (1806-1847) and Nəgus Haylä Mäläkot (1847-1855) and their successors the Argobba homelands were by the nineteenth century slowly but surely incorporated into the royal estates of the Kingdom of Šäwa (Abbebe Kifleyesus 2006:39-88). During this same century the erosion and gradual culmination of landed Wälasma feudal authority and Argobba regional political economy was facilitated by Angoläla/Ankobär-based state taxation and continuous Christian Amhara settler penetration. More seriously, the opening of the *Chemin De Fer Franco-Éthiopiennes* Djibouti-Addis Ababa railway during the first two decades of the twentieth century bypassed trade routes that crossed Argobba settlements and marginalised and turned them into backwaters. After the 1950s, the Argobba, who had established commercial posts and actively participated in local and regional markets for centuries, began to in significant numbers migrate and reposition themselves in urban and semi-urban centres along the Däbrä Bərhan-Däse and Nazret-Awaš-Manda roads in search of commercial engagement and entrepreneurial employment. The contemporary culinary custom of the Argobba homelands is thus formed by a number of geographical, historical and cultural contours from within and outside the borders of these regions of Šäwa and Wällo.

In as much as the Oroomo population movement and Amhara settler penetration of earlier centuries were accompanied by new foodways and novel culinary habits in and around the Argobba homelands, the arrival of the railway during the second half of the twentieth century and indeed the road connection to Addis Ababa from Däbrä Sina and Däbrä Bərhan also brought foreign foods that the Argobba were eventually unable to produce and control by themselves due to shortage of cash circulation in the rural lands. With Argobba migration to such urban and semi-urban milieu their means of livelihood shifted, as Vaughan (2019) reiterates for Eastern Šäwa, from cultivation to weaving and trading, and alien cooking and cuisine practices gained momentum as a result of close contact with commercially concocted coking commodities coming from modern markets and marts outside Argobba village settlements and initiated by engagement in wage labour in urban centres.

Thus, as much as there are periods of smooth functioning of market places and their food products, moments of commercial crisis also form the watersheds of change in feeding habits (Guyer 1987:23). Such socio-economic transformations experienced in recent years led to Argobba involvement in the material production and reproduction as well as consumption of processed and prepacked foods which in turn created, as Bevan (2019) demonstrates for Eastern Šäwa, increased economic inequalities, eroded indigenous cooking and cuisine, substantially affected the structure and the function of Argobba dietary systems, and radically changed their agriculture and cuisine culture. The Argobba of both the villages and the towns are therefore increasingly becoming dependent on cash resources and foreign food habits; and intermittent droughts and food shortages as well as the need for cash to pay government taxes are driving them into trade networks and the purchase of market-produced cooking commodities.

In these rural homelands, the Argobba who now number around 40,000 people, terrace their lands using ox-drawn ploughs, and fully utilise these marginal cultivable spaces and places in order to maximise their agricultural production along the eastern edge of the escarpment slopes.[4] Most Argobba settlements receive enough rainfall to grow cereals such as sorghum (*zängada—Sorghum vulgare*), millet (*mašəlla—Sorghum bicolor*), maize (*boqqollo—Zia mays*), peas (*atär—Pisum sativum* or *šəmbəra—Cicer*

[4] Ethiopia, Central Statistics Office, National Census (2016).

arietinum), beans (*baqela—Faba bona*), lentil (*məssər—Lens culinaris*) and *čat* (*Catha edulis*) twice a year but they also trade and practice weaving in order to supplement agricultural earnings.[5] During years of rainfall shortages and intermittent droughts, of which there have been numerous ones, decline in food production, as Pankhurst (2019) shows for *kəllәl* Amhara in general, are common experiences. In Argobba escarpment settlements such as Bärähāt, Mäṭäqəläya and Rasa, grains such as barley (*gäbəs—Hordeum vulgare*), as Zemede Asfaw (2003) shows for Ethiopia in general, and wheat (*sənde—Triticum aestivum*) are staple foods while many also raise some cattle, sheep, and goats. Since they largely live on lentil and grains and some slaughtered stock as well as on dairy products of animals, the diet of the Argobba is high in carbohydrates and fibres and low in animal protein foods.

The interlocking networks of kinship and marriage, and social relationships ranging from social visitations, voluntary associations (*əddər*), as Elias Yitbarek (2008) and Pankhurst (2008) show for urban Ethiopia, rotating credit associations (*əqqub*), as Mulugeta Gashaw (2019) shows for Eastern Šäwa, to moments of fasting and feasting and pilgrimage to saintly sites, as Abbebe Kifleyesus (2016 and 2018) demonstrates for the Argobba of Ethiopia, and reciprocal exchange of food gifts and prestations amongst loved ones, and exchange of services and goods such as sugar and salt in markets and marts are appealing and entertaining. These is because they allow the Argobba purchase food items from same social settings and thus seemingly rub elbows with both the elite and commoners, and because they permit the Argobba spend their time and that of others taking their quota or share of flattery and attention. It is also because they provide a coherent inclusive system of social ties which, in effect, define Argobba individual redistributive obligations and bring them together in a constantly changing disposition of ritual events and "calendrical celebrations", to use Leach's (1950:250) phrase.

Reciprocity and redistribution thus create ties of social networks that are maintained largely through the ritualised exchange of Argobba foods and beverages, and there is a rich repertoire of food-and drink-based gifts to

[5] Relations with kinsmen and neighbours are affirmed and renewed through the sharing and offering of *ḉat*, whose chewing sessions create friendship and comfortable fellowship unavailable in any other form of social relation. For a detailed study on *ḉat*—a small tree or shrub, whose young leaves, stem tips and tender barks are chewed for stimulating effects—see Cassanelli (1986) and the rich list of references at the end of the article. For a more recent study on the economic history of *ḉat*, see Ezekiel Gebissa (2004).

acknowledge such events and relationships. For example, gifts (*ḥadəyya*) that accompany requests and needs may involve coffee beans to *sufi* sheikhs, chicken and eggs to patrons, or simply sugarcane stalks (*šonkora'agäda—Saccharum officinarum*) to neighbours or friends. Even when labour and services are articulated between households, food again lubricates social relations between their members.[6] For example, in case relations between kin and friends cool, invitations that involve casual prestations of foods and beverages reinforce the social ties between them. The Argobba therefore operate within the world of food gifts and prestations in order to conform to the cultural norms of their homelands.

In these social scenes, the Argobba meet kinsmen, close and distant relatives, in-laws, prospective brides and grooms, and neighbours, and persons connected through combinations of these ties, and engage in the exchange of food products as hosts and guests, patrons and clients, and as traders and customers careful and watchful of *ḥalal* and *ḥaram* profit margins, within informal Muslim merchant or trade traditions during different seasons.[7] It is also in these social surroundings that Argobba men cultivate and trade while women assume tasks such as cooking, child rearing and caring, tending the dwelling and doing petty marketing. As a result of the products that the Argobba household receives as the fruits of its collective labour, certain categories of commodities are contributed by specific family members. For example, vegetable and poultry products and crops with curing/healing properties are handled by women while grain products and camels and goats are managed by men.

The much-expected harvest season, roughly between September (*Mäskäräm*) and October/November (*Ṭəqqəmt*/*Hədar*), is, for example, when the landscape is most alive and beautiful, the fields are green and lush in August (*Nähase*), and gradually turn gold, and every breeze moves the grains in waves and ruffles the leaves of their stalks. The rains have stopped, the harsh *Ṭəqqəmt* cold and winds have not yet begun, the weeding is done but the back-breaking

[6] See Young (1971:19), Appadurai (1991:48) and Caplan (1994:63) devote several pages for other perspectives concerning such arguments.

[7] The Argobba are Muslim in both the religious and ethnic sense, and Islam with all its *shari'a*-based constituencies and distinctions between edible (*ḥalal*) and non-edible (*ḥaram*) foods is thus deep-rooted, well understood and strictly followed by all Argobba Muslims. Argobba religious discourses in the form of "purity and pollution" thus mark out certain culinary categories of food as taboos. For flesh food as a marker of boundary grounded on religion, see Fiquet (2006).

harvest and *däbo*-based communal threshing is still ahead. The expectation for a good harvest is daily visible in the ripening fields where by then it is too late for rain or drought to do much damage, unless uncertainties prevail. Prolonged rains made harvesting difficult since crops harvested wet would not thresh properly and might rot before it dried. The high spirit and huge expenditures of energy that usually characterise the harvest season are quite literally dampened, and Argobba families make every effort to remain cheerful and relaxed despite the ever-present risk of crop failure of which there have been several in the past.

Argobba peasants are alert to signs of crop condition and weather alteration. On several rainy days in any particular month of any particular year, breakfast, for example, may shade or slide imperceptibly into what in other societies is defined as lunch. During such difficult times no one left the house more than briefly, women roasted boiled beans called *ašuq* and cooked some larger dishes, and breakfast comes late and becomes a rather long-drawn-out affair in which sleepy men and children, still wrapped in blankets in which they had slept, poked at 'plates' of grain (usually barley) breads or bowls of roasted or toasted beans or peas called *qolo*. When crops are judged dry enough to harvest, all household members go to the field long before dawn to begin work, then, smelling of the out-of-doors. They came briskly back to the house for breakfast (*qurs*) and hungrily took their first nourishment after several hours of hard work. *Qurs* can thus become a work break marking the pace of the agricultural day, rather than a social event as it had been before. Likewise, the cooking of *qurs* as a main meal may change from an early morning welcome food shared by all female household members to but one involving women's work in animal tending and cooking and may even simultaneously stretch to child caring.

The harvest season is not only the time of ceremonies and fresh foods, but also of reunions of families too often set apart. Despite the financial needs and market exchanges that drives men to towns and the peer pressure to conform to the norm of schedules of commercial engagement and town employment, almost all Argobba come home and stay home for the harvest. Some men, after missing a few days of work or trade in towns, look forward for the *sufi* saint holydays during the third month of the *Hijra* calendar (*rabi'al awwal*) ahead and simply don't bother to go back to towns. In a long year marked by a struggle to survive Amhara, Oroomo and Afar cultural domination, this short but intense period is, as Benkheira (2009) indicates for a Muslim community

in Maghreb Africa, one in which Argobba religious rituals including *Maulid*/*Eid Al-Fitr*, *Adaha/Arafa* and pilgrimages to saintly sites through *ziyyara/wärra* are indigenously and ethnically celebrated. This is because they, as shown by Olmstead (1997:78) in the Gamo highlands, all fall within the contours of Argobba agricultural and cosmological charts. Others return to the rural settlements as the season progresses and the need for extra hands in the fields becomes more pressing.

It is true that the burden of sending children to school robs the family of children shepherds who have traditionally pastured herds and flocks and looked after field farms against wild animals and birds and makes it difficult for women to take over the work of farming and herding. This conflict constitutes the contradiction that education has created for rural Argobba women and has imposed on them a rigid school schedule not built around the agricultural work schedule of these rural communities, and more importantly school-days falling at even with harvest times have robbed families of the labour of their children. Yet schools too soon begin to empty when short-handed families, with reluctance, take away older children out to assist in harvesting or to free mothers' time by taking over the herding or still to help them in water hauling, fuel fetching and cloth washing in the height of the harvest season. This period is indeed one in which households reassemble their fragmented family labour resources and reschedule mealtimes around workdays and social lives rather than bending and bowing to schedules imposed from certain circles.

This adds to a sense of power and self-worth that is strong in the harvest period, when the sight of grain filling the granary (*gotära*/*gäbäta*) gives an illusionary hope that the family can depend on its own resources to revive and survive. The year then has a conspicuous character determined by the agricultural calendar and is celebrated by a series of "seasonal rituals", to borrow Harrison's phrase (2004:591), involving special stews and soups. For example, marriage celebrations fall within the period *Mäskäräm* to *Ṭər* and are accompanied by distinct dishes and, likewise yearly pilgrimages to saintly tomb sites are accomplished during this very season and are full of *hadra* or prayer sessions and *hadəyya* or food gifts and prestations. Indeed, the changing colours and smells of the escarpment slopes are linked with periods of plenty and scarcity in the life of the hearth; everyday Argobba social patterns, the passing of the seasons, and the coming of special occasions such

as *Ramadan* rituals are all reflected and created through the making of menus and meals.

This then is the season that marks an extraordinary period punctuated by marital movements, and thus moments when newly-wed young grooms and brides on mule-back descend and ascend the various escarpment slopes of the Argobba homelands to begin a long, slow journey of establishing a nuclear family. As stated earlier, this also is the season when *sufi* saint sites received pilgrims in search of, among other things, well-being and offspring. It is therefore a season of plenty and fertility featuring a contrast between the fresh green foods of harvest time and the dried foods eaten during the rest of the year. Following the harvest season, the year literally 'dies', and it is almost quite time until *Mäggabit* or March and *Miyazəya* or April bring back the *mähär* or little rains. Indeed, the harvest period comes at the end of the 'living' half and is, as Ingold (2017:195) convincingly concludes, the most intensely alive of all. Yet, it is harvesting which empties the fields and marks the beginning of the 'dead' period. This is precisely why the growing of food crops determines the shape of time (Dresch 1975:14; Giddens 2015:97-98) and space (Lucas 1973:51; Giddens 2015:104). For example, 'task time' (*yä səra/šəqqäla sä'at*) revolves around the needs of crops and animals, while the 'larger time'(*gəze/wäqt*) within the calendar year is, as Caristein (1982:81) argues, shaped by the agricultural cycle.

There are thus times of stubbly, empty fields, times of gleaning newly exposed red or black earth waiting for seed, times of bright young green and of golden yellow crops. Finally, there are the times when the earth is full of grain ready to be brought from field to the front-yard and then to the hearth. These are therefore times that are intimately related to cooking and cuisine, seasons that shaped dietary desires, and the changing colours and smells of the land that linked periods of plenty and scarcity in the life of the hearth. When the new grains and legumes colour the fields a dense dark green, the hearth too is invaded by a plentiful of fresh-tasting grain and legume stalks (*əšät*). Gradually, as the dry gold ripe grains and legumes overwhelm the eye outdoors, the same colour fills the hearth where piles of grain and legume stalks for fuel lie indoors.

Similarly, sacks of pale gold grain glut the air as the kernels are ground and baked into bread (*ənğära*), a term also popularly used as a metonym for food and indeed for wealth in general. The periods of emptiness in the farm fields

are represented by darkness and gloominess in the hearth. The calendar, as Baxter (1984:467) reiterates for Arsi Ethiopia and Whyte (2004:182) does the same for eastern Uganda, then, is shaped by the production of foods in which the year is defined not only by agricultural work but also by the rites that celebrate the passage of the seasons, and by the rituals of daily dishes determined by the seasons. In such societies, 'task time' is part of social activities and therefore time is socialised whereas in industrial societies, 'clock time' organises activities measured by duration and thus time is commodified (Giddens 2015:9).

Nowadays, the Argobba *wäräda* homelands in *kəlləl* Amhara are, as Dom *etal*. (2019) show for *Oroomiya*, increasingly becoming dependent on cash resources and foreign food habits. Bakery breads and factory biscuits are, for example, forcing Argobba youngsters to skip regular meals and thus their tendency to eat anything anytime or snacking or their continual feeding or 'grazing' as a way of eating is replacing rural foods and 'patterns of timing and indeed eating' (Mennell 1996:199). The shared meal unites family members whereas missing or skipping a meal is tantamount to risking both the status of one's own presence in and the cohesion of the family of which one is a member. So breaking bread together is no longer the focal point of family meal all seated round a bamboo 'table', as Murcott (2011:35) points out using other ethnographic experiences.

But over the years, as Theis (2021) demonstrates for Sudan's Kordofan, it introduced watersheds of change in food habits and greatly affected the structure of mealtimes, the function of culinary customs and radically altered Argobba 'modes of thought', to use Horton's (1971) phrase, of timing revolving around farming, livestock herding, and family gathering involving eating.[8] The erosion of indigenous cuisine resulting from the material production and reproduction as well as cultural consumption of processed and pre-packaged foods furnished by involvement in trade networks and wage labour earnings in towns is the beginning of their rescheduling of the time of eating. In all these food functions, the hearth represents the centrality and continuity of the household and family, and it is women who toil inside it with domestic tasks of utmost necessity.

[8] For a similar observation using different ethnographic experiences, see Flandrin (1996:268) and Scholliers (1996:251).

Household Hearth

Argobba codes of cuisine are closely intertwined with the life of the hearth, not only in making meals but also in following seasons, feeding family members and disposing of food remains. This is perhaps why the hearth is ultimately and intimately related to cooking, eating and cleaning, and it hence shapes diet and cuisine within Argobba culinary customs. The Argobba household produces and reproduces the means of subsistence and the relations of production and the intimate details of hearth activity within it reveal a great deal about Argobba Muslim family and society. The hearth, as used in this context, is a clearly discernible sub-set nestled in the household. As part of the kitchen (*mä'ad bet*, literally a house where food is commonly consumed), centred on the earthen oven, the hearth is a concept that children, men, and women themselves employ in their daily lives. In this sense, the term *mä'ad bet* implies both the household space (*mağät*) for food preparation as well as the place for food consumption. Indeed, all domestic drudgeries are handled by the household hearth, where women cook and transform 'raw' products into nourishing 'cooked' foods (Levi-Strauss 1970). It is also here that members of the household gather, eat, occasionally sleep, and where children are born and socialised.

The social organisation of the Argobba household hearth and its various activities involving production and consumption thus reflect social and symbolic meanings of cooking and cuisine through mother and child, brother and sister, husband and wife, and consanguineal and affinal relations. Their relative dominance over and subordination to one another can be seen in the labour invested in cooking, serving and cleaning up, and in the ideological practice interwoven into the activities of the hearth where there is a shift of the focus of attention from the notion of the 'people of the escarpment' as a unified culture confronting choice and change to hearth experiences that are individual and role-specific. [9] Hence kinds of foods, ways of cooking, cuisine, and manners of eating, are the building blocks from which social meaning is constructed by individual Argobba household hearths. Such a specific practice of the household hearth serves to ensure the reproduction of social meanings and thus defend the family's ability to reproduce itself within the household. This ability depends not only on relations of kinship and marriage, but also on

[9] Althusser (1971) calls ideology a practice of representation that fixes the relationship by which the individual represents himself in his/her world of objects. It provides the positions from which individuals can act and represent themselves and others within the totality of social events.

the Argobba relations of production that govern the activity of the household hearth and its articulation within the larger Šäwa and Wällo regional economy.

This household hearth is therefore the epicentre of early socialisation, not only through social interaction but through the sense of experiences of taste, touch, and smell. Indeed, also through the spatial orientations implicit in its architecture and the arrangements of objects and utensils, storage of grains, placement of foods, spices and condiments, and ornamentation of its walls, and the physical and temporal rhythms found in the division of labour that allows some members of the family to benefit from the labour of others. The hearth therefore occupies a principal place in the family's economic life, altering the results of its productive activities into consumable forms, and thus 'standing' in between food production and consumption. The cultural construction of this transformation lies in the conversion of products obtained through Argobba households' commercial connection with the world beyond its walls into the manners, menus and meals that are consumed within the hearth by its members. It is here that the structures of Argobba cuisine transforms these food products of diverse ecologies and economies into a formation or composition that is a culturally domesticated culinary creation cast for consumption.

Owing to Islamic religious ethos dung (*dərdər* or *fəg*), is not, as in Christian Amhara households, used in plastering internal walls or the smearing of ground floors of kitchens or still in the smoothening of threshing grounds. Neither is it used for making hearth articles such as *məṭad* (earthen oven pan used for baking *əngğära*), whose surface is always smoothed using oil seed grease, *akämbalo* (lid of the pan), *wäfćo* (base of the grinding stones), and *gotära* (grain stores). The manufacturing of most of these hearth articles, the Amharic names of which have been adopted by the Argobba, whose language is quickly and certainly giving ground to the Amharic language, is instead accomplished using clay. The material life of the household hearth is made up of things gathered and grown, things bought, and things made and traded. The straw to fuel the fire comes from the surrounding bush lands. At the hearth the women's experienced and dexterous hands steadily feed the fire with wood, twigs, and straw, spreading the thin dried leaves and grasses so that the flame catches evenly and efficiently and burns hot during cooking.

Pulses or leguminous crops such as *adäng^{w}arre* (*Vigna unguiculata*) and oil seeds such as linseed or *tälba* (*Linum usitatissimum*) are exchanged with the

people of the highlands while salt slabs and grinding stones are bought in the market from the Afar people from the lowlands. Women's ability to at the hearth transform the foreign into the domestic, the strange into the familiar, is significant because of the heterogeneity of Argobba household economic strategy in this rural society. As a core cultural activity, cooking is the means by which the natural world is domesticated and made social (Lévi Strauss 1965:56), and the way by which the hearth internalises the external world. Just as, at the level of physical reproduction, the long-term survival of the family depends on bringing people in from other families through marital ties, so its day-to-day survival depends on the hearth's conversion of external products into cooked meals for household members.

Much of the social significance of cooking, a process that involves not only processing and combining but also categorising and naming, has therefore to do with matters internal to the Argobba household hearth, whereas the ordering of foods in Argobba cuisine refers to the process in between production and consumption. It is through the transformation of labour into the means of palate satisfaction that the Argobba household hearth establishes a unified cultural identity in consumption patterns. In other words, the hearth transforms products of diverse ecologies and economies into something specially made ready for Argobba consumption categories. Thus, the messages carried by images of cooking may be seen in the light of production and consumption, in the acquisition of the raw materials, in the processing and preparation, and indeed in the labour represented by the completed meal within the household hearth.[10]

The Argobba hearth defines the home not only by daily transforming external production into internal consumption and by way of those who eat together but also by the fact that it is in the kitchen that the meals are made and consumed, storage is kept, household decisions made, neighbours entertained, baths taken, hair dressed and evenings spent. In a word, the hearth is a home, and the conceptual basis in the foundation of the nuclear family or family of orientation is the formation of a new kitchen within the household. On a daily basis, the use of lineal or generational kinship terminologies refers to Argobba family members who share space in the hearth by of the older generation that

[10] This excessive preoccupation with exchange and circulation merely means a reduced representation but not an oversimplification or distortion of market transaction. Both Baxter (1984:464) and Hamer (1994:135) report related observations in Arsi villages and Sidama settlements, southern Ethiopia, respectively.

feeds and the younger one that is fed. Food, not blood, is then the tie that binds (Bakhtin 1984:61). Indeed, Argobba individuals joking, gossiping, arguing about hearth cooking, are frequently focused on mother/daughter, husband/wife, consanguineal/affinal/in-law, and host/guest relations. Here women are answerable only to their husbands, who consider cooking as work outside the male domain. In the absence of women, Argobba men can 'cook' for themselves, but they consider their cooking as an *ad hoc* improvisation attempted without the benefit of women's knowledge within the household hearth.

The products of these various hearth activities are given social value, and women as main actors are, as Yared Amare (1997) shows for Wogda Amhara, accorded social worth, in ways that reinforce the social structure of the Argobba household and the power relations within it. In such a household setting, whether it be the stove (*mədəğğa*) or the spindle (*ənzərt*), Argobba women's hearth tools are an inseparable part of their nature, so that the process of cooking and other hearth tasks assigned to them are subject to female representations. The image of the hearth is then intrinsically associated with that of women, as mothers, wives, sisters, sisters-in-law, daughters, daughters-in-law. The whole conceptual framework called 'hearth' is therefore considered to be the exclusive prerogative of the female gender. Indeed, Argobba production and preparation of alimentation is still centred on the household hearth. Around this fire-side women cook and wash, and family (*betä säb*) matters are discussed by the father figure or patriarch (*abba wärra*) and the mother (*əmma*). Hence some aspects of what is eaten, in what manner it is eaten, and where, and when, and how, continue to excite Argobba commentary, innuendo, and gossip whenever there is food to eat and Argobba women to cook it.

Women's Work

The succession of household activities and the division of the year into ordinary and orgy moments is guided by, as Bourdieu (1963:41) demonstrates for 'Algerian peasant time', the Argobba peasant's almanac conditioned in turn by the seasonal rhythms, the organisation of household work schedules as well as by the shifts and reversals of various tasks imposed by the force of circumstance.[11] Food production is indeed temporal and 'task-tailored'

[11] The year is divided into four seasons (*kərämt*, *bäga*, *mähär*, *ṣädäy*) of unequal lengths but almost equal importance. For more elaborate consideration, see Mesfin Wolde-Mariam (1991).

because the ground is cultivated; the seeds are planted and cared for; crops must be harvested, and processed so as to put food on the 'table'. In this regard, workday meals in Muslim Argobba weekly cycle are rarely contrasted with, for example, Friday (*jum'áá*) communal meals. Instead, Muslim Argobba time underscores the relationship between daily and weekly chores and food calendars which are regulated according to 'seasonal solemnities' to use the phrase of Curtin (2013:127). The organisation of time, as indicated earlier, is therefore entirely task-tailored and 'labour and leisure oriented' (Giddens 1995: 136; Ingold 2017a:328) from one day to the next. For example, as Mulugeta Gashaw (2019a) shows for *Oroomiya*, men toil in the land and women fill their daily routine with a number of diverse drudgeries without making apparent distinctions between cooking chores, farm functions and other domestic duties. According to Gurvich (1961:11), Mellor (1981:111), and Aymard (1996:172), such societies are devoid of the domination of the modern concept of time and are instead cultures where time is constructed socially in terms of tasks and travails.

In such culinary circumstances, Argobba women's work includes preparing and serving food. Cooking meals, although an important part of women's work, is far from being their only preoccupation. Proper cooking is a function of the woman cook's aptitude to understand the phases and times of fire. This correlates with the fire's intensity—controlled by adding a greater or lesser amounts of twigs, bushes or woods—and with combustion time, all of which as processes require time. In other words, meal preparations, as Curtin (2013:131) shows, involve perusing menus, strategic planning in order to ensure that the dishes will be ready at the same time, tasting, experimenting, and deciding how to present the meal. When the meal is completed, the dishes are cleared, cleaned and returned to their proper places, ready for the next round of preparation, cooking, eating and cleaning. When an Argobba woman serves a dish, she has prepared, this offering of her labour is an act of submission. The meal is thus the product of an Argobba woman's domestic labour, showing her willingness to serve family members. Hence the preparation of food, as Ortner (1978:71) argues, is considered an act of servitude, the demonstration of subordination and service representation of social position.

The symbolism of serving food found in the formal structure of Muslim meals in Argobba households thus seems to place women at the bottom of the social hierarchy. However, as Appadurai (1981:497) and Holtzman (2002:263) point

out, despite this apparent powerlessness, the potential for 'gastro-politics' afforded to those who control the serving of meals is considerable. So much so that women allocate food according to their perception of the needs of various household members, derive pleasure and power in the domestic domain from their ability to choose when, how and to whom to distribute food and beverages in the Argobba household economy,[12] including visitors, guest and strangers. Their position around the cooking pot thus controls not only the order of serving but also the quantity and quality of what is served so as to stress the social inequality of those who eat together.

Moreover, women find meal preparation a more tedious and time-consuming labour-intensive activity in which water must be hauled, fuel fetched and carried in, fires lit, and grain ground with a mortar and pestle or grinding stone long before the actual cooking process starts. All these activities follow Argobba "seasonal rhythms" (Young 1988:36) and "indigenous timetables" (Heldke 2013: 204). For example, grinding grain to make bread is simply one of the last actions in the long process that begins when the earth is turned over for sowing seeds. Although Argobba women's posture and pace suggested leisure, they always had busy bodies and hands, never ceased to be occupied with peeling potatoes, chopping onions, roasting or toasting beans, breastfeeding, cotton spinning or coffee brewing. Meal preparation is thus a long and labourious undertaking that occupies most of the waking hours of the day in which the activities of farming, herding and cooking are not succinctly separated.

Women's work thus involves feeding the entire household, not just its human members, but also animal life including chicken. Indeed, a typical women's day begins with rising up at four in the morning in order to grind grain, bake *əngära*, prepare stew and brew coffee all served as breakfast just before dawn. As other family members scatter to perform a variety of tasks, women begin the long process of tending animals and chicken along with caring for infants and looking after children. They then leave to the field to assist in farm activities from where they return home at around four in the afternoon to begin cooking again for the early evening main meal. The remaining family members working in the fields struggle home in the early evening carrying fuel for fire in order to eat this early evening meal, then spend the remaining

[12]In crafting the phrase 'power in the domestic domain', I was enlightened by Netting's (1993:103) contextual and conceptual use of power and gender in the household.

early evening resting or playing with children, until coffee drinking ends the day sometime after dark.

Coffee (*bunna—Coffea arabica*)[13] drinking right after supper is a lengthy process involving not only drinking but also incense burning, some snack eating, and much sitting around talking to each other among family members and with neighbours or friends or gossiping, whilst women spin cotton or are in the middle of breastfeeding or child-caring. In this respect, the occasion for drinking coffee creates, as Montanari (1989:45) shows, conviviality, conversation and leisure, whereas the turn-taking drinking of coffee and sharing of food treats by women creates blood bonds between sisters and wives and long-lasting friendship between neighbours and strangers. Exhausted and fatigued from their early rising and working all-day long, the women fall asleep, well ahead of everyone else, with the youngest children on their lap and below their braless breasts. The men and older children joke and talk around the remnants of women's hearth-fire the rest of the evening.

Women cook for their family according to a pattern that reflects a two-main meal structure. But this is a certain circumstance found only during periods of time that escape from the strictures of men's occupation in towns. Indeed, Argobba traditional agricultural cycle involving the contrast such as that between the meals eaten during harvest time and those eaten the rest of the year is interwoven with the strictures of urban workweeks thus creating a new and complex pattern of meal time. Women's agricultural tasks are therefore also equally important and hence the two-main meal structure is suited to women's other productive activities. This schedule is particularly appropriate for women because its spacing of mealtimes allows for an extended uninterrupted period of daylight, morning to late afternoon, in which to deal with domestic drudgeries and, in some cases, to tend fields and pasture flocks that fit so easily into a "moral economy".[14] For women with absent trader husbands, the contrast between the imposed times of work and the 'structured times' of the agricultural cycle has, as Bourdieu (1963:40) and Elias (1992:73) suggest using different field experiences, thus in itself become part of the formal pattern of time.

[13] This ceremonially consumed drink is a beverage, an aphrodisiac, and a food. Three-four rounds of cups of strong black coffee will keep an Argobba peasant alertly working up to noon.

[14] For lucid elaboration on this concept, see Sahlins (1975:31-34;1976:51-52).

Despite pressure from town-derived mealtime patterns, the Argobba have staunchly resisted the rhythms imposed by such town patterns. For climatic reasons women cannot, for example, change the dates of the harvest. Such a calendar embraces this binary annual rhythm, concentrating all of its principal festivities between *Hamle* (July) and *Hədar (*November), during the five months that make up the high season of the year. It is a time when agricultural work is in full swing, when the harvest brings the men back home from towns, and when the entire family lives once again under the nourishing care of women, wives, and mothers. It is thus a time when women reclaim their food calendar, rearrange it to suit their tastes and concretely mark its high points by way of the content and form of meals and by reasserting their position and power in the hearth. As Pollock (2003:63) shows for the *Culina* of the Amazon, it is also a time when Argobba women are able to contain conjugal relations and procreation and ensure continuity of generation.

Rural women welcome the harvest period, not only because they miss their absent kinsmen and school children, but also because their social position as cooks and conjugal partners is returned to them. Women thus restore their self-esteem and image through cooking and conjugal relationships while men who trade and work for wages in towns reclaim their agrarian heritage during the harvest period. Women can now cook when and how they please, and their trader or wage-earner husbands, who eat so many meals in town taverns and who therefore are more likely to 'keep' or 'see' concubines or other unmarried or second wives, are now home to share meals and indeed also 'beds'. Women thus enjoy what they consider a return to their rightful position in culinary and conjugal relations, working in the field or sharing complementary chores side by side with men, but also sitting at the hearth ladling lentil for fathers and children and laying in 'bed' by the side of spouses. This also is the time when massively missed males meet super-cook and sex-athlete females. Men who fail to sexually satisfy women after such a long absence are considered as weaklings (sing. *yäwänd alləçça*/*ləfəsfəs*) because sexuality and virility legitimise the notion of masculinity (Robertson 1990:83; Meigs 2013:111).

Food metonyms and metaphors woven or ossified into the contours of copulation thus have a particularly powerful or potent conjugal connotation. Similarly, the mutual affection between spouses and their interest in sustaining the conjugal union is metonymically and metaphorically expressed as having 'grain and water' (*əhəl wäha*). Such smooth marital relation falls apart when their 'grain and water' diminishes or collapses (*əhəl wäha siyaləq* or

sizzägga).[15] Likewise, Argobba birth and marriage rites are all dominated by the popular discourse of foods and beverages in the form of sharing and gift giving that link kinsmen, neighbours, friends, and spouses through a series of foods and beverages that are both locally produced and come from foreign economies during good and lean years.[16] That is perhaps why Appadurai (1986:3) suggests that all food commodity gifts have social and metonymic meanings. Food therefore is a critical component of Argobba life-crises events.

The harvest season in these rural homelands, then, is imbued with the imagery of gender in which, for example, the male and female symbolism is associated with the division of the year into 'living' and 'dead' halves. Planting, for example, is associated with the fecundity of a female earth while harvest time occasions celebrations of fertility which also marks a "transition from life to death" (Appadurai 1991:106). In this Argobba tradition of imagining the year as composed of opposing halves, the year seems to have taken on connotations of plenty and scarcity. The symbolism inherent in the harvest season and the refusal to allow other social obligations to interfere with indigenous meals and mealtimes during this time of the year has thus to some extent enabled the rural Argobba to live like natives at this particular period.

This symbolism, rooted in the 'indigenous system of timing' (Newton-Smith 1980:71; Fekede Menuta 2015), links human bodies, seasons, and the escarpment slopes. At present it is given special poignancy because it actually serves to gather men in indigenous cultural celebrations and provides a glorious affirmation of the masculine potency of rural surroundings that at most times have become communities of women, children and the elderly. The presence of migrant men, who for sometime leave towns in order to participate in rural rites with rural folks, is, as Pankhurst (2007:165) recollects for Ethiopia in general, therefore, an annual attempt to reconfirm their commitment to rural roots through remittances and the giving of gifts and prestations that added up to the monetary and material exchanges of rural

[15] Food and the act of serving food are intrinsic to the political and ideological roles women play in marriage. As Clark (1994:54) shows for Asante market women, food and cooking food are so central to the concept of marriage that they often replace or serve as a euphemism for gender and marital relations. Thus, the act of cooking is also the material means that bears the cost for the care of raising children and the food eaten by them. This section of the discussion takes its inspiration from readings in Dwyer *etal.* (1988:13).

[16] These economic and cultural interactions shape the material basis, symbolic meanings and gendered relations of cooking and cuisine in Argobba rural community environment.

communities. Their return to rural roots also reasserts their rights to the produce of the land they inherited from their families. If they did not, these resources might be considered to belong to their wives or their sisters, and ultimately, they lose the claim to the land itself if they are too long absent from it.

In these rural settings, women must sometimes bear the description that labels their household and field labour as 'non-work'. This is a label that insidiously connects Amhara ideas about Muslim Argobba women's isolation or seclusion and 'idleness' or 'laziness' to their femaleness. However, in fields full of crops, corrals of animals, busy looms and spindles, muscled arms and calloused hands, the stereotype of Muslim women's 'idleness' or 'laziness' remains unchallenged by this Amhara 'inactivity' reference. This image pervades Christian Amhara conceptions of Muslim Argobba women, providing a central motif that the people of the region constantly express. So much so that it has even began to affect the perceptions of some Argobba traders and wage earners whose departure from the rural farmlands increases the burden of women's work, and, paradoxically, defines their household work and field work as non-work. Accordingly, trade and wage labour are defined as work, while domestic drudgery—even where this encompasses weeding, herding animals, hauling fuel and fetching water—disappears as household labour and becomes, as Veblen (1953:29) and Bittman *etal*. (2000:175) conclude, a kind of 'leisure'. Rural wives of wage-earning or merchant men thus find their tasks described as a form of 'house work' that is by definition not 'real work' because it does not involve income,

By definition Argobba time is divided into structured, valuable time recompensed with wages and commercial cash incomes, and 'unstructured time' (Frazer 1977:33) which neither valuable nor productive. This plays into existing Amhara reference about Muslim Argobba women's supposed inactiveness and idleness and Argobba trader and wage-earner men's conception of their ruralness. Such 'conceptualisation of time' (Gale 1968:42; Ricoeur 1975:17; Derib Ado Jekale 2015) as well as 'representation of time' (Leach 1961:133; Derib Ado Jekale 2015) and 'definition of work' (Bittman *etal*. 2000:167) threatens the cultural content of household work by redefining feminine fatigue or undermining their centrality in rural labour undertakings. For example, Argobba women invest time and energy in the harvest period in which cultural traditions predominate but also become defined as one devoted

to family and festivity and thus consigned to the domestic domain that both the Amhara and Argobba devalued as non-work.

Thus, as Argobba rural women become consigned to a domestic domain defined as lesser in value, even if the labour in question involves both the preparation of household products and the actual production of much of the food for family consumption, men engage in activities that are associated with what is public, vital and pivotal rather than domestic and irrelevant. Yet, whereas the work required for consumption is, as Appadurai (1984:17) demonstrates using the peasants of India, done beyond the bounds of production, outside the time and space of remunerated work, and whereas the dietary drudgery is, in contrast to work time, in Argobba traditions considered as time spent doing nothing or even as past time, consumption is, as Evans-Pritchard (1939:200) shows in Nuer time, in Argobba nuances of time and work defined as leisure time.

Timing of Eating

In the Argobba homelands, the meal is served in a proper order and time in a regular sequence of two main meals arranged symmetrically across the day involving "time telling" as (Gel 1992:86) and Dogen 2013:154) suggest, namely, morning meal (*qurs*), and evening meal (*ərat*). The rhythm of the day is thus maintained and clearly defined by two main mealtimes of various lengths. One at dawn (*nəgat*) and one in the early evening (*məššət*). This type of timing has the advantage of leaving a large block of time—from about 8am to around 4pm—for women's involvement in farm work, animal management, and other household chores. The pulling of mealtimes into two different directions is patterned after two separate types of tensions, namely, leisure time mainly tied to women's neighbourhood visitations, and work time including agricultural activities tied to solar day travel time or pilgrimage to saintly shrines where pilgrims are obliged to eat food prepared by non-wives and strangers.

Flexibility in mealtimes, as Holtzman (2007:445) points out for Samburu eating time and Oxby (1998:139) does the same for Sahara nomadic time of feeding, and sizes thus characterises life on daily basis, allowing the day to be shaped by the work that must be done, as well as by social needs and simple human moods and dietary desires. This kind of flexibility and temporality in mealtimes is lost when people begin to bend to metropolitan rhythms. Because here work and time are not loosely understood in terms of leisure and quality

time, but become more rigidly and sharply defined, and in the process their 'meanings changed' (Barnes 1971:543; Donham 2001:140). This implies that Argobba mealtime is not an abstract entity, a single thread, and empty frame or a 'dominant chord' to borrow the phrase of Sabban (1996:331) in which consumption takes place. Rather, it inversely is the uses to which it is put, its regularity and integrative functions, the conflicts it gives rise to, and the relationship it maintains with work that reflects its social and metonymic meanings.

Mealtime, as Curtin (2013:129) demonstrates, is experienced only briefly because it is transient and contextual and thus its 'moment' comes and goes. In this 'traditional time thought', to use the phrase of Hallpike (1979:5), the pre-dawn or dawn food fare includes a very large meal. This is predominantly hot and salty often accompanied by sour or sweet coffee, while the other large meal is eaten in the early evening. The meal structure of the Muslim Argobba who a earn a living through trade and wage labour in towns outside the Argobba homelands, on the other hand, reflects the influence of metropolitan three main meal eating habits, and hence its tendency toward symmetry may betray indigenous origins. In this latter system, a day begins with a small amount of *ənğära* mashed in stew (*fərfər*) and accompanied by cups of coffee, and is punctuated by a snack in mid-morning and a large meal (*məsa*)in the early afternoon. This heavy mid-day course is the hallmark of Argobba town-based traditional cuisine and the bulwark of family ration. At night another large meal is eaten, often very similar to the mid-afternoon fare. These food breaks, the daily chronology of meals, the hours at which they are taken, and the amount of time devoted to each are closely linked to the importance people place on meals. Such breaks directly determine the composition and arrangement of the foods and beverages habitually consumed at different times during the day or the year.

The Argobba are therefore well aware of temporal references such as the week or the year, opposition between work days and rest days, normal days and holidays/holydays, and between fasting periods or periods of food taboos and the rest of the year. Indeed, also between seasons, and between more or less long phases of intense work and, as Justin (1979:110) suggests, periods of more or less forced leisure. These two obligatory meals are principally associated with labour intensive farm field tasks such as weeding or harvesting, which mobilise all available hands (*däbo*) including neighbours. Such scenarios sometimes entail a workday, calibrated in traditional time

thought on the rising and setting of the sun. The ideological pressure to conform to metropolitan mealtimes thus has several origins. Young Argobba men who travel to urban centres to trade or work for wages learn the ways of the town and come home newly critical of food habits and time schedules they once took for granted.

But for some Argobba women, awareness of the mealtimes of towns comes from another source, namely, from children who attend public middle and secondary schools in small towns. As children are withdrawn from the workforce to pursue formal education, and Argobba men are absent from the farmlands seeking trade or wage labour, women not only become solely responsible for the farm for long periods of time, but they also become even more critical to household survival. With children in school and husbands tied with work and trade in towns, time is altered because meals must be cooked according to the schedule of husbands' and children's separate experiences. This creates new categories of time, defined by the presence or absence of family members. The domination of chronometric time does not thus completely suppress the "hour-marking or rhythm furnishing" (Thompson 1961:60; Young 1988:39) functions of Argobba common culinary conditions.

The nature of shared consumption, as Maclagan (2004:163) shows for a Yemeni community, whether between two persons or in a feast conveys culinary meanings in forms and conventions of apportion or in the sense of 'communion', to use the word of Turner (1974:67). Argobba commensal occasions range from *Ramadan* family meals to the entertainment of visitors and invited guests such as *sadaqa* or sacrificial and or alms meals, and to life-cycle and other ceremonial meals like meals during death or mourning moments. Such funerary rites and the three-day mourning time (*ta'əzziya*) for the dead involving lots of animal slaughtering and meat giving. Moreover, Muslim Argobba nutritional relation has a distinct and a well-developed pattern of sharing consumables among neighbours which, as Diouri (2004:238) exemplifies using a Moroccan ethnographic experience, is exalted to its highest during the months of *Ramadan*, *Arafa* and *ziyyara*.

In this, the ties of Argobba neighbourhood (*duda*) appear to operate independently of the existence of any other kinds of kin ties including distant and near. The Argobba thus do not conceive of the similarity between behaviour towards kin (*zämäd*) and behaviour towards neighbours (sing. *goräbet*) in terms of kinsmen behaving like neighbours but rather they

conceive it as neighbours behaving like kin outside traceable genealogical ties or assumed common descent. Those who eat together implicitly mark their common identity and equality because commensality is a demonstration of social solidarity among participants. This bear, as Hamer (1994:133) argues, moral implications of mutual support during moments of need. More definitively, commensality also implies shared understanding of what constitutes 'proper' food, and thus, as Meigs (2013:112) demonstrates, guests from other food traditions are expected to approve or applaud the food of hosts. The institution of hospitality or showing generosity and courtesy to guests and accepting the food offered is therefore a cultural and religious obligation.

Rules concerning commensality are, as Hamer (1994:135) shows for Sidamo Ethiopia, also significant markers of status and purity that define hierarchy within Argobba society. For example, non-Argobba individuals of slave background gobble gastro-intestinal parts of slaughtered animals which the Muslim Argobba would consider too vile to touch let alone to eat. Avoidance of food sharing, as Braukämper (1984:435) shows for southern Ethiopia, is therefore one indication of the social distinction between the Argobba and people of slave origin. The ultimate sanction of rejection, represented by withdrawal of commensal privileges, is thus a form of ostracism. Accordingly, the same reactions towards the same foods and beverages are not visible in all categories of individuals.[17]

Likewise, Argobba beliefs in spirit possession in general and belief in the evil eye (*buda*) in particular involves the person causing the possession or 'eating', the possessed or 'eaten', and the exorcist person called upon to relieve the possessed. Moreover, the *buda* offends dietary rules by eating carrion meat and other foods prohibited in Argobba alimentation while food as conspicuous consumption is believed to be connected to the frequent fear from the 'evil eye' or '*hassid*' attached to it. This is especially true if the person who is to consume the food is either vulnerable or is, as Yamani (2004:183) demonstrates using field notes from Saudi Arabia, in a position to be envied.

[17] Hamer (1994:32) arrives at a similar conclusion using the Sidama people of southern Ethiopia where food production and its distribution to others are a measure indicating individual or collective worth. I find his insights on commensality useful in noting the avoidance of food sharing as an indication of social distinction, in comprehending how hierarchy is connected with eating practices and in making sense of forms of commensal relationships in everyday living.

All these beliefs strongly suggest that a good deal of religious beliefs too is, in Evans-Pritchard's (1939:196) terms, negotiated around food.

Men eat with guests and older boys, women with girls and small children. On smaller, more informal family occasions men and women eat together. When members of an Argobba household include others in their meals, the meal is not so much a sharing of food but the giving or offering of food by hosts to guests. Even when the meal involves only household members, it is still conceived as a gift from parents to children and indeed women to men. When men have finished eating, women and children eat what is left. In other words, women, who do some of the work in growing food and are almost solely or exclusively responsible for its laborious preparation—including gathering wood and fetching water as well as manually pounding and grinding grain—serve themselves last and least. Indeed, Argobba men are favoured when it comes to allocating scarce food resources, and wives not only favour their husbands, and may amongst children differentiate between sons and daughters, but still practice what Whitehead (1981:66) and Heldke (2013a:305) call 'maternal altruism', giving themselves least. Here the calorific value of work is not represented in the pattern of food consumption within the family. Rather the pattern tends to guarantee priority rights in resources to 'important' members of Argobba society, who almost always are adult male figures. Hence rights to consume are distributed differently among the more and less important members within the family and community.

Normally, cooking brings all people together around the same cooking pot. Even if cooking of foods occurs at particular times, food may be set aside for someone who is not present; yet there is a strong sentiment for eating food while it is hot. Ideally, everyone eats out of one common family plate placed first before men; when they have finished eating, the women eat what is left for themselves and the children. This means that when women ladle food they make sure that men and children eat first of what is the best, while they themselves eat last of what is the rest. Indeed, women "demonstrate deference to male preference" (Caplan 2011:12). For example, if the meal is chicken stew (*doro wät*), men get breasts (*färäsäññña*) thighs (*mällalaça*), and legs (*əgər*) while women and children receive necks (*angät*), wings (*kənf*), and skin (*qoda*) pieces. Indeed, different members of the family eat different parts of the slaughtered animal, eat them at different times, and in different places. For example, kidneys and hearts are roasted for children right after slaughtering and eaten outside the hearth.

The head and the mandible are gradually boiled as soup and eaten inside the household at a time convenient to all family members. The cooking of these particular foods takes time and so family members tend to wait nearby during their preparation. Hence physical, temporal and social distance in the act of eating between age and gender categories is blurred and therefore this kind of cooking and eating or "food from family" (Caplan 2011:9) breeds familial and filial familiarity between household members. For example, men do not eat porridge in the company of women, a practice of "strict segregation" (Delamont 2018:174), formally followed even during delivery, but in this case "familiarity breeds contempt" to use the phrase of Sahlins (1976:91;1981:56).

Argobba family members eat together on a fairly regular basis. Eating together is not only obligatory but it is also a central cue for creating and cementing good social relations. Argobba wives' obligation to always have fresh food ready when husbands come home is of course the source of much conflict, along with serving as a symbol for disputes initiated elsewhere. When an angry or upset spouse decides to indulge in a full-fledged public airing of grievances the accusations that 'she has no food ready' when he is hungry, or that the meal awaits, long enough to turn cold, while 'he never comes home' are heard more often than any other complaints. The centrality of Argobba women at the household hearth as the very image of 'home' is revealed in these relationships. If the wife is supposed to serve food to her husband, he in turn is supposed to eat it. Otherwise, she will have a perfectly legitimate ground for contest and protest. Thus, meals are not only among the most relaxing and enjoyable moments the Argobba family spends together, providing the indulgence of gustatory satisfaction and the pleasure of social interaction between men and women and children but, by the same token, they often also become expressions of the confrontations and frustrations endemic to Argobba family life.

At present, Argobba Muslim society finds itself at an historical juncture in which changing economic conditions are demanding resolutions concerning foreign foods. These choices and changes are by no means nakedly economic, but lie embedded in cultural, social and political practices that are symbolic and ethnic. These days, then, the articulations of foods that support the Argobba household as a unit of production and consumption are more and more the economic ties with capitalist mode of production. Argobba men and women who need to connect with these urban and semi-urban ties do not thus have time to eat formal meals on an occasion of family. In 'eating without

meals' to use the phrase of Holtzman (2001:1050), eating has therefore become de-socialised. The increased need for cash has replaced the material life of the units of commodity production based on personal, reciprocal, and kinship relations.[18] Cooked foods, gifts, and prestations are no longer composed only of indigenous products but are also made of those products permeated by cash coming from modern market transactions. Argobba cooking and cuisine categories thus operate within Muslim culinary customs in a region and nation undergoing rapid political and socio-economic transformation.

Conduct of Consumption

Meals in Argobba households are marked by manners or formalities, along with a careful observance of matters such as the order of seating and serving, and the niceties of proffering and accepting foods. Argobba households may thus lack 'tables' but have 'table' manners; so, everyone sits around on benches or on the floor, eating out of a common plate and following a strict hierarchy in seating arrangement. The highly honoured diners, usually the senior males, occupy tiny benches or elevated earthen seats. Then, following flexible family features of social status that places old before young, male before female, and guest before host, others sit on still lower seats, stone pieces or on skin or straw mats spread on the floor. Hospitality is not therefore only conspicuous consumption but also informal politics elaborated, for example, in seating arrangements, in the order of precedence in serving, and indeed in the manners or etiquette expected of guests and hosts.

Great respect is shown for foods, and following Muslim traditions people bless themselves before and after eating and, as best as possible, refrain from talking or laughing while eating. They scoop small pieces of food with three or four of their fingers and always chew, with their mouth closed, along one side of the jaw, because chewing on both sides of the jaw is considered gluttony and grid. Central to the construction of culinary customs is therefore the discipline and restraint in eating, so that what men's stomachs solicit do not interfere with their responsibilities towards the well-being of women and children. The eating in the company of others thus inculcates not only self-restraint, but also

[18]My use of food as a commodity that has material life is an adaptation from the works of Appadurai (1981:498), Guyer (1987:1-15) and Holtzman (2003:145).

the value of thinking of others before oneself, and indeed, as Heldke (2013a:311) demonstrates, of oneself in relation to others.

The Argobba eat slowly and with restraint, urging their fellows, '*ənnəbla*' '*ənnəbla*' ('*let's eat, let's eat'*). Women carry this modesty to extremes, and if they are guests, they will often swear that they have eaten already, and if they have not, they will confirm that they are not hungry. Men, on the other hand, are supposed to be exempt from facing scarcity, which is shared out among women and children only. Not eating in most circumstances has a positive Adults and children thus learn enough etiquette to survive a meal without embarrassment because the aesthetics of taste, the etiquette associated with eating, the proper manners and pace of eating allow conviviality but not conversation during the time of eating.

According to the Islamic *purdah* tenet of isolation, or the etiquette of formal food occasions, which is invariably followed when there are guests, and sometimes as a matter of family routine, Argobba men and women eat separately. Eating with others is thus marked by boundaries indicating a wide range of social distances and relationships, and general rules define the persons who should and should not eat together and therefore eating behaviour is both internalised and externally enforced. In principle, men do not eat together with women unless they are 'familiar' with each other. Women as wives are not only cooks but they also serve food to men first, themselves eating what is left. Thus, ladling food, as Holtzman (2001:1043) shows for Samburu elderly men and women, begins with older men and ends with women and children. But it is women who place plates of food that make the final statement concerning social status, and decide in what order to serve, the ordering of which may or may not correspond to the seating arrangement.

Women also express the nuances of social status by the discrepancies in size, shape, and quality of the plates in which they serve meals, and in the distribution of foods in each plate, especially in the selection of meats and their placement on shared plates. Argobba etiquette of meals or 'table manners' thus contains symbols all its own. For example, Argobba men not only eat before women but consider prized food items such as meat to be their exclusive prerogative. Women and children learn to refuse meat and, on formal or ritual occasions, to eat what the men leave. Thus, at mealtimes involving meat, Argobba men are served more meat than women, and older adults before younger ones. However, when subsistence is precarious it is

proper and dignified for men to hold back and leave plenty for children and women. The shared meal represents the unity of the Argobba family that gathers to eat it, but the manner in which it is served and eaten also speaks to the division of between more and less important household members. If the etiquette of the meal thus reproduces household relations and had its own symbols, the flow of food exchanges and reciprocities, as Mauss (1954: 33) argues, between households establishes the larger social structure of the whole community.

At every meal, no matter how mundane, diners formally acknowledge the labour women have invested in its preparation at the hearth, as well as women's control over the occasion as a social event through a sequence of patterned verbal exchange of thanks and observance of courtesies and complements. To proffer the prepared dish to Argobba household members is an act never performed without a series of attendant ceremonies and rituals, no matter how informal the occasions. For example, during lunch and supper a great deal of 'communion', to use the word of Turner (1974: 58), is observed between family members when serving and eating meals. In the act of serving, women pamper family members, put 'proper' seats for them, bring them foods and beverages, and every now then urge them to eat, or even put a five fingerful of food into their mouth (*gurša*) in case they are hesitant or shy to eat or still are too slow in eating. The size and composition of each portion of food and the order of scrupulous serving it are highly ritualised and symbolised, and respect is shown through sharing and the uttering of specific statements of requests and thanks.

Food is not in this sense simply something one eats, but something that sustains socially proper behaviour at a variety of levels. For example, the etiquette that is observed scrupulously when eating chicken stew is suddenly side lined when serving *šəro*, *kəkk* or *məssər* stews. What thus makes such stews so appealing is that the formality rules ordinarily observed when serving and eating other meals become irrelevant. Moreover, the preparation of *šəro*, *kəkk* or *məssər* stews, most of the time with the most minimum of spices and condiments, does not take time, and nor does it require the painstaking labour of women. Again, such stews are without formality simply poured on *ənğära* and everyone eats from it together. For example, the special metal and/or earthenware meant for chicken stew preparation and presentation lie untouched as the family members eat the *šəro*, *kəkk* or *məssər* stews out of common plate reserved for ordinary days. Stews served in this way makes

them the most inherently enjoyable, and involves scooping, propelling food into the mouth with calm contentment, then, following Islamic culinary customs, licking or sucking the fingers in search of food remains in the dextrous digits, and finally drinking water and silently burping as a sign of delightful digestion. All these simplicities in mannerisms and minimal tossings and the general absence of seasonings add to the informality of manners during these meals.

There are, however, also special-occasion meals which are much more formal than those of ordinary occasions. For example, meals that are often eaten when relatives and neighbours gather for a work party or *däbo* during harvesting, the usual structure of Argobba family relationship demanding respect is superseded by the more formal relations of host and guest. The fact that family members all eat together on a fairly regular basis, does not affect the formal nature of harvest work party mid-day meal because it represents the sealing of a social contract through labour obligations. Within the structure of such a meal, there is a complex interplay of expressions of gratitude in a form much elaborated in Argobba culinary customs. The guests thank the hosts for their labour in preparing the work party meal, but the meal itself is an expression of thanks for the guests' labour contribution. Such formal meals created a social bond during harvest time when a pressing need for labour and an abundance of food with which to prepare large meals coincide. The harvest season is thus curiously characterised by both the least formal and the most formal of meals. Each coveys a quality that marks it as exceptional, one by offering an escape from ordinary strictures and the other by elaborating upon them. The manners of meals reveal both the household division of labour and the gendered social rights, and the structure reflected in meals is reinforced or broken by the political processes prevailing in the meals, menus and manners.

Muslim Argobba eating habits thus have social and symbolic meanings in the types of foods eaten, the context for eating, and eating the right food in the right company and thus constructing group identity across lines of social distance, age, class, gender, and ethnicity. For example, the shared meal represents the unity of the Argobba family that gathers to eat it, but the manners in which it is served and eaten also speaks to the social interaction between household members. Accordingly gendered relations place Muslim Argobba household members in separate social positions, and all claim the right to household resources and define their particular part in the family's food power politics. The manners of meals reveal both the household division

of labour and the gendered social rights, and the structure reflected in meals is reinforced or broken by the political processes prevailing in the culinary customs. Cuisine thus reproduces household relations while the flow of food goods between Muslim Argobba households informs the social function of meals, menus and manners.

Constitution of Cuisine and Culinary Customs

In this article, diet is defined as the kinds, proportions, and nutritional values of foods that the Muslim Argobba eat. Cuisine, on the other hand, refers to the cultural construction of meals, the structure that organise knowledge about foods, and the pattern of their preparation and combination inside the hearth with a firm feeling for familiar foods.[19] Muslim Argobba culinary categories of cuisine constitute principally of grains, legumes, greens or vegetables, but tuber foods also in turn form meals through combination of foods, and foods for special occasions. During the different years of fieldwork, I repeatedly observed the rules of cuisine that underlay the making of meals and the frequent use of grains, legumes, and vegetables.

After many meals I learned to group foods within Argobba cuisine categories. For example, onions (*qäy šənkurt—Allium ursinum*), garlic (*näç̣ šənkurt—Allium cepa*), tomatoes (*timatim—Lycopersicum esculentum*), potatoes (*dənnəč—Solanum tuberosum*) and green peppers (*qarya—Capiscum frutescens*) go together, while coffee beans (*bunna*), cardamon (*kororima—Afromomum angustifolium*), basil (*bässobəla—Ocimum basilicum*), ginger (*zənğəbəl—Zingiber officilinale*) and coriander (*dəmbəlal*) belong with sugar (*sukk^{w}ar*), *ṭossiñ* (*Micromeria biflora*) and *moqmoqqo* (*Rumex abyssinicus*). Muslim Argobba diet may be said to precede cuisine; just as I had to learn the former before I could study the latter, the structure of cuisine is easier to express once the basic materials from which it is constructed has been described. I begin with grains.

[19] Cuisine is part of the material act of cooking that allows the combination of raw ingredients and preparation for consumption. The socio-cultural definition of cuisine thus reveals the close connection between diet and cuisine and the cultural ordering of foods and cooking. Cuisine is therefore distilled from the 'sedimentation' of thousands of past meals. When these conditions change, the rules of cuisine must in turn adjust in order to conform with the norm of the new culinary situations. Cuisine, as Goody (1982:27) argues, allows people to deploy resources and make choices according to needs and dietary desires.

Grains form a characteristic part of Argobba agricultural crops, and are produced for both consumption and transaction. They occupy a principal part of agricultural and domestic work time, define relations of blood kin and affine, and in this regard become a focus for agricultural and cultural representation. In Muslim Argobba local exegesis, sorghum (*zängada*), millet (*mašəlla*) and maize (*boqqollo*) are "iconic cuisines" to repeat McCann's phrase, or the stapple foods forming the mainstay of indigenous diet.[20] When sorghum, millet and maize did not grow, Argobba households purchased them for consumption and seed preservation for future cultivation. Such grains are either heavily and finely ground, sifted, and baked or lightly and coarsely ground and baked. Most Argobba main meals thus consist of bread (*ənǧära*) made of these familiar grains, and the heavy carbohydrate content makes them very filling but light meals. Although Douglas (1967:68) speaks of the pleasure with which people react to being served a familiar dish, Argobba pleasure comes not so much from the presence of a particular food element as from the use of a familiar pattern in food composition. Older people feel that sorghum, millet and maize should be a part of the Argobba diet, but younger families are used or seem accustomed to its absence. For the former the current condition is seen as an unusual and unpleasant situation. For the latter it meant adjusting 'past' palates to 'present' (Bloch 1977:285) culinary customs.

The significance of sorghum, millet and maize in Argobba culinary customs varies widely due to distinctions in socio-economic status. Argobba households with a cuisine that is principally indigenous will choose affordable food goods when purchasing staple grains. Poor peasant families depend heavily on sorghum, millet and maize, while wealthy trader families subsist on wheat, barley, *ṭef* (*Eragrostis abyssinica*) and oatmeal (*aǧǧa—Avena sativa*). In contrast to the diet of the well-to-do or wealthy trader families, who seldom if ever or often eat entire meals that contain no sorghum, millet or maize, and may perhaps go entire days or weeks without eating such meals, the diet or daily meals of the poor peasant families of all socioeconomic levels consist of nothing else but sorghum, millet or maize breads. They always sustain themselves with it, and days typically begin and often end with sorghum, millet or maize breads, and midday and evening meals often contain 'plates'

[20] For the importance of cereals in Ethiopian foodways, see (Tubiana 2002). Argobba peasants who grow millet (*mašəlla*) on the escarpment slopes scrutinise sorghum (*zängada*) as a separate crop, whereas in highland Amhara and Oroomo minds sorghum definitely is a kind of millet. For details on the scientific classification of this crop, see Bornstein-Johannsen (1975).

of such grain breads. Intra-household variation is therefore reflected in diet and cuisine, and distinctions in socio-economic status indeed affect dietary desires.

Bread is the mainstay of Argobba diet, something without which a meal would be incomplete.[21] The early morning Argobba meal is almost always tea served with sugar and accompanied by toasted or baked barley or wheat bread called *qiṭṭa*. Given that it is the essential product of the hearth and home, bread is the quintessential symbol of Argobba reciprocity and household hospitality; some is always kept on hand to offer to guests and visitors. As Turner (1967:105) and Geertz (1973: 87) have argued, when an object is changed from a possession into a gift, as in the case of the prestation of wheat or barley breads to guests, it becomes a symbol of reciprocation. If market bakery bread (*dabbo*) is an object of desire, *qiṭṭa* is the locus of satisfaction that all Argobba aspire.[22]

Wheat and barley flour (f*urno duqet*) are also used as the principal ingredients, as observed earlier, for making porridge or *gänḍo* dishes more commonly used during life crisis celebrations or rites of passage rituals such as birth, marriage and death, and as part of the foods served for breaking the fast during the *Ramadan* months. Oatmeal is served only after it has been strained and is consumed as the main ingredient of a beverage (*aǧǧa*) that is made up of honey, sugar, or butter as flavourings. It is always mentioned as a necessary diet of pregnant women and individuals recuperating from all sorts of ailments including bone fractures. When eliciting idealised descriptions of a diet during pregnancy, *aǧǧa* also becomes most visible as a substitute for wheat or barley porridge during delivery.

Contemporary affluent Argobba trader families developed a distinct taste for a grain-based porridge that they adopted from the Amhara. For them the prepared porridge must have lustre, stickiness, and taste, and the appropriate consistency. It should not be farinaceous or gritty, and nor should it be too hard, too heavy or too liquid. Most of the time the relish, usually made up of glutinous ingredients like butter mixed with red pepper provides the lubricant

[21] As Pankhurst's article (2003) highlights for Ethiopia, Bruneton's (1975) study shows for High Atlas Africa, and Weismantel's work (1988) demonstrates for High Andes South America, bread is a validation of a meal, that which seals it and marks it as satisfactory.
[22] *Dabbo* may be longed for as a treat, but not as substitute for the entire doxa, to use the word of Bourdieu (1979), of known and familiar Argobba foods such as *qiṭṭa.*

which allows a mouthful of thick porridge to easily slide down the alimentary canal. Thus, certain food ingredients, techniques, and combinations are typical 'trader Argobba', while others are 'poor peasant Argobba'. Since 'trader Argobba' and wealth, and 'poor peasant Argobba' and destitution tend to go hand-in-hand, disparity in the allocation of economic resources in the Argobba homeland settlements is, among other things, a vocabulary for expressing class ideologies and socio-economic distinctions through diet and cuisine. As Goody (1982:55) suggests, whether the food is about wealth or poverty, the meal accepted or rejected has to do with class and cultural associations and with the dominant ideologies current in the changing processes by which these ideologies exhibit their presence.

The production and place of leguminous crops including *atär* (*Pisum sativum*), *akuri atär* (*Glycine max), šəmbəra* (*Cicer arietinum*), *adäng*^{w}*are* (*Canavalia gladiata*), *adagura* (*Phaseolus radiatus*), *g*^{w}*ayya* (*Vicia sativa*), *baqela* (*Vicia faba/bona*), *məssər* (*Lens culinaris)* varies widely according to seasons. Around September (*Mäskäräm*) and October (*Ţəqəmt*) they are eaten fresh (*əšät*). During subsequent months, many menus and meals centre around *atär*, *baqela* and *məssər* which become the staple foods of these rural settlements. They are ground into flour and mixed with *bärbärre* (*Capiscum frutescens*) and spices such as *näć šənkurt* (*Allium cepa*), *zənğəbəl* (*Zingiber officilinale*), *bässobəla* (*Ocimum basilicum*), *abəš* (*Trigonella foenum-graecum*), *ţena addam* (*Ruta chalepensis*), *Ǝrd* (*Curcuma longa/Turmeric*) in order to prepare thin or thick stews called *šəro*, *məssər* or *kəkk*. *Šəro*, *məssər* or *kəkk* stew dishes and sorghum or maize breads (*ənğära*) in general thus form the foundation on which Argobba diet and cuisine rest. When *šəro*, *məssər* or *kəkk* stews appear in meals, people are pleased, and eating these leguminous meals is appealing in terms of their freshness, texture, and orange colour contrasted sharply with greys, greens, and browns of other pulses.

Although in wealthy trader families such stews and breads are a mark of hard times, there is a qualitative difference between the *ənğära*/*šəro, ənğära*/*məssər* or *ənğära*/*kəkk* stew consumed by poor peasants and that eaten in well-to-do or wealthy trader households. In the former households, the function of the stew is almost limited to moistening the *ənğära* and hence Argobba mothers shout at children when they consume too much stew by eating it with as little *ənğära* as possible. In well-to-do trader households, on the other hand, *šəro*, *məssər* or *kəkk* stew acquires a separate status, independent of *ənğära*, whose function is no longer to moisten *ənğära* but to accompany it as a better means

of consuming stew. This implies that in wealthy trader households the consumption of *ənǧära* decreases with increasing consumption of stew. Moreover, in fortunate households the potage of such stews may be flavoured with chopped onions, some stew spices, and a lump of butter (*qəbe*), while in less fortunate families such stews are cooked with vegetable oil and water.

The importance of legumes in Argobba dietary staples thus cannot be overemphasised as, like greens and tuber foods, they predominate in every meal, and are by far the most principal part of both diet and cuisine. Even when other meals are prepared, legumes in the form of *šəro*, *kəkk*, or *məssər wäṭ* (stews) are added as side dishes. When used this way, they come close to filling the role of 'vegetable' foods, present in amounts greater than a complement but less than a main course or main ingredient. Legumes are thus staple foods that play a principal part in most meals and some part in every meal. During the months of abundance, they, as major foods in Argobba overall diet, add variety to the basic foods. The rest of the year legumes are toasted (*qolo*) or boiled and toasted (*ašuq*) as snack foods (*mäksäs*). Not every food eaten in Argobba households is therefore part of a meal. There is *sənq*, food people carry with them to eat out in the field, pasture or during a trip, and there is *mäksäs*, food that by definition does not form part of a full meal. It is a 'snack' or 'treat' that as a significant segment of the diet provides some nutritional elements in-between main meals. Bread marinated with honey is also a favourite food treat, considered critical in many social and ceremonial contexts, consumed mostly in well-to-do households. These kinds of treats have a function that is more social than distinctly dietary and nutritional.

The Argobba are not forthcoming in talking about relative wealth, but one notices that only some households have wheat or barley foods and that the meal of plain *šəro*, *məssər* or *kəkk* stews with sorghum, millet or maize breads is, as indicated earlier, a mark of hard times. Nonetheless, these grain breads and leguminous stews form the foundation of diet and cuisine over much of the Argobba households. I have frequently shared meals that consisted solely of *šəro*, *məssər* or *kəkk* stews cooked with vegetable oil and eaten with these grain breads, but I have never seen a meal in which there was an insufficient amount of food during serving; it is only the full nutritional complement that is many a time missing. Inter-household variation is thus not an issue in the cultural construction or composition of menus and meals.

A woman from a poor peasant family cooking *šəro, məssər* or *kəkk* stews and a wealthy trader family woman whose cooking pot contains some flesh foods and whose 'plate' is full of wheat or barley breads are, for example, both using the same structure in their cooking; the former prepares an impoverished, and the latter an enriched version of the same culturally correct menu or meal. Between these extremes are the middle-income Argobba households, in which dependence on sorghum/millet/maize and wheat/barley is balanced. Seasons of scarcity, Chadwick (1999:68) argues, are, however, marked by both food insufficiency and nutritional deficiency. In other words, in situations of scarcity this may lead to a deficient diet for women and children, and a less nutritious diet for women and children than for men. This perception of shortage is probably a reaction to lack of familiar foods rather than a complete absence of foods.

Among vegetables, tomatoes (*timatim—Lycopersicum esculentum*) and cabbages (*ṭəqqəl gommän—Brassica oleracea*) are used as sweetening and thickening agents for stews and soups, while onion and garlic (*qäy šənkurt—Allium ursinum* and *näḉ šənkurt—Allium cepa* respectively) are the most significant seasonings and/or greens in Argobba daily diet.[23] In almost every Argobba household, onions and garlic are eaten every day, and the amount used in a meal is controlled by a strong Argobba cultural preference for the presence of these vegetables. While three onion and two garlic stalks are normally thought to be an appropriate amount for a *šəro*, *kəkk*, or məssər stew that will feed a family of five, *doro wäṭ* or chicken stew or recipe, consumed very rarely, requires six to seven onion and about four to five garlic stalks. Several Argobba stews, soups, sauces, or toppings that usually require boiling, frying, and seasoning are made up of finely chopped onions, garlic, and other vegetable ingredients and spices including, among others, pepper, ginger, saffron, cinnamon, cumin, and coriander.

Red pepper (*bärbärre*) which is prepared through the combination of all sorts of condiments such as *azmud* (*Nigela sativa*), *kororima* (*Afromomum angustifolium*) and *dəmbəlal* (*Coriandrum sativum*) is a prominent seasoning whose presence in cooking and cuisine is more frequent than its absence.[24] It

[23] For detailed descriptions on the importance of onions in African markets and meals, see Clark (1994).

[24] The Argobba, following Amhara foodways, often prepare *bärbärre* in a jelly form by pounding red peppers together with garlic, red onion, salt and some other spices in a wooden mortar or by grinding them in a stone mill. Water is then added to the powder in order to

is not only exclusively culinary but, like paprika, also adds colour to the flavour of foods. Muslim Argobba men, women and youth may grab raw green pepper (*qarya*) at will and hack off a piece to eat along with *šəro*, *məssər* or *kəkk* meals. Often, these stews, flavoured by just salt, are served with green peppers which are either sliced and cooked together with the leguminous stews, or sliced and stuffed with onions and tomato and parsley pieces and served raw on the side. Sometimes still hacked as is together with the *ənğära* and the scooped stew in order to increase their edibility. Argobba characteristic cuisine or culinary condition also frequently uses potatoes (*dənnəč—Solanum tuberosum*). The appetite for potatoes is further indicated by its ubiquity in Argobba cuisine and its appropriate addition to any Argobba diet. Aside from being eaten boiled, baked and roasted in or out of their skins, potatoes are also mashed and fed to infants.

The only variety of squash I have seen eaten in the Argobba homelands is a large, round, hard squash (*dubba—Cucurbita pepo* or *maxima*), bright orange or light green like a pumpkin on the inside. It is cut up, without the skin and seeds, and cooked in stews along with other condiments and ingredients. My visits of the Argobba homelands past the disastrous droughts of 1984-1985 and 1987-1988 helped me see the significant role that *dubba* plays in Argobba diet. It is grown and sold in markets, along with other escarpment products. It is very cheap and considered an inferior substitute for the more costly *dənnəč*. The climate of escarpment on which it is grown is so different from that of the highlands that droughts that affect escarpment crops would be less likely to strike *dubba* rinds. *Dubba*, therefore, serves as a substitute staple during rainfall shortages and can even be grown in gardens. The ever-adaptable squash or *dubba* that serves as a substitute staple during rainfall shortages has over the years thus captured the tastes of Argobba consumers, and helped shape their cuisine in the form of stews and soups.

This adaptable food framework fits the *dubba* into Argobba culinary customs as staple food of poor peasants, a prestigious vegetable food of wealthy trader families, or as an ingredient of Argobba dishes or cuisines that set one *dubba*-eating family apart from another. In fact, the northern and southern Argobba homelands constructed their own distinct *dubba* cuisine and tastes around particular *dubba* varieties. Such diversified dishes and ingredients offer both the poor peasants and wealth traders many more food options whereby the

create a paste and thereby to thin it. Variations of this particular product at large include *dəlləh* and *awaze*. For more details on this critical condiment, see Sebsebe Demissew (2003).

former cook *dubba* using only red onions, vegetable oil and *bärbäre* while the latter prepare *dubba* dishes by tossing pieces or cutlets of flesh foods as principal ingredients. In other words, there are inter-household differences that are matters of diet and cuisine, and pertain to Argobba class character with correspondences to socio-economic stratification.

The Argobba thus eat a predominantly vegetarian diet, and milk and milk products as well as flesh foods are scarce culinary resources. Yet, home life in Argobba rural settlements is permeated with the presence of chickens.[25] They are mostly raised within household courtyards, though in my experience they also tend to be inside the house together with humans. While few families raise sheep or goats and fewer still cattle, it is a rare case where an Argobba household does not have chickens. Chicken stew is served during special or festive occasion meals and, normally, is not eaten on an everyday basis. Such stews serve to mark special occasions like regular end of *Ramadan* religious feasts and, as Delamont (2018:26) suggests, life-crisis or rite of passage events such as births and marriages. Indeed, special occasion-foods, as Hansemo Hamela *etal*. (2012) report for southern Ethiopia, are luxuries, something to sacrifice and serve during Muslim holidays, life-cycle ceremonies or present to guests, to close relatives and to most dear friends.

To cook chicken stew for someone is an open declaration for deepening and formalising relations between Argobba hosts and guests. Although chickens and eggs are also bought and sold in markets, and few families eat eggs on a day-to-day basis, families owning laying hens will cook those eggs not sold in markets or use them in redistributive networks and reciprocal exchanges or still toss them in meals as nutritional supplements or as a way of flavouring home cooking. For example, 'rich', hot and seasoned food is what always distinguishes Argobba daily dishes during *Ramadan* as opposed to meals during the rest of the year. Such foods call for a wide range of ingredients, spices, herbs and aromatics so as to stimulate other senses than that of taste, most notably visual and olfactory appeals through coloured toppings and unique unguents respectively.

Argobba culinary customs concerning *Ramadan* recipes call for a great variety of legumes and vegetables commonly associated with stewed, roasted, boiled,

[25] In this article, chickens are discussed not so much as part of daily diet, but in terms of their significance as ceremonial cuisine. Indeed, fowl flesh foods are softer and tastier than animal meat but they are also cheaper to sacrifice and serve it to guests and to most dear friends.

and garnished foods in sauces that contain very little fat and but that in the end came up with a simple unified dish. People eat whatever is ready in the form of a common plate using *ənğāra* made from sorghum flour, and a bowl of beans, lentil, peas, beans, potatoes, squash or vegetable soup as starter for breaking the fast. Some well-to-do households prepare wheat and barley flour porridge plates using pulses as sources of vegetable oils, and cook oats in either water, milk or butter and some sugar or honey for breaking the fast. Rich peasant families who are used to eating meat often, improve the quality of their *Ramadan* stews by adding extra butter, onions, and other spices and condiments.

Poor families who normally eat various kinds of legume stews and eat leas meat try to have meat, if not every day, at least a few times a week during *Ramadan*. In all instances, food is served with seasoned onions and garlic, considered palate-pleasing condiments possessing medical properties, and drinks like *abəš* (*Trigonella foenum-graecum*), *suf* (*Carthamus tinctorius*), *tälba* (*Linum usitatissimum*), and *bərz* or honey fermented in water, accompany foods as beverages. The heavy presence of red pepper and saffron and the incorporation of aromatics in the form of coriander, ginger, red pepper, cardamom, *gommān zār* (*Brassica integrifolia*), *ənsəlal* (*Pimpinella anisum*), *ţéna addam* (*Ruta chalepensis)*, *bāssobəla* (*Ocimum basilicum*), etc. during the process of *Ramadan* cooking represents aesthetics and fragrance as well as flavour, odour and colour.

During *Ramadan* there is more recourse towards sweetness which come in diverse and delicious forms and whose caloric contribution is also significant. Accordingly, town-based Muslim Argobba families prepare home-made honey-sprinkled pastries and pancakes or biscuits (*buskut* or *baškoti*). They also bake breads immersed in butter and yoghurt (*fatta*) and filo pastries filled with thin layered bread immersed in sugar (*mišabaaḳ*). Breads resulting from kneading, fermenting, damping and drying and baking and appearing in the form of loaves, bricks, rolls or buns also appear in the menu. *Qwalima, Ramadan* ‘sausages’, is vegetables mixed with chopped flesh-food preserved in its own fat with salt and chopped greens, herbs, and rubbed with spices and condiments. All this is stuffed into cleaned intestines whose pieces of innards are marinated, skewered and tightly bound in several lengths of clean fats.

Sambusa, on the other hand, is made from fermented wheat flour and eggs fried and simmered in oil broth, cooled, cut up in lozenges, and stuffed with seasoned assortment of flesh foods or meats, vegetables, onions, lentil, nuts and other exotic ingredients and spices. These are then rolled or folded like the Mexican *burrito* to encase dollops of balls, oblongs, triangles, rectangular quadrangles, squares, triangles or crescent shaped half-moons, cigars, and coils. None of these food specialties and shapes are available in the Muslim Argobba rural households. Instead, here *Ramadan* foods are made up of simplified nourishments involving grains, relishes and vegetables produced locally.

The differences in *Ramadan* foods eaten in rich and poor households are often in trivial changes of ingredients and occasionally in more important elements. In both rich and poor peasant households, the late-night meal, is not a special meal but made up of warmed food remains of both the early and mid-evening meals. In other words, the last meal before day break is usually a light meal consisting of whatever was left from earlier meals. Although during *Ramadan* the number of meals is reduced, the overall quality of the food is better than usual, the amount of food is larger, meals are substantial and of more sumptuous variety than those served during the other months of the year. Moreover, the quantity of sugar and salt is greater, and many women resort to menu messages of traditional cooking methods allowing a lot of sharing that disregard socio-economic distinctions.

No *Ramadan* meal is considered complete without finishing with several rounds of coffee, often served with either sugar or salt, and popular because of its ceremonial context, and because its rather lengthy preparation and consumption processes kill time. More importantly, because drinking it is traditionally a lengthy process that provides an opportunity to relax, especially for women whose only time to cease arduous labour of food preparation during fasting days is coffee time. Similarly, a kettle of tea, always kept warm in the corner of an earthen oven, is prepared using a leaf called *ɟossəñ* spiced with dried ginger, cardamom or cinnamon. A woman unable to keep both beverages alive is considered an incompetent mistress. At present some of the new food habits acquired from involvement in trade in markets and marts and labour engagement in towns have inevitably led to the rejection of previous *Ramadan* dietary desires by the younger generation with greater emphasis on consumption of non-flesh foods.

Preference for meat did not in most Argobba households therefore ensure its regular consumption. When reduced peasant incomes had an impact on the provision of family foods it was the reduction in the quantity and quality of flesh foods which was most frequently reported and regretted. Accordingly, vegetables and starches are present in every meal, proteins and carbohydrates are included more often than not, but the quantities of flesh foods are often small. This indicates the peripheral position of flesh foods and the centrality of their scarcity. Argobba flesh foods are thus 'good to eat', to use the phrase of Harris (1986:22), but are also hard to produce and therefore they get their symbolic power from this combination of utility and scarcity. In short, flesh foods are not only difficult to obtain and maintain but they are also animal products whose provision and consumption have in turn been used to demonstrate the supposed affluence of wealthy trader families who command their supply, and to show the poverty of peasant households which are short of such flesh food sources.

Even if standard vegetarian relishes are sometimes garnished with small chunks of meat, flesh foods play a very peripheral role in most Argobba meals. Indeed, meat is frequently present more as a flavouring than as a significant ingredient; communal and individual servings contain stews, but the pieces of meat are often gristle to be sucked, rather than actual morsels. Muslim religious holidays and
coming of age events as well as sacrificial rites (*sadaqa)* are, as Bonte (2013) demonstrates using other Muslim field experiences, the times and moments at which flesh foods, as occasional meals, play a much larger part. Families may, for example, receive small gifts of raw or cooked flesh foods from other families celebrating circumcision rites or undertaking religious rituals related to *Id al Adha* or *Arafa*. Parts of the slaughtered animal are mapped into a particular age and gender ranging from children to older men and women.

Ritual slaughtering and butchering, as Salamon (2012) shows for an Ethiopian community in Israel, are carried out by men, while women prepare meat meals from what is given to them by men. In other words, men slaughter and slice and women stew and spice. While sheep are slaughtered and eaten more rarely than goats, being less common on the escarpment slopes, mutton is more commonly consumed in the highlands. Goat meat is thus the most visible flesh food in Argobba households, and families either butcher one of their own goats or purchase one for slaughtering. They do so when a goat is dying of natural causes or simply when it is felt that there has been too little meat for

far too long. On such occasions, the slaughtering of an animal is, as Biesele (1984:101) suggests, not sacrificial but merely social.

Women experiencing pregnancy and delivery and sick persons going through recuperative relapses are many times provided with a great deal of flesh foods. Therefore, Argobba meals in which flesh foods and stews made from them are the principal ingredient are, for example, those served at households in which a baby is being or has been born or still at homes where there is care for ill persons. On such occasions people plough through mounds of meat in shared dishes, and among children they fuel food fights. Child birth and illness are thus occasions for slaughtering and butchering and a time for family members and friends to pay a visit to new mothers and sick persons. Unlike the Amhara, the Argobba do not particularly care for *dulät* (gastro-intestinal parts sautéed with various vegetable ingredients and seasonings) because dietary desires are designed by culinary customs (Simoons 2004:18) and do not generally eat flesh foods in their raw state (*ṭəre səga*). For them the scent of sizzling *səga* (meat) undergoing cooking is appetising, while the odour emanating from raw flesh food is repellent.

The head (*ras*), including the tongue (*məlas*) and the mandible or jawbone (*mängaga*), are eaten in the form of a broth or soup (*märäq*/*qəqqəl*) while the rest of the body parts are kept aside for day-to-day consumption in the form of *qäy* or *alləçça wäṭ* (stews with or without *bärbärre*). Once in a while the Argobba dry or smoke and preserve flesh foods ($q^{w}anṭa$) inside the house by hanging it on a rope or wire from one corner of the hearth room to another. This process of smoking partially desiccates flesh foods, inhibits rotting, and thus keeps them fresh and unspoiled for several days. Last to be consumed in such $q^{w}anṭa$ form are strips of fat (*çoma*) that are also used for flavouring stews or soups long after the red meat (*qäy səga*) is gone, and as an unguent for healing human bone fractures and dislocations. This last strip of fat may be eaten some ten days to two weeks after the butchering, and the passing of several intervening meatless days.

In general, beef plays an insignificant part in Argobba diet. Unlike chicken, beef would never be chosen as a special-occasion flesh food or everyday taste treat. Yet rural households attempt to raise at least one cow and/or two oxen that can possibly be butchered for the sole purpose of selling the beef within the community. Even when an ox or a cow or heifer or bullock (*fərida*)is dying unexpectedly and is thus slaughtered and butchered by its owners, a

great deal of effort is often made to sell the meat rather than eat it. It is divided on the basis of equal portions (*qərća*) comprising a package of every principal cut (*qurṭ* or *bəllət*) of internal organ, muscle meat, and bone of the slaughtered animal. Size of a package is determined by the number of divisions. The greater the number of divisions the smaller the size of a package of meat.[26] By and large meat plays a very peripheral role in most Argobba meals. It is perfectly acceptable to eat meatless meals, as it violates no cultural norms to serve meals without meat. Ye there are occasional meals in which meat plays pivotal parts whose social and symbolic weight is markedly greater than that accorded to most other foods. These include religious rituals, rites of passage and visitations by important guests.

At present the Argobba rural settlements are struggling for ethnic definition and preservation within the contemporary Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia *kəlləl* administration, and meals, and ways of preparing and eating them, as well as menus and manners are undergoing transformation due to adoption of Amhara and Oroomo foods and because of Argobba men's engagement in wage labour in towns and their subsequent adoption of alien or foreign foods from town markets and marts. Given that this close attachment with alimentation provides the affective power for Argobba ethnic affiliation and religious differentiation, it is eminent to explore this Argobba food foundation in the context of such processes of change as well as in relation to Amhara and Oroomo food habits in order to properly understand the alimental formation and alteration of Argobba Muslim menus, meals and manners in these rural homelands.

Accordingly, the Christian Amhara alimental penetration into the escarpment slopes of north-eastern Šäwa and south-eastern Wällo brought a variety of cultigens and cuisines, and introduced an enormous diversity of foods, ranging from barley and wheat to pulses and leguminous plants, that enriched and gradually but surely altered Argobba palates and plates and ways of cooking and cuisines. These Amhara relations of incorporation were reminiscent of the

[26] This practice is not unique to the Argobba but is instead quite universal among many peoples of Ethiopia. The principal meat cuts (*bəllət*) of this package include, among several others, the rump or end of backbone (*tannaš*), upper thigh (*tallaq*), front leg (*wärč*), hip (*šənṭ*), shoulder (*g*^{w}*ädəntädabit*), hump (*mängg*^{w}*uda*/*šaññа*), buttocks (*dänddäs*), lower thigh (*šulluda*), chest (*frəmba*). For more details, see the works of Pankhurst (1988), Dore (2006) and Orlowska (2012). Animals that have died a natural death or have died as a result of illness or accident are thought as unfit for consumption. For more details on this subject using other field experiences, see Vialles (2007:23-27).

stigmatisation of certain consumption patterns involving Muslim-slaughtered and butchered meats and Muslim prepared grain-based non-alcoholic beverages (such as *qäribo*) and hence considered as 'Muslim' products not only unfit for consumption by Christians, but also contrasted with highland Christian foods and beverages as being ethnic foods and beverages of Muslims.

It is because of this social function of eating and drinking as a means of asserting dietary diversity that foods and drinks feature as important markers of Argobba ethnicity and Muslim identity. Similarly, stimulating shrubs chewed for euphoric effects such as *ć̣at* among the Muslim Argobba and *ṭälla* (grain-based alcoholic beverage) drinking among the Christian Amhara are strong ethnic markers that consequently provide an endless source of metaphorical referents of religion and ethnic origin, ranging from the highland Christian Amhara speaking of the Argobba as *ć̣at* chewers('eaters') to the escarpment slopes Muslim Argobba calling the Amhara, as Abbebe Kifleyesus(2011) shows for the Tägulät Amhara of northern Šäwa, *ṭälla* drinkers. The former refers to hallucination and the latter to intoxication and inebriation. Stated differently, the Argobba and the Amhara hold strong xenophobic stereotypes of each other's consumption products, where the latter jeer at the former for chewing *ć̣at* leaves as a basis for bliss while the former mock the latter because they drink alcoholic beverages.

Ţälla, the alcoholic beverage commonly drunk by the Amhara, therefore, poses a threat to the *doxa* or defended orthodoxy of everyday Argobba drinks. It enters Argobba societal discourse as the consciously recognised symbol of alien Christian cultural practices whose ideological valences are charged with political meanings using drinks. Unlike the complaisant silence of most non-Muslim beverages, which do not call attention to themselves, the marked presence of this beverage calls for comments and shouts such as *kafr* (non-Muslim) and *jahil* (ignorant). The fact that alcoholic beverages are religiously disapproved merely added to their piquancy. Thus, Christian slaughtered and butchered meat and *ṭälla* become banners of Christian Amhara hegemonic pressure that seek to subvert the *ḥaram*/*ḥalal doxa* of Muslim Argobba dietary and drink culture. In a way then foods and beverages act as protective mechanisms against personal pollution and collective contamination.[27]

[27] For a seminal discussion on the notion of 'purity' and 'pollution' see, the classical work of Douglas (1967).

In Argobba culinary customs, preparing and eating vegetable-based foods and some flesh foods in Argobba ways are, as observed earlier, part of their cultural identity. For example, grain-based foods such as *ənğära* marinated with butter and honey (*alleṭaṭo*), sausage (*q*^{w}*alima*), and earthen-oven stone-slab barbecued beef (*əton*), have become types of cuisine associated with the Muslim Argobba. Because the Argobba eat these 'Argobba' foods in 'Muslim' ways their culinary customs differ from that of their Amhara, Oroomo and Afar neighbours. Similarly, the elements and techniques and the very chain of processes by which foods are combined into meals and the ways in which foods are shared among family members are not the same as those of their neighbours. For example, among well-to-do Amhara grain breads are made mostly of barley or *ṭef*, stews are cooked in animal fat, there are ample dairy products, and the beverage is barley beer (*ṭälla*).

Whereas among wealthy Argobba trader-families grain-based food is sorghum bread, stews are mostly cooked in vegetable oil, milk and butter are not central features of their diet, and the drink is sorghum-based beverage (*qäribo*). Muslim Argobba and Christian Amhara also find it difficult to eat meat together because of the differing religious rules of slaughtering. In other words, it is forbidden by Muslim dietary laws to consume animals slaughtered and hence flesh foods prepared by non-Muslims because what is prohibited (*ḥaram*) and permissible (*ḥalal*) has a lot to do with the way of doing the slaughtering. Similarly, there are differences between Argobba and Amhara perceptions of sweetness. For example, the Argobba enjoy sweet foods like honey-marinated bread which to Amhara palates is considered sickly sweet. The Argobba have tolerance for high levels of sugar, especially in tea, which among the Amhara, beyond a certain concentration, is commonly thought to be too sweet.

This is not to suggest that Argobba cuisine and Amhara, Oroomo and Afar culinary customs do not contain some identical dishes and culinary contents, but it is to say that the contrast between the two cuisines in the manner of combining principal parts and ingredient elements and preparing meals out of these dishes is equally striking. For example, Argobba daily menus feature traditional leguminous and vegetable stews accompanied by sorghum or maize breads. A meal without them would be equivalent to a milk-less lunch or dinner for many neighbouring Afar peoples. Most Afar drink milk with meals. In contrast, the Argobba like the Amhara use water as beverage. The Argobba

roast meat (*əton*) on, as observed earlier, red-hot stone slabs inside earthen ovens, while the Amhara roast beef (*ṭəbs*) on metal pans or receptacles.

The taste of Argobba meals improves more sharply with greater amounts or quality of key ingredients or condiments such as *qäy šənkurt*, *näç šənkurt* as well as *timatim* rather than with better ways of cooking. In such cases, Argobba mothers or wives pay attention to what and where to purchase food flavourings. For example, Argobba wives wishing to send a subtle warning to irresponsible or unfaithful husbands will by intent and not by accident double-salt the stew or forget *in toto* key ingredients like tomatoes as a sign of disgust and mistrust. Rarely do Amhara stews include tomatoes as a key ingredient but do instead add several stalks of red onion and garlic as well as a greater amount of red pepper or *bärbärre* as crucial condiment components. Such culinary customs thus refer not only to the Argobba ecological environments but also to their productive processes in which transformation in production and consumption inevitably alter social and sexual relation.

Alimental Formation and Alteration of Particular Palates and Plates

Meals play a prominent part in establishing and polishing social relations within a group and are equally potent expressions of relations between groups. Mintz (1985:46) suggests that people who eat strikingly different or similar foods in strikingly similar or different manners are thought to be strikingly similar or different. During the long period of Oroomo north-word migration and subsequent Amhara settler penetration, the Argobba appropriated certain alien culinary customs and in time assimilated them into their own 'indigenous' dietary tradition, but other food ways, as Strathern 's (1977) ethnography shows for a Melanesian society, were contested or rejected as 'Amhara' and 'Oroomo' culinary traditions. For example, the Argobba are not very familiar with Amhara ways of making *bässo* (barley-based dough) and preparing porridge using pulses such as *suf*, *nug* (*Guizotia abyssinica*) and *tälba* as sources of vegetable oils, nor were in the past well acquainted with, as observed earlier, Oroomo traditional foods such as *qənće, ćäććäbsa* and *ćəkk*o.

At present, however, these foods figure prominently in the flow of consumables that surround Amhara, Oroomo and Argobba cuisine categories. As Robertson's (1990) ethnography shows for Ghana, socio-economic transformation inexorably restructures hearth functions as well as the language of cooking and cuisine, and therefore the constitution of the current Argobba culinary tradition emanates from such culinary alterations. Just as the local

cultigen sorghum or *zängada* is currently defined as the essence of indigenousness, alien and packaged foods like bakery bread or *dabbo*, wheat flour or *furno duqet*, rice or *ruz*, *basta* and *mokkoroni* (meaning *pasta* and *macaroni*) have also been grafted on to native Argobba *doxa*. Even Argobba women who have little interaction with outsiders, separated from them by the practice of *purdah* and other religious barriers, learn the lessons of the presence of foreign foods and alien culinary practices brought into the Argobba rural communities from markets in neighbouring towns and cities.

The Argobba were already experiencing rural/urban migration and global commercial interaction and their food habits were already or would soon be in the process of transformation when wheat flour and bakery bread first set foot in these rural homelands. The Argobba peasants and rural petty traders who had left for nearby towns and cities soon returned and brought back with them new requirements in food preferences and eating habits. As a result, Argobba culinary customs and dietary habits as well as the traditional family food preparation and consumption patterns that for long were so homogeneous were now in a state of alteration, impacting upon the living and working conditions around which the new dietary patterns were organised. This development, for example, led to abandonment of home-made grain bread and the increased consumption of bakery bread whose use in the past was confined only to religious rituals and community ceremonies. Accordingly, Argobba households receive products from other ecologies and markets, and family members invest labour in other informal economies, and their products become prestations and gifts that link husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, consanguineal and affinal kin, neighbours and other community members, and households within and outside Argobba rural settlements.

Indeed, the everyday practices of cooking and cuisine involve the restructuring of lives of Argobba peasants who are moving out of their past as weavers and cultivators and, as Pankhurst (2019a) shows for rural Ethiopia in general, entering a new and problematic future in a regional, national and global economy as traders and consumers of commercial food products. They are thus adopting new dietary habits and patterns owing to their integration into a commercial economy beyond their borders, and therefore going into new commensal relations and diversity in food types and mealtimes. More and more young Argobba peasants, attracted by what Illich (1977:56) calls the ‘commodity-centred culture’ of towns, are nowadays consuming coca cola company beverages and Ethiopian industry-produced fruit juices such as

mäaza/*mango* and *guzo/mango* and all sorts of artificially sweetened drinks such as *kk* that come in attractive plastic bottles of all sizes and shapes, eventually recycled for household uses.

They are also eating or wishing to eat processed or prepacked foods such as wheat flour, bakery bread, biscuits, pasta, macaroni, rice, powdered beans, lentil and *bärbärre*, and as of recently, amongst several others, factory-made *Indomie* and *Sossi* noodles as well as powdered or crystalised *Knorr ank*^{w}*ar* stew flavourings the relishes for which were never cooked by their mothers, elder sisters or divorced daughters. Such alterations in food habits have thus led to generational confrontation between parents and children concerning the rejection of old woodways and the adoption of new dietary desires and industrial soft drinks that consequently affected social relations between elders and youngsters caused by fathers' inability to provide foreign foods and mass-made and high-sugar-level drinks to sons and daughters due to shortage of cash resources. For the elderly, traditional foods are the most rigidly regulated because they are exemplars of adherence to culinary customs. They find little value in these foods apart from keeping people alive, and regard them symbolically empty, nutritionally inferior, very unpalatable, diets diminished in health and vitality, and not filling and unprotective of effects of cold weather.

The conspicuous concentration of pre-packed foods along market entry or exit routes in places such as Alәyyu Amba, Harramba, Gorgo, Mäṭṭäh Bәla, Bora, Šäwa Robit, Sänbäte, Kämәsse and Harbu constantly tempt or force hurried housewives to by intent lower their standards for preparing quality meals in this less obvious way using such market or mart foods. Given that these convenience food products are priced higher and may conceal adulterated or lower-quality ingredients, they in some respects have therefore had an impact on traditional 'home cooking' of daily dishes in Argobba household hearths. The purchase of such fully or partially processed foods thus promoted Argobba women's liberation from strenuous dawn-to-dusk exertion during food preparation because the making of traditional meals indeed is a back-breaking occupation. It is no surprise then that Argobba women currently choose commercially concocted nourishments when they can afford them and get hold of them. Women are thus no longer willing to spend time on burdensome tasks preparing traditional meals when they can as well opt for foods that require shorter amount of preparation time in order to come up with 'fast-fixed-foods'. More importantly, the fact that partly prepared foods are

available in nearby village shops or *suqs* or weekly markets and marts reduce meal preparation time considerably.

Moreover, because of the adoption of food preparation methods using kerosene stoves which required much less time in the art of cooking than using the earthen-ware tripod (*gulləčča*) as in the past, Argobba women's leisure time has given them more freedom to interact with or visit others in order to, among others, talk or gossip about important marital matters including affairs, flirtations, actual or potential divorces; neighbourhood issues concerning the administrative and financial running of rotating credit associations (*əqqub*) and self-help or mutual aid associations (*əddər*), and community concerns revolving around the price of goods that go far beyond the simple expression of family tastes and needs. In the past, Argobba peasants ate an early morning breakfast and an early evening dinner, thus baking *ənğära* twice a day, with no other meal in between; at present, owing to the availability of partially processed foods such as bakery bread lunch without *ənğära* is becoming a more frequent feature of daily dishes. This is not only a transformation in meal composition but also a commensal change in and around Argobba culinary and temporal tradition.

Argobba preference for market-produced foods like bakery bread is also associated with time elaboration because it is consumed by people on the move with no time for formal or social meals. Bakery bread now thus has a more regular role as the morning meal of children and adults. This implies that the advent of such prepacked products has enabled family members to eat alone when in the past serving the morning meal made up of *ənğära* and some stew remains from the previous dinner had been a family occasion. Although such forms of eating may be associated with freedom of individual choice, in 'eating without meals', to use the phrase of Mintz (1985:49), eating has become 'de-socialised', to use the term of Gurvich (1961:19). The formation of Argobba household economy consisting of men traders and women subsistence producers has thus driven apart production practices.

Yet, ultimately, labour migration does not so much divide households but instead unites economies, interlocking rural and urban settings so as to permit the transfer of food products and dietary habits from one to the other Couniham (2006:63). Argobba rural settlements, fuelled or lured by commercial cash, are therefore expanding their foodways rapidly even if many seem to remain loyal to indigenous menus, meals and manners owing to

isolation and food deprivation. It is true that the purchase of partially processed foods has liberated women from strenuous back-breaking dawn-to-dusk drudgery opting for foods that took shorter time to prepare and cook, but the ingredients and repertoire of recipes familiar to female cooks limit the incoming of pre-packed foods because familiar foods are easier to prepare than the need for constant experimentation in foreign foods.

The Argobba escarpment slope settlements that make their homelands seem hard-to-reach places or appear isolated from the rest of the nation is in fact the very reason for the ties that bind or connect them to the larger regional economy. The political economy of these settlements, where 'plough culture is still the form of agriculture' (McCann 1995), is not therefore excluded from the global economy, but is instead inextricably bound to it by the need for money that reproduces Argobba material life through the purchase of goods ranging from sugar and salt to coffee, coriander and ginger. Even if Argobba working lives in the rural settlements for the most part concern subsistence production, they are thus still lives in which days and hours are mostly occupied with reflections on things only cash can buy. It is true that they grind grains or spin and weave cotton threads, but their thoughts and discourses turn frequently to the deployment of precious town-earned cash that can purchase town-provided market goods and prepacked foods.

This, in the words of Appadurai (1996:56), is therefore a political economy characterised by the incomplete separation of subsistence production and global commodity market transaction. As such the ingredients and condiments of Argobba indigenous culinary customs have changed largely owing to local and regional commercial contacts. On the other hand, food deprivation caused by intermittent droughts and famines during the last four decades have led to the throes of food shortages, and for many it became impossible to replace subsistence crops by purchased prepacked foods due to decline in cash resources and the rise in the cost or price of *suq*-bought staples and government taxes. More importantly, commodification of culinary customs had wide-ranging ramifications on some sectors of society. For example, it markedly decreased and diminished food sharing or lending, traditionally main means of redistribution from trader to poor peasant families or neighbours. The Argobba are now reluctant to share freely food purchased in markets because such foods are finite resources which can be renewed only through a continuing sale of other goods or through earned wages.

More seriously, labour migration and price depression for Argobba food crops produced in the rural homelands meant the provision of cheap foods and low labour costs for towns and thereby the weakening of development of Argobba agricultural pursuits. For example, leguminous foods that would feed a family of four for four days are exchanged for one small chicken. This is the socio-economic condition in which the Argobba find themselves in towns as traders and wage labourers. Unable to support themselves and their families on land of rural homelands, more and more of them turn to towns in search of work. But employment there is so sporadic and wages are so low, that they are unable to move their families entirely so as to become full-time wage workers. They thus live in-limbo, suspended between rural villages and the urban spaces and places of work.

Since neither the rural nor the urban economy can fully support the household, Argobba women and children eke out a living from the rural fields, with their monetary needs partially met by men's wages, while they in turn are partially maintained by field crops. Even if foreign food influences upon food preferences mediated predominantly through commercial contacts had a great impact in the evolution and adoption of new eating habits among families of labour migrants, they gradually learned to enjoy such convenience consumables by combining them with more typical Argobba rural foods and flavourings, and sometimes by even improving and turning into their own daily dishes. For example, partly prepared foods such as powdered *šəro* or *kəkk* that are available in *suqs* or weekly markets are transformed into Argobba palates and tastes through the addition of home-made condiments and spices and by engaging in carful cooking in traditional household hearth-fires.

Argobba changing food habits thus fit very well into Meillassoux's (1981:28) observation that the articulation of traditional subsistence agriculture in a capitalist mode of production can contribute to capital accumulation. This articulation altered the lived experience of Argobba foodways despite the apparently peripheral presence of the Argobba rural homelands, where the domestic and capitalist modes of production actually occur at the level of the household hearth. So much so that in Argobba subsistence production, the informal economy bears the cost of the labour force's reproduction or indeed the cost of raising children. Some of the surpluses generated in production are thus used for providing the food eaten and the care demanded by the young. In the meantime, Argobba fathers and grown-up sons migrate to towns in search

of commercial conundrums and markets, leaving mothers and daughters in charge of agricultural fields and weaving looms. The Argobba world of escarpment slopes thus represents 'men who migrate and women who wait'[28] in a food ecology that is becoming increasingly vulnerable but less vocal to foreign foods and beverages. On the other hand, in many informal social contexts there has been a general relaxation in traditional food and beverage consumption. It is difficult to measure the extent of this actual development, but it is now, for example, common knowledge that some Argobba in both the northern and southern homelands have taken up drinking traditional alcoholic beverages in Amhara-owned *ṭälla* taverns or temporary tents set up for market days using calabashes, gourds or metal vessels, and this has created tension and confrontation between liberal and conservative Muslims or between mere Muslims and *mu'ummins*.

Argobba subsistence strategy is inevitably linked to the regional and national economic transformations, and the erosion of Argobba cooking and cuisine is a product of these coercions of change. In the past, exploitation of these forces was made possible and tolerable by a rigid retention and preservation of Argobba culinary customs using social and religious boundaries, but at present national ideologies and world economies and "time arrangements", to use the phrase of Fabian (1983:25), call for the rapid assimilation or alteration of such forces and foods. As a result, traditional grain-based foods are fading before the images of partially or entirely processed and market-supplied foods and industry-produced beverages. Therefore, the content of Argobba cooking and cuisine is not fixed and immutable, but is instead in a constant state of alteration. Some of these alterations are contested but others occur without ever evoking these confrontations. In any event, it is clear that Argobba 'home cooking' and cuisine is constantly eroding as a result of consecutive droughts and food shortages and that the need for cash to pay government taxes are driving them into trade networks and forcing them to the purchase of market- or mart-furnished foods, and consequently are undergoing culinary changes through reproduction of foreign foods and beverages so that what is represented as 'traditional' may at times be no less novel than the 'new' foodways that are confrontational.

[28] For an elaboration of this observation using a similar conclusion from another field experience, see my article in *Northeast African Studies* (2012).

Conclusions

The article describes the popularly proclaimed Argobba culinary customs anchored by the social meanings of meals, menus and manners, examines the composition of ingredients and preparation and processing methods, looks at commensality, identity and boundary relationships, and discusses the great variation in food preferences, both between and within Argobba populations, and the contrast between plenty and scarcity, tradition and modernity, food familiarity and novelty, hunger and satiety, and change and continuity by engaging empirical and long standing theoretical debates dealing with and applied to food habits of traditional societies. It examines how Argobba consumers have become accustomed to foreign foods and new modes of preparation and distributions of foods, how such changes have also altered the ways in which food expressed social relations in terms of class, ethnic and gender identity, and looks at food politics and aesthetics and gendered meanings behind the organisation of Argobba menus, meals and manners; explores how meals formalise socialisation of children embedded in foodways, and how the organisation of dinner 'tables' or plates reflects social differences and constructs social boundaries. In the process, the article demonstrates that the daily dishes consumed in Argobba households emanate from the rural settlements of the escarpment slopes, or come from the highlands and lowlands; they are locally grown or raised, or are acquired through trade, or with cash collected from commercial currents in town-based markets and marts far and beyond Argobba rural community control.

In order to understand Argobba adoption of alien aliments, nutritional niches, and how they became tangent to their tastes, menus, meals and manners, I asked under what circumstances did the Argobba absorb foreign foods and how did they accommodate new food products, consumption patterns and commensal changes. The transition from endorsement to enjoyment of these alien tastes is a function of habituation. People gradually learned to combine them with Argobba food fancies and flavourings and sometimes altered them into their own daily dishes by integrating them into familiar foods. They enjoyed such convenience consumables by combining them with indigenous foods and turning them into their own daily dishes by adding home-made condiments and relishes and flavouring them through careful cooking. For example, bakery bread comes from commercial circuits and has become part of a snack for Argobba adults often on the move without time to eat formal or sociable meals, and a morning meal for children who eat it solely and not collectively during an occasion of family. Young Argobba urbanites' rejection

to eating with the family and the threat implicit in their choice for 'quick-fix-foods' is thus expressed through things that are dietary.

Argobba mealtimes being daily must not only be repeated from one day to the next, with even their variations coming at regular intervals, but that they cannot be conceived outside the realm of regularity. The allocation of meals in terms of time, and the association of these meals with other social events, are thus of critical concern for the Argobba not only in their social context but also as punctuations for the events of daily life. Time among the Argobba does not therefore reflect to the social activity of timing and nor is it conceived as a continuous flow. Instead the social need for timing is much less acute and pervasive. This sort of flexible, adaptable and natural time templates places the Argobba in harmony with themselves and the cosmos and denounces the concept of modern time as hard, unbending, repressive, and above all an artificial notion that clashes with the internal physical nature of the Argobba and the external nature of their rural and urban environments.

Mealtime is indeed undergoing de-structuration or erosion, but this certainly is not a reversal of the traditional order of meal scheduling, or a departure from Argobba custom's hold over meal timing. The slow alteration is a result of increased economic pressure from men's involvement in trade and markets and engagement in wage labour outside Argobba rural realities. The increased off-take for external trade and markets forced the Argobba to rely heavily on purchased pre-packed foods; and such a shift to a great extent driven by broader political economy of the region shaped the contours of culinary change. The reshaping of mealtimes has thus replaced the indigenous two-main meal pattern in order to conform to these urban or semi-urban norms. Nonetheless, it is also apparent that rural Argobba households make time for local culinary customs despite losing ground to town patterns.

In that sense, the response to hegemonic pressures is fundamentally indigenous in form and integrates aspects of these hegemonies because they promise new opportunities that maintain rural identity through traditional cooking and cuisine. For example, a work-day meal is sometimes eaten at mid-day not because schedules demand it but that it is taken as 'appropriate' enters the Argobba discourse of mealtime. Similarly, when women send children to school and allow husbands to trade or seek employment in towns, they take on new burdens that trigger additional work including but not only tending farm fields and managing herds, and confront trader and wage-earning family members who are much more assimilated into town-ways of thinking

and who impose down-grading or demeaning definitions onto the rural agricultural and hearth lives of wives and mothers.

There is functional ambivalence in daily Argobba mealtimes because they are not always taken on time or fixed hours and hence meals do not divide the day and mark the time of the Argobba day. The relaxation of mealtimes corresponds to the profound evolution of mentalities in Argobba rural society, an evolution favouring individual expression in the alteration of social situations. Argobba youngsters now frequently eat when they like to eat. Most of them do not thus comply with standard culinary customs and do not fall into the daily meal patterns and traditionally enforced prescription or budgeting of time coming from the direction of their mothers for whom the day belonged to a mass of work activities and conventional social duties each of which had its proper place and time in the Argobba household economy. Argobba rural society therefore posits an opposition between a domestic domain that includes family values, motherhood, sharing meals within patterned two-main meals, and celebrating cultural traditions, and an intrinsically more important public domain that involves a world of wage labour, trade and markets, and all other masculine activities.

In this kind of world, rural Argobba women prepare meals, manage herds, in contrast to men who, favouring trade and wage labour in towns, abandon farm fields and, with it, a total commitment to a culture embedded in agrarian traditions. Ideas about women, work and time thus define Argobba rural existence and shape indigenous mealtime structures that are sometimes characterised by what is modern and masculine. The Argobba household meal thus represents both the household's own internal integrity and its articulation with the outside world community, the subordination of women to men and yet a focal field for feminine power within the family, the product of women's work transformed into the satisfaction of desire, and the proof for the household's survival strategy and reproductive capacity and the occasion for confrontation arising in intra-family. The ideological process by which women's work is redefined as a kind of activity more relevant for family than for society, and as being a form of emotional investment rather than being productive in an economic sense, is then one in which Argobba culinary customs are not only changing in superficial ways, but are also made to rest on concepts of gender, time and norms more like those of towns.

The growing demands of globalisation and the widespread speculation in marketing agricultural products ruptured the spheres of Argobba subsistence

production rather than growing food for home consumption which in turn allowed significant gains in the penetration of foreign tastes, gains that often corresponded with reduction in the time devoted not only to food production but also to food processing, preservation, storage, transportation, and in certain instances even food preparation. In some cases, the total amount of time devoted to food-related activities has increased, even though it might sometimes be a matter of social time not directly associated with consumption. The series of breaks and ruptures in the socio-economic configuration of Argobba rural homelands have thus witnessed alteration at the level of consumption affecting the content, the relative importance, and the scheduling of meals. In such settings, Argobba trader townsmen defined and defended the right to punctuate their day with a meal break that involves a lunch time past mid-day. The positions sketched by mealtimes grow more complicated still when one compares the food fads of well-to-do trader households to the culinary customs of poor peasants. These shifting strategies and deconstruction of daily meals has led to a new rhythm of consumption, one whose meals are more widely spaced out over the course of the day, while the banalisation of meals has resulted in the loss of their institutional status in which anything is allowable and possible due to the encroachment of foreign foods by way of men's involvement in trade and markets and engagement in wage labour in towns.

Yet the Argobba of these regions of Ethiopia have responded to such alteration with a dialectical imagination, using a strategy of incorporation of alien elements of culinary customs and mealtimes into their dietary tradition while resisting more profound culinary assimilation. Accordingly, the pattern of taking food two times daily seems to have resisted the affirmation of the three-meal system emanating in towns. Nonetheless, in this ostensible ability to sustain life with two meals, only one truly qualifies as a meal which in any case is used as an opportunity for conviviality and a forum for creating codes of conduct for commensality and conjugality. These patterns, however, underlie social differences in the rhythms of life and work as well as the diversity of individual choices that exist among them. Argobba meal patterns are therefore a more or less stable compromise between antagonistic constraints or a confrontation between clashing conceptions of social time reflected particularly in women's work requirements and the demands of town-based men traders and wage earners. Such confrontations also stem from global influences coming from the direction of pre-packaged foods originating in town circles. At present, as the Argobba deconstruct their meals and mealtimes to accommodate new work hours originating in altered town

calendars, they are also showing their skill at creating new practices that both take account of changing social and economic realities and reasserting indigenous culinary identity.

The ingredients in dishes, the dishes in meals, the meals and dishes in cuisines form the structural systems of Argobba culinary customs in which the quality, taste, smell and texture of foods are vividly visible. Yet, the Argobba have long also incorporated foreign ingredients and alien dishes into their cuisines so much so that they are at the forefront of formation and alteration of their own cuisines and indeed adaptation of foreign foods ingested from Oroomo and Amhara aliments. The Argobba thus find themselves mirrored in a multiplicity of cuisines, and they as a result are now associated with menus and meals that come from both local and foreign culinary customs. The local food referents reflect the economic and cultural patterns of their living in the escarpment and the productive process of this very environment. The Oroomo migration and Amhara settler penetration created circumstantial crevices for catching new palate products, and a reason for abandoning old ones, and shaped the grafting of certain cuisines into Argobba culinary choices and cosmological charts.

The alteration of the processes of food production and consumption caused by foreign foods in time changed the content of their cooking and cuisine. Whether the bread is buttered or marinated or the beverage is bitter or sweet, the meal and menu desired or detested have to do with Argobba ethnic and religious associations by which they make themselves felt in the escarpment slopes, living as they do amongst Amhara and Oroomo neighbours. It is these neighbours that determine the direction of diffusion of such alien aliments whose encounter in the form of food fealties often prompts the Argobba people to ponder about their identity in relation to these neighbouring polities and their culinary customs. However, such foreign food features were felt not overnight but instead some decades diminished between the introduction of these aliments and their integration into Argobba culinary customs. Given that these processes of food production and consumption disclose information about Argobba dietary traditions, Argobba matters of Muslim menus, meals and manners contain a politics all their own.

The cultural emphasis on a diet of grains and legumes, proper patterns of provisioning, eating and food sharing constituted a domain densely packed with core culinary customs and entangled webs of social relations that over the past several decades experienced significant shifts due to contact with foreign

foods and because of trade engagements and wage earned in towns and more seriously caused by a change in World Food Programme (WFP) and Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) food paradigm from 'food security' to 'food sovereignty'. Yet the Argobba found it impossible to totally replace subsistence crops by purchased pre-packed foods because of shortage of cash and the rise in the price of 'strange' staples. The composition of cuisine, discourses about diet, and customs of cooking and catering are so immersed in the cultural and material life of the escarpment slopes that they condense a wealth of social, ideological, and religious meanings pivotal to Argobba everyday lives. Traditional vegetable- or legume-based stews and soups still defines and defends the base of most Argobba rural household dishes. There still are, however, some changes in the mentality and metonymy of eating habits or culinary customs with irreversible culinary consequences on rural dietary desires. These culinary changes and choices have become significant sites for shaping Argobba rural recipes.

The movements of labour and alien food products within Argobba household families are thus eroding their cooking and cuisine, anonymous market exchanges of foreign foods that the Argobba have no control of are increasing, and Argobba culinary customs which are by no means only ethnic, linguistic and religious, but lie embedded in Argobba social and cultural practices that organise material life through coking and cuisine, are struggling to encompass these transformations through new meanings of meals, menus and manners. Nowadays, however, the Argobba homelands find themselves at an historic moment in which conflicting commercial conditions demand resolution, the choices to be made are difficult and the possible outcomes are unclear in the escarpment environment. This function of cooking and cuisine as a means of asserting cultural identity and as a way of featuring important markers of Argobba ethnicity expresses what the Argobba think of themselves, who they are as Muslim peasants, weavers, and traders; where they live, and what their position is in the natural and social world of the escarpment and in the political economy of these regional areas of Šäwa and Wällo within Argobba *wäräda* in *kəlləl* Amhara of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. It is hoped that this article in particular and the book project in general will provide a rich menu of theoretical perspectives and empirical ethnographic examples and satisfy students' and scholars' appetites for both information and stimulation and provoke further field work of this rather new field of inquiry in Ethiopian studies.

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